

INTRODUCTION

The Event of *Charlie Hebdo*—Imaginarities
of Freedom and Control



Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Alessandro Zagato

It's about a guy falling off the fiftieth floor of a skyscraper.
On his way down past each floor, he kept saying to reas-
sure himself:

So far so good ...

So far so good ...

How you fall doesn't matter.

It's how you land.

This is what a background voice says in the initial scene of the 1995 French film *La Haine* (Hate), directed by Mathieu Kassovitz. In the last scene, when Hubert (one of the protagonists, a migrant background young man from the *banlieues*, the multi-ethnic Parisian suburbs) and a policeman deliberately point guns at each other, the same sentence is repeated but with a slight modification, where the subject 'guy' is replaced with 'society': "It's about a society in free fall." Kassowitz's imagery and words evoke a scenario of urgency, desperation, and passive, almost suicidal—certainly nihilistic—acceptance of the impending final outcome. They perfectly encompass the sense one gets when witnessing events such as the 7 January 2015 attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris

and the subsequent attacks that took place in the Île-de-France region.

The figure of the fall and imminent impact represents the current zeitgeist and the sense of finitude shaping it. It points to a present that “from whatever angle you approach it ... offers no way out” (Invisible Committee 2007) and where, as has been repeated by many, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,”¹ the totalizing economic and social system that is leading the planet to environmental and social catastrophe. One can assume that a similar desperate feeling of closure, lack of hope, and agency led a group of men in their twenties, who had grown up in the *banlieues*, to get involved in a violent and suicidal mission such as that performed in Paris early this year. Beyond the crude materiality of their act, which is not the main point of analysis in this volume, some critical questions need to be considered. Symbolically, who or what was the target of those bullets? How did *Charlie Hebdo* come to represent absolute evil in the eyes of the attackers—an enemy that needed to be eliminated even at the cost of taking human life? What led so many people to identify immediately and simultaneously with the victims of the shootings and the value of freedom of speech, which the journal all of a sudden seemed to fully embody? Which imaginaries has this violent occurrence invigorated or reactivated? And, finally, what do the political and state responses tell us about current social orders in France and beyond?

Inspired by such questions, the present volume aims primarily to be a contribution and a critical response to the enormous and varied amount of discussion that this violent and spectacular event has ignited among citizens and intellectuals from around Europe and beyond. Our aim here is *not* to propose an alternative or more detailed reconstruction of what occurred during the attacks but to

analyze the effects that they have had in various spheres of social life, including politics, the state, ideology, collective imaginaries, the media, and education, among others. We start from the observation that the events being popularly attributed to *Charlie Hebdo* go beyond the sensationalist headlines of the mainstream media, transcend the spatial confines of nation-states, and lend themselves to an ever-expanding number of mutating discursive formations.

In our view (and following Mari Korsbrekke's argument in her article), more than representing a historical rupture—the emergence of something novel or to some extent separated from current historical conditions and themes—the shootings constitute an intensification of current processes. It is a moment in which patterns of social life become more evident as well as easily identifiable and analyzable. In the first place, the *Charlie Hebdo* event has shed light on the present evolution and consolidation of contemporary processes concerning statehood (including related ideological formations) and politics.

Today, the most manifest feature of the state—beyond the ruthless demolition of its democratic functions—is perhaps its militaristic nature and ever-growing war-mongering tendencies. Present-day accelerated processes of external and internal militarization are reflected in the proliferation of new war zones in many areas of the planet, in particular since the declaration of 'infinite war' by the Bush administration. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military expenses have increased rapidly in areas like Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East where "[a] combination of high oil prices until the latter part of 2014 and numerous regional conflicts contributed to rising military expenditure in several of the major spending countries in these regions" (SIPRI 2015).

