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False affectivity and the manufacture of outrage: rethinking cartoon controversies

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Abstract

This article challenges the prevailing assumption that the offence and outrage expressed during contemporary cartoon controversies are spontaneous reactions to satirical attacks. Instead, it highlights the central role of misinformation and misleading interpretations in provoking such responses. Drawing on three case studies—the Danish cartoon controversy (2005-2006), the Taubira cartoon controversy in France (2013), and the PEN America controversy concerning Charlie Hebdo (2015)—the article shows how intermediaries circulated misinformation or misleading interpretations that generated outbursts of outrage, offense, anger, and disgust. In order to describe the social affects engendered by distortions, the article introduces the concept of "false affectivity". Defined as an affect-oriented parallel to the long-standing critical concept of "false consciousness", this concept provides a framework for critically engaging with social affects that are often either uncritically embraced or summarily dismissed.

Keywords: cartoon controversies, misinformation, misinterpretation, Jyllands-Posten, Charlie Hebdo.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been haunted by a conspicuous number of controversies over satirical cartoons, many of which have transcended the national borders that previously contained and restricted them. According to humour scholar Giselinde Kuipers, the Danish cartoon controversy—which started in 2005 when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed some satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad—was "the first transnational humour scandal" (Kuipers, 2011, p. 63). In the ensuing decades, the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* has been at the centre of several transnational cartoon controversies, some of which have also included cartoons of Muhammad. As a result, we have become accustomed to dramatic media headlines such as: "How cartoons fanned flames of Muslim rage" (*Guardian*, 2006); "Cartoons in Danish and Norwegian newspapers depicting the prophet Muhammad in unflattering poses, have triggered outrage among Muslims across the Middle East" (*Washington Post*, 2006); "French mag sparks outrage as controversial cartoons of nude Prophet Mohammed are

published" (*Independent*, 2012); or "New Charlie Hebdo Muhammad cartoon stirs Muslim anger in Mideast" (*New York Times*, 2015).

On the one hand, such headlines are consistent with contemporary affect theory, which emphasises that feelings, or affects, are fundamentally social and collective phenomena rather than individual and private ones. As cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has put it: "Most critics today accept that far from being merely private or idiosyncratic phenomena […] feelings are as fundamentally 'social' as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism" (Ngai, 2005, p. 25). In order to emphasise the primordially social nature of our feelings, philosopher Judith Butler has similarly argued that "our affect is never merely our own […] and we can only feel and claim affect as our own on the condition that we have already been inscribed in a circuit of social affect" (Butler, 2009, p. 50). From this perspective, the collective outrage of Muslim protesters over satirical cartoons of Muhammad is a prime exemplar of the fundamentally social nature of human feelings: far from having some merely private feelings, the protesters are inscribed in, and influenced by, a larger pre-existing circuit of social affect. And even if millions of Muslims are not part of this affective circuit, the phenomenon in question is certainly still a mass phenomenon.

On the other hand, when media claim that these cartoons "*triggered* outrage", "*fanned* flames", or—in the present tense— "*sparks* outrage" or "*stirs* Muslim anger", they tacitly assume that there is an immediate and instantaneous relation between the satirical cartoons on the one hand and the affective responses on the other (my emphasis). The cartoons are identified as the cause, and the subsequent offense, disgust, outrage, or anger is presented as the effect. Furthermore, it is assumed that there is a single cause, namely the cartoons, and that the relationship between cause and effect is direct and unmediated. In Latourian terms, we can say that the prevailing narrative describes the cartoons as "non-human actors", yet fails to acknowledge the extensive "networks" of "mediators" in which actors are always embedded according to Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005, pp. 63–86, 191–218). In fact, the networks of mediators involved in cartoon controversies—which often include actors with vested interests in escalating the conflicts—are routinely rendered invisible in narratives of these controversies.

Unfortunately, such narratives are found not only in the media, from which we expect no greater degree of complexity, but also in academic research. For example, Robert Phiddian has emphasised that "the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists *sparked* a level of murderous rage that no one should have to endure in 2015" (Phiddian, 2019, p. 29, my emphasis). In fact, Phiddian writes an entire book about the "public emotions" (or social affects) triggered by satire without considering the roles that mediating factors such as misinformation or misinterpretation might play in *evoking* these emotions (Phiddian, 2019). Similarly, in her account of the Danish cartoon controversy, Saba Mahmood has emphasised "the affront the cartoons *caused*" (Mahmood, 2013, p. 63, my emphasis). Like many other commentators, she fails to acknowledge the role played by intermediaries in this controversy—a point that will be addressed in the following sections. Notwithstanding their illuminating aspects, these and many other texts fail to take into account the multitude of mediating factors—the network of human and non-human actors—that contribute to the *generation* of the offense, disgust or anger they describe as spontaneous and immediate. A crucial omission in many discussions is the failure to acknowledge the vested interest that middlemen may have—and in some cases surely have—in disseminating misinformation about the cartoons or promoting misleading interpretations of them.

This article focuses on the role of misinformation and misinterpretations circulated by middlemen in three recent cartoon controversies: the Danish cartoon controversy in 2005-2006; the controversy concerning the depiction of French Minister of Justice, Christine Taubira, in *Charlie Hebdo* (*CH*) in 2013; and the PEN America controversy over *CH* in 2015. The fact that misinformation or misinterpretation played a pivotal role in all these controversies raises a number of unsettling questions: To what extent were the offense, disgust, outrage or anger at

the heart of these controversies spontaneous reactions to the satirical cartoons themselves, and to what extent were they mobilised or manufactured by middlemen spreading misinformation about the cartoons or promoting misleading interpretations of them? If the social affects integral to these cartoon controversies were to some extent manipulated or the result of misdirection, can we then assert that they were, in a sense, false? Did the cartoon controversies involve a kind of *false affectivity* similar to the "false consciousness" coined by Friedrich Engels and used as a concept by the subsequent critical tradition (Engels, 1968 [1893], p. 97)?

Although the concept of false consciousness has fallen out of favour in contemporary theoretical discourse, the mode of thinking it encapsulates remains deeply ingrained. Contemporary phenomena such as blindness to one's own privilege or the failure to recognise structural forms of discrimination bear a clear family resemblance to the idea of false consciousness and would likely have been identified as such by 20th-century critics of ideology. At the core of these critical frameworks is the idea that our understanding of reality can be inaccurate, superficial, misguided, distorted, or otherwise false. As Slavoj Žižek has observed, this critical tradition presupposes the existence of "a distance, a divergence between the so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it" (Žižek, 2008, p. 24). In a similar vein, I suggest that social affects can also be superficial, misguided or distorted, and therefore considered to be false. Just as our understanding of reality hinges on contestable interpretations of signs and events, so too do the public emotions or social affects that move us. We are only offended, outraged or disgusted by cartoons we *interpret* as offensive, outrageous or disgusting. Despite their apparent immediacy, affective responses to satirical images are always *mediated* by available information and acts of interpretation. And since both information and interpretations can be biased, misguided, or distorted, it follows that the affects they generate can be equally compromised.

Crucially, the concept of false affectivity does not rely on the assumption that interpretation precedes emotion, or that rationality precedes affectivity. Its implicit ontological claim is far more modest: it merely asserts that affectivity is never 'pure' or 'unmixed.' As Ben Anderson observes, affect is never simply "affect itself" or "affect as such" but "always-already […] mediated" (Anderson, 2014, p. 165). In other words, affect is never wholly separable from information and interpretation—just as these cognitive processes are never entirely devoid of affective charge. The two are equally primordial, or *gleichursprünglich*, to borrow Heidegger's term, and therefore need to be studied together (Heidegger, 1993, p. 13).

