

Charlie Hebdo, Republican Values & The Philosophy Of Frederick Douglass



Picture: "French President Francois Hollande is surrounded by head of states including (first row,LtoR) European Commission President European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi as they attend the solidarity march (Marche Republicaine) in the streets of Paris January 11, 2015. French citizens were joined by dozens of foreign leaders, among them Arab and Muslim representatives, in a march on Sunday in an unprecedented tribute to this week's victims following the shootings by gunmen at the offices of the satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo, the killing of a police woman in Montrouge, and the hostage taking at a kosher supermarket

at the Porte de Vincennes" by European External Action Service on [Flickr](#). Follow The Critique on Facebook & Twitter @dekritik for more special features.

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An Attack on the Values of the Republic

The assault on the offices of [Charlie Hebdo](#) on 7th January, 2015 by two brothers, killing 12 people, and the related shootings in a kosher supermarket that left a further four dead, have been widely seen as attacks on the French Republic itself and, especially, on its values. Certainly, this viewpoint has been heavily emphasised in the political rhetoric in France in the aftermath of the attacks and in the response of the government.

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, declared the shootings to be "an attack on the values of our republic". The President, Francois Hollande gave an account of what that meant, telling his people that "today it is the Republic as a whole that has been attacked. The Republic equals freedom of expression; the Republic equals culture, creation, it equals pluralism and democracy. That is what the assassins were targeting. It equals the ideal of justice and peace that France promotes everywhere on the international stage".

The Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, drew the inevitable conclusion, that France was now "at war to defend our values".[\[1\]](#) The enemy in this war was given a particular form. It was not only "terrorism... and everything aimed at

breaking solidarity, liberty and fraternity”, but specifically “radical Islam”. This naming of a wider enemy contrasted with the general domestic and international response to the attacks carried out in 2011 in Norway, by Anders Breivik, killing 77 people. His was also an attack on these same universal values, and Breivik could also be linked to a network of others with similar beliefs. Nevertheless, this incident has been treated for the most part as the action of a deranged and lone individual.

A significant difference, of course between the actions of Breivik and the Kouachi brothers, the perpetrators of the Paris massacre, is that the latter are seen in the light of a series of attacks across the world that came to prominence on September 11, 2001. Although not directly linked, coming only weeks after the taking of hostages in a Sydney chocolate shop, the events in Paris fed into a political context that had already decided how to understand its meaning. The attacks were seen as part of a global confrontation between those who supported the values of a militant Islam and those who supported tolerance, peace and democracy.

Values are not Abstract Notions

Taken at face value, the description of the Paris shootings as a rejection of French values is obviously correct. The perpetrators were quite open about this. And in the wake of a national tragedy of this kind, for politicians to appeal to the values of the nation may seem to be a quite natural reaction in the bid to reaffirm and maintain unity amongst its people at a difficult time.

In the context of both republican politics and race relations in France, however, rallying round the country’s values has a

far more divisive meaning. Values in this sense do not only refer to a person's behaviour or their 'moral compass'. Rather, they are a statement of identity and of loyalty to the group (they are, said M. Valls, 'our values' and we will defend them).

There has been a longstanding and widespread prejudice held at all levels of the country that Muslims have not integrated well into French society and that they may well be "unassimilable".^[2] (The facts, as it happens do not bear out either of these claims).^[3] [See Lindergaard on the proposition that multiculturalism played a role in the attack]. In the present climate, these attitudes have become mixed with the rhetoric of a global struggle against radical Islam casting suspicion against any Muslim. Talk of values against this background often amounts to testing Muslims to show where their loyalties lie.

The idea of 'republican values', then, is not some abstract notion that is very far removed from the very challenging practical daily problems that French Muslims encounter, such as unemployment, poverty and racism. These values are an expression of Frenchness itself.

Ostensibly, republican values derive from the French Revolution. As M. Valls reminded us, these values are said to be "universal", and they include the famous ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Nevertheless, republican values are also expressions of the ideals of the body of French citizens. Over time, the exact nature of even 'universal' values inevitably changes. Women, for example, were not originally included as the equals of men and they had fewer freedoms. Most French people no longer believe that this is right, and so their universal understanding of 'equality' and 'liberty' has changed to give women the same standing as men.

