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POLITICS

Why Garry Trudeau Is Wrong About *Charlie Hebdo*

The cartoonist urged satirists to "punch up" against authority, but the world does not divide so neatly between the privileged and their victims.



Hussein Malla/AP

DAVID FRUM | APR 13, 2015

One of the most attractive features of Anglo-American liberalism is its instinct to sympathize with the underdog. This is not a universal human norm. Across much of the modern world, human beings still follow the ancient Roman rule, *vae victis*—woe to the loser. But the liberal tradition appealingly sees its core task as standing up for the weak against the powerful.

“Hold off, Cuff; don’t bully that child any more; or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” Cuff asked in amazement at this interruption. “Hold out your hand, you little beast.”

“I’ll give you the worst thrashing you ever had in your life,” Dobbin said, in reply to the first part of Cuff’s sentence; and little Osborne, gasping and in tears, looked up with wonder and incredulity at seeing this amazing champion put up suddenly to defend him: while Cuff’s astonishment was scarcely less. Fancy our late monarch George III when he heard of the revolt of the North American colonies: fancy brazen Goliath when little David stepped forward and claimed a meeting; and you have the feelings of Mr. Reginald Cuff ...

I wonder if that famous scene from Thackeray’s great novel *Vanity Fair* echoed in Garry Trudeau’s mind as he stepped forward to deliver his acceptance speech at the Polk Awards last week. In thanks for an award honoring his lifetime of achievement as a cartoonist, Trudeau used the occasion to denounce the murdered cartoonists and editors of *Charlie Hebdo*. *The Atlantic* [posted](#) his remarks. I’m glad we did, because they deserve to be read and carefully considered. They perfectly express and encapsulate a point of view held by many

influential people in our society and especially in our media.

Trudeau was not the first to give voice to this point of view by any means. Before the bodies of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff were buried, the novelist Teju Cole [cautioned](#) readers of *The New Yorker*: "It is not always easy to see the difference between a certain witty dissent from religion and a bullyingly racist agenda, but it is necessary to try." He then proceeded to an extended excursion into what is nicely called what-aboutism:

The solidarity that we are seeing for the victims of the Paris killings, encouraging as it may be, indicates how easy it is in Western societies to focus on radical Islamism as the real, or the only, enemy. This focus is part of the consensus about mournable bodies, and it often keeps us from paying proper attention to other, ongoing, instances of horrific carnage around the world: abductions and killings in Mexico, hundreds of children (and more than a dozen journalists) killed in Gaza by Israel last year, internecine massacres in the Central African Republic, and so on.

Yet if Trudeau is not the first, he is surely the most emphatic. Even Teju Cole stressed that he did not literally blame cartoonists for their own murder. "Just because one condemns their brutal murders doesn't mean one must condone their ideology," wrote Cole, and reciprocally one must assume that although he did not condone the ideology of *Charlie Hebdo*, he did nonetheless condemn the murders.

Trudeau, however, has taken a step beyond Cole. Almost exactly three months

have passed since two heavily armed gunmen killed 11 people and wounded 11 more to punish a satirical weekly for publishing images they did not like. At the same time, two associates took hostages in a Parisian kosher supermarket, leading to the deaths of four shoppers. About a month later, a sympathizer with the *Charlie Hebdo* killers opened fire upon a meeting in Copenhagen attended by another cartoonist. One person was killed; three police officers were wounded. That same killer then proceeded to Copenhagen's main synagogue, where he murdered a volunteer security guard and wounded two more police. For this long record of death and destruction—and for many other deaths as well—Garry Trudeau blamed the people who drew and published the offending cartoons.

As you know, the Muhammad cartoon controversy began eight years ago in Denmark, as a protest against “self-censorship,” one editor’s call to arms against what she felt was a suffocating political correctness. The idea behind the original drawings was not to entertain or to enlighten or to challenge authority—her charge to the cartoonists was specifically to provoke, and in that they were exceedingly successful. Not only was one cartoonist gunned down, but riots erupted around the world, resulting in the deaths of scores.

In Trudeau’s telling, the members of the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* were even more culpable than their Danish counterparts. *Charlie Hebdo* did not miss an issue after the massacre. Some might have seen something heroic in this continued commitment to their work in the aftermath of a slaughter intended to silence. Not Trudeau.