In our digital age, the rapid circulation of misinformation and misinterpretations has repeatedly triggered intense affective responses. As the following sections will demonstrate, such dynamics have been central to several major cartoon controversies of the 21st century. Deliberate misinformation, for instance, played a decisive role in shaping the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005–2006, while the American debate over *CH* in 2015 was marked more by ill-informed and context-blind interpretations. In none of these cases were the social affects that defined the controversies provoked by the satirical cartoons alone. Instead, in all cases they were manufactured or escalated by middlemen who, through misinformation or misinterpretation, influenced the reception of the cartoons and shaped the affective response.

2. First example: the Danish cartoon controversy in 2005-2006

On 30 September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed twelve cartoons under the heading "The Face of Muhammad". Prior to this, Danish media had carried stories about various forms of self-restriction: on 17 September, media reported that Danish illustrators had declined illustrating a children's book about the life of Muhammad out of fear for their lives; on 18 September, media quoted Danish comedian Frank Hvam as saying he did not dare "to take

the piss out of the Quran"; and on 25 September, media reported that Tate Gallery in London had removed conceptual artist John Latham's sculpture *God is Great*, which contains a Bible, a Thora and a Quran, for fear of offending religious sensibilities (Rose, 2014, pp. 26–37). To the editors at *Jyllands-Posten*, these and similar events suggested that a new form of fear-based self-censorship might be spreading, and they therefore decided to test the extent of self-censorship in Denmark. To this end, they invited members of *Danske Bladtegnere*, an organisation of cartoonists and illustrators, to "draw Muhammad as you see him" for a fee of around 100 Euros (Rose, 2014, pp. 29–30). The editors received twelve drawings and published them all, although some of them did not depict the Islamic prophet but instead ridiculed the newspaper or the author who was unable to find illustrators.

About four months later, numerous Muslims took to the streets in Muslim-majority countries to protest the Danish cartoons. Danish products were boycotted; Danish flags were burned in the streets; Danish embassies and consulates were set on fire; bounties were put on the heads of Danish cartoonists; *Jyllands-Posten* received bomb threats; al-Qaeda encouraged Muslims to avenge the cartoons; and tragically, more than 150 people died during the violent riots against the cartoons. Plenty of literature has already described the events in detail and identified a large number of intermediaries—imams, grand muftis, ambassadors, politicians, businessmen and others—who helped turn the publication of some cartoons in a small Danish newspaper into a full-blown global controversy (e.g. Klausen, 2009; Akkari, 2014). I will therefore concentrate on the still relatively under-examined role that the spread of misinformation played in the controversy.

In the first months after the publication of the cartoons, little happened in public. On 14 October about 3,000 people demonstrated against the cartoons in Copenhagen, but then the protests petered out in Denmark, and in the Muslim world there were no protests at all (Klausen, 2009, pp. 35, 83). During October and November 2005, the cartoons were republished in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Fagr*, the Moroccan newspaper *Al-Nahar Al-Maghribiyya*, the Indonesian online news site *Rakyat Merdeka* and the Bosnian-Herzegonian weekly *Slobodna Bosna*, but this did not trigger any protests (Klausen, 2009, p. 48; George, 2017, p. 65). "Nobody seemed to care about it", the Indonesian editor Tegud Santosa later recalled (George, 2017, p. 65). Contrary to how the media later portrayed the controversy, the cartoons did not spark instant anger or spontaneous outrage among the predominantly Muslim audience of these media outlets. On their own, the cartoons were apparently not sufficiently offensive or provocative to mobilise Muslim masses. More was needed—and more was on the way.

In Denmark, a group of conservative imams had developed an action plan with the aim of getting *Jyllands-Posten* as well as the Danish government to issue public apologies for the cartoons (Klausen, 2009, pp. 86–87). Among the leading figures in the group were avowed Salafist Raed Hlayhel and avowed Islamist Ahmed Akkari, both of whom had previously received negative coverage in *Jyllands-Posten*—Hlayhel for referring to women as "the tools of Satan" during a Friday prayer and Akkari for writing in a Muslim youth paper that women deserved a "kick in the back" if they did not wear headscarves (Borg & Olesen, 2005; Thromle & Johansen, 2005). As part of their action plan, the Danish imams now sent letters to the ambassadors of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, Algeria and Morocco urging them to support their "Muslim brothers" in Denmark (Akkari, 2014, p. 246). The Egyptian ambassador was ready to help and proposed sending a delegation of Danish imams to Egypt to spread the word (Akkari, 2014, pp. 259–261, 272–274). From 3-11 December 2005, the first delegation of Danish imams visited Cairo, where Egyptian officials had organised meetings, press conferences, media appearances, etc. A second delegation of Danish imams visited Lebanon and Syria from 17-31 December.

On these delegations, the Danish imams met with influential religious and political leaders such as the Secretary General of the Arab League, the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Lebanon, and

Syria, the rector of the influential Al-Azhar university in Cairo, and several Middle Eastern ministers and political advisors (Klausen, 2009, pp. 88–89). Ahmed Akkari, who was part of the second delegation but has since distanced himself from his previous Islamist views, later revealed that they secretly also met with leaders from Hamas and Hezbollah, although they were aware of the risk: "if our collaboration with known terrorist organisations was revealed, we would lose the tailwind that was beginning to blow" (Akkari, 2014, p. 294, my translation).

At all these meetings, the Danish imams distributed copies of a 43-page dossier with material compiled by Hlayhel (*Milaf*, 2005; Klausen, 2009, p. 87). Among its content was a written introduction to the controversy, copies of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons with Arabic translations and comments, and three additional and extremely crude images that had no relation whatsoever to *Jyllands-Posten*. One was a photograph of a man wearing pig ears and a snout, reproduced with the text: "This is the real picture of Muhammad"; the second image was a homemade montage of two photographs showing a woman in traditional Muslim garb lying down in prayer while a dog mounted her from behind, accompanied by the text: "Why Muslims pray"; the third image was an amateur drawing of a man with horns on his forehead, dolls in his hands and a small visible penis, reproduced with the text: "The paedophile 'prophet' Muhammad" (for the images, see *Milaf*, 2005, pp. 34–36, available online; my translation).

