



# To be or not to be #CHARLIE - IS that the question?

written by Sylvain Piron  
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Over the past week 'the world' has been in shock over the murders of the Charlie Hebdo journalists - or has it? We consider this issue via a debate that ignited on the subject among core members of Allegra's editorial team as we contemplated on how best to address these events.

*Is Allegra Charlie or is it not - or perhaps rather: is this even a relevant question to ask?*

## Sylvain

I would like to reflect on the opportunity to write somewhere something like: "Allegra is Charlie". I know that Charlie Hebdo's style is about the opposite of many of your tastes - or so it may seem. But here, in Paris, this phrase means precisely that we are willing to defend the right of anyone to laugh about



anything, even when it's not our taste, as the very basis of democracy. And this is, I suppose, a core value of Allegra.

## **Antonio**

Let me first say that what happened in Paris is horrible, wrong, dramatic. We cannot be other than sorry for the victims of such cowardly violence. What I find disturbing, however, is what mainstream media take for granted, that is the killing of French people in Paris is perceived by the media to be an event that is much more shocking than dozens of Afghans killed in Afghanistan or civilians killed in Pakistan, Nigeria, and so on.

Such parochialism - which is the rough version of ethnocentrism - is deeply unjust. Political (or religious, ethnic...) violence is bad always and everywhere, not only when it knocks on our door.

*I think democracy suffers when freedom of expression is questioned, but also when it is exported through bombings. The mainstream reaction to these shootings was that we should have more efficient security regimes and that we should all be free to laugh about anything. Is this enough to understand the current situation?*

If we have to go with a slogan (something that I do not see as necessary), why not "Allegra is X" - ? Whereby X can be Charlie, but also the unknown victim of a drone attack.

## **Julie**

I do not feel comfortable with the 'Je suis Charlie' slogan either. It makes me think of Bush's famous catchphrase after 9/11: 'Either you are with us or you are against us'. The potential side effect of such a statement is that those who are not joining the chorus of self-proclaimed 'Charlies' are automatically perceived as suspicious, as traitors to liberal democratic values. As human rights lawyer Scott Long powerfully phrases it in a [recent blog post](#):



*Our solidarity, our ability to melt into a warm mindless oneness and feel we're doing something, is contingent on your involuntary solidarity, your losing who you claim to be in a menacing mass. We can't stand together here unless we imagine you together over there in enmity. The antagonists are fake but they're entangled, inevitable.*

Since this horrible massacre occurred, people have massively re-posted controversial front covers of Charlie Hebdo on their Facebook page to show their solidarity with the victims. But was it really necessary?

I am not a big fan of Charlie Hebdo's humor and, in fact, I suspect most French people (including some of those who posted Charlie's cartoons on their walls) are not either. Charlie Hebdo went almost bankrupt in 2010 and was about to close down on several occasions. In any case, I understand some people have felt upset by its acid satires in the past, especially those who have to endure racism and discrimination on an everyday basis. It is always easier to laugh at oneself when one is not the constant target of public scrutiny, as is the case with French Muslims since 9/11. I don't want to go into the details here, but over the past 10 years, many laws aiming at regulating Muslims' presence in public (the law banning headscarves in schools in 2004, the law banning niqabs in public spaces in 2010, to name just a couple) have been implemented, all of them justified by the necessity to defend a very narrow and exclusionary version of 'laïcité'.

Allegra is NOT Charlie simply because Allegra would rather make fun of the powerful than the most vulnerable segments of society. And Allegra is 'feminine' enough to remember that feminists have often been portrayed as humourless and hysterical for exactly the same reasons as European Muslims who struggle for equality today.

This is not to justify the horrible actions of the criminals who committed this massacre: it needs to be condemned without any hesitation and freedom of speech has to be defended. But like any right, perhaps the time has come to define collectively what responsibilities freedom of speech should entail.



*At a moment of crisis like this one, I wonder whether it is possible to highlight the problem of double standards when it comes to freedom of speech.*

A few months ago, the French government banned demonstrations of support for the people of Gaza who were being savagely bombed by Israel and now this same government wants to present freedom of speech as a 'sacred' Republican value. But we all know that in every country, including France, there are limits to such a right. Freedom of speech, far from being sacred, is always contingent. [In 2005 Le Monde was found guilty of "racist defamation" against Israel and the Jewish people](#). In 2008 a cartoonist at Charlie Hebdo was fired after refusing to apologise for [making anti-Semitic remarks in a column](#). It is interesting to note that none of the cartoons that portrayed Muslims as terrorists received similar treatment.

