Anti-sociologisme, Zionism, and Islamophobia in Philippe Val’s Charlie Hebdo

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Abstract
In this article, I examine Charlie Hebdo, under the editorship of Philippe Val from 1994 to 2005, and how it reported on themes related to Islam and Muslims, both in France and abroad, particularly in relation to the satanic breasts controversy and the Hebron massacre in 1994, the Kosovo war, 9/11, and the 2005 banlieues riots in France. I argue that despite the plurality of voices within the magazine, Val succeeded through his editorial line to establish and promote a link between antisemitism and Muslims and produce a narrative that harbours Islamophobia. By conflating Arabs and Muslims, pro-Palestinianism and postcolonialism, and by arguing that anti-Semitism is inherent in Islam, Val sowed the first seeds of Islamophobia in Charlie Hebdo’s editorial line as early as 1994. This reached its culmination first in 9/11 then in the Mohamed caricatures, and has consistently and irreversibly continued to shape the magazine’s ethos.

Keywords
anti-Semitism, Charlie Hebdo, Islamogauchisme, Islamophobia, Philippe Val, postcolonialism

Standing on trial for charges of anti-Semitism, and replying to the judge’s question about free speech, Charlie Hebdo’s cartoonist Siné said,

yes there are limits to freedom of expression. I mock bosses, the bourgeois, and those who stop others from living. I am anti-religious, anti-military. I will always be. I will never mock the homeless, the poor, the roms. They are not rich. (Le Monde Diplomatique, 2009)

Siné, a veteran of political cartoons in France, was not a core nor even a regular member of Charlie Hebdo during its original incarnation between 1970 and 1981. Before Charlie Hebdo was even conceived, Siné was publishing his own monthly magazine titled Siné Massacre (launched in 1962), an anticlerical, anti-establishment, and anti-colonialism weekly (then monthly) paper. When
Charlie Hebdo was relaunched in 1992 by Philippe Val – who reigned over it until 2009 – Siné joined the magazine with a permanent column titled ‘Siné sème sa zone’. His politics severely displeased his boss. Siné, a very well-respected figure in the French press scene, his eviction by Val in 2008 was a definitive juncture in the history of Charlie Hebdo. It illustrates the magazine’s slow but steady shift from an irreverent, iconoclastic, anti-establishment, environmentalist and anticlerical standpoint, which many still consider Charlie Hebdo to uphold, to a clearly proclaimed ideological position that was firmly rooted in a new form of compliance with governmental policies and dominant stances regarding the question of Islam and identity-politics in France.

In 2008, in his regular Charlie Hebdo column, Siné mocked Jean Sarkozy, the son of President Nicolas Sarkozy, for his engagement to the daughter of Bernard Darty, a Jewish entrepreneur and co-founder of the multinational company Darty. Siné ridiculed what he thought was Jean Sarkozy’s opportunism saying, ‘He just announced his intention to convert to Judaism before marrying his fiancée, the Jewish heiress of Darty. He will go a long way in life, this lad!’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2008). The comment would have gone unnoticed if journalist Claude Askolovitch had not brought it up on radio (On refait le monde in RTL), saying, ‘It is an anti-Semitic article, in a magazine which is not’. Under the looming threat of a lawsuit, Val asked Siné to apologise to Jean Sarkozy, which he refused to do, even though he accepted to apologise to those he might have hurt by his ‘shameful and condemnable’ comment. For Siné, the joke was meant to denounce the absurdity of converting to religion, any religion, and to mock the fascination of the Sarkozy family with money. On 16 July 2008, Val used his editorial to defend Charlie Hebdo and to publicly fire Siné. The affair did make a lot of noise (Schlegel, 2008). Petitions were signed and editorials were written on both sides of the dispute. A few months after the eviction of Siné, in May 2009, Val was promoted to director of Radio France Inter, a move sponsored by first lady Carla Bruni (Bacqué, 2009). Siné, on the other hand, launched his own satirical paper, Siné Hebdo in 2008, which became Siné Mensuel in 2010. Val himself admitted that the new magazine stole Charlie Hebdo’s readership, those truly loyal to the bête et méchant spirit of the 1970s Charlie Hebdo.