By punching downward, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority with crude, vulgar drawings closer to graffiti than cartoons, *Charlie* wandered into the realm of hate speech, which in France is only illegal if it directly incites violence. Well, voilà—the 7 million copies that were published following the killings did exactly that, triggering violent protests across the Muslim world, including one in Niger, in which ten people died.

The closest Trudeau will approach to any sympathetic word for the victims of mass killing is his approving quotation from Jon Stewart: “Comedy in a free society shouldn’t take courage.” Yet increasingly ... it does. American cartoonist Molly Norris [remains](#) in hiding four years after drawing a cartoon that depicted Muhammad on a thimble, a domino, and a teacup. “I didn't mean for my satirical poster to be taken seriously. It became kind of an excuse for people to hate or be mean-spirited. I'm not mean-spirited,” she said, before vanishing in the face of multiple death threats.

RELATED STORY



[The Abuse of Satire](#)

In 2012, Garry Trudeau drew a series of strips about a Texas law requiring an ultrasound before an abortion. Trudeau’s point of view was ferocious: He had one of his characters pronounce, “By the authority invested in me by the GOP base, I thee rape.” Some newspapers found the series objectionable and declined to publish. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Trudeau [acknowledged](#) the sensitivity of the subject

matter. To avoid it, however, would be “comedy malpractice.” But here’s the good news: Nobody attempted to kill him. And because of the absence of threats, those who reported on the incident felt free to [reproduce images](#) from the series in their news accounts.

Once violence is deployed, however, everything changes. Here’s one of South Park’s [contributions](#) to the Muhammad cartoon debate—a contribution that, fittingly, was excised from TV.

(Uplifting music.)

You see, I learned something today. Throughout this whole ordeal, we all wanted to show things that we weren’t allowed to show. But it wasn’t because of some magic goo. It was because of the magical power of threatening people with violence. That’s obviously the only true power. If there’s anything we’ve all learned, it’s that terrorizing people works.

That's right. Don't you see, gingers: If you don't want to be made fun of any more, all you need are guns and bombs to get people to stop.

And of course, South Park was right. Violence does work. Unlike Garry Trudeau’s abortion cartoons, news organizations that report on the Muhammad cartoon controversy typically omit the images at issue. And indeed, in the absence of violence, it’s hard to imagine that Garry Trudeau—a [winner](#) of the Pulitzer prize, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the recipient of 30 honorary degrees—would have been moved to condemn as “hate

speech” the violation of someone else's definition of blasphemy.

To fix the blame for the killing on the murdered journalists, rather than the gunmen, Trudeau invoked the underdog status of the latter:

Traditionally, satire has comforted the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable. Satire punches up, against authority of all kinds, the little guy against the powerful. Great French satirists like Molière and Daumier always punched up, holding up the self-satisfied and hypocritical to ridicule. Ridiculing the non-privileged is almost never funny—it's just mean.

Had the gunmen been “privileged,” then presumably the cartoons would have been commendable satire. The cartoonists would then have been martyrs to free speech. But since the gunmen were “non-privileged,” the responsibility for their actions shifts to the people they targeted, robbing them of agency. It's almost as if he thinks of underdogs as literal dogs. If a dog bites a person who touches its dinner, we don't blame the dog. The dog can't help itself. The person should have known better.

On first reading, then, Trudeau is presenting us with a clear and executable moral theory:

- 1. Identify the bearer of privilege.*
- 2. Hold the privilege-bearer responsible.*

Trudeau famously put this theory into practice in his December 29, 2014 comic

strip on *Rolling Stone*'s notorious coverage of the University of Virginia rape case. The strip—which accepted *Rolling Stone*'s inflammatory allegations as true—was published more than three weeks after *Rolling Stone* itself admitted that the story could not be supported. Trudeau's editors explained that the timeline of publishing cartoons did not allow the strip to be corrected in light of the facts. Trudeau himself, however, offered a more robust defense. The facts of the case did not matter. What mattered was ... [exposing](#) privilege:

Jackie's story was not the focus, only the setup for commentary on institutional conflict of interest in adjudicating sexual assault, an issue that did not disappear with the credibility of the article. Not even UVA has claimed otherwise.

But here's the trouble: There are many dogs in any fight, and the task of identifying which one is the underdog is not so easy.

