

Charlie Hebdo Reveals the West's Intra-Civilizational Clash

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There has been a lot of discussion about the reverberations of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack, with many commentators saying that it's further proof of Samuel Huntington's ['Clash of Civilizations'](#) thesis. That may be true to a certain extent, but such advocates are missing out on the deeper problem right under their own noses, and that's the West's intra-civilizational clash that the terrorists finally brought to the surface. While simmering for some time, it's now undeniable that Western civilization is clearly divided along three distinct fault lines: freedom of speech, multiculturalism, and self-identity. Each of these forms a foundational pillar of Western civilization, and their polarization into two diametrically opposed sides (especially in the wake of Charlie Hebdo) threatens to upend the flimsy ideological unity that has misleadingly been a hallmark of Western culture for years.

Flogging The Freedom of Speech

Western civilization loudly (and falsely) advertises itself as supposedly being the only one that cherishes freedom of speech. The popular outcry in the aftermath of the attacks was that the West shouldn't let the terrorists censor their personal expressions, no matter how vile and disrespectful they may be, hence the 'I am Charlie' slogan that has come to symbolize this attitude. *This extreme knee-jerk reaction came about because the said 'freedom' was physically under attack, but the West is actually divided over what exactly should constitute freedom of speech, and France serves as the perfect battleground of this intra-civilizational conflict.*



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On one hand, the extremely liberal elements in society '(the 'Charlies') advocate absolute freedom in saying whatever one pleases - provided that it doesn't contravene an unspoken political correctness that pervades society and is enforceable by law. Their thinking goes that one can be as Islamophobic as they please, but they can't be anti-Semitic or voice their support for terrorism. Talking unflatteringly about Jews can lead to [possible criminal charges](#) of "inciting religious hatred", while people that post positive things about the Charlie Hebdo terrorists (or [appear to do so](#)) are [immediately arrested](#) and charged with "inciting terrorism". The irony is that it took France until November 2014 to [jail its first returning jihadist](#) from Syria, and prior to that, it was only [investigating](#) such individuals. Anyhow, the extreme liberals exemplify the fact that 'freedom of speech' is merely just an emotional and selectively applied rallying cry to be evoked when it's politically convenient for their cause.

On the other side of the spectrum, there's been voices of moderation within France and the West that understand the responsibilities that come with any freedom, namely that of speech. They're against taking it to its extreme (and hypocritical) end and instead preach against all hateful iterations of expression, be it anti-Semitism or Islamophobia (although they still have a long ways to go in campaigning against [Russophobia](#)). Nonetheless, in the current political climate, these individuals are being labeled as having 'capitulated' to the terrorists, and full-scale information campaigns are now initiated to discredit this line of thinking, despite having millions of adherents. *This massive social cleavage is one of the main features of the West's intra-civilizational conflict, and the direction that it takes will have long-standing implications for how its society interacts with both itself and others.*

Rethinking Multiculturalism



Nicolas Sarkozy, then French president, shaking hands with Amedy Coulibaly, a terrorist who killed one policeman and four shoppers in a kosher supermarket in Paris early January 2015. This handshake took place on July 15 2009, at an official event at the Elysee palace, organised to promote apprenticeships for youth.

One of the staples of modern Western civilization has been the supposed sacredness of multiculturalism, an ideal that was previously immune to serious criticism with society. When it was formerly contested for being a naïve depiction of reality and nothing short of an impossible ideological project, its detractors were castigated as 'racists' and written off as 'right-wing extremists'. This authoritarian attitude towards civil discourse obviously conflicts with freedom of speech, but in the pursuit of hyper-liberalist ends, any means of self-contradiction are apparently excused. The ideological blindness that dictated such hypocritical policies facilitated the creation of ethnic and religious ghettos in major Western cities, whose non-Western immigrant or immigrant-descended inhabitants refused to assimilate and integrate into the larger society.

Putin pointed out in 2012 how multiculturalism is a failed concept, [writing](#) that it "elevates the (idea of the) 'right of minorities to be different' to the absolute and, at the same time, insufficiently balances this right with civil, behavioral, and cultural obligations in regard to the indigenous population and society as a whole." This in turn creates "closed national and religious communities...which not only refuse to assimilate, but [do not] even adapt...neighborhoods and entire cities where generations of immigrants are living on welfare... (and) do not speak the language of the host country." The Russian President's assessment is extremely accurate, and it gave a voice to the millions of disgruntled Western citizens who had frustratingly been saying the same thing for decades but to no avail. Now, considering that the Charlie Hebdo attackers are the spawn of such an ideological creation as multiculturalism, moderate opposition to this radical concept is now growing, and with it, the potential for further conflict within the West's civilizational space.

National Realities vs. Transnational Fantasies

The conflicts over the proper expression of freedom of speech and the effectiveness of the multicultural ideal are indicative of a larger struggle over how Western countries self-identify, and whether it is as independent nations or subservient national appendages of a transnational entity. Put another way, are the people of France uniquely 'French' or are they just the French part of the larger European whole (and thus, responsible to the larger

hodgepodge entity)? This cultural question raises the larger and more salient issue of sovereignty and the degree to which its tradeoff is acceptable on behalf of an abstract 'greater good'.



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Moving away from intangible theory and toward the realm of practical examples, *one can see that France has historically been extremely proud of its cultural heritage and sees it as an integral part of its identity.* At the same time, however, the transnational concept of the EU and the free movement regime of the Schengen Zone have led to a relative dilution of France's prized identity asset, as multiculturalist influences from all across the world (including the non-Western Francophone one) moved in to replace traditional French culture. The French boast of their long-standing tradition of sarcasm and satire (especially in the defense of Charlie Hebdo), but the caustic reality is that the country itself has become a caricature, as the birthplace of Western liberal democracy turns into a post-modernist parody.

The more that France tries to become 'European', the more it loses its 'Frenchness', but conversely, any movement back to its national identity is criticized as 'fascist' and being 'against the European spirit'. Tragically, France is far from alone in facing this predicament, since the population of every EU member state is in the same sinking boat. Just as a Chinese finger trap strengthens its hold over someone the more animatedly they wiggle back and forth, so too are the national cultures of Europe ever more trapped in the jaws of their dilemma as they frantically oscillate between 'European' and national policies. Expect this debate to deepen all across the continent in the aftermath of Charlie Hebdo and for it to have the most impactful consequences of all for the societies comprising Western civilization.

Concluding Thoughts

A civilizational clash most certainly was brought to the forefront after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, but contrary to popular perception, it wasn't of the West versus Islam, but of the liberal and moderate elements of Western society fighting amongst themselves. 'Islamic' terrorists were the catalyst for truly setting this conflict into motion (which had been tensely building up until then), but regular Muslims (those who are not extremists and have successfully integrated/assimilated into their host states) are being blamed and victimized by boisterous elements of the Western press. *This convenient bait-and-switch approach blinds the mainstream population to the true internecine nature of the current intra-civilizational conflict and provides each ideologically opposing side with millions of scapegoats and scarecrows for their protracted struggle with the other. It's not known which side will come out on top, nor how long this fraternal conflict will drag on for, but the internal clash within Western civilization may certainly stall its members general progress in all spheres and contribute to the cancerous rot that has been eating away at the West for decades.*

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