The Siné affair demonstrated the duplicity of Charlie Hebdo when it comes to offensive humour targeted at Jewish people; the magazine comfortably adopted a responsible, anti-racist ethical stand towards Jews, but was clearly complacent when it comes to offending Muslims. In fact, the notion of caricature thriving against a backdrop of Islamophobia, provided a context for the judiciary system’s favourable verdict during the Mohamed caricatures trial in 2006, when Charlie Hebdo was acquitted in the name of free speech. Though Siné won his lawsuit, the case showed that when the target was not Muslims, but a Jewish person, the courtesy extended to Val previously, and to caricature as a French tradition of parody overcoming good taste, was denied to Siné. While Val was praised for effectively hitting his target through his decision to publish the Mohamed caricatures in 2006, Siné was reprimanded for missing the target, and the narrative of the freedom to use the very peculiar – yet mythologised – medium of caricature and satire was replaced by the narrative of the responsible journalistic practice.

In fact, in March 2006, a few weeks after the publication of the Mohamed caricatures, Val published a petition for the right to blaspheme, signed by Bernard-Henri Lévy, Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasrin, and eight others, which became to be known as ‘le manifeste des 12’, titled ‘Ensemble contre le nouveau totalitarisme’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2006). Val prefaced this by stressing that his motive was ‘refusing to be intimidated in the name of respect for cultures and religions’, and urged other newspapers to follow his lead. The manifesto spreading over two pages was superimposed on a large, panoramic caricature depicting a Muslim crusade, waves of bearded men holding the Qur’an, women in burqas, and even suicide bombers. On the European shoreline, waves of people are enjoying food, wine, and music, in other words, the pleasures of life. The apocalyptic scene leaves nothing to the imagination and expresses quite loudly the terror of a
Muslim invasion to a peaceful and hedonistic European paradise. Val chose to stop at 12 signatories in a symbolic reference to the original *manifeste des 12* published in 15 November 1940 by 12 unionists to protest against Vichy France’s anti-Semitism. L’Express, Jyllands-Posten, and Der Spiegel published the manifesto (Remy, 2006).

In what follows, I take several examples of editorials, covers and selected stories that were run in *Charlie Hebdo* under the editorship of Philippe Val, and show how the magazine started flirting with Islamophobic tropes as early as 1994, a couple of years into its relaunch. These examples will help understand Val’s agenda for *Charlie Hebdo*, his position from the left, and his prejudiced perception of Islam and Muslims. I will discuss the important equation which ties two dominant themes in Val’s worldview: he repeatedly defended Jews but also Israel while stigmatised Muslims and accused them of inherent anti-Semitism. He refuted what he called *sociologisme*: a process by which the left in France blames governments and their policies for society’s ills and removes responsibility from the individual. This process, ‘an intellectual mechanism’, often leads to scapegoating of the Jewish minority in France according to Val (2017).

‘This fake anti-Zionism’

The French fashion house Chanel’s spring/summer collection of 1994 featured Claudia Schiffer wearing a gown with bold Arabic script embroidered on its chest, which, it subsequently became apparent, was a verse from the Qur’an. This fashion faux pas which sparked the satanic breasts controversy provided *Charlie Hebdo*’s most esteemed cartoonist, the author of the Mohamed caricatures in 2006, and one of the victims of the 2015 massacre, Cabu, with a cartoon cover to comment on the perceived offensive nature of the incident. It featured an angry imam shouting at a statue of a naked Claudia Schiffer bust: ‘If you want us to buy your Mirage [French jet fighter], you have to change this [pointing at Schiffer’s naked bust]’. The cover was accompanied by the headline ‘Chanel Offends Islam’, and it was followed by an editorial from Val that reversed the equation and stipulated that it was Islam that offended Claudia Schiffer: ‘The Qur’an is an insult to Claudia Schiffer’. Here, Val argued that this controversy proved that all religions hold ‘a fundamental hatred of women’, and expressed his disappointment at Karl Lagerfeld’s apology to the offended Muslims, because designers were supposed to be defenders of ‘culture and Western tolerance’ (*Charlie Hebdo*, 1994a). On the other hand, the Hebron massacre in Palestine’s West Bank, which took place a short while after, and left 29 Muslims dead in the Ibrahimi mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, did not make it onto the covers nor the editorial of *Charlie Hebdo*, but it did inspire Val 2 weeks later. In fact, Val only wrote an editorial on the subject to react to a piece published by the journalist Jean Daniel in *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Val argued that a certain faction of the left in France represented by Daniel entertained the illusion that a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian could live in peace together. Furthermore, Val argued that the media coverage of the massacre which took place 25 February 1994 was pro-Palestinian and biased, and that what happened right after the attack was ‘surreal’. The fact that Palestinians, reacting to the massacre, demanded the liberation of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons, or that the Syrians demanded the liberation of some of their occupied land in the Golan Heights, or that Lebanon demanded that the Israeli army leave its occupied territories in South Lebanon: for Val, all these demands were very illogical, unjustified, even bizarre (*Charlie Hebdo*, 1994b). In addition, Val believed that those Muslims massacred in the mosque in Palestine were getting too much press coverage, and that their death should not open a debate about Israeli violations in other parts of the Middle East. This stood in contrast to the Taslima Nasrin case in 1993, in which Val had argued that a writer who criticised Islam and portrayed Muslims as criminals was not getting enough press time and support, in France at least.
When writing his homage to *Charlie Hebdo* after the January 2015 massacre that killed many of his former colleagues, Val reminisced on his time as head of the publication and further expressed his position on Israel-Palestine, and more specifically his position on the support Palestinians get from the French left:

