

Charlie Hebdo and the “Wild West”

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Innumerable Hollywood films begin with or contain scenes that can be roughly described as follows: family of settlers (whether pastorally or agriculturally engaged) are found dead, including women and children of course. Indications of “native” activity, i.e. arrows are found either in the corpses or in various places in the set. (Atrocities have been committed: women raped, men scalped, babies impaled on stakes.) Often flames or smouldering ruins appear.

Then someone with authority enters the scene to summarise the events making it clear that “Indians” have attacked and murdered an innocent settler family. This inevitably leads either to police, military and or vigilante retribution.

What is almost always omitted from these films is the fundamental fact that “settlers” were invaders in foreign territory. They were seldom unarmed, even if such weapons as they possessed were more suited for hunting and self-defence than offensive action. Their presence was deliberate and provocative. They were civilians but invaders nonetheless. However their civilian status and the naïve assumption that civilians are per se non-combatants is essential for the narrative that propels events in such films, namely the violent attacks against the indigenous population who in fact were the defenders of their own land and resources from “white” invasion.

The recent events in Paris are not unlike the Hollywood narrative above. A tiny group of “settlers”, let us call them journalists, are found dead in their urban log cabin by police officers. They were merely producing propaganda for the armed forces of their country, when a pack of “natives” (if any credence can be lent to the official story) swooped down on their homestead and killed them, omitting the flaming arrows. What is missing in the story is what these “settlers” were doing in fact.

Amidst all the hypocrisy about engaging in free speech and other slightly protected privileges derived from the West’s ostensible embrace of so-called Enlightenment values, the fact remains that both the style and content of the magazine were racist and incendiary. According to the liberal version of this story journalists and publishers if not all citizens are entitled to publish even racist speech or attacks on religion or other cultures. To attack people who are merely exercising their civil rights is not only wrong but also a criminal violation of those rights. While it is true that the support for Charlie Hebdo is hypocritical—given the statutory bars against anti-Jewish speech—this is not the most important issue raised by the deaths in the magazine’s editorial offices. (Israeli Jews as archetypal settlers, carriers of the arc wherever they go.)

The West—that is NATO and its neo-colonial allies—has been waging war against what can be roughly called the Muslim world for decades. (Of course the war against Islam predates NATO by at least a thousand years.) No later than the beginning of Brzezinski’s war against

the secular Afghanistan government, under US President Jimmy Carter, did this war become part of the West's "total war", which after the destruction of the New York World Trade Center became the "global war on terror" (GWOT in US military parlance). This global war is quite like the endless wars described in Orwell's 1984. Essential to that war effort were the "hate" sessions in front of the "telescreen". At the operational level however, the deliberate use of obscenity, racism, and cynicism in barracks humour is an essential part of maintaining soldiers' indoctrination and the requisite "hateful" attitude toward the enemy. This is particularly true in imperial wars where the objective is to control resources, land, the political and social movements, and labour of populations defined as inferior.

The political leadership of the West—its elected and appointed functionaries—have insisted since 11 September that it is engaged in a total war in which the loyalty and vigilance of the entire (Western) population is indispensable. In other words the white population of Europe and North America have been recruited into the auxiliaries. They are civilians but only nominally non-combatants in this world war. Moreover, to oppose the eternal war, to be for peace and reconciliation, is criminalized as treachery.

The Hollywood "Western" depicts the lone settler on the frontier who is attacked by Indians. This is made to appear as an invasion or act of aggression by maintaining silence as to the true invader, the settler. This 'sin of omission' metastasizes into the Lie in the Soul, as Plato called it. The settler can no longer appear the invader because when this film genre emerged, "Whites" could safely assume that North America belonged to them (just as Palestine belongs to the Jews, or Algeria to the French). The Indian had in fact disappeared as a threat. The real story, the propaganda at the core of "Westerns" was not directly against the Native American but against the external enemies of American capitalism in whatever form (the Other), but especially communism. The story in short was that peaceful, entrepreneurial settlers were being threatened by violent foreign invaders whose culture was violently opposed to that of the peaceful white folk on the prairie.

