# After the Paris attacks: It's time for a new Enlightenment

We must move past the tired debate that pits the modern west against its backward other and recover the Enlightenment ideal of rigorous self-criticism

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The perpetrators of the unconscionable massacre of Charlie Hebdo's journalists, and the gratuitous killing of French Jews at a supermarket, were the sort of young men who might have been little more than petty criminals in another era – disaffected drifters who are now susceptible to the pied-pipers of jihad. They preen in the costume of the pious for their propaganda videos, and betray easily their very modern brand of criminality. The Paris murderers claimed to be redeeming the honour of the Prophet Muhammad, but they made the most venerated figure in Islam seem like a small-time mafia boss.

Yet many commentators on the attacks have revived the very broad discourse of the clash of civilisations, which was fatefully deployed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to justify the war on terror, and resulted in the latter's catastrophic imprecisions. Once again the secular and democratic west, identified with the legacy of the Enlightenment – reason, individual autonomy, freedom of speech – has been called upon to subdue its perennially backward "other": Islam.

Describing the murderers as "soldiers in a war against freedom of thought and speech, against tolerance, pluralism, and the right to offend," the New Yorker's George Packer called for "higher levels of counter-violence". Salman Rushdie claimed that religion, "a medieval form of unreason", deserves our "fearless disrespect". However, many other writers have rejected a binary of us-versus-them that elevates a vicious crime into a cosmic war between secular Enlightenment and religious barbarism. There is a specific context to the rise of jihadism in Europe, which involves Muslims from Europe's former colonies making an arduous transition to secular modernity, and often colliding with its entrenched intellectual as well as political hierarchies: the opposition, for instance,

between secularism and religion which was actually invented in Enlightenment Europe. Writers such as Hari Kunzru, Laila Lalami, and Teju Cole – who have ancestral links to Europe's former colonies – have argued that the simplistic commentary on the attacks is another reminder that we must urgently re-examine these evidently self-sufficient notions from Europe's past.

In many ways, it is this intellectual standoff rather than the terrorist attack that reveals a profound clash – not between civilisations, or the left and the right, but a clash of old and new visions of the world in the space we call the west, which is increasingly diverse, unequal and volatile. It is not just secular, second-generation immigrant novelists who express unease over the unprecedented, quasi-ideological nature of the consensus glorifying Charlie Hebdo's mockery of Islam and Muslims. Some Muslim schoolchildren in France refused to observe the minute-long silence for the victims of the attack on Charlie Hebdo mandated by French authorities.

It seems worthwhile to reflect, without recourse to the clash of civilisations discourse, on the reasons behind these striking harmonies and discords. Hannah Arendt anticipated them when she wrote that "for the first time in history, all peoples on earth have a common present … Every country has become the almost immediate neighbour of every other country, and every man feels the shock of events which take place at the other end of the globe." Indeed, it may be imperative to explore this negative solidarity of mankind – a state of global existence in which people from different pasts find themselves thrown together in a common present. For Arendt feared, correctly as it turns out, that this inescapable "unity of the world" might result in a "tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else".

Differences of opinion are particularly stark between people whose lives are marked by Europe's still largely unacknowledged past of colonialism and slavery, and those who see metropolitan Europe as the apotheosis of modernity: the place that made the crucial breakthroughs in politics, science, philosophy and the arts. Such divergent experiences have long coexisted but they make for greater public discordance today. Europe no longer confidently produces, as it did for two centuries, the surplus of global history; and the people Europe once dominated now chafe against the norms produced by that history.

For many Anglophones, Paris has long evoked, from Henry James's The Ambassadors to a gamine Jean Seberg vending the Herald-Tribune in Godard's Breathless, a dream of sensuous pleasure and intellectual freedom. But an indigent immigrant or asylum-seeker in Europe today might find himself echoing the Austrian-Jewish novelist Joseph Roth, whose encounters in the 1930s with Europe's antisemitic bourgeoisie provoked him into angry generalisations about "the habitual bias that governs the actions, decisions, and opinions of the average western European". Roth's sense of ostracism was echoed by those who came to Europe from its colonies. Jacques Derrida, who grew up poor and Jewish in French Algeria in the 1930s, said that he was exposed at school to a history of France that "was a fable and a bible, but a semipermanent indoctrination for the children of my generation": it contained "not a word about Algeria". Today, many of those naturalised Europeans who originally arrived in the continent as cheap labour – mostly from countries Europe once ruled or dominated – still cannot recognise themselves in their host country's self-image.