This fake anti-Zionism barely hides its militant hatred towards the state of Israel. Such hatred, which the left shares with the Arab world, made these ‘pure’ and ‘purely anti-American’ leftists form a platform for all those who oppose Israel [. . .] This intellectual posture, restyled as ‘geopolitical opposition’, managed to rise from the small-scale furtiveness to which it had been confined, now speaking openly in bright daylight on television and in the newspaper pages. (Val, 2015b)

In fact, Val’s attack on the ‘prétendus chercheurs’ and their intellectual posture is reminiscent of Frédérique Vidal, the French higher education minister’s recent rhetorical offence on *Islamo-gauchisme* that is ‘eating away’ at France’s universities (McAuley, 2021). However, the term *Islamo-gauchisme* has been used in the inner circles of *Charlie Hebdo* as early as 2002 to designate a link between a fraction of the left, and certain milieu or ideas that call for more respect of the Muslim community in France. Before its most recent reappropriation, the term was relatively publicised in media and therefore often used in a stigmatising manner to disqualify the left and trivialise their support for the Palestinian case.7

Val believed that at the heart of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict lay religion, and the only solution was to build a secular state where both populations could live together in peace and harmony. Val gave much coverage to Israel, and to anti-Semitism. He used the Garaudy trial to write an editorial on 4 March 1998 attacking the French media for their negligence in an affair that, according to him, should have been at the top of their agendas.8 Roger Garaudy had published a book in 1996 in which he claimed the deaths of the six million Jews in the Holocaust was a myth, which led to his prosecution in 1998 under French law on the charge of Holocaust denial (Rousso et al., 2006). The Garaudy affair was a very important and dangerous matter according to Val, and a global one as it involved the whole Arab world, the United States, and, of course, Israel. It was dangerous because the ideas that Garaudy promoted fed into paranoia which turned into hatred directed by millions of Arabs towards their neighbour, Israel. This hatred was kept alive by Arab dictators from Hafez al Assad to Hosni Mubarak and it was fuelled by the illusion that Jews were responsible for all the Arabs’ and Muslims’ suffering – Val did, and still does not, deliberately distinguish between Arab and Muslim (*Charlie Hebdo*, 1998). Also, Cabu signed the cover which depicted an Israeli soldier fighting a Palestinian civilian. The first clutches a rifle and the second holds a rock and a knife. The Israeli occupied the centre of the page, standing on a pile of dead corpses of both Palestinians and Israelis. The Palestinian occupied part of the right-hand side of the cover. It is hard to imagine that this was a random positioning of characters; the drawing illustrates the common journalistic trope of bothsidesism or false balance, a media bias often used to frame Israeli wars against Palestinians by equally blaming both sides and/or calling both sides to deescalate. Val concluded that in negating the ‘first genocide’ of the Jews, Garaudy lays the ground for the second. He stated,

Nine times out of 19, from Algeria to Pakistan, the support of Palestinians is nothing but a strong indication of a solid hatred of Jews, utilized by local media and politicians as a constitutive element of Muslim identity. (*Charlie Hebdo*, 2000a)

Via an enormous leap of logic, Val draws a monolithic essentialist picture of the Muslim world from North Africa to Asia, where support of Palestinians is reduced to an anti-Semitic sentiment. Cabu’s cover and Val’s editorial show the fusion between the two men’s line of argument.
Nonetheless, in November and December 2000, Val on one hand, Siné, and Charb (who was the main target of the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January 2015) on the other, took to the pages of the magazine to address a persistent and irreparable divergence between them which was precipitated by the Second Intifada.