The first image has subsequently been identified as a photograph of a contestant in a French pig-squealing contest, with no relation to Muhammad (Klausen, 2009, p. 91). The origin of the latter two images is uncertain, but may have originally appeared on a far-right U.S. website (Klausen, 2009, p. 91; Malka, 2021, p. 26). According to Akkari, these images came from hate emails sent to Danish Muslims, presumably by a single rabid person (Akkari, 2014, pp. 253–255). Nevertheless, they now turned out to be helpful, as they could be used to prove the existence of a pervasive atmosphere of Islamophobia in Denmark:

> We immediately took all of Denmark to task for the content of the letters, which far surpassed *Jyllands-Posten's* 12 satirical cartoons in terms of grossness. These cartoons were offensive—and useful. They could be used as proof of what we had been saying all along: That there was an ugly atmosphere and general agitation against Muslims in Denmark. So, we included the letters in our arsenal of arguments in the debate, but cleverly omitted to mention that, to the best of our knowledge, they came from a single rabid person.
>
> (Akkari, 2014, p. 255 my translation)

In the words of Jytte Klausen, author of what remains the most thorough study of the controversy, the imam's dossier was "misleading and on some points plainly false" because it gave the impression that the three additional and extraordinarily provocative images had also been printed in *Jyllands-Posten* (Klausen, 2009, p. 92). In December 2005 and January 2006, it contributed significantly to escalating the conflict that the dossier with the fake cartoons was spread far and wide. When leaders from more than 50 Muslim-majority countries met in Mecca on 7-8 December 2005, the Egyptian foreign minister, Ahmed Abdul-Gheit, distributed the dossier to his fellow ministers (Eko, 2014, p. 164). Furthermore, it featured in Muslim media outlets where the photograph of the man wearing pig ears and a snout "was regularly given particular prominence" (Klausen, 2009, p. 102). "A number of Middle Eastern media […] simply reported that Danish newspapers had represented Muhammad as a pig" (Hundevadt, 2008). Even BBC World showed footage of a Danish imam showing the photograph of the pig-faced man, while the announcer explained that this was one of the cartoons printed in *Jyllands-Posten* (Hansen & Hundevadt, 2006, p. 83). Klausen concludes that:

> The false cartoons made a significant difference […] Few of the Middle Eastern leaders I interviewed knew the difference between the false cartoons and the real ones […] And everyone who has seen the dossier, in Mecca or Cairo, in December 2005 or at some later occasion […]

> thought that the ugly, sexually explicit cartoons had been published by *Jyllands-Posten*. Evidently, the dossier was the primary source of information for Middle Eastern religious authorities, and it shaped their view about the treatment of Muslims in Denmark.
>
> (Klausen, 2009, p. 101)

In addition to all the human actors who helped make the controversy happen, the false images were important non-human actors in the same project. Through intermediaries, the fake image eventually reached Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is considered by many to be the ideological leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a popular TV preacher on *Al Jazeera* (Klausen, 2009, p. 89; Wagemakers, 2022, p. 170). On 3 February 2006, he gave an inflammatory Friday sermon on *Al Jazeera* and *Qatar TV*, calling on Muslims around the world to organise a "day of rage" against the cartoons: "The *Ummah* [i.e. the entire Muslim society or nation] must rage in anger […] We are not jackasses for riding, but lions that roar […] We are a nation that should rage for the sake of Allah, His Prophet, and His Book" (qtd. in Klausen, 2009, p. 103). In the following days, demonstrations spread across the world. Radical groups like Hamas and Hezbollah joined the campaign and violence erupted: embassies and consulates were set on fire, *Jyllands-Posten* became a target of terrorist groups and so on (Klausen, 2009, pp. 57–58, 105–106; Akkari, 2014, pp. 350–351).

To the public, the outrage and anger seemed to be a spontaneous, popular reaction to the degrading satirical cartoons. This was how both Western and Middle Eastern media portrayed it. However, as Klausen has put it, "there is little support for the assertion that Muslims reacted with spontaneous rage" (Klausen, 2009, p. 116): "In reality, [the demonstrations] were the result of a process of deliberate, albeit uncoordinated, escalation" (Klausen, 2009, p. 39). An extensive network of mediators or middlemen, each with their own interests, contributed to this escalation. First, Danish imams and Egyptian diplomats collaborated to spread the word and arouse anger. Then, Muslim governments, transnational organisations and radical groups like Hamas and Hezbollah got involved. At the same time, Muslim media covered the story, including the fake images. Finally, popular preachers condemned the cartoons, culminating in al-Qaradawi's call for a "day of rage"—and *then* riots broke out.

Rather than being a spontaneous reaction to the cartoons themselves, the offense and rage was remarkably the result of deliberate manipulation, rhetorical incitement, and uncoordinated escalation. The fact that the cartoons were published in several Muslim media outlets in October and November 2005 *without* causing any protests at all suggests that the demonstrations were significantly the product of middlemen stirring up hostile affects and organising violent riots. Without the involvement of an extensive network of mediators, it is doubtful whether there would have been any controversy at all. According to Akkari, the cartoons would probably have been quickly forgotten had they not interfered:

> Would the cartoons have been passed over in silence if we hadn't formed a campaign and travelled the world to spread the word? As I see it, the answer is unfortunately yes. We were the ones who publicised the dossier. We were the ones who demanded a reaction. And we were the ones who fought to maintain the anger in the Islamic world.
>
> (Akkari, 2014, p. 355, my translation)

To Richard Malka, *CH*'s lawyer, it seems strange that several critics have accused *CH* of fanning the flames when it was in fact other actors—first and foremost the Danish imams—who fanned the flames. Their "falsification brought tens of thousands of people into the streets", writes Malka, "and yet we were the ones who threw oil on the fire?" (Malka, 2021, p. 28, my translation). In his opinion, it's quite the opposite: "They lit the fire and for fifteen years now they've been calling us Islamophobic arsonists" (Malka, 2021, p. 28, my translation). In recent

years, *CH* has indeed often been labelled as Islamophobic and racist, but as I hope to demonstrate below, misinformation and misinterpretation have played a significant role in this process.

3. Second example: The Taubira cartoon controversy in 2013

On 30 October 2013, *CH* published a drawing of the then French Minister of Justice, Christiane Taubira, a black woman of Guyanese decent, as a monkey (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Drawing of Christiane Taubira by Stéphane Charbonnier. Source: *Charlie Hebdo* No. 1115

Prior to this, French media had run stories about far-right politicians and activists who had compared her to a monkey. A local election candidate for the far-right party, *Rassemblement National* (National Rally), then called *Front National* (National Front), Anne-Sophie Leclere, had posted a photomontage on her Facebook profile, consisting of two juxtaposed photos: one showed a small, dressed monkey with the caption "At 18 months" while the other showed the then French Minister of Justice, Christiane Taubira, with the caption "Now" (fig. 2).

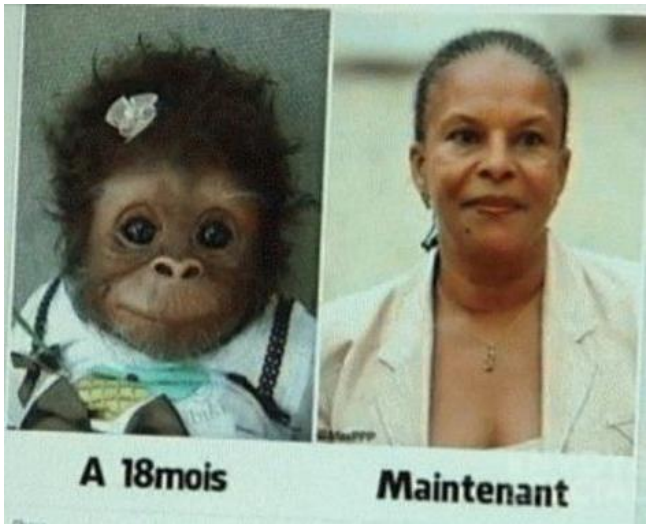

Figure 2. Facebook post by Anne-Sophie Leclere. Source: Facebook

Speaking on French television on 17 October, Leclere explained that she perceived Taubira as "a savage" and would "prefer to see her in a tree swinging from the branches rather than in the government" (*France Info*, 2013). Furthermore, on 25 October *La Manif Pour Tous*—a coalition of traditionalist believers, supporters of the *Front National* (*FN*) and outspoken homophobes—demonstrated against a law recently introduced by Taubira that legalises gay marriage (Steiner, 2018, pp. 93–94). French television showed that some of the demonstrators had chanted "a banana for the monkey" (*une banane pour la guenon*) and "monkey eat the banana" (*la guenon mange la banane*), drawing on the same old stereotype of black people as savage and animalistic as Leclere (*Huffington Post*, 2013).