This week marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of the *Nation* magazine. The *Nation* was a crucial force in upgrading the word “liberal”—before 1865, typically used by Americans as an adjective—into a noun describing a political outlook independent of the American party structure. From the first, the *Nation* saw its job as championing the underdog, and in its early years, it knew exactly who that underdog was: the white population of the defeated Confederacy.

Yes, those whites sometimes behaved badly. But whose fault was that? The fault of the Northern overdogs of course! Here's E.L. Godkin, the editor of The *Nation*, [on](#) the Ku Klux Klan in 1871:

We cannot gain-say anything anybody says of the atrocity of riding about the country at night with one's face blackened, murdering and whipping people. But we confess we condemn Ku-kluxing very much as we condemn the cholera. We are opposed to the cholera. It is a loathsome disease, and brings terrible suffering on any community which it assails; nothing too bad can be said about it. But we know that it originates in filth and bad drainage, and if anybody proposed to us to proclaim martial law in the alleys in which the filth was found, and imprison the people who made it, we should refuse to support such a measure ...

Godkin and the *Nation* published dozens of articles on Reconstruction in the magazine's first 15 years of life. They make toe-curling reading today. Take Godkin in 1874, [denouncing](#) Reconstruction in South Carolina:

There is undoubtedly a great deal of difference among the South Carolina negroes in intelligence and morality. Among the small number of negroes in the cities who have always been free there is a good deal of industry, intelligence, and good conduct. But the average among the rest is very low—so low they are but slightly above the level of animals.

Reading those words today, one might imagine that Godkin was a horrible reactionary. But that's completely wrong! Godkin was a self-conscious advocate of progress, a fierce opponent of what he saw as his era's overweening overdogs:

The Northern industries and railroads that had grown to huge scale during the Civil War, the wealthy men who owned those industries and railroads, and the Grant administration that did their bidding. Godkin **disdained** the freed slaves precisely because he saw them as tools of the Northern industrial overdogs, deployed against the real underdog: Those "unfortunate Americans, equally entitled to care and protection, demoralized by an accursed institution for which the whole Union was responsible, and which the whole Union had connived at and, down to 1860, had profited by; [Americans who were] rent and desolated by a bloody war; disorganized by the most radical social and industrial revolution ever witnessed"—in other words, the white South.

It was precisely this great liberal's compassion for those he identified as underdogs that blinded him to his era's most extreme and aggressive acts of oppression and violence.

There are many “dogs” in any conflict, and the task of identifying which one is the underdog is not so easy.

Which brings us back to Garry Trudeau. As with Godkin's Southern whites, it's hard to ignore that many whom Trudeau regards as European victims are simultaneously engaged in large-scale violence against people they regard as their enemies. As Jeffrey Goldberg reported in a **disturbing** cover story for last month's Atlantic, Europe is witnessing a surge of violent anti-Semitism.

About 40 percent of all hate crimes [recorded](#) in France in 2013 were committed against Jews, and 95 percent of those crimes were committed by people of Middle Eastern or North African origin.

Hate crimes against European Muslims, thankfully, appear to be comparatively rare. (I tried to compile a tally [here](#).) In response to this violence at the hands of their Muslim neighbors, Jews are again emigrating from Europe.

Non-Jews, meanwhile, are submitting to new restrictions imposed by violence and enforced by vigilantes on what may be said on religious topics: no operas [featuring](#) Muhammad, no Islamic [images](#) on museum websites, no scholarly [investigation](#) of the origins of Islam.

The concept of the “underdog” becomes unstable and uncertain in these conditions. To support his preferred identification that the most violent are the most oppressed, Trudeau is led to equate the practitioners of the violence with their targets:

The French tradition of free expression is too full of contradictions to fully embrace. Even *Charlie Hebdo* once fired a writer for not retracting an anti-Semitic column. Apparently he crossed some red line that was in place for one minority but not another.

Again, Garry Trudeau is not the first person to insinuate that France and Europe are guilty of over-concern for the sensibilities of Jews at the expense of the sensibilities of Muslims. Glenn Greenwald made the same point on the *Intercept*, by [posting](#) some prize specimens from his collection of anti-Semitic cartoons.

The rulers of Iran likewise have [organized](#) a festival of Holocaust denial cartoons. (This is actually the second such festival in Iran; a prior festival was staged in 2006.)

But Trudeau is the first prominent person identified with the mainstream of American liberalism to advance the point, and that represents a milestone of sorts. But a milestone toward what?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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