In November 2000, Val asked ‘Raciste ou antisémite?’ and explored the reasons that pushed people in Europe, and particularly in France, to perform acts of anti-Semitic violence such as burning synagogues and attacking Jewish people in the streets (Charlie Hebdo, 2000c). Val denounced the automatic association of all Jews with the state of Israel, and the smearing of the whole state of Israel with far-right associations. Then he argued that both the extreme left and the extreme right, as well as a faction of the bourgeoisie, used Palestinians merely as a convenient vehicle to express an old French racial hatred. Anti-Semitism, Val theorised, was not like any other form of racism, such as anti-Polish, anti-Italian, or anti-Arab racism, because these were temporary anti-immigrant prejudices that would dissipate once the immigrants settled in and became French, whereas the hatred of Jews was permanent. Reminding the reader of the Dreyfus affair and how it drove France close to civil war, Val tried to explain what a Jew was in the mind of an anti-Semite. In anti-Semitic ideology, the Jew was ‘sexually hyperactive, rich, and intelligent’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2000c). Val claimed that to be Jewish was the dream of every man. It was this assumption that the Jew was a person very different to the self-image of most French people that created a certain jealousy and envy in the racist’s heart against the successful, rich, intelligent, and sexually hyperactive Jew. Referencing Freud and Nietzsche, Val hastily concluded that anti-Semitism was in reality a form of self-hatred.

In what reads like a direct answer to Val, Siné, in his weekly column ‘Siné sème sa zone’, criticised another left, a left that remained silent to the daily tragedy lived by Palestinians (Charlie Hebdo, 2000d). Countering Val, Siné took issue with religious explanations for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, instead believing this to be ‘a dirty colonial war’. Siné believed that the French left had a guilt complex caused by their inaction and silence towards Jewish deportations under the Nazi occupation. Ashamed of their complicit past, the French were unable to criticise Israel out of fear of being labelled anti-Semitic. Another guilt complex adding to the first one concerned the French’s silence during the Algerian War in the face of ‘anti-Arab carnage’. Therefore, the French could not now blame the Israeli for what they themselves did to the Algerians a few decades ago. In conclusion, he stated, while Palestinian children were being killed or maimed, the French media was busying itself by reporting the US elections, mad cow disease, paedophile priests, and football. Siné’s opinion and analysis went completely against Val’s editorial line.

The following week, Val replied to Siné through his editorial ‘Israel–Palestine: quand les athées se tournent vers La Mecque’. The sardonic title should be interpreted as a direct accusation that Siné had turned into an Islamo-gauchiste. Val first admitted that he had mixed feelings about the conflict because of its many complex layers: historical, psychological, and political. After an appraisal of the exceptional cultural and intellectual richness of the Jewish population, Val referred to a sense of cosmopolitanism within Jewish identity that was lost by the act of creating a state and a nationality. Val expressed disgust at certain pro-Palestinians who thought that the Israelis were like everyone else: racist, unjust, selfish, just like the French, or the Italians. Val added that the left had just replaced the word ‘Jew’ with Israeli but used the same discourse of the interwar anti-Semitic pamphleteers. For Val, Israel was just another state capable of making the same mistakes as any other country. He further observed that those who were ‘radical pacifists’ during the war in Kosovo – which maybe a direct reference to Charb and Siné, who were reportedly the only Charlie Hebdo contributors opposed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military intervention – now became supporters of Hamas and Hezbollah. Finally, Val argued that Israel was not a colony, but a country built on a former Ottoman colony.
A week later, in his weekly column ‘Charb n’aime pas les gens’, Charb replied to Val. He regretted that there were anti-Semitic Nazis who used Palestinians to spread their hatred of Jews, which meant that those who did actually defend Palestinians should make more effort to defend themselves against anti-Semitic accusations (Charlie Hebdo, 2000e). Charb, as an opponent of military intervention in Kosovo, regretted the accusations against him of being a collaborator, LePenist, and pro-Milosevic. Charb observed that the debate had degraded to the point of pro-Palestinianism being equated with the SS. He then declared ‘yes, I am pro-Palestinian. Today, here, now, in this precise moment, in the face of what the Palestinian people are suffering, I am pro-Palestinian’. The Palestinians, according to Charb, were victims of a colonial war. ‘Yes, I am anti-Israel’, he added, just as he was anti-French during the Algerian War, anti-Soviet during the Afghan War, and anti-South African during apartheid. Charb concluded that all people have the right to defend themselves when they are attacked or expelled from their homes. While recognising that Hezbollah and Hamas were ‘anti-democratic, violent and fundamentalist movements’, Charb believed that their fight for the liberation of their countries was legitimate.