Even in 2008, it was possible for the president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, to announce in the Senegalese capital of Dakar, that Africans have remained close to nature and "never really entered history". Many people so excluded from the history, politics, and economy of the modern world have manufactured their own partial or distorted historical views of Europe and the west. The righteous feeling of "humiliation" by foreigners has grown especially potent among many Muslims since the "counter-violence" after 9/11, which resulted in the murder and displacement of millions of people. The denizens of Parisian banlieues and Asian and African shantytowns, the ill-adjusted graduates of technical institutes, as well as the rote-learners of the Qur'an at madrassas, can now nurture an exalted

grudge against the world that denies them dignity.

Globalisation, while promoting economic integration among elites, has exacerbated sectarianism everywhere else

In a typically contradictory move, globalisation, while promoting economic integration among elites, has exacerbated sectarianism everywhere else. The sense of besiegement by "foreigners" with hostile values has also intensified in Europe as globalised financial markets restrict nation-states' autonomy of action; globalised labour challenges dominant ideas of citizenship, national culture and tradition, and globalised terrorism provokes the curtailment of civil liberties and a draconian regime of surveillance. Economic stagnation not only stokes anti-EU sentiment; it also boosts far-right parties in Europe, some of which, such as the Front National, have repackaged their foundational antisemitism, and now feed on fears of a continent overrun by Muslims. This paranoid fantasy, novelised most recently by the French writer Michel Houellebecq, who was featured on the cover of Charlie Hebdo days before the attack, has found many German believers, who in recent weeks have held massive protests in Dresden against the "Islamisation of the west". Demagogues such as the Dutch MP Geert Wilders, who has proposed expelling millions of Muslims from Europe, have gone mainstream.

But if we admit that another bloody purge of minorities in Europe is unthinkable, how then do we achieve a kind of modus vivendi? Ordinary people can be trusted more than the intelligentsia to achieve dignified coexistence in their myriad everyday transactions with the "other". Still, what should be the starting point of an intellectual effort to coexist: jihadist networks, the tradition of Parisian satire, the sanctity of free speech, the nature of religious hurt, or the conflicts and contradictions of a coercive negative solidarity? Certainly, we will need to understand afresh the relevance of the much-invoked Enlightenment – what Kant famously described as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity".

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The Enlightenment became possible in Europe when, as Kant defined it, individuals began to "dare to know" – to employ their reason without the intercession of any authority. The French Revolution actualised the Enlightenment's greatest intellectual breakthrough: detaching the political from the theocratic. The Revolution also helped create what the historian Jacob Burckhardt called "optimistic will" – the belief in progress, reason, and change, which France's revolutionary armies then spread across Europe and even into Asia.

As the 19th century progressed, Europe's innovations, norms and categories came to achieve a truly universal hegemony. Political institutions like the nation-state, aesthetic forms such as the novel, ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism and socialism, and processes such as science, technology, industrial capitalism became the reference points for the evaluation of any other form of human life, past and present.

Secularism was one of the more influential modern European norms – one that deemed traditional religion to be inferior to the new rational ways of understanding and improving human society. Confronted with Europe's unprecedented power, which was moral and intellectual as well as military, men in Asian and African societies either adapted to or resisted European ways. In both cases, they

ended up configuring ancient ways of life, ethical codes of conduct and cultures, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, along modern European lines. Constructs of the modern age, these newly cohesive faiths were often purged of their old otherworldly content and then infused by western-educated Asians and Africans with political purpose, reformist zeal, and even revolutionary content.