It was in response to these blatantly racist attacks on Taubira that Stéphane Charbonnier, known as Charb, drew what he has described as a "parody of an election poster for the *Front National*" (Charb, 2015, p. 61 my translation). It depicted Taubira with a monkey body next to the logo of *FN*—a flame in red, white and blue, the colours of the French flag—under the title *Rassemblement Bleu Raciste* (Racist Blue Rally). For *CH*'s French audience, it was obvious that this title was a pun on *Rassamblement Bleu Marine* (Marine Blue Rally), a well-known coalition of right-wing parties created in 2012 by Marine Le Pen, who was also the leader of *FN*. Now that members of the right-wing community had come out as overt racists, Charb apparently saw it fit to change the coalition's name to the more accurate *Rassemblement Bleu Raciste* (Racist Blue Rally). Furthermore, the shockingly grotesque image made it difficult for the French middle-class voters, who were increasingly attracted to the *FN*, to ignore the fact that this supposedly decent party was actually a rallying point for blatant racists regarding people of colour as wild animals. In other words, Charb's parody of an election poster for the *FN* was designed to confront the party's potential and actual voters with the 'naked truth' about the ingrained racism of the party.

Pretending to reveal the 'naked truth' about someone or something is a common satirical device that has been used since antiquity (Sloterdijk, 1983, pp. 54–55). In recent years, *CH* has repeatedly used this device to unmask and undress Marine Le Pen. Since she took over leadership of the *FN* from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in January 2011, she has sought to make the party more palatable to middle-class voters by distancing it from overt racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric. In France, this process is known as *dédiabolisation* or de-demonisation (Michelot & Quencez, 2017). According to *CH*, however, the party's image makeover under the leadership of Marine Le Pen was nothing more than a strategic ploy invented to attract voters. In April 2011, the magazine thus pretended to lay bare the 'naked truth' beneath the party's new

neat surface by revealing that Marine Le Pen's pubic hair was shaved like a Hitler moustache, suggesting that the party was still as far right as it had always been (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Drawing of Marine Le Pen by Laurent Sourisseau. Source: *Charlie Hebdo* No. 984

A similar satirical device is employed in the drawing of Taubira as a monkey: it pretends to lay bare the 'naked truth' about the grotesque racism in the right-wing community. *CH* has long perceived the French right wing as being profoundly racist; indeed, in 1995, the magazine even proposed a ban on the *FN* (issue no. 195). Consequently, when Taubira was compared to a monkey, the magazine did not consider this to be merely the hallucinations of a few deranged individuals. Rather, it was interpreted as a Freudian slip, revealing the dirty truth that populists like Le Pen were trying to hide under a respectable, bourgeoise disguise. Leclere provided the public with an uncensored display of the racism that her party is trying so hard to censor when she revealed how people of colour are actually perceived on the French right. In turn, Charb publicised her Freudian slip in all its grotesque monstrosity by making it the centrepiece of a *FN* election poster.

CH's persistent attacks on the *FN* can also be interpreted as an expression of a desire to distance the magazine from a policy that, on some points, is uncomfortably similar to its own.

In a thought-provoking analysis, Fredric Bogel has argued that satire does not merely reflect existing differences in the world but actively creates them (Bogel 2001, Chapter 2). As Bogel has put it: "The crucial fact is not that satirists find folly or wickedness in the world and then wish to expose that alien something. Instead, satirists identify in the world something or someone that is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like them […] something, then, that is *not alien enough*" (Bogel, 2001, pp. 41–42, emphasis in the original).

This perspective may help explain *CH*'s recurrent attacks on the *FN*. The satirists' antagonism may stem, at least in part, from a perceived resemblance between their own critiques of Islamism and those voiced by the *FN*. Precisely because of this shared terrain, *CH* has been eager to underscore—or, in Bogel's terms, to make—the differences between their political stance and that of the far right. Notably, *CH* has insisted that its criticism targets conservative political interpretations of Islam, i.e. Islamism, while the far right is against Islam as such and prejudiced against Muslims in general (El-Rhazoui, 2015; Ervine, 2019, Chapter 1). The cartoon of Marine Le Pen can be seen as an effect of this dynamic. Yet, the satirical force of the cartoon lies not only in 'making a difference' between *CH* and the *FN*, but also in maintaining a certain duality that the *FN* seeks to conceal: the duality of the party's polished façade and its underlying racism.

A significant *contrast* between the cartoons of Le Pen and Taubira is, of course, the point of view employed: while Marine Le Pen is seen from the point of view of the satirist, i.e. Laurent Sourisseau (Riss), Christiane Taubira is seen from the point of view of the object of the satire, i.e. Anne-Sophie Leclere. Whereas the former cartoon adopts an external perspective, the latter adopts an internal perspective, portraying the world as it is seen through the eyes of the satirical object. This kind of indirect satire, in which the satirist's perspective is only expressed through alterations of another person's viewpoint, can be more cognitively demanding than direct satirical attacks. Nevertheless, it is a widespread satirical practice that has been used with great success by famous satirists from Jonathan Swift (*A Modest Proposal*, 1729) to Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*, 2005-14). The Taubira cartoon is evidently part of this well-established satirical tradition and taking it at face value would contradict both the general editorial stance of *CH* and its explicit position on the racism Taubira was facing. The very issue of the magazine containing the cartoon (no. 1115) unequivocally stated:

> Shame on the families whose children insulted Taubira in Angers with comments like 'Who's the banana for? It's for the monkey.' It is evident that these parents were affiliated with *La Manif Pour Tous*, those anti-gay marriage people who believe that insults are the only way to make their voices heard. Shame on them.
>
> ("Ignominie," 2013, p. 3, my translation)

Nevertheless, some critics of *CH* have argued that using racist imagery to expose the 'naked truth' of the right-wing worldview is, itself, an act of racism. For instance, communication scholar Matt Jones has argued that *CH's* cartoons "wavers between a condemnation of racism and reinforcement of a particular xenophobia that has wide circulation in contemporary France" (Jones, 2017, pp. 87). Despite his initial openness to the possibility that CH's satire could have a variety of effects, he ultimately arrives at a definitive conclusion that rejects any ambiguity: "They […] increase the suspicion levelled against one fragile part of the community", namely Muslims (Jones, 2018, pp. 88).

A parallel argument can, of course, be made in relation to the Taubira cartoon. While the intention appears to have been to increase the suspicion levelled against the *FN*, it is possible that it may have resulted in an increased suspicion of people of colour. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering have attributed such unintended effects of antiracist satire to what they term the "Alf Garnett syndrome", named after a character by that name in various British sitcoms

from the 1960s until the 1990s (Lockyer & Pickering, 2009, p. 16). Although Garnett was satirised as a racist, he gained a certain degree of popularity, and the syndrome named after him refers to instances in which "what is being satirised becomes a source of celebration among at least a section of the audience" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2009, p. 17). It is possible that a comparable dynamic is at play in the reception of *CH*, and that the magazine's efforts to expose racism has resulted in a celebration of racism, at least in a section of the audience.