Another important question is whether, after such a traumatic event, there will be room to reflect on France's colonial legacy and its unavoidable racist repercussions. Or will the call for 'National Unity' once again promote an abstract and a-historical version of Republican principles (Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité)?

*Will it be possible to say: 'Because of my specific position, as a woman, as a Muslim, I am not Charlie but I still feel the same pain as you'?*



JE SUIS  
AHMED

## Sylvain

To Antonio first: I reached my full political awareness at the age of 12 by reading John Donne's poem that Hemingway used at the opening of his novel For Whom the Bell Tolls:

*No man is an island  
Entire of itself  
Every man is a piece of the continent  
A part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea  
Europe is the less.*

*As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:*



*Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,*

*And therefore never send to know  
for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

I suspect that it is for the same type of moral reason that we all engage in social sciences, because of this deep universal solidarity with mankind. Any massacre, wherever it happens, diminishes us, makes us enraged.

So what is the difference?

The shooting took place in surroundings where I used to live. I knew well one of the cartoonists, who survived by chance. Because of this proximity, I am deeply shocked. I am also hurt as a French citizen by this action committed by fellow countrymen. Yet this is surely not the point.

One main difference, I believe, is that the daily massacres that take place in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Irak, Syria, Nigeria, etc., happen in places that are in a state of civil war. This is a most horrendous way of fighting. Our indignation melts in a vaster bitter powerlessness in the face of such wars.

The other crucial fact is that here ten journalists or workers of a magazine and two policemen were shot in cold blood for ideological reasons. Killing journalists in the name of an ideology has universal implications – and this is the meaning of the expression of solidarity that has taken the form of this slogan. The killers claimed: “we killed Charlie”; the slogan answers: “Charlie’s not dead”.

I am not especially happy with the slogan, but now that it is launched, the question is to endorse it or not. Or contradict it.

*What I would like for us to reflect on is the meaning of the verb of the slogan. “I am Charlie” does not mean that I agree with their drawings and would publish them. Certainly not. It means, as John Donne has it, I am Charlie because I am a*



*part of mankind and believe in freedom of speech, even when it takes the form of bad taste humor.*

Allegra is surely not Charlie's style, which belongs to peculiar tradition of French anarchism, strong on anticlericalism, antimilitarism and rejection of all authority. But Allegra is about doing the social sciences in a joyful way, breaking with boring conventions – and Charlie is certainly the least politically correct journal in the world.

Maybe this is one for tetravalent logic, instead of binary. Not only yes vs. no, but also “neither nor” or “yes and no at the same time”. This is the most difficult answer, but also the most interesting. Allegra is and is not Charlie – and I hope you understand why I think that in a much stronger way it is than it is not.

## **Julie**

I do not want to overemphasize my concerns with Charlie's content. However, I want to mention quickly that I hear in Charlie the voice of middle-aged middle-class bourgeois white men from a certain leftist/anarchist tradition, which has historically denied women and minorities a voice.

Charlie was inherently misogynist and ironically, became even more islamophobic with the entrance of a woman, Caroline Fourest, to its editorial board. To me, Charlie's history embodies the failure of the left to diversify itself and give space to other representative segments of society. I think Olivier Cyran, a former journalist of Charlie Hebdo who decided to resign when the journal's editorial line became morally problematic, summarizes this failure quite well [in this article](#).

*Does it mean that to express support to the victims, I need to hold a 'Je suis Charlie' sign? I don't think so. I think we can be horrified, saddened, and angry about this attack against freedom of speech and still remain careful that our humanist ideals are respectful of everyone.*



In my view, this distance is necessary to keep nationalist emotions at bay and start unpacking the reasons for which such a horrific event occurred. Only such a healthy distance can allow us to reflect on our collective responsibility in creating the conditions that pushed these young French men to carry out calculated acts of political violence.

A black rectangular poster with the text 'JE NE SUIS PAS CHARLIE' in white, bold, serif capital letters, arranged in three lines.

**JE NE  
SUIS PAS  
CHARLIE**

### **Luigi**

I confess that I agree with Julie and Antonio. Having said that, Sylvain, what you say makes much sense in many ways. I like John Donne's poem – I did not know it before your email.

You may be right when you say that our engagement in social sciences is – at least in part – motivated by a similar moral commitment. In a seminal article that appeared in *Current Anthropology* in 1995, Nancy Scheper-Hughes remarks that “above and outside the political fray is where most anthropologists cautiously





position themselves.”