Campaigns of extermination conducted over the last two decades in the name of peace continue as low-intensity warfare, even after they are declared terminated and various forms of peace are formally declared at official levels. The feeling is that the goal of these activities is to turn societies into a sort of manageable chaos. In cases like Iraq (since 1990), Afghanistan (since 2001), Libya (since 2011), and Syria (since 2011), among other countries, war seems to be aimed at destroying “any cohesiveness of the state, and to replace it with a combination of direct military occupation and economic corruption. As the philosopher Alain Badiou has recently argued in a lecture at the University of Bologna, the objective of ... military intervention is to create plebeian masses everywhere deprived of any capacity of collective cohesion” (Pozzana and Russo 2005: 208). Governments and their military apparatuses seem, in other words, to be implementing violent fragmenting and atomizing processes aimed at the eradication of any collective political capacity of a society.

Nearly 10 years ago, Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo (2005: 208) observed that Western military interventionism is diverging substantially from previous forms of imperialism in that now its aim is “the dislocation and disarticulation of the state’s civil functions ... [T]he present military campaigns are only the first steps in a plan to fully militarize the state.” In light of current worldwide developments, their remarks are revealed to have been truthful. Indeed, the evolution of war they were analyzing is now mirrored in the internal militarization of states on a global scale, including intense policing practices that increasingly resemble low-intensity warfare. Crucial here is that, following the terror attacks of September 2001, some of the most powerful countries in the world officially elevated the threat of terrorism and the fight against it as a

priority in their global agendas. Constructed as a spectral and virtually ubiquitous (internal and external) threat, the ghost of Islamic terrorism has produced ideas of infinite and pre-emptive war. It has served as the pretext for the introduction of special laws and new security measures, the increase and diversification of military and policing expenditures, and the launch of new wars, especially in North Africa and the Middle East. In his article, Axel Rudi argues that the current militarization of Paris, in particular of the multi-ethnic *banlieues* circumscribing the political and commercial urban core of the capital, may be seen as integral to such a reconfiguration.

In some circumstances military strategies and actions are applied to situations that are close to civil war, as in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, which is an attempt to rebuild the black liberation movement in response to state racism and extrajudicial killings of Afro-American people by police and vigilantes. In other cases, militarization is implemented as a means to protect European borders and prevent African migrants and refugees from crossing them. The recent massacres of migrants in Mediterranean waters constitute the outcome of the militaristic and legalistic approaches implemented by the European Union.

Current patterns of state action and evolution apply not only to the state's most basic and obvious apparatus: the military/police. They also shape other dimensions of statehood that Bruce Kapferer (2010) has put together under the idea of 'the corporate state'. On the one hand, the economic logic has become "ontologically foundational, permeating all social and political relations" (ibid.: 127). To live experiences that do not follow an underlying economic logic is becoming increasingly rare in personal spheres as well—to the point that authors like John Holloway (2010) see anti-capitalism as starting as resistance

of the ‘human’ against the inhumanity of the capitalist colonization of the most intimate aspects of life.

In the face of the above reflections, one could read the pure act that the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* represents as somehow mimicking and reproducing state-defined categories (e.g., the clash of civilizations) and the patterns of militarization that they ideologically support. But this act can also be seen as a desperate attempt to affirm a principle different from the overwhelming economic logic, as well as a rupture with that logic. Alessandro Zagato argues in his article that the attack can be viewed as a surrogate for a new politics of emancipation that has not yet been found. Depoliticization and the rule of money abandon the younger generations to a sense of disorientation that can be fulfilled by naturalized identitarian views, providing a sense of belonging and a way out of oppression and marginalization.

Added to this, the corporate state constantly implements preventive strategies aimed at coping with the eventual uprising of forms of resistance capable of destabilizing its order and threatening its legitimacy. Kapferer (2010: 132) argues that “the activity of the agents and agencies of the state in social production and the creation of its moral order—and in varying degrees the involvement of the citizenry—can be seen as a major strategy for addressing forces that may challenge or resist the state.” However, in view of events such as those we are dealing with in this volume, one could also argue that this production of a moral order and related strategies of counter-insurgency are in turn decisive in constructing the state’s own enemy. Indeed, one outcome of Western military interventionism in the Middle East has been the creation and expansion of terrorist organizations such as ISIS, while many violent forms of protest in European cities over the last decades have mirrored the structural forms

of racist, classist, and symbolic violence—“a violence of the category,” as Kapferer (ibid.: 133) puts it—that shape contemporary statehood.

