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The Road From Paris to Damascus—and Back Again

Where the Most Pernicious Attacks on Freedom of Expression Come From

by AFSHIN RATTANSI

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Paris.

The so-called West doesn't like freedom of expression. When I began working at Al Jazeera, then investigating Al Qaeda, the Qatari company was violently targeted. When I was at the BBC, we had a source who was trying to tell the world that Tony Blair's government was deceiving the public about evidence for an invasion of Iraq. The scientist David Kelly was allegedly driven to suicide. Afterwards, millions were made refugees, wounded or killed, in and around Iraq. Journalists who tried to be free to express themselves were driven out. The head of the BBC was removed.

When The Guardian tried to reveal the Edward Snowden revelations about everyone in Britain being bugged by the secret services, David Cameron sent in the heavies – not to kill editor Alan Rusbridger – but to smash up Guardian computers. Snowden had to flee to Moscow with the aid of Wikileaks. The mass surveillance state had already been used against Wikileaks for having the temerity to believe it was free to expose U.S. military killing of civilians. Thousands more than who died in Paris have been extra-judicially assassinated by President Obama's drones. There was no place in the Western mainstream media for blame on NATO nations for aiding Israel as it killed and maimed thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza over the summer.

Britain bans TV stations. And as the recent dramatic reconstruction of the work of U.S. journalist Gary Webb – Michel Cuesta’s “Kill the Messenger” – tries to explain, the careers of Western reporters are destroyed if they try and publish stories against the state. Webb killed himself. Rolling Stone reporter Michael Hastings died when his car exploded in LA after he took down – in an article – the commander of Western forces in Afghanistan.

One doesn’t need violent conspiracy theories to understand where the most pernicious attacks on freedom of expression come from in the West. They come from a system of powerful corporate advertiser-funded journalism that prevents real issues of life and death from ever reaching the consciousness of ordinary people in Western Europe. It was the great French revolution that set the scene. For all its benefits, the worst wars in the history of civilisation have been secular and driven by values embedded in perversions of the European enlightenment – not in religion. It has been the search for resource exploitation and profit that has killed more than any ten-year old girl strapped into a suicide vest by Boko Haram.

That’s why it sounds so absurd when liberal commentators try to resuscitate “Clash of Civilisations” rhetoric after Paris. They claim superiority for allowing freedom of expression, for supporting journalism. But they were the ones cheering on as NATO bombed journalists at Serbian TV during the war on Yugoslavia in 1999. They were the ones cheering as NATO bombed journalists at Libyan TV in 2011. They are the ones who cheerlead wars that kill journalists and anyone else in their way.

The liberal defence appears to be that the threat against free expression posed by Islam is too great. Only printing cartoons and launching wars can save us from this religion. But when they namecheck “Islam”, do they even know that the unprecedented march of medieval Islam was precisely because unlike other religions of the Book, it offered freedom of expression? Maybe they think history is irrelevant.

Or is this actually nothing to do with Islam? Is this just propaganda from a Western press that isn’t free? Is there just a playbook for Western journalists in which “Islam” can be swapped for “Socialism in 1930s Spain”, “Communism in Russia”, “Maoism in China”, “Bolivarism in Latin America”, “Non-Aligned Movement in Asia”? It doesn’t matter what it is – just that it is seen as the enemy because that is in the interests of hegemonic Western capital.

Journalists in the West who have fought to tell the truth about 20th/21st century interventions in the developing world – they have destroyed the lives of billions – know what it’s like. Fight against the system, and power will threaten your livelihood. And, more likely than not, you’ll be left with nothing but the ability to say “told you so” after a scale of slaughter is unleashed that not only kills more than ISIS could ever dream of but also catalyses the deluded to carry out atrocities like those in Paris.

There is something suicidal about elite media responses to the Charlie Ebdoo massacre. It’s not only that what goes for journalism ignores the fact that the worst slaughters in history – world wars – trace their lineage from secularism. It’s that journalists seem unaware of what questions to ask about the European enlightenment, let alone the French Revolution.

“Liberté, égalité, fraternité” did not so much concern the freedom to publish anti-Semitic or Islamophobic cartoons in Charlie Ebdou magazine. It was about the revolutionary emancipation of the dispossessed. Satire aimed at Marie-Antoinette, not the sans-culottes; the slave-masters of Haiti not the slaves. In due course, the so-called terror at the hands of secular Saint-Just and Robespierre would be as nothing compared to what happened with the ensuing retrenchment of power. Who knows what the Jacobins would have made, a quarter of a millennium on, about rising religious fundamentalism in America and corporations as Gods in Europe? Zhou-en Lai, Communist China’s first premier, had it right – whether he was referring to 1789 or 1968 – when he said it was too early to give his assessment of events in Paris.

But, now, a rotten Western journalism accompanies an entire Western economic crisis. There’s mass austerity because of gigantic, corrupt financial services but no context of the logical need for a complete overhaul of society. The response of the so-called free press has been to write and broadcast as if only sovereign debt ratings rule civic life. Journalism ceases to be free when all mainstream political debate in Western countries centres on pleasing a miniscule percentage of the one percent about deficit reduction. Western journalists appear not to be free to question whether society really is just what gilt-traders tell them.

As for guilt for Western war crimes, there is fear of terrorist attack from “the other.” Fear is what “free” Western journalists use when they cover NATO militarism. And ever greater restrictions on press freedom in NATO countries prevent journalists from talking about something more cataclysmic and eschatological. Recent world events suggest that Western corporations think they have found a way out of the crisis, a kind of final solution. It’s arguably the *reductio ad absurdum* of the powerful counter-revolutionary forces unleashed by the guillotining of the Jacobins: an out and out, overt, world war.

Lethal, foreign interventions appear on the world scene as if they are the twitches of a dying superpower. No amount of socio-economic strife at home can prevent NATO governments from perceiving military existential threats. Journalists repeat lies and forget history. Wars are prepared against the great powers of the 21st century. NATO plays war games for attacks on China – and, of course, Russia. A breathless Western journalism about Ukraine allows no dissent so that all developments are seen through the prism of Russian expansionism, not NATO’s. But, they merely posture against Russia, China and India. And in Africa and Latin America, there are signs that they sense the game is already up.

One region – dominated, as it happens, by Islam – remains in focus. It doesn’t matter that Saudi Arabia has been the financial source for ISIS. Fossil fuel profits of the Middle East are paramount. Environmental catastrophe isn’t even an issue. Nor are repeated defeats in Mesopotamia. To explain this to the people, NATO powers require a “free” press of fake stenographer-journalists who repeat what’s leaked to them. It can be fake dossiers, redlines and fake WMD and it’s all in the context of a fundamental misunderstanding of the post-1789 world.

So journalists excuse Israeli atrocities. Palestinian cartoonists don’t count when they are persecuted. They look the other way as freedom-fighters threaten the oil-fields of Eastern Saudi Arabia. It doesn’t occur to the journalists that Saudi is the financial source of so much Islamist funding. In this maelstrom, cowering in the face of Western decline, EU servant-rulers of capital

transform into suicide bombers. President Hollande armed the Islamist rebels fighting secular Bashar Al-Assad. The Charlie Ebdo killers were part of that movement. It was on the road to Damascus, that the French taxpayer, like taxpayers in Britain and America, facilitated those who committed the atrocities in Paris.