*Scholars, especially anthropologists, have been afflicted by a haughty intellectual aloofness in the name of a cultural relativism that reads more and more as moral detachment.*

However, as experts who study how power, domination, and structural violence affect everyday life, anthropologists and social scientists should be well positioned to take a clear political stance. This is what you, Sylvain, urge Allegra to do, and I agree with that.

I also understand your “personal involvement”. It does matter that the shooting happened in the proximity of your friend’s house and that, in general, has clear imbrications with your daily life. We all are more sympathetic toward tragedies that touch us more directly. I myself operate by the same logic. When I feel compelled to act, this usually happens in response to the atrocities committed against Palestinians – people with whom I have lived for years.

However, I am not sure I understand where you want to go with your distinction between places that are in a state of civil war and those that are not; I am not comfortable with this clear-cut distinction. Of course, I am perfectly aware that living in any European country is not like living in Syria today. Yet, civil wars do not happen in a vacuum. It is hardly striking that two of the three suspects in the Charlie Hebdo shooting have been suspected of carrying out the killing upon their return from the Syrian civil war.

I actually think that our hamletic doubt – to be Charlie or not to be Charlie – is explained by a different understanding of universalism. “I am Charlie” is not a universal appeal against violence; not in a context where civil wars – as you, Sylvain, seem to acknowledge as well – are never just internal and bounded conflicts.

In our world, “I am Charlie” means overlooking the political context; it means de-



historicising the construction of political ideologies, and hiding history behind a one-way universalism that does little to account for injustices perpetrated elsewhere – the very same injustices that can also have dramatic reverberations where we live.

*I think that embracing “Charlie” – rather than “x” – is dangerous because it inevitably shifts attention toward a very specific “here” and “now” that smells of ethnocentrism – or parochialism as Antonio put it.*

But more than that, since what happened at Charlie Hebdo has to be placed in a historical and political context, this over-emphasized slogan may support the claims of those who confuse “universal peace” with “universal justice”. In other words, it sounds to me more like a call to endorse counter-terrorism: terrorism’s best bedfellow. My advice is to be careful.

*“Being Charlie” is a malicious slogan that may lead us to involuntarily evoke the very same evil that we want to fight.*

A black and white graphic featuring the French phrase "JE SUIS JUIF" (I am Jewish) in a bold, sans-serif font. The text is centered on a solid black rectangular background. The words "JE SUIS" are in white, while "JUIF" is in a light gray color.



## Sylvain

Answering Julie this time: The prevalent racism in this society that you mention is something I understand as the unending and undigested Algerian war – this is not the place to elaborate on this history, perhaps it should be the topic of a separate Allegra post.

(However, briefly: De Gaulle called for an amnesty on the events, preventing any serious discussion or the production of a shared pluralist memory of what happened; no novelist had the courage to produce a masterpiece that would have brought together all sides of the conflict; the mass of young conscripts who had to fight barely made their memories public and grew bitter silently; the mass of refugees who had to leave and their descendants are the main electoral basis of National Front; youngsters of the third generation of immigrants identify intensely with an Algeria they never even visited, etc.).

I may be wrong on this, but I care much less than you do about Charlie's ugly drawings and bad jokes. I totally disagree with them when they reproduce the common French obsession about Muslim women wearing the veil.

*Yet – and here we may disagree: it is for the very same reason that I defend the right of everyone to wear whatever one wants – especially women – that I also defend the right to publish ugly drawings and bad jokes.*

However, and here I think you misunderstood my point, I never claimed that Charlie has anything to do with universal ideals. I only meant that a democracy has to make room for bad jokes and ugly drawings. This might even be a crucial test for a democracy.

Now, Luigi, my rough distinction was a way to answer Antonio about why we react more to this event than to any slaughter taking place elsewhere. My point was that it is understandable that public reaction is stronger to a terrorist attack taking place in a peaceful society than to one taking place in the midst of a civil



war – and this is not strictly parochialism.

But things are certainly connected. The guy who fired the shots was trained in Yemen. Hundreds of young French guys joined Daesh in Syria and Iraq. They certainly want to involve us in a global civil war.

To move now to the central point. My real question to you was: In what way should Allegra react to what is happening? I certainly was not asking to simply publish the slogan unquestioned, but I felt we could not remain silent. Like Antonio, I don't think a slogan is necessary. But now that it has been so widely circulated, shared by Marc Zuckerberg and shown on the Nasdaq screen, it is important to reflect on it.