This is the story propagated by Charlie Hebdo and similar publications and broadcasts throughout the West. The proper perspective from which to understand the Charlie Hebdo phenomenon actually needs no reference to a possible act of vengeance. Charlie Hebdo and in fact most of what comprises "satire" or humour today is actually a part of the war propaganda effort. Anyone who has served in the armed forces knows what functions this language and caricature has in the ranks. What most commentaries miss is that since the "war on terror" is a global and total war, the civilian population (mainly white) constitutes the auxiliary to the armed troops at the asymmetrical (as the military calls it) "front". The fact that the magazine is now openly subsidised now only underlines the fact. Insulting and denigrating the "enemy" in all its forms is an essential part of waging war in the West. Hence, assuming that the perpetrators were Muslims, the magazine was certainly a military target.

Such attacks are the essence of "selective terrorism," the military tactic used by those whose lands are being invaded, those who are outgunned and outlawed in their own land, those who can't bring to bear the "state terror" of drones and nuclear subs, of aircraft carrier fleets and skewed judicial systems - of structural terror. Selective terrorism is designed for maximum publicity, to let the oppressor know the oppressed can attack its "soft targets" at will, and that collaborators will be made to pay a price

Given the dearth of living witnesses, there is every reason to doubt the official narrative. But

just assuming that the events transpired as they were reported– a very big if– then this was still not a civilian casualty by Western definition. It was a military action at least as legitimate as bombing Serbian national television (see Bill Blum’s comparison this week in Anti-Empire Report).

The European colonisation of Africa and the Middle East was actually promoted by supporting the most conservative and even reactionary religious groupings/ authorities and permitting them to exercise “tribal rule”. Colonial powers resisted the liberation or modernisation trends among the colonised (Islam had its own Enlightenment quite independent of Western authority) in order to deprive the colonised of political control by subjecting them to religious authorities—e.g. French policy in Algeria. The Western colonial powers never consistently supported modernisation or “enlightenment” waves in their colonies when there was a reactionary religious force available. Where indigenous religion was deemed unreliable Christian missionaries filled the gap. The wave of reactionary Islam that surged from the end of the 70s, e.g. US funding of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, not to mention Anglo-British establishment and support for the Saudi tyranny, was consistently funded by the West as a way to defeat secular nationalism that might align with the Soviet Union or not at all.

US support for reactionary religious leaders and movements enjoys a long domestic tradition. The so-called “religious right” is big business. Corporate support for the Ku Klux Klan is neither seldom nor an extreme example of how business and religion ally. Corporate executives and reactionary religious leaders are essentially the same type of person (in the US this can be seen in the “religion business”). Secular states admit competing interests, which may quickly compete with those of corporations. Religious states (like the US itself) divide the power: corporations get the wealth and “churches” get the souls. Seen on a global scale– in proportion– the US and Saudi Arabia are made of identical stuff.

The image of the fanatical Muslim “Indians”—on the warpath—attacking a tiny, helpless intellectual family in the Parisian prairie is pure fantasy cultivated by the mass media presentation of events. It relies on the reinforced belief that, still mainly Roman Catholic, secular France is being invaded by foreign reactionary religious fanatics. Furthermore one must believe that Muslims are per se foreigners in Europe. European politicians regularly reiterate the claim that Christianity is Europe’s core culture (as if the crimes of the Christendom were something of which to be proud). The Hollywood story is given a French glacé. Yet it remains essentially the narrative of the US-led GWOT.

The deaths in the offices of Charlie Hebdo were civilian casualties but in a war where NATO and its allies have declared that the front is everywhere, these were casualties of that war inflicted on civilian combatants. The only way to end such deaths is to end the war.

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