

**Comments by Deniz Göktürk**

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On the Una's Lecture

**“Religion and Freedom of Speech: Cartoons and Controversies”**

by Robert Post, David Boies Professor of Law, Yale University

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**Can We Imagine a Global Public Sphere?**

One of the sharpest interventions in the Muhammad cartoon affair came from a cartoonist. In his essay titled “Drawing Blood” for *Harper's Magazine* in June 2006, Art Spiegelman argued convincingly that a cartoon is, first and foremost, a cartoon. Following Spiegelman, we can define caricatures as charged or loaded images, which compress ideas into memorable icons, namely clichés. A cartoon must have a point, and a good cartoon might have the potential to change our perspective on the ruling order. Spiegelman opens his discussion with classical caricatures such as Honoré Daumier's 1831 depiction of King Louis-Philippe as Gargantua and George Grosz' 1926 attack on the “Pillars of Society” as beer-drinking, pamphlet-reading, swastika-wearing men without brains. Spiegelman acknowledges these cartoonists as “masters of insult” who often had to face trials or imprisonment in return for their transgressions.<sup>1</sup> The implied question is whether the 12 cartoons of Muhammad, published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30, 2005, are in any way compatible with the great tradition of caricature.

A key point in Sigmund Freud's study on jokes is the triangular structure of communication in humor: “Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”<sup>2</sup> Following Freud, we always have to ask ourselves: Who is laughing at whom and why? What kinds of bonds are forged between the teller of a joke and his listeners? Are hidden aggressions expressed indirectly through the joke? And who is the object of attack, or the butt of the joke? I was, in fact, wondering about this during some moments of merriment at Robert Post's lecture, which left me feeling a little uncomfortable. Was the audience invited to laugh at those Europeans who made such an overblown fuss about a few “prosaic” cartoons, which would have been a matter simply resolved in the U.S.? Or were we all laughing at the Pakistanis who still maintain blasphemy laws, and who are lacking the cultural skills to read a cartoon?

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spiegelman. “Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage.” *Harper's Magazine*. June 2006: 43-52 (45).

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York/London: Norton, 1989: 118.

When we take a look at the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons it is not evident who is being ridiculed—the prophet Muhammad, militant Muslims, or the Western media?<sup>3</sup> At least three of these cartoons appear to be self-reflexive in the sense of putting the cartoonists themselves on the spot, most prominently in the image where a little Muhammad in a local soccer-team uniform is pointing to a line written in Farsi on a black board: “The *Jyllands-Posten* journalists are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs.” (On Spiegelman’s “fatwa bomb meter” this cartoon is rated clean.) In a special issue of *International Migration* devoted to the cartoon affair, Erik Bleich has pointed out that this is “not a picture of the Prophet... Rather, it is an immigrant child who is both cheeky and savvy enough to thumb his nose at the media.”<sup>4</sup> Four cartoons, on the other hand, present either the prophet or Muslims stereotypically as prone to violence, most prominently in the sinister picture that shows Muhammad’s head as an ignited bomb. No coherent pattern of communication emerges from these pictures overall—not surprising perhaps, as the 12 cartoons were drawn by 12 different cartoonists. At first sight, it is difficult to classify these pictures as hate speech, which is set to instigate violence against Muslims.

However, Spiegelman in his essay also raises the crucial question about context as he compares the effect of the cartoons with that of other circulating images of the Middle East. “In fact the most baffling aspect of this whole affair is why all the violent demonstrations focused on the dopey cartoons rather than on the truly horrifying torture photos seen regularly on Al Jazeera, on European television, everywhere but in the mainstream media of the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Considering the scope of the affair, including consumer boycotts, public protests, flag burnings, 139 people killed, newspaper editors and ministers fired, it is puzzling indeed why all the outrage was triggered by the cartoons, and not by photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in late April 2004. Perhaps the revelation of torture photographs came as less of a surprise in Iraq, where stories of assault by the occupational forces and violence in prisons circulate on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup> The photographs and stories of violated bodies in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, and other locations hit a taboo in the self-conception of U.S. society and its values. The cartoons, however, targeted sacred beliefs of Muslims.