What it meant in the first place was a purely emotional response, something like: I feel personally wounded by this attack. In no way does it imply identifying with or sharing Charlie Hebdo's views.

The slogan as such has no strong content beyond this emotional response. Luigi, you are totally right about the risk of de-historicisation what it involves. Yet, since I am in Paris and I know what the real Charlie was (utterly antimilitarist), I cannot imagine that the slogan as such would encourage counter-terrorism.

This may be naive or stupid, but what I had in mind is the following: people around the world are emotionally sympathising with a Charlie they know nothing about, simply because of the horror of the shooting and because journalism is involved.

*This global emotion is thus creating an imaginary Charlie, that is, for the time being, like an empty shell. This situation opens the way for us to imagine what an ideal Charlie should be – a Charlie that would have very little to do with the real one, if it has to be the embodiment of “universal peace” and “freedom of speech” at the same time.*

On the contrary, it would have to contain by necessity a number of qualities such



as respect, tolerance, lack of racial and religious prejudice, defence of the weakest, ability to reflect on concrete social and historical situations, but it would still uphold the urge to be able to laugh at the worst – something that would look exactly like what Allegra should be. I think this is what I really meant when I proposed this absurd identification.



## **Judith**

When thinking about #JeSuisCharlie, one way to interpret the public reaction would be to say that people are taking sides, or rather a side. “Taking sides” has been dealt with rather differently in anthropology throughout the last century: In structural-functionalist literature, for example, the “sides” were considered to be unproblematic (e.g., the structural opposition between Nuer lineages in Evans-Pritchard’s analysis) and understood as the structure that upheld social order. With the interpretative turn in anthropology came the awareness that “sides” needed to be imagined, postulated and made manifest first, while processual



approaches focused on the strategies of how this was being done. But taking sides is only the easiest way to think about social relations. I think it is worthwhile reconsidering the metaphor and the suggested positionality.

*From a phenomenological perspective, the question is not which side people are, but rather, one of the common ground on which everyone stands. While saying “Je suis...” is an act of solidarity, in many cases it is also the structural-functional default that allows the division of the world into “us” against “them.”*

It's not only the sides that matter – people often switch, as we know from conflict theory – it's the common ground that should not get out of focus: our shared humanity. This requires the willingness to reflect on one's own perspective, which, in turn, requires an awareness of the different perspectives from which others speak and act.

What is required is thus not only the expression of solidarity offered by siding with the victims, but also the almost unthinkable task of putting yourself in the place of the perpetrators. If we really want to understand, that is, to engage our “common” sense (Hannah Arendt) – and I agree with Hari Kunzru, who has [argued in The Guardian](#) that “[u]nderstanding is the least we owe the dead” – then it is not enough to state “Je suis Charlie,” and not enough to exclaim “Je suis Ahmed Merabet”. We will begin to understand only when we are also ready to ask – what if I was Saïd or Chérif Kouachi?

**Antonio**

I'm now reading what is going on in Nigeria. I cannot help myself from thinking that accepting the idea that in certain places the death of people due to war and violence is considered somehow “normal” is something that may not simply affect any idea of democracy, but indeed demolishes the very idea of humanity.

**Sylvain**



What Boko Haram did is act of war against civilians that should qualify as genocide. It is a hundred times worse, Antonio, but it belongs to a different category.

And the dozens of heads of state and government who want to walk with the Paris people, on what is the usual route for unionists protests, is just obscene beyond imagination.

But just to let you know, things are over now. We heard some explosions, from Porte de Vincennes around 5 pm. It is said that the terrorist there died in the police assault. At Dammartin, the two brothers were also killed in the police attack.

## **Antonio**

It is also a problem of categories, yes. And according to widely accepted “categories,” the massacre of “civilized” Europeans is mediatically considered more shocking than the massacre of the “underdeveloped”. The reaction that we can expect by Europeans on war and political violence perpetrated “elsewhere” is at best a form of humanitarian solidarity which implies that by giving a fistful of Euros to an NGO we have done our duty.

*However, it is worth recognizing that, in our world, there’s no “elsewhere” for political violence and war, there’s no “other place”. Because of their causes and implications, these forms of political violence occur always here.*

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*This exchange took place in between Jan 9 and 11, 2015. We expect the aftermath of these events has not even started. Different in its details, these events bring to mind a film released exactly 20 years ago: Mathieu Kassovitz’s [La Haine](#).*

*For those interested in knowing more about the 2 Kourachi brothers, [here is an](#)*



[interesting article](#) which provides important elements of explanation for their radicalisation.