The Power to Include and to Exclude

The values of the republic, then, embody the values of the French citizens themselves at a particular time. Those who are counted as citizens have the moral as well as the political right to define, and to then refine, what values the republic has. If you are not regarded as a citizen, then you must simply conform to the values as they are given. Anyone who cannot, or will not submit in this way, is seen to have demonstrated their unfitness to be citizens.

While most of France's Muslim population are formally citizens, their legitimacy as 'true' citizens is very often much in doubt in many people's minds amongst the non-Muslim majority. This puts them in a very precarious position, rather closer to being non-citizens than full citizens. Instead of being empowered to challenge French values, as for example a (white, non-Muslim) feminist might as she sought to overturn centuries of patriarchal oppression, Muslims are required to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment as citizens through acquiescence.

A philosopher who was very aware of the power that those who had control over determining the values of a political community had to either include or exclude others was Frederick Douglass. The values and institutions of a republic, he argued, must be the collaborative outcome of all its citizens. Any other arrangement will result in a subtle and intangible, but very real, imbalance of status and influence. Since no opportunity to exercise power over others ever goes unused, once social inequality is permitted, it will be exploited. As power is exploited, inequalities begin to multiply and spread from one part of society to another, creating ever more opportunities for domination and

division. Ultimately the unity of the republic is broken. If a republic becomes divided, it ceases to be a republic since there is no longer a united body of citizens which is, in essence, the very essence of a republic.



[Picture: Robert on [Flickr](#)].

Republican theory, whether in America or in France, has traditionally been written by the winners. It was the victors in the French Revolution, for example, who provided the basis for the foundational principles that govern France today. What is so fascinating about Douglass's work is that he wrote from the perspective of a slave, as one oppressed rather than protected by the republican society within which he lived. This gives him a unique and very different perspective on the use and abuse of social power and stigmatisation.

An escaped slave himself, Douglass became a prominent leader of the abolitionist movement and an important statesman, serving as ambassador to Haiti for example. Despite his achievements, living as a black man in a white America was an experience he regarded as slavery no less than during his days of captivity.

Comparing Modern France and Reconstruction Era America

It may seem odd, if not far-fetched or even offensive, to compare the situation of French Muslims today with that of liberated American slaves. My intention is not to focus on the notion of slavery itself but on the question of integrating new populations into republics that already have very firmly established national values, especially where the new population is much poorer and subject to social hostility. Seen this way, we can see several parallels between the two cases.

After the Civil War, there were some 4 million slaves that were now part of the republic whose population was around 30 million (around 13%). They were regarded as being too different and alien from the existing population to be easily accommodated. They also started from a highly disadvantaged position, entering civic life without homes, capital, employment, education or personal networks. In spite of this, they were expected to respect, submit to, and uphold America's values as these were already understood through the revolution and constitution.

The Muslim population is around 5 million out of over 60 million (8%). And while the evidence shows that French Muslims are, on many measures very well integrated (they

have a predominantly favourable view of the republic, for example, and see themselves as citizens, more so than for their counterparts in some other European nations), they are nevertheless the subject of suspicion and treated as being potentially hostile. On many measures, the Muslim population is highly disadvantaged economically, socially and politically. They earn considerably less and are more likely to be unemployed. Their levels of education are substantially lower. They make up a staggering 70% of the prison population. Finally, the arrival in significant numbers of Muslims into France has been after the establishment of the republic and so they are expected to live under values that have already been defined and accepted.

The Birth of a Republic

If a republic is meant to be the reflection of the values of the citizens taken as a whole, then part of what this means is that all the social groups that live within it can potentially have some input into defining or redefining what those values are.

Just as in France, when the American republic was created its first generation of citizens had the clearest opportunity to establish its principal values by drafting the constitution and setting up the core institutions of democracy and justice. Each subsequent generation of white citizens has been able to see itself represented in those earlier decisions. These generations are also recognised as the legitimate heirs who have been given the moral right to make changes to the republic as their ideas and interests shift over time (such as by including women as citizens).

