

THE MYTH OF LIBERAL NEUTRALITY

“Il s’appelle Selim mais il est gentil”¹

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It is not a secret by now that those who were outraged by the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and sympathized with the millions who showed solidarity with the victims had at the same time problems with the slogan of #JeSuisCharlie. One of the main reasons for that is that they are well aware of the social, racial and ethnic barriers that the French citizens with an immigrant especially Muslim background encounter on a daily basis in France. One story that still haunts me today for instance dates back to the times when I was an undergrad student in Paris, back in the mid-90s. A real estate agent who was also helping me to find a *chambre de bonne*² was trying to convince a landlord on the phone that he should not worry about his client because yes *il s’appelle Selim* (his name is Selim), *mais il est gentil* (but he is nice). I was eighteen years old at that time and I fast understood that life in Paris will be a bit more challenging than usual when you carry certain names, possess certain skin colors and certain backgrounds. Albeit being a Muslim Turk, I was secular enough perhaps to be deemed ‘normal’ and this ‘normality’ facilitated my entry into the French public sphere. However, this privilege has not blinded my eyes towards everyday prejudices that the Muslim and especially Arab origin French citizens need to confront in France.

This is why I am one of those who had unease with the slogan of #JeSuisCharlie although *Charlie Hebdo* massacre tormented me deeply.

I am pretty confident that a majority of the *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturists who were massacred by the radical Islamist terrorists were committed to denounce racism and to defending liberal democracy coupled with French *Laïcité*. This is because they mainly understood French secularism and liberal democracy as being neutral. The liberal democracy in France however is far from being neutral. First of all, it assumes a neutral public sphere where everyone has equal rights. It does not problematize enough or at all, all those who cannot have access to this liberal public sphere because of their names, their skin colors or socio-economic class. Moreover, Islam in this liberal public sphere is not even treated as a minority religion but an exterior force. This alleged neutrality and homogeneity marginalize hence many vulnerable groups on the basis of religion, ethnicity, race, class and/or gender. In this sense, one can admit yes that *Charlie Hebdo* was making fun of everyone, but not everyone has

¹ His name is Selim but he is nice.

² A small room built for maids originally in middle class houses or apartment buildings, but rented out to students nowadays.

equal footage and status in this so-called neutral public sphere. The myth of neutrality and homogeneity of the secular and liberal framework renders it difficult on the contrary to talk about difference.

One should also underline that *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons have somewhat flirted with racism. The Muslims including the Prophet Mohammed were often depicted as big nosed and ugly characters and depicting Mohammad persistently and in a humiliating way was usually done only to antagonize the Muslims. The former editor of *Charlie Hebdo*, Phillippe Val and one of its main intellectual supporters Caroline Fourest are indeed neo-conservative public figures in France. Caroline Fourest is especially known for her publicly exposed islamophobia. As the left wing and Algerian born French actor Guy Bedos has brought it to the attention of the public, the satirist's job should hence not be to make fun of those who are already discriminated against and are often excluded from the liberal public sphere by certain power structures.

Despite everyday barriers, however, a majority of Muslims living in Europe today assume that they are part of the European societies that they live in. Treating Islam as an alien force to the public sphere and the liberal secular framework and representing it by foreign and distant hook-nosed characters do not help understandably to consolidate this phenomenon. Exclusionary practices have furthermore the potential to radicalize those who feel marginalized vis-à-vis the liberal public sphere. Those who feel marginalized often see in Islam a language of protest for their claims and grievances. Such grievances are aggravated furthermore by certain Western powers' foreign policies in the Muslim lands which are often interpreted along the religious lines by the marginalized and articulated at times by violent actions. Those who sincerely mourn for the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre should find ways hence to demythify the liberal public sphere in order to be able to transform the marginalizing structures beneath.