In this respect, the wordless destruction that revolts such as the *banlieue* uprisings of 2005 and the London riots of 2011 displayed are the expression of needs and desires that are absolutely incompatible with the current social order. These rioters seemed to have no negotiable vindication to express—just pure antagonism. Of course, such events do not constitute an absolute novelty: as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: 234) highlight, *jacqueries*—organized rebellions “based on indignation”—have cyclically returned, “punctuating modern history” (ibid.: 237).² However, what is striking about the youth riots that have occurred over the past two decades is the institutional loneliness of the perpetrators—that is, the absence of any ties with political organizations.

Such a politics of insularity or, perhaps better, such an insularization of politics sheds light on the fact that official politics is increasingly detached from the reality of ordinary people, reduced to a sterile competition for state power, and highly colonized by economic logics. After the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Badiou has argued that “political proposals apart from the ruling consensus—proposals of a revolutionary and universal nature, able to organise these young people around an active, solid, rational political conviction—are disastrously weak, internationally” (see Watson 2015). Echoing the sterility of current political approaches, civil society’s response to the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* have followed a narrowly identitarian logic, counterposing European identity, based on Western exceptionalism and Enlightenment symbols, to Muslim fanaticism, as Axel Rudi’s and Knut Rio’s contributions to this volume clearly highlight. Even the mainstream left-wing journal *La Libération*, on the morning of 8 January,

had “La France debout” (France Stands) as a headline—a slogan that was used historically by several French governments with nationalist and populist purposes (see Rio’s article). This popular response perfectly overlapped that of the state: the government denounced the “barbarity” (in President François Hollande’s words) of the act, appealed for national unity, and encouraged people to come together en masse and demonstrate—a very curious occurrence in a society that values freedom of expression.

In his article, Jacob Hjortsberg interprets this state response as a massive superego spectacle in which everyone is called on to identify as a particular kind of moral subject (“I am Charlie”), apparently to defend something like satire, which is meaningful only as long as it refuses to be moral. At the level of ideology, the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* have touched upon multiple imaginaries of freedom that are integral to Western liberal democracy and its egalitarian grounds. These include, for instance, freedom of speech and secularity, with blasphemy constituting one of modernity’s great paradoxes, as Theodoros Rakopoulos’s article illustrates. However, the invocation of such freedoms is also frequently used as a narrative device to provide a sense of identity, as well as to demonize those who are perceived as not conforming to such imaginaries (e.g., an observant Muslim family in Paris). In some cases, they are made into tools of racism, bigotry, and exclusion, as in 2011 when ideas of free speech were called upon by Northern American Islamophobic groups campaigning to stop the television network Al Jazeera from expanding in the United States (Pilkington 2015).

From what is written above, it should be clear that we do not see the Paris attacks as erupting from an absolute void, as the media spectacularization of the *Charlie Hebdo* event may suggest. Such mainstream narrative renditions often seem to focus strictly on what Slavoj Žižek (2008:

2) has defined as “subjective violence,” that is, violence “experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level” and perceived as “a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things.” Seemingly, as if out of nowhere, there was an unexpected eruption of atrocity that threatened not only Paris but also France and ‘the West’. We do not see the attacks solely as expressing the ubiquitous and immanent threat from Islamic terrorism. Rather, we believe that they must also be understood against the background of a situation where racism and symbolic (structural) violence toward those who are considered non-European are widespread and historically rooted. In her article, Maria Styve illustrates how the long shadows of racialized and imperial politics (colonialism, for short) can help us to understand the defiance toward—or at least the non-total compliance with—the “Je suis Charlie” script that was implemented in French schools after the attacks.

A case in point is that the perpetrators were French citizens, born and raised in the Parisian *banlieues*. The fact that they chose to act as they did raises important questions about their motivations and the process of radicalization that they had undergone. Perhaps the fact that some of them were of Algerian descent can help us to relate their action to French colonization and the anti-colonial struggle, whose effects, we assert, are far from being over in France.

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Notes

1. "Introduction: Present Tense, Future Conditional," *Turbulence* 4 (2008): 3.
2. See Eric Hobsbawm ([1959] 1965) for a similar argument about such incidents of rebellion.

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