A great deal more secularisation has happened in the world since the 18th century, when a few European and American sages proposed a future in which individuals armed with reason and rights would bring about progress. Not all has gone according to plan. The post-Enlightenment history of Europe has rendered much of Voltaire's fearless disrespect for religion unacceptable – for instance, his denunciation of Jews as born fanatics who "deserve to be punished". Assimilation policies in secularised Europe failed to secure the rights of Jews, or to save them from discrimination and contempt, provoking a desperate Joseph Roth to remark that he preferred Europe's old "fear of God" more than its "so-called modern humanism". The Enlightenment's abstract notion of equal rights turned out to be weak by comparison to the imperatives of territorial and national sovereignty.

It is hard to imagine what Enlightenment philosophers would have made of Europe's self-perceptions today. Bookshops in France are gaudy with such titles as What's Wrong with France? France on the Brink, France in Denial, France in Freefall and, most recently, France's Suicide. The European continent on the whole resembles, according to Pope Francis, a "haggard grandmother". "Europe is ill," announces the Marxist critic Perry Anderson in a long recent article that depicts Berlusconi's Italy as a toxic "concentrate of Europe".

You don't have to be a Catholic, or a Marxist, to acknowledge that Europe is beset by serious problems: soaring unemployment, the unresolved crisis of the euro, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the stunning loss of a sense of possibility for young Europeans everywhere – events made intolerable for many by the invisible bondholders, exorbitantly bonused bankers, and the taint of venality that spreads across Europe's oligarchic political class. "Right in front of our eyes," the Polish thinker Adam Michnik laments in his new book The Trouble with History, "we can see the marching parade of corrupt hypocrites, thick-necked racketeers, and venal deputies." "Today, in our world," Michnik argues, "there exists no great idea of freedom, equality, and fraternity."

In these circumstances, the unspoken supposition that while everything else changes in the modern world, European norms should remain self-sufficient and unchangeable, deserving of unconditional submission from backward foreigners, makes you pause. As Tony Judt demonstrated in his magisterial Postwar, the notion of Europe as the embodiment of democracy, rationality, human rights, freedom of speech, gender equality was meant to suppress collective memories of brutal crimes in which almost all European states were complicit. They cannot be said to have reinvigorated the values of the Enlightenment in recent years, either. European nation-states, even those that did not participate in Anglo-American wars and occupations, facilitated extrajudicial execution, torture and rendition, which were originally sanctioned in the name of reason, freedom and democracy. Marine Le Pen has not got close to occupying the Élysée Palace by advocating pluralism and tolerance. Nicolas Sarkozy reportedly secured his tenancy there in 2007 with the help of a €50m donation from Libya's Gaddafi (Sarkozy denies the charge); he then committed a French version of blasphemy by claiming that the roots of France were "essentially Christian".

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Increasingly, the oppositions we have inherited from secularising 19th-century Europe – the irrational v the rational, archaism v modernity, or, indeed, secularism v religion – which are routinely deployed by many logrolling columnists, do not satisfactorily explain the world in the 21st century. Their assumption, of irreversible progress in the fully modern and secularised parts of the world, no longer holds.

Heavily armed nation-states, powerful corporations, and what seems to be ineradicable structural inequality characterise our age, along with rampant depoliticisation caused by a widely felt loss of individual and collective sovereignty. Enlightenment values of individual freedom are manifested best in individual acts of criticism and defiance. This is at least partly why Charlie Hebdo, which belongs to a tradition of small, plucky magazines, has provoked such spontaneous solidarity among artists, writers and journalists around the world. Most of modern art and literature emerges from this critical ethos of the Enlightenment, the relentless questioning of the claims of progress and civilisation. Intellectuals and writers who defend the leviathan state and its violence, and espouse lethal ideologies, have been rightly held guilty of trahison des clercs.