Conversely, the Taubira cartoon may, of course, *also* have persuaded certain members of the audience that the FN is a racist party unworthy of their vote. A recent meta-analysis of 70 empirical investigations has found that "satirical news has a very small but message-consistent effect on persuasion," meaning that it "persuade[s] the audience to adapt a stance in line with the satirical message" (Burgers & Brugman, 2022, pp. 972, 982). This finding contradicts the idea that satirical news outlets like *CH* primarily have unintended effects. More specifically, it suggests that the (minimal) impact of the Taubira cartoon was consistent with the intended message.

Nevertheless, it remains challenging to draw definitive conclusions. The potential impact of satire has been a subject of discussion among scholars for many years, and theoretical frameworks have been developed to characterise satirical works as subversive, conservative, rebellious, disciplinary, liberating, polarising, and much more (Elliott, 1972; Griffin, 1994; Billig, 2005; LaMarre et al., 2009; Greenberg, 2011; Fotis, 2020; Declercq & El Khachab, 2021). This theoretical diversity is likely attributable to the inherent impossibility of determining the impact of satire with certainty, whether in a broad context or in relation to a particular satirical cartoon.

However, with regard to issues of misinformation and false affectivity, the question of the impact of satire is of secondary significance. Of greater significance is the fact that the Taubira cartoon was deliberately manipulated. Following its initial publication, the cartoon was circulated on social media *without* the telling title and *without* the revealing *FN* logo, making it appear as if the cartoon was an expression of how the satirists at *CH* saw Taubira, and not a satirical exposure of how the members of the *FN* saw her (Weston Vauclair & Vauclair, 2016, p. 88). Due to a sly cropping of the cartoon, what was meant as a satirical critique of racism became a racist expression itself. According to Charb, this was not a unique case. In one of the last texts he wrote before he was killed by militant Islamists in 2015, he complained that "it has become common for our detractors to distort a cartoon to make it fit the perception they have of the magazine", which is that it is "an Islamophobic and therefore racist newspaper" (Charb, 2015, p. 60, my translation).

The distorted version of the Taubira cartoon was originally posted on Instagram by French rapper Sérigne M'Baye Gueye, known as Disiz (his post is reproduced in: Dessinez Créez Liberté, 2020). Prior to this, a dispute had erupted between *CH* and the rapper Ken Samaras, known as Nekfeu, over a song accompanying the premiere of the film *La Marche*. The song features a verse by Nekfeu, in which he says: "I call for an auto-da-fé for the dogs of *Charlie Hebdo*" (*Marche*, 2013). In response to this text, *CH* issued a press release saying they were "appalled" by Nekfeu's threatening rhetoric (Le Monde, 2013). Nekfeu remained silent, but Disiz, who also contributed to the song, responded by posting the cropped drawing of Taubira, accompanied by a text mocking *CH* for being appalled when they "allow themselves to draw whatever makes them laugh" (Dessinez Créez Liberté, 2020). The fact that *CH* never published the amputated version of the cartoon that Disiz posted as proof of their moral depravity, did not seem to bother the rapper. Neither did the fact that the original cartoon was never meant to provoke laughter, but to expose the grotesque racism of the French far right. Instead of criticising *CH*'s actual satire, Disiz manipulated it and added his own threat to Nekfeu's: "Even if you

were silent, I'd shut you up. You know how? By chopping off your hands" (quoted in Charb, 2015, p. 62, my translation).[1]

Although the doctored version of Charb's cartoon of Taubira did not enrage the masses to the point where they took to the streets, it was certainly meant to stir up anger against the infidel "dogs" at *CH* who apparently deserved to be both mutilated and burned. The violent hate speech of Nekfeu and Disiz strongly suggests that they would not mind seeing their threats translated into actual violence. But as was the case with the original Danish cartoons, Charb's original cartoon did not cause any noticeable offence to the French public. It did not provoke the outrage and animosity that Disiz felt the satirists deserved, so if he wanted to achieve this goal, he had to create his own falsified cartoon that made the magazine appear outrageously racist. The indignation subsequently expressed on social media was thus—once again—manufactured and orchestrated. Rather than being a spontaneous reaction to *CH*'s actual satire, it was the result of a scam. The social affects that defined the controversy were provoked by sly middlemen or "hate spin agents", as Cherian George has called them (George, 2017, p. 18). In recent years, such hate spin agents have played a significant role in religious controversies across the globe (George, 2017). Nevertheless, they often operate in the dark, because we routinely regard outbursts of outrage or anger as spontaneous reactions of insulted or intolerant masses rather than expressions of manipulated, false affectivity:

> If provocative symbols do not always and everywhere produce strong reactions, it must follow that some other intervening factor affects how people in a given time and place respond. This intervention comes in the form of middlemen who decide whether it is in their interest to transform a potential provocation into a full-blown protest […] We will be oblivious to these underlying dynamics as long as we are satisfied with accounts that simplistically ascribe violence to mass intolerance and outrage.
>
> (George, 2017, pp. 19, 22)

As we have seen, not even the publication of Muhammad cartoons in Muslim media produced sufficiently "strong reactions" to start a controversy. The Danish cartoon controversy as well as the Taubira cartoon controversy only really took off *after* hate spin agents intervened. Some people certainly found the real cartoons provoking, but there were not enough people who found them sufficiently provocative to start a controversy. Something more was needed, and in both cases, hate spin agents used misinformation in the form of homemade or cropped cartoons to generate a sufficient level of indignation and anger. The masses were evidently deceived, and the social affects at the heart of these controversies were thus significantly manipulated.

These are relatively straightforward cases of manipulation, but in the following sections I will argue that even in cases where no one has tampered with the cartoons, a kind of false affectivity may be at play. My argument is twofold: Firstly, it is widely recognized that feelings are *reactions* to stimuli. In the case of cartoon controversies, however, they are not simply reactions to the satirical cartoons themselves, but to our *interpretations* of them. We are only offended by a cartoon, if we *interpret* it as offensive. Although we tend to overlook the interpretive activity between the satirical cartoons and the social affect they trigger, affects are always also products of interpretations.

Secondly, although satirical cartoons can often be interpreted in several contradictory ways, it does not follow that *all* interpretations are equally valid. Interpretations can still be ill-informed, superficial, misguided, one-sided, biased and the like. To recognise this does not mean to support the 'authoritarian' idea that a satirical cartoon has one single meaning that is guaranteed by some interpretive authority. It only means that we cannot impose *any* arbitrary

[1] Today, most satire researchers acknowledge that not all satire wants to eliciting laughter. As a recent introduction to satire has pointed out, "at least some satires do not aim to be funny" (Greenberg, 2018, p. 28).

meaning on it. This assertion should be fairly uncontroversial. As Bruno Latour has put it: "if it is quite true that [a work of art] has to be interpreted, at no point do we have the feeling that we are free to do 'whatever we want' with it" (Latour, 2013, p. 241). Or as Umberto Eco has pointed out, "even the most radical deconstructionists accept the idea that there are interpretations which are blatantly unacceptable" (Eco, 1994, p. 6). If this is indeed the case, social affects can also be products of *misinterpretations*—for example of misguided or one-sided interpretations—in which case they may be said to be false. In the following section, I will argue that the controversy that erupted in the writers' and free speech organisation PEN America after the terrorist attack on *CH* was haunted by a false affectivity based on misinterpretation rather than deliberate misinformation.

