

Charlie Hebdo and free speech: France's murky past



In the aftermath of the murderous attacks on the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* at the beginning of 2015, calls to rally to the defence of French 'republican values' have resounded throughout the country and indeed, much of the rest of the world.

Beyond a simple enumeration of the fundamental human rights these values are supposed to represent, what does the historical record look like when it comes to the actual application of those rights to citizens of *la patrie*? The answer to that question, it turns out, very much depended on *who* you were.

Simply put, from 1881, all citizens of the republic enjoyed legal freedom of the press; and those who weren't didn't. No

small matter, moreover, when those excluded from the category of full citizens mostly included the millions of French colonial subjects living in its the country's imperial possessions scattered across Africa, Indochina and elsewhere.

Most strikingly, in the case of colonial Algeria – officially a part of France – citizenship was specifically defined as including all those who were not Muslims – a racialised appropriation of religious identity for the purposes of exclusion that remained in force right up until the country finally achieved independence in 1962 following a brutal and protracted liberation struggle against the French.

An excellent [short article](#) by Arthur Asseraf – an online contribution to the St. Anthony's College Oxford '[Free Speech Debate](#)' project led by [Timothy Garton-Ash](#) – sets out the historical record. Asseraf's conclusion makes clear the connection between examining past French uses and abuses of citizenship and contemporary efforts to build more inclusive societies:

As we struggle to respond to [the Charlie Hebdo] massacre and to find a definition of free speech appropriate for our times, we will have to come to terms with the past uses of free speech to exclude and control certain populations. Claiming free speech as a 'Republican', 'French' or 'Western' value by conjuring a mythical pantheon of canonical Enlightenment figures will not help us build more inclusive societies.

<http://freespeechdebate.com/en/discuss/has-france-been-hypocritical-about-free-speech/>