In order to understand what has been described as “a Danish Rushdie affair,”<sup>7</sup> we need to go beyond a textual analysis of the cartoons, and, I would argue, also beyond a limited focus on constitutional law. In his outline of the case Post does not mention that our discussion of the cartoon wars takes place at a political moment in history when two Muslim countries in the Middle East (Iraq and Afghanistan) are under non-Muslim occupation and in a state of bloody

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<sup>3</sup> The *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons can be found online in the Mohammed Image Archive: { HYPERLINK "http://www.zombietime.com/mohammed\_image\_archive/" }.

<sup>4</sup> Erik Bleich. “On Democratic Integration and Free Speech: Response to Tariq Modood and Randall Hansen.” *International Migration* 44.5 (2006). Special Issue on “The Danish Cartoon Affair: Free Speech, Racism, Islamism, and Integration”: 17-33 (18). { HYPERLINK

"http://www.bris.ac.uk/sociology/ethnicitycitizenship/danishcartoon.pdf" }.

<sup>5</sup> Spiegelman: 47.

<sup>6</sup> This is suggested by Yahia Said. “Return to Iraq.” May 28, 2004. { HYPERLINK "http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraqwarafter/article\_1927.jsp" }. Also { HYPERLINK "http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=791" }.

<sup>7</sup> Bhikhu Parekh. “Same Difference? The Danish cartoons and the Rushdie Affair.” *Catalyst*. March 9, 2006. { HYPERLINK "http://www.catalystmagazine.org/Default.aspx.LocID-0hgnew0bi.RefLocID-0hg01b001006009.Lang-EN.htm" } }

civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, the prospect of military intervention in Syria and Iran is a daily topic in the media, and the International Court of Justice in The Hague rules Serbia “not guilty” of genocide in Bosnia. This political constellation has left many Muslims feeling that a “global crusade” against them is in full force. In the light of the war in Iraq (with civilian death counts changing between 60,000 to 660,000 people) as well as revelations about detention and abuse of prisoners by the U.S. military, the discourse of defending freedom of speech and democracy against Muslim fundamentalism, as propagated by the United States and Western Europe, has lost much of its credibility.

The cartoons and other images thus gain significance within a cultural force field where Samuel Huntington’s self-fulfilling prophecy of a “clash of civilizations”<sup>8</sup> has become the inevitable master narrative governing world politics. But what exactly is clashing here? Gustav Seibt in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* displays the prominence of this rhetoric by proclaiming that the battle of civilizations is no longer fought between nation states, nor between states and armed fighters as assumed in the phrase of “a war on terror.” We have rather become, Seibt argues, spectators to a clash of emotionalized public spheres on a global stage.<sup>9</sup> Any argument that still assumes a unified public sphere regulated by a national constitution, is therefore bound to fall short of understanding the significance of this case.

In fact, the cartoon controversy was not a Danish peculiarity, explicable on the basis of growing anti-immigrant xenophobia in that particular country. If the cartoons had been published just once in Denmark, in September 2005, they would have been soon forgotten. The question whether the cartoons should or should not have been published is therefore of lesser interest. The affair only became a global media event six months later when newspapers in several European countries such as Norway, the Netherlands, France, and Germany decided to reprint the cartoons under the banner of upholding freedom of opinion (*Meinungsfreiheit*) and when reports about the cartoon controversy were globally transmitted on BBC and CNN. Muslims around the world perceived these deliberate acts of performative repetition as an assault and humiliation in line with racialized stereotyping. The outraged responses were not directed at the cartoons as such (in fact, many people who were dismayed had not actually seen the cartoons), but at what was perceived as the violence of representation and the arrogance of “the West”—utilizing the rhetoric of democracy and freedom of speech as an all-too-thin veil for power politics.