When the slave population was liberated, an enormous cohort of 4 million new citizens was instantly created. They

had had no say in establishing the values and institutions of their new country. Nevertheless, they were expected to demonstrate their fitness and loyalty as citizens by submitting to and supporting its ideals and institutions. This presented them with something of a dilemma.

On the one hand, these values can be seen as universal and timeless. They included the ‘self-evident’ truths of the Declaration of Independence, based upon unalienable rights endowed by the creator and including equality, freedom, and democracy. At the same time, on the other hand, as they were practiced these were the very same set of principles that had kept black Americans in slavery for more than two centuries. This contradiction was not lost on them.

One implication of black citizens being subjected to a set of ideals, no matter how worthy and universal they might be, was that it reinforced the idea that white citizens were of a higher social status, and that this gave them a greater legitimacy. W. E. B. Du Bois, an early black theorist, captures just this thought, writing that for all that was fine about ‘American values’, their default status had simply served to “make the English New England stock dominant in the United States.”

It was after all, he said, their “fine language and democratic ideals and freedom of thought” that had created the country. ‘Lesser’ men, he added, by which he meant the “Negro, Jew, Irishman”, on the other hand, were admitted only “as dumb laborers or silent witnesses” and must be “willing to surrender their will and deeds to the glory of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’!”[\[4\]](#)

A Battle over Ideas

This inequality in status created a tacit but very real imbalance between the dominant white population, who represented the custodians of the nation's values, and those others (particularly the former slaves) who would always be on trial under those values.

Cultural subordination, according to Frederick Douglass, is fundamental to sustaining any form of oppression over time. The ability to exclude others from the benefits of society and to withhold or render ineffective the legal protections it offers, gives those in dominant positions in society an incalculable power. This advantage, he argues, never goes unused. Building on the old republican saying that 'power corrupts', he shows that it is not just individuals who hold power that are affected. The whole society becomes riddled with intrigue, power struggles and mind games as the desire to dominate others spreads from one relationship to another.

Where anyone holds a substantial enough amount of power over another that you could call it domination, Douglass argues that a struggle for control is inevitably brought into play between the two parties. Both dominator and dominated must compete by any means they can to outdo each other, the one to maintain power, the other to try to gain some control over their lives. Between human beings, this competition is waged in the mind as each side attempts to outthink the other, devising more effective strategies and deceiving their opponents. Speaking specifically of the relationship between masters and slaves, Douglass observes that "it is the interest and business of slaveholders to study human nature... Conscious of the injustice and wrong they are every hour perpetrating, and knowing what they themselves would do if made the victims of such wrongs".^[5] The basic principle can be generalised for any power struggle.

It is not enough simply to try to beat your opponent personally. Each side must also try to win others over to their side and do their best to discredit the other side. The result, Douglass concludes, is a propaganda war in which truth is set aside in favour of manipulation and rhetoric. The inevitable outcome of this process, Douglass continues, is the corruption of the original values of society as these become twisted into the service of whoever can control them. For a political community like a republic that relies fundamentally on the unity of citizens around shared values, this is devastating.

Again, drawing on the example of slavery but illustrating a wider point, Douglass argues that it was not enough for slaveholders simply to keep their own slaves quiet. The task of subjecting four million people, around a sixth of the population, required a co-ordinate effort in which the wider public would come to accept the practice of slaveholding as legitimate.

With this level of motivation and mutual cooperation, Pro-slavery supporters were able to infiltrate and eventually take over, each of the important cultural and political institutions of the state. The interests of the slaveholders, Douglass said, became “woven and interwoven with the very texture—with the whole network—of our social and religious organizations”. Slavery, he added “has not only framed our civil and criminal code, it has not only nominated our presidents, judges, and diplomatic agents, but it has also given to us the most popular [religious] commentators... in America”.[\[6\]](#) With backing like that, how could they lose?

It takes two to ‘tole’ the truth

The values of a republic really matter, according to Douglass. It's not their precise content that matters, nor exactly how they are manifested. What matters is who is seen to be in control of them and how they are used in order to maintain social and political power for some, and to exclude and alienate others. Following his reasoning, many of the current racial problems in the United States today have their roots in this very same battle, such as the disproportionate police violence against African American citizens and the struggle over whether Black Lives Matter.