But so intense is the demoralisation of many previously regnant elites that historically self-aware criticism – the fundamental tenet of the Enlightenment – in recent decades has often shaded into fervent self-pity or equally zealous cultural nativism. On this spectrum exist popular tracts such as Éric Zemmour's France's Suicide and Pascal Bruckner's trendsetting The Tears of the White Man, which accuses those examining France's colonial past and minority problem as appeasers of fanatical Islamists and deluded multiculturalists. "White Man, What Now?" a much circulated essay by the well-regarded German novelist Matthias Politycki contrasts the overwhelming vitality, religious and physical as well as economic, of Asians and Africans with anaemic Europeans. "What value," Politycki asks, "does a completely enlightened ie godless society have with which to counter a (partially) unenlightened one?" And concludes dramatically "that this is the fundamental problem that has sealed the downfall of many great civilisations".

Pursuing imperial vigour and electoral advantage in Africa and the Levant, French leaders and intellectuals such as Bernard-Henri Lévy have only demonstrated, through their fiascos, the urgency of finding a more modest place for themselves in the world. It has become nearly impossible for Europe's political class since the financial crisis of 2008 to square their commitments to partners in business and finance and promises to the restless electorate. To cut spending on the welfare state while giving tax breaks to corporates requires many feints. Sarkozy dabbled in economic nationalism before moving on the politics of civilisation. Hollande's tenure, too, is chiefly distinguished by U-turns before cul-de-sacs. Immigrant-bashing can bring in votes, but it also helps the far right.

Self-regarding elites now haunted by premonitions of decay, and trapped in the clash between local democracy and global capitalism, face another, more existential challenge: it is the absence, as the historian Mark Mazower put it in 1998, of "an opponent against whom democrats can define what they stand for". The terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought a likely replacement for Nazism and communism in sight: "Islamic totalitarianism". This grand intellectual conceit was recklessly applied to a loose grouping of megalomaniacs, fanatics, delinquents and misfits, most of whom had thrived in the ecosystem of extremism (schools, mosques, newspapers, satellite channels) originally set up by

citizens of a stalwart western ally and theocracy, Saudi Arabia. It gained some persuasive power only after the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq, which radicalised a significant number of Muslims, provoking retaliatory attacks on European cities as well as the ravaging of large parts of Asia and Africa. The calamitous war has now spawned a nihilistic death-cult, resembling the Khmer Rouge, in Iraq and Syria.

The peril of Islamic totalitarianism has proven, in Europe at least, to be a poor substitute for the threat posed by nuclear-armed communism. Putin, recoiling into anti-westernism, has grabbed more European territory and killed more people; one of Europe's biggest terrorist attacks was mounted by not al-Qaida but an Islamophobic Norwegian blogger. Only 5% of the Muslim population in France, a variegated group, regularly attends a mosque; nearly 20% are atheist. Muslims, as much as Hindus and Buddhists, have long been undergoing their own Enlightenment-style transition from the sacralised world of meaningful symbols and signs to a disenchanted one of neutral facts, in which individual reason and judgment are more reliable guides than transcendent authority. All peoples from what was once known as the Third World are "condemned to modernity", as Octavio Paz once wrote. Muslims in Europe realise this fate not as a commercial bourgeoisie triumphing over a religious and aristocratic elite but as a poor minority subject to the compulsions and prejudices of an aggressively secular state with which they share a long and dark history.

The problems of Muslims in France mostly stem from the country's abnormally exclusive employment and education system. Some of these Muslims, who see the holy trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity as a cruel hoax, will embrace radical Islam and violent crime – the possibility, in general, of achieving manhood through senseless killing. Others will find through Islam a reconciliation with private pain. Its promise of justice will attract others. A large minority will turn away from religion altogether. Some of its members may still remain socially conservative and culturally Muslim. Contrary to what Rupert Murdoch thinks, there is no such thing as a single "Moslem" community: the worldview of a Tunisian bricklayer would always differ considerably from that of a Pakistani kebab vendor, let alone a Somali cabdriver. It is safe to say, however, that for many Muslims the exemplary life of the Prophet will continue to define codes of ethical conduct.