4. Third example: the PEN America controversy in 2015

On 7 January 2015, seven of the cartoonists and columnists of *CH* were killed by terrorists trained by Al-Qaeda. In addition, five more people were killed. News of the massacre quickly travelled around the world and millions of people expressed solidarity with the victims. Suddenly, the hitherto little-known magazine was discussed, celebrated and criticised in torrents of statements, opinion pieces, cartoons and social media threads. In March 2015, PEN America, the writers' organisation dedicated to defending writers' freedom of expression, announced that *CH* would be honoured with the PEN/Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award at their upcoming award gala in May. In response, some PEN members expressed their discontent to the organisation or wrote opinion pieces in newspapers (Prose, 2015). On 26 April, six writers withdraw from the upcoming gala, and on 5 May, PEN received a letter of protest from Teju Cole, signed by more than 200 members of the organisation (Cole et al., 2015).

A recurring argument in the objections to the PEN award was that *CH*'s satire targets an already vulnerable minority, namely Muslims, and therefore does not merit the honour of being awarded an accolade. For example, on 26 March the writer Deborah Eisenberg wrote to PEN's Executive Director, Suzanne Nossel:

> I have read – and heard – that "equal opportunity offence" is the aspiration of Charlie Hebdo. But how is such an aspiration to be fulfilled unless the disparate "targets" of offence occupy an equal position and have an equivalent meaning within the dominant culture? […] To a Muslim population in France that is already embattled, marginalised, impoverished, and victimised, in large part a devout population that clings to its religion for support, Charlie Hebdo's cartoons of the Prophet must be seen as intended to cause further humiliation and suffering.
>
> (Eisenberg, 2015a)

In response, Nossel wrote to Eisenberg the following day:

> The new editor *of Charlie Hebdo* has said that in mocking religion their aim has been not to attack religion itself, but rather the role of religion in politics and the blurring of lines in-between, which they see as promoting totalitarianism […] We have heard from Muslims, many of whom reject the prohibitions on the depiction of Mohammed, actually decrying the discussion about Muslim grievances in the wake of Charlie Hebdo. They believe this line of discourse legitimises Muslim extremism, which they see as a far greater danger to Muslims than Western anti-Muslim sentiment.
>
> (Nossel, 2015)

Regardless of one's opinion of their arguments, it is noteworthy that both parties seem to rely on second-hand information about the magazine: Eisenberg writes "I have read – and heard –

that […]" while Nossel writes that "the new editor of Charlie Hebdo has said that […]". Neither seems to have first-hand knowledge from actually *reading CH*. In this regard, there was apparently no substantial distinction between the intellectual elite and the general population. Immediately after the terrorist attack, millions of people either supported or opposed *CH*. The hashtag #JeSuisCharlie became one of the "most intensively used and globally dispersed hashtags" and rapidly produced antagonistic forms such as #JeNeSuisPasCharlie (Titley, 2017, p. 22). However, as Gavan Titley has noted, only "a tiny proportion of participants in the communicative event had any relationship with Charlie Hebdo as an actual publication" (Titley, 2017, p. 20).

A comparable lack of familiarity with the magazine appeared to be common among the American literati. As observed by Lyombe Eko, "the reactions of some members of PEN America showed that most of the members of the organisation had never heard of, let alone read Charlie Hebdo, before the deadly terrorist attack on its editorial offices in Paris" (Eko, 2019, p. 34). Indeed, a considerable number of those who signed the protest letter to PEN were unable to read French. And among those who did read French, many had apparently never read *CH* or familiarised themselves with the events to which their cartoons refer. As a result, the controversy unfolded on a relatively superficial and generalised level, with minimal reference to specific drawings or texts in the magazine. Unsurprisingly, this lack of specificity provided fertile ground for ill-informed interpretations and misguided conclusions.

In her response to Nossel, Eisenberg argued that "Charlie Hebdo's objectives are entirely beside the point. It is the work available to us, not the objectives behind it, which we experience and judge" (Eisenberg, 2015b). However, she did not provide any analysis or interpretation of "the work available to us". Indeed, she did not even offer an example to support or illustrate her judgment. Neither did the official letter of protest to PEN mentioned above. Despite the assertion in this letter that *CH* targets "Muslims" and fuels "anti-Arab sentiments," the signatories failed to substantiate these claims with illustrations or interpretations (Cole et al., 2015). In the course of the controversy, only a few of the critics involved made reference to specific cartoons. Furthermore, even in these instances, they did not engage in any comprehensive analysis. For example, Teju Cole, who spearheaded the letter of protest to PEN, published an article just two days after the deadly terrorist attack in which he claimed:

> In recent years the magazine [i.e. *CH*] has gone specifically for racist and Islamophobic provocations, and its numerous anti-Islam images have been inventively perverse, featuring hook-nosed Arabs, bullet-ridden Korans, variations on the theme of sodomy, and mockery of the victims of a massacre […] Blacks have hardly had it easier in Charlie Hebdo: one of the magazine's cartoons depicts the Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira, who is of Guianese origin, as a monkey (naturally, the defence is that a violently racist image was being used to satirise racism).
>
> (Cole, 2015)

This is as close as Cole's text gets to an actual analysis of the *CH* cartoons: he notes that some of them feature hook-nosed Arabs, bullet-ridden Korans, depictions of black people as monkeys etc. The fact that Cole does not provide detailed analyses of the cartoons to support his moral condemnation suggests that he considers it self-evident that a depiction of, say, a black person as a monkey can only serve racist purposes. Any "defence" suggesting that the framing, headline, logo or context points in another direction is dismissed out of hand. In other words, Cole does not reject conflicting interpretations by means of more comprehensive analyses or more compelling interpretations. Instead, he presents a conspicuously reductionist interpretation that focuses on a few visual motifs while disregarding numerous other significant elements, visual as well as textual.

The lack of detail in Cole's description of the Taubira cartoon renders it impossible to ascertain whether he has seen Charb's original work or the falsified, cropped version that has been circulated online. *If* he has seen Charb's original cartoon, this does not have a notable impact on his perspective: he does not ascribe any significance to the conspicuous headline or the unmistakable *FN* logo. On the contrary, both of these elements are absent from his description, which is symptomatic of his approach: he concentrates exclusively on a few, carefully chosen visual elements that can be perceived as stereotypical, while ignoring all other elements, be they visual, textual or contextual.

The paucity of detail also makes it difficult to determine which *other* cartoons Cole is referring to. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that one of the cartoons in question is the one that was published on the cover of *CH* on 10 July 2013 (fig. 4). This is the only widely circulated *CH* cartoon that features a "bullet-ridden Koran" and that could be perceived as featuring a "hook-nosed Arab".

Figure 4. Drawing of Egyptian Islamist trying to use a Koran to protect himself from gunfire, by Laurent Sourisseau. Source: *Charlie Hebdo* No. 1099

This cartoon was created by Laurent Sourisseau, known as Riss, in response to the recent "massacre in Egypt" as the headline says. A week prior to this, on 3 July 2013, the Egyptian military had removed President Mohammad Morsi from office after weeks of mass demonstrations against his conservative leadership and perceived overreach of power. In response, protests erupted in Cairo, and on 5 July pro-Morsi demonstrators clashed with military forces, resulting in the aforementioned massacre with several deaths. It is the killing of one of Morsi's supporters Riss portrayed as a man in traditional garb trying in vain to use a Koran to protect himself from gunfire. The accompanying text read: "Massacre in Egypt: The Koran is a piece of shit - it doesn't stop bullets."