Similar tensions were rehearsed following Pope Benedict XVI lecture on September 12, 2006, in which he quoted the views of a Byzantine emperor from a 1391 text: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”<sup>10</sup> Taken out of context, this quote was taken as an assault on Islam and triggered extensive protests, which had to be tactfully appeased during the Pope’s subsequent visit to Turkey. The omission of this bigger picture of tense relations in an argument about religion and freedom of speech obscures the real stakes by merely assuming a self-congratulatory position about the merits of the United States Constitution

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington. “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*. Summer 1993. { HYPERLINK "http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=791" }.

<sup>9</sup> Gustav Seibt. “Kulturkampf, global.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. February 6, 2006. { HYPERLINK "http://www.sueddeutsche.de/ausland/artikel/691/69622/" }.

<sup>10</sup> For the Pope’s speech cf. { HYPERLINK "http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5348456.stm" }.

and the First Amendment. It is, of course, common knowledge that majority rule does not mean democracy—without civil rights, electoral rights do not make a country democratic. Confining our discussion to legislative frameworks will render limited insight; we will also need to take into account how these frameworks are practiced. It is therefore futile to separate the legal question from its ethical implications.

If anything, we learn from symbolic politics in action, such as the cartoon affair, that every claim to ethnic or religious identity today is articulated on a global stage, and that no utterance of the national can be separated any longer from transnational entanglements. In response to the replication of the cartoons as a global media event, Muslims' protests also evolved as demonstrations of a hypermodern global community, networked by way of cell phones, the internet, and television. The protests against the cartoons were political acts that resonated far beyond the confined boundaries of state and citizenship. It is one of the challenges of our times to imagine responsibility within a global public sphere and regulatory frameworks that will transcend the boundary of the nation state. As Faisal Devji has argued in the Open Democracy Forum, on this global arena there is "no common citizenship and no government to make freedom of expression meaningful even as an expression."<sup>11</sup> Whether the discourse of international human rights will provide a viable alternative and corrective to state-bound constitutional law is a question for open-ended discussion. The Turkish minister of religious affairs, Ali Bardakoglu, declared that the cartoons were not only disrespectful, but a violation of human rights.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, a popular Turkish movie of the same year, *Valley of the Wolves Iraq*, prominently restaged news photographs such as the iconic picture of piled-up nude human bodies in Abu Ghraib as visual evidence for the brutality of American soldiers. The universalist discourse of human rights can be utilized by many people in the service of particular interests.

Returning to the Danish cartoons after this brief excursion into context, we will notice a very different structure of communication than we encountered in Freud's analysis of joking. The jokes that Freud wrote about were primarily told among Jews—so-to-say "among us" within the extended family. The teller, the audience, and the target all tend to be Jewish, the butt frequently being a Gallician "Eastern" Jew who assumes a refined and civilized pose, but whose true nature eventually breaks through the guise of assimilation. Although these jokes frequently express hidden aggressions against wealthy Jews or against the institution of marriage, they are primarily concerned with rituals of community bonding. Joking defuses aggressions within the group—much as dreams enable the dreamer to go on sleeping. Of course, this in-group dynamic referenced and appropriated stereotyping from outside the group. Anti-Semitic caricatures are the absent other in Freud's jokes. The caricatures gathered by Eduard Fuchs in 1921 show that hateful depictions of Jews had a long tradition from the late 14th century.<sup>13</sup> Such abusive representations later culminated in the infamous anti-Semitic caricatures by Julius Streicher published in *Der Stürmer*. Clearly, these caricatures lack the defusing mechanism of the joke-work; instead they appear like graphic illustrations of Nazi doctrine and are therefore more suited to stirring up hatred or confirming people's prejudices.

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<sup>11</sup> Faisal Devji. "Back to the Future: The Cartoons, Liberalism, and Global Islam." April 13, 2006. { HYPERLINK "http://www.opendemocracy.net" }.

<sup>12</sup> { HYPERLINK "http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/02/060206\_cartoons\_turkey.shtml" }.