The rational morality of the Enlightenment, as even Jürgen Habermas, its most eloquent defender, concedes, "is aimed at the insight of individuals, and does not foster any impulse toward solidarity, that is, toward morally guided collective action". In an age where money is more than ever the measure of all things, secularisation can appear too much like despiritualisation, if not dehumanisation: a recipe for inauthenticity. And conflict is always likely if Asian and African minorities are forced to observe Europe's norms of secularisation, which not only enforce the relegation of such symbols of religious identity as the veil to the "private space" but can also abruptly stipulate that, as a much-cited slogan after the Paris attacks put it, "nobody has the right not to be offended".

The history of French colonialism has shaped the perceptions and self-perceptions of its north African minorities

Though too rarely discussed in official history and media discourses, the history of French colonialism has shaped the perceptions and self-perceptions of its north African minorities. The French in the 19th century identified the veil as a symbol of Islam's primitive backwardness; it was used to justify the brutal pacification of north African Muslims and to exclude them from full citizenship. Since

colonialist stereotypes continue to proliferate, many second- and third-generation Muslim women have creatively used the veil in charting their own path to the modern world. In 1989, three French girls deliberately risked expulsion by wearing headscarves to school. The veil for them was not only a badge of identity but also an assertion – one that a feminist Enlightenment philosopher might have admired – of freedom from the state's oppressive authority. The task confronting people condemned to modernity is "not so much to escape this fate", Paz wrote, "as to discover a less inhuman form of conversion", that "does not bring duplicity and split personalities in its wake, as is the case today". To acknowledge that there are many passages to modernity, each with its own complex strains, is to move toward a less unilateral view of humanity, and, perhaps, to the more accommodating form of secularism and democracy that is increasingly the need of the hour in an irrevocably multiethnic Europe.

Muslim women, however, were absent from the French debate on the foulard, whose tone was set by Jacques Attali comparing the veil to the Berlin Wall, and the philosopher André Glucksmann describing it as a "terrorist operation". (Confusingly, Bernard-Henri Lévy called it "an invitation to rape".) The hysterical denunciations yet again revealed how many of the Enlightenment's heirs and sentinels have lapsed from individual reason into a zealotry of the state, in which, as Joan Scott wrote in The Politics of the Veil, the reality of an "imagined France", one that is "secular, individualist, and culturally homogenous", can only be "secured by excluding dangerous others from the nation": by effectively proscribing a small piece of cloth that covers the head and neck.

The attempts to define French or European identity by violently detaching it from its presumed historic "other", and by setting up oppositions – civilised and backward, secular and religious – cannot succeed in an age where this "other" also possesses the power to write and make history. Economic globalisation, by prompting interdependence, seemed at first to be undermining nationalist or civilisational solipsism. In fact, as is revealed by the recrudescence of the clash of civilisations discourse, we are far from transcending obsolete and increasingly rigid notions of belonging and identity. The necessary discussion of flexible notions of citizenship and sovereignty or fluid identities – both imperative in the globalised age – is quickly pre-empted by blaming the incorrigibly medieval nature of religious people and their failure to appreciate the virtues of secular modernity.

Crude depictions of already segregated minorities, though protected and even sanctioned by the state's ideology, can only result in further ghettoisation and radicalisation, whether the targets of degrading ethnic, racial and religious stereotypes are devout or atheistic. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes, "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves".

It doesn't require an extensive exploration of the difference between Islamic and Christian semiotics to grasp that if many Muslims seem to take personally degrading images of the Prophet it is because he is an exemplar of noble humanity to them rather than a distant figure of stern authority – someone whose smallest act is worthy of emulation. Assertions of freedom of speech, or that nobody has the right not to be offended, are undermined by the inevitable double standards: the refusal, for instance, of Jyllands-Posten – the Danish newspaper that in 2005 published cartoons depicting Muhammad – to publish drawings mocking Jesus Christ for fear of "an outcry" among its Christian readers. In any

case, freedom of speech does not require that we deny cultural difference and the inequalities of power. This may seem unacceptable to those who assert, like Sarkozy, that satire is an “ancient French tradition”. But, living in a diverse and volatile world, and sharing from different backgrounds a common present, non-Muslims as well as Muslims are called upon to renounce, as Arendt put it, not their “tradition and national past”, but “the binding authority and universal validity which tradition and past have always claimed”.