As a pro-Morsi protester, however, the depicted victim of military violence does not represent the "Arabs" in general, as Cole suggests. Morsi was the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood's political party—the so-called *Freedom and Justice Party*—and during the protests he was backed by members and supporters of this avowedly *Islamist* organisation, which seeks to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law (Wagemakers, 2022, pp. 22–23, 52–54). Far from being a typical Arab, the man in Riss' cartoon is thus an *Islamist* who espouses a very specific political-religious ideology that millions of Egyptian Muslims oppose and that scholars and intellectuals of Muslim descent have described as "far right", "fascist", "totalitarian" and "dominated by men stuck in the seventh century" (El-Rhazoui, 2015; Abdel-Samad, 2016, p. 24; Mozaffari, 2017, p. 267; Eltahawy, 2016, p. 16). To an audience unaware of the situation to which the cartoon explicitly refers—namely, the current "massacre in Egypt"—the bearded man in traditional garb may appear to be an ordinary Muslim or Arab. However, if the context is taken into account, it becomes evident that such an interpretation is terribly ill-informed. He is unmistakably a pro-Morsi, pro-Brotherhood Islamist. And as numerous scholars have stressed, Islamists are *not* to be confused with Muslims. Islamism is *not* identical to Islam. As Syrian-German political scientist Bassam Tibi has put it:

> Islamism [is] the promotion of a political order that is believed to emanate from the will of Allah and is not based on popular sovereignty. Islam itself does not do this. As a faith, cult, and ethical framework, it implies certain political values but does not presuppose a particular order of government. Islamism grows out of a specific interpretation of Islam, but it is not Islam […] Yet even though Islamism is political, it remains religious. Unlike its totalitarian predecessors, communism and fascism, the new totalitarianism is not a secular but a religious ideology.
>
> (Tibi, 2012, pp. 1–3)

By failing to acknowledge the seminal difference between Islamists and Muslims, and more specifically, between the opposing sides in the Egyptian conflict, Cole effectively allows an ultra-conservative, far-right Islamist to represent the Muslim community as a whole. According to British-Iranian human rights activist Maryam Namazie, misrepresentations of this kind are distressingly common. As she has put it, non-Muslim commentators like Eisenberg and Cole tend to "see Muslim 'communities' and 'societies' as homogeneous and one and the same with the religious-Right" (Namazie, 2015). This misconception, or deliberate misrepresentation, not only "discounts the many believing secularists, feminists, freethinkers, and atheists and socialists amongst those deemed 'Muslim'"; it also "ignores the widespread dissent and resistance" that characterises Muslim societies (Namazie, 2015). In contrast, *CH* is acutely aware that Muslim societies are as conflicted and divided as Western societies. As the Moroccan-French writer, ex-Muslim and former *CH* columnist Zineb El Rhazoui has put it:

> *Charlie* is aware of the intellectual and ideological ferment that is animating the Muslim world, it has understood that a war is on between freedom and politico-Islamist dictatorship, whether you date it to before or after the Arab Spring, and *Charlie* has quite simply chosen its camp: ours, that is, that of the anti-clericals [and] all the atheists of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt or Palestine [who are]

> so virulent they regularly spend time in jail for blasphemy […] because they're busy fighting their own far right: Islamism.
>
> (El-Rhazoui, 2015)

In contrast to their American critics, the satirists at *CH* realise that the so-called 'Muslim countries' in the Middle East and Maghreb are home to a significant number of anti-clericals, atheists, agnostics, secularists, freethinkers, socialists, feminists and others who want *less* religion in politics and society, *fewer* laws based on Sharia, and *more* human rights. When commentators such as Eisenberg assert that Muslims are "a devout population that clings to its religion for support", they not only ignore the fact that millions of so-called Muslims identify as non-believers (Eller, 2024, pp. 4–6), but also fail to recognise that numerous secular Muslims and ex-Muslims support *CH* (see for example Chafig et al., 2006; El-Rhazoui, 2015; Hirsi Ali, 2016, pp. 246–247; Namazie, 2016). These commentators disregard the fact that a significant number of people of Muslim descent welcome the dethronement of Muhammed through satire and critique—not least because Islamist leaders routinely invoke Muhammad's words to justify legislation that infringes upon human rights (see for example Rushdie, 2005; Chafig et al., 2006; Akkari, 2014, pp. 451–452; Oguz, 2015). The question arises as to whether this can be ignored. Is it ethically sound to leave people like Maryam Namazie, Zineb El Rhazoui, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, Halime Oguz and many others in the lurch, merely to avoid offending any party? By avoiding blasphemous satire, are we not aligning ourselves with the most conservative, far-right factions of the Muslim world?

We need to reevaluate some of the binaries that structure debates about satire and Islam: West versus East, secular versus religious, conservative versus liberal. From the perspective of *CH*, there is no Huntingtonian clash between a religious Eastern civilisation and a secular Western one (Huntington, 1996). Instead, there are *internal* conflicts within both civilisations. Broadly speaking, there are fights between liberals and conservatives, or between left-wing and right-wing actors, in *both* civilisations. And *CH* has chosen the liberal-left camp, at home as well as abroad. In France, they fight the Catholic Church, the anti-gay movement, and the *FN*; in the Middle East and Maghreb, they fight the authoritarian dictators, the Mullahs, and the Islamists who want to create an Islamic State built on Sharia law. For the same reason, they support intellectuals and activists like Zineb El Rhazoui, Maryam Namazie, Irshad Manji, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and many others of Muslim descent who advocate for human rights, gender equality, democratic principles, rule of law and so on.

By all accounts, Cole espouses similar values. However, due to a superficial analysis that focuses solely on iconography, he interprets the ultra-conservative Islamist in Riss's cartoon not as an Egyptian parallel to the *FN* supporters targeted by *CH* at home, but as a representative of the Arabs in general. He fails to differentiate between conservative, theocratic Islamists and liberal, democratic Muslims. Consequently, he perceives the cartoon as "racist and Islamophobic", even as "perverse" (Cole, 2015). The affects he thus communicates to a wider audience are born out of ill-informed, superficial interpretations. There is no evidence to suggest that he deliberately spread misinformation, as was the case with the intermediaries in the Danish cartoon controversy and the French Taubira controversy. However, there are strong indications that he misinterpreted the cartoons published by *CH*. His overt disgust for the "perverse" and "racist" cartoons is, by all appearances, based on false premises. Nevertheless, his words contributed to a circuit of social affect that in the end persuaded more than 200 writers to sign a protest against PEN America's decision to bestow a Courage Prize upon *CH*. In this way, Cole became one of the mediators who made this controversy happen.

Cole also writes that *CH* features caricatures of Arabs with hooked noses—an iconographic trope long associated with anti-Semitic propaganda. In doing so, he implies that the magazine suggests Arabs possess innate negative traits, in a manner disturbingly reminiscent of how Nazi

imagery used hooked noses to mark Jews as inherently malevolent or harmful to society (Brustein, 2010, pp. 20–21). An illustrative example of this kind of Nazi propaganda is the 1938 children's book *Der Giftpilz* (*The Poisonous Mushroom*), published by Julius Streicher, editor of the notoriously anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer* (Hiemer, 1938). The book compares Jews to poisonous mushrooms, thereby implying that they are inherently poisonous to society due to their deceitful and cunning nature. Moreover, it claims that just as poisonous mushrooms are difficult to distinguish from edible ones, so are Jews difficult to distinguish from Christians. Nevertheless, it is possible to recognise individuals belonging to the 'Jewish race' by their hooked noses, which bear a striking resemblance to the number six (Fig. 5). Thus, Nazi propaganda taught German children that the hooked Jewish nose was a racial marker indicative of inherent negative traits, comparable to the characteristics of poisonous mushrooms.