So what would Douglass argue had to happen before the freed black population would be fully integrated into American society? He is sometimes said to be an ‘assimilationist’, on this point, somewhat along French lines whereby the black population would be required to adopt the culture and value of the pre-existing white America and to disappear from view as a distinct group. Nothing could be further from the truth. His conclusion is far more radical.

The work of full integration, he said, requires “nothing less than a radical revolution in all the modes of thought which have flourished under the blighting slave system”.[\[7\]](#) We should not underestimate what this means. Americans, he insists, will have to “reconstruct the whole fabric of... society”. But this can only be done together, collaboratively and collectively, across class, religious, gender and racial boundaries. “No one man can tell the truth”, Douglass sums up, “Not even two men of the same complexion, sometimes can tell it. It requires a white man and a black man - as black as he can be – to “tole” the whole truth”.[\[8\]](#)

Back to Charlie Hebdo

In discussing the significance of social inequality and the role of republican values, I am not speculating in any way about what the actual causes of the Charlie Hebdo attacks were. Those causes – if they are even knowable – are likely to be complicated, varied and very murky. My purpose has only been to examine the implications of the subsequent rhetoric about defending the republic's values in an ideological war.

While there is clearly far more to creating a culturally integrated and cohesive society than creating a set of shared values, it is important to recognise that these are not simply abstract concepts without any real meaning in people's lives. The work of philosophers like Douglass shows how the power to define values is foundational to any society, establishing the baseline from which the emerging society is then constructed. (Economic, legal and political equality must then follow, of course, or else the power inequalities that result in those areas will in their turn be exploited leading to the same eventual social breakdown.)

When a tragedy like the events in the offices of Charlie Hebdo strikes a nation, it is inevitable that its people will reflect upon how such a thing could have happened from within their midst. The reaffirmation of the values that they had believed they all stood for as a country is invariably a part of this process. Doing this has the potential either to unify or to further divide the nation. Which of these it does will be a result of the structure of social and status inequalities in place when the call to reassert and protect 'our' values goes out.

A unified society must be one in which its defining values reflect the ideas of all its citizens inclusively. For this to happen, there must be a genuine status equality between those citizens so that everyone has the opportunity to speak out for change and everyone has a realistic chance to be

heard and to help amend those values where they have become disconnected with their people.

Douglass knew that this would not be an easy goal to achieve and he knew that it would take a long time. “The spirit of caste is everywhere” in society, he said, pitching not just races against each other (“the bordermen hate the Indians, the Californian the Chinaman”) but also religions, as well as rich and poor.[\[9\]](#) But the public acknowledgement that we are all equal in coming together to discuss, define and renew our collective values is the platform upon which this process must begin.

Footnotes & References

[\[1\]](#) Hidalgo: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2015/01/07/97001-20150107FILWWWoo347--charlie-hebdo-anne-hidalgo-va-faire-de-charlie-hebdo-un-citoyen-d-honneur-de-la-ville-de-paris.php>;

Hollande: <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs/events/article/attack-against-charlie-hebdo> ;

Valls: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/10/manuel-valls-radical-islam_n_6449414.html

[\[2\]](#) In general, I find the label ‘Muslim’ very unhelpful since it glosses over the diversity that characterises a large population that has roots in very different countries, traditions and practices. However, since I’m making a general point, I use the term with caution.

[\[3\]](#) On the integration of Muslims in France, see: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey>

cage/wp/2014/07/29/are-french-muslims-integrated-depends-on-what-you-mean-by-integration/

[4] “Americanization” in *The Crisis Magazine*, 1922, issue 24, reprinted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 383-4.

[5] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom*, London: Penguin, p. 202.

[6] Frederick Douglass, “A Farewell to the British People”.

[7] Frederick Douglass, “The Work of the Future”.

[8] Frederick Douglass, “Good Men are God in the Flesh”.

[9] Frederick Douglass, “This Decision has Humbled a Nation”.