Freedom of speech does not require that we deny cultural difference and the inequalities of power

Without this qualified renunciation, our state of negative solidarity can only become “an unbearable burden”, provoking “political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion against all powers that be”. Arendt’s grim prophecy seems to be realised today by many revolts and eruptions around the world. We have heard much since 9/11 about what Rushdie calls the “deadly mutation in the heart of Islam”. But we have heard relatively little about the worldwide rise in tribalist hatred of minorities – the main pathology of scapegoating released by political and economic shocks – even as the world is knit more closely by globalisation. Whether in the screeds of angry white men, or the edicts of vengeful Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish chauvinists, we encounter a pitiless machismo, that does not seek to understand, let alone express sympathy over the plight of weaker peoples. These must now submit, often at pain of death, expulsion, and ostracism, to the core ideals of the tribe dictated by the history of its religion and territory.

The revival of such sectarian fanaticisms hints not so much at the vitality of medieval religion as the sad mutations in the heart of secular modernity. Michel Houellebecq is guilty of exaggerated self-pity when he announces that “the Enlightenment is dead, may it rest in peace” and that Islam is an “image of the future”. But contemporary secular society in his bleak novels – defined by extreme inequality, loss of community, narcissistic self-absorption and indifference to suffering – does resemble an impasse that many undergoing their own Enlightenment and making the transition to the disenchanted modern world are seeking to avoid.

The old promise of homogenous European nation-states – that if you integrate, you’ll enjoy the privilege of a society based on the concept of individual rights – no longer seems adequate, even if it can be fully redeemed. It seems imperative that these diverse societies redefine their principles in ways that explicitly acknowledge different visions, religious and metaphysical, of the world. The French thinker Simone Weil, who never ignored France’s minorities in her broad-ranging reflections, recognised early that the old standardised model of progress had to be replaced, for the values of individualism and autonomy that originally brought forth modern human beings had come to threaten their moral identity and spiritual health. In The Need for Roots, a book written in 1943 to clarify the lessons of France’s capitulation to Nazi Germany, Weil went as far as to abandon the language of rights. The advocacy of individual rights had been crucial to the expansion of commerce and a contract-based society in western Europe. In the aftermath of France’s catastrophic defeat, Weil argued that a free and rooted society ought to consist of a web of moral obligations. We have the right to ignore starving people, she said, but we should be obliged not to let them starve.

The anthropologist Talal Asad wondered in a similar vein while remarking on the Danish cartoons controversy why fulfilling our moral obligations to the powerless should be deemed inferior to committing pugnacious blasphemies against religion in the name of secularism. “What would happen,”

he asks, “if religious language were to be taken more seriously in secular Europe and the preventable deaths in the global South of millions from hunger and war was to be denounced as ‘blasphemy?’” Jürgen Habermas has come around to believing that the “substance of the human” can only be rescued by societies that “are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions”. Habermas’s dramatic shift is one sign among many that the identity of the secular modern, which was built upon exclusivist notions of secularism, liberty, solidarity, and democracy in sovereign nation-states, has unravelled, and requires a broader definition. A new common space has to be renegotiated. The militarily and culturally interventionist, business-friendly but otherwise minimalist state peddling an ideology of economic growth won’t do. Such nullity might even play into the hands of fanatics who want to destroy the most valuable legacy of the Enlightenment: the detachment of the theocratic from the political.

We may have to retrieve the Enlightenment, as much as religion, from its fundamentalists. If Enlightenment is “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity”, then this “task”, and “obligation” as Kant defined it, is never fulfilled; it has to be continually renewed by every generation in ever-changing social and political conditions. The advocacy of more violence and wars in the face of recurrent failure meets the definition of fanaticism rather than reason. The task for those who cherish freedom is to reimagine it – through an ethos of criticism combined with compassion and ceaseless self-awareness – in our own irreversibly mixed and highly unequal societies and the larger interdependent world. Only then can we capably defend freedom from its true enemies.

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