<sup>13</sup> Eduard Fuchs. *Die Juden in der Karikatur: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte*. München: Albert Langen, 1921: 100.

The crucial difference between the Jewish jokes, which form the basis for Freud's analysis, and the Danish cartoons, is that the latter are stereotypical representations from outside the group, forging a bond between the cartoonists as representatives of Western media and the newspaper readers as "us," the enlightened Western public, at the cost of "them," those obsessively violent "Orientals." In the age of mass media, however, jokes are no longer private. We all know that what is an acceptable "offensive" joke behind closed walls among "friends" is not necessarily a joke you would tell in "public." The butt of the joke in Freud's model would rarely hear about the joke, but in today's world, given the information flow, the joke does get to the "other" very quickly. As the circulation and repetition of the material in a globalized public sphere configures new audiences, the distinction between "us" and "them" keeps being perpetually reinstated and, at times, blurred, as in our earlier example of the immigrant child poking fun at Western media—this little Mohammed is as much "us" as he is "them."

Has Anti-Islamism become the new Anti-Semitism? The first question after Post's lecture did indeed point to the parallels between the racism of the Muhammad cartoons and the Nazi use of anti-Semitic cartoons for purposes of propaganda and justification of genocide, suggesting that depictions of Muslims today are of related ilk. At this point, I would like to return to the cover of the already mentioned June 2006 *Harper's*, which presented a cartoon by Art Spiegelman with sketches of nine different racialized characters. There is a big-mouthed, round-eyed "Black" with two dice rolling next to his head; a greedy-looking, big-nosed "Jew," his coat covered in dollar signs, even the smoke from his cigar forming a dollar sign; a little "Chinese" with two huge front teeth sticking out of his big grin; a pin-up girl with two stripes barely blacking-out her sex, incidentally the only woman on the scene; a "Redskin" with feather and tomahawk; a pig-headed Catholic cleric grabbing a scared-looking choir-boy; a noirish "American" gangster; a "Mexican" with sombrero, liquor, and gun; and last, but not least, the center-piece, a vicious looking "Arab" with turban and full beard, sword in hand. The point of this nine-head drawing lies in the assembly of all these crude types on one page, garnished with splashes of red. Recognizable clichés are thus put side-by-side. Such juxtaposition exposes preconceived markers of identity and calls for a mobilization of stereotypes in order to break them. Spiegelman included his own contribution to the Iranian Anti-Holocaust cartoon contest and an interesting Jewish variation of the bomb head from an Israeli contest of anti-Semitic cartoons. Opening up the stage for *Borat*-like impersonations and exposures, he went on to conclude his essay with a call for a global cartoon contest. I believe that Art Spiegelman is on the right track when he calls for "a world-class, nuclear bake-off of rancorous visual satire with Halliburton-sized payouts! ... So I propose that all armed combatants be yanked from the Middle East, and I dream of battalions of cartoonists airlifted in from all corners of the globe to replace them! Feelings will no doubt be badly bruised, but in the end may the artists with the sharpest pen prevail."<sup>14</sup> That will be the day!

I am not sure whether I would go as far as Palestinian thinker Bassam Jarar, quoted on the website of Al Jazeera, who believes that the cartoon affair will be "a good lesson for Muslims

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<sup>14</sup> Spiegelman: 52.

and Westerners,” which “might lead to greater understanding in the long range.”<sup>15</sup> I do believe, however, that as we are trying to imagine a global public sphere, we will all have to learn to continuously question our performative group politics, scrutinize representations of ourselves and others both from “inside” and “outside,” and rethink the boundaries that we take for granted between “us” and “them.” In times of the world-wide web, as the triangulation of humor and aggression is multiplied and replicated manifold, each of us can become the teller, the listener, and the butt of the joke—all at the same time.

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<sup>15</sup> Khalid Amayreh. “Islam and the West: Conflict or Cohesion?” *Aljazeera.net*. March 4, 2006. { HYPERLINK "http://english.aljazeera.net/English/Archive/Archive?ArchiveID=18960" }.