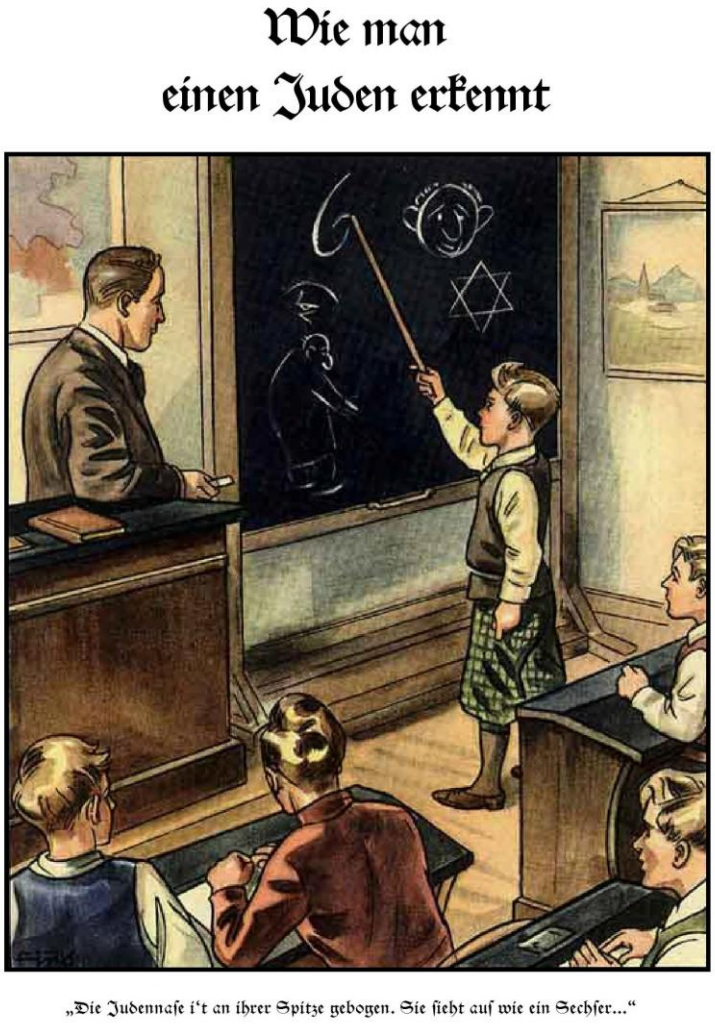

Figure 5. German boys are taught to recognise a Jews by his nose. Source: *Der Giftpilz* (1938).

It is, however, absurd, if not outright libellous, to insinuate that *CH* should suggest something similar. The notion that Islamists should constitute a specific race, identifiable by their noses, is no doubt laughable to the magazine's cartoonists and columnists. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, no interpretation of a *CH* cartoon has ever demonstrated that the magazine would propagate such racist notions. *If* the Islamist in Riss' cartoon has a hooked nose and not, say, a broken nose because of military violence, this certainly does *not* imply that all Arabs possess inherent negative characteristics. Firstly, such an interpretation is predicated on the assumption

that the cartoon represents the Arabs in general, which is obviously incorrect. Secondly, the text, which is integral to Riss' cartoon, makes explicit that the depicted Islamist is being ridiculed for his belief in the almighty power of God's words, i.e. the Koran, and not for his ethnicity as an Arab. In the words of Charb, the cartoon shows how "an Islamist […] who sought to impose his vision of religion on an entire people tragically realises that God is not so powerful after all" (Charb, 2015, p. 45, my translation).

5. Conclusion: toward a critical theory of social affect

This article has argued that the waves of public outrage surrounding contemporary cartoon controversies are best understood not as spontaneous emotional responses to offensive imagery, but rather as complex affective phenomena that are generated, shaped or intensified through the circulation of misinformation or misinterpretation. Through close readings of three emblematic cases—the Danish cartoon controversy, the Taubira cartoon affair, and the PEN America dispute—it has demonstrated that the social affects at the heart of these controversies were, to a significant extent, manufactured by intermediaries. Through ill-informed reading, selective framing, strategic distortion, or outright fabrication, these actors reconfigured the meaning of the cartoons to align with their political, ideological, or religious agendas.

This finding challenges the dominant narrative—prevailing in both media and scholarly discourse—which tends to frame such controversies as spontaneous and unmediated reactions to offensive content. In none of the cases examined were strong social affects "triggered" by the cartoons alone. On the contrary, the instigation or escalation of outrage was initiated by middlemen or mediators who propagated manipulated images or misleading interpretations. As this analysis has shown, these intermediaries—or "hate spin agents" in Cherian George's terms—played a crucial role in creating enough negative affect to transform otherwise quotidian satirical critiques into full-blown public controversies. In all three cases, intermediaries were instrumental in producing what this article terms false affectivity.

By introducing *false affectivity* as an affective analogue to the critical concept of *false consciousness*, the article contends that affects—like beliefs—can be ill-informed, misled, manipulated, and in that sense, false. The notion of false affectivity implies that social affects can be as distorted—and distorting—as the patterns of thought critical thinkers used to call ideologies. Far from denying the sincerity of the affects accompanying contemporary cartoon controversies, the concept calls attention to the informational and interpretive frameworks that underpin them. What is at stake is not whether people genuinely feel offended, outraged, or disgusted, but whether the feelings they experience are grounded in reliable information and accurate interpretations of the material in question.

I am aware that the assertion that other people's feelings can be false may appear provocative. Questioning the feelings of others is often perceived as presumptuous, if not outright patronising. In contrast, the interrogation of interpretations is a widely accepted practice that is often celebrated as an academic virtue. Consequently, the truism that only those affected by a cartoon can know how they feel should not impede critical examination of the social affects surrounding cartoon controversies. As long as these affects are examined in relation to the (mis-)information or (mis-)interpretations to which they are inextricably linked, they remain open to analysis, contestation, and, where appropriate, rejection.

The notion of false affectivity thus enables critical engagement with affective responses to satire *without* resorting to blanket dismissals or uncritical acceptance. It offers a path between Scylla and Charybdis: avoiding, on the one hand, a relativism that treats any collectively expressed affect as self-legitimating and beyond scrutiny, and on the other, a dismissiveness that writes off such responses as mere hypersensitivity or irrational outrage unworthy of serious

attention. By attending to the informational and interpretive conditions that help shape collective affects, we gain a means of distinguishing between affective responses grounded in substantive engagement with the material and those elicited through superficial examination or manipulation by middlemen.

Ultimately, this approach enables us to grasp not only how satire can be misread or weaponised but also how affective life itself is produced—and, at times, strategically manipulated. A critical theory of social affect resists taking public outrage at face value; instead, it calls for careful examination of the frameworks that lend affect its apparent immediacy and persuasive force. In an age when misinformation circulates faster than ever and affective mobilisation has become a potent political instrument, such scrutiny is not merely an academic exercise. It is a precondition for moving beyond simplistic narratives of spontaneous outrage and civilisational clashes—and for a more nuanced comprehension of the intricate processes through which cartoon controversies emerge.

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