Soon after, Val replied to Charb and Siné, and to an abundance of angry letters he received from Charlie Hebdo’s readers. Val argued that the idea that Palestinians were the image of resistance and a fight for liberation was too romantic and did not bear any relation to reality (Charlie Hebdo, 2001a). He admitted that he had not expressed himself properly and clearly, and that what he was trying to say was that French society could not talk about anti-Semitism using the same register and the same ideas and arguments as they had done before the Dreyfus affair and after witnessing the horrors of the Holocaust. Clearly, Val succeeded in making the question of anti-Semitism a frequent and a prominent public matter. Even if he did not succeed in telling the readers what to think, he did succeed in telling them what to think about.

Did this dialogue prove there was a panoply of voices inside Charlie and the magazine was a space where journalists were free to express their political opinions? It does show there was a bond between Siné and Charb: an intellectual resonance as it were. They were both unconditionally pro-Palestinian, Tiers-mondistes, and anticolonialist. It also demonstrates the publication’s lack of coherence and consistency, and its conflicting editorial structure. There was a genuine ideological difference between Val and Charb/Siné. It sounded as if Val enjoyed the dialogue as it gave him the opportunity to set the agenda and choose the subject the readers should be interested in. He then pleaded his case in the most important and authoritative page in any publication – the editorial – to tell the readers how to think about a topic he chose. Val continued to publish editorials on the question of defining anti-Semitism, such as a 5 September 2001 piece titled ‘Zionism = SS’ on the Durban summit on racism and xenophobia. Val questioned the presence of countries with racist policies at the conference, naming Mauritania where there is ‘racism against women’, ethnic racism, and where slavery was not abolished until recently. He also blamed the French and US governments for sending only low-profile envoys to the conference, taking a few paragraphs to stress that the origins of slavery are Arab. He blamed Europeans for their indifference to Arabic slavery and theorised mockingly that it was due to the fact that ‘we found it folkloric in turbanned savages who wear the sword with as much insouciance as we carry an umbrella’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2001b). He then regretted ‘the resistance [among Europeans] to put into a fair perspective the responsibilities of committing crimes against humanity’. So, after discrediting the ‘turbaned savage’ Arabs, Val moved to discredit their proposal to the conference which consisted of equating Zionism with racism. He proceeded to reject the proposal for its negationist tone, while assuming that negationists are widespread in Arab countries. Val pointed out that the Dreyfus affair and the prosecution of Jews in the Second World War are what ‘made Zionism a patriotic movement at the origin of the State of Israel. It has nothing to do with racism’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2001b). Val disagrees with Siné and argued that one could condemn ‘the attitude’ of the Israeli government, one could
‘curse’ Ariel Sharon. But, wanting to equate the ‘Jews’ [deliberately conflating Jews with Zionists] to the Nazis [racists] is just a way to ‘deny the intensity, the scale, the specificity, the means employed, the ideology behind, and the human consequences of the Final Solution’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2001b). Val used the word ‘attitude’ to describe and dilute the Israeli government’s decisions, policies, executive and military superpower, and all that it entails. He argued that we could go as far as ‘cursing’ Sharon, surmising that all that a civil society, the press, or media in general, can do to raise awareness or challenge human rights violations. Val concluded that condemning Zionism is a form of negation.

This was a very important conversation between the editor and his journalists which clarified two opposite positions regarding anti-Semitism and clearly revealed Val’s bias against Palestinians in particular and Arabs in general. Conflating Arabs and Muslims further laid the ground for his Islamophobia. Looking at the aftermath of 9/11 and Charlie Hebdo’s coverage of it will provide further evidence of the magazine’s worldview.

‘Spécial ça va chier’

On 19 September 2001, Charlie published special issue number 483 titled ‘spécial ça va chier’ with a cover by Cabu depicting the inside of the World Trade Centre seconds before the plane crashed into it. While everyone was busy working on their computers, someone noticed the plane and screamed, ‘Sell it all’. Val reported that

The editorial meeting was intense. We absolutely wanted to strike the right tone, we wanted to capture, as much as possible, all the information and the implications of the event. We wanted to show the extent to which we are all connected, intimately, in our lifestyle, in our freedoms, to all the achievements of democracy and laïcité, which guarantee the possibility of happiness and joy in our existence. (Val, 2015b)

Val, in his special editorial, analysed President Bush’s speech on good and evil and stated that, in face of the necessity to choose a side, he chooses the camp of Bush. He wrote, ‘those planes did not only crash into the twin towers, they crashed into those who believe in dialogue, those who prefer compromise to victory, and those who choose an imperfect life over a glorious death’ (Charlie Hebdo, 2001c). Val argued that the attack marked the end of politics and the reign of new puritanical wars. Charb on the other hand through his drawings warned that the attacks would result in an acceleration of violence against Palestinians and in increased discrimination against Muslims in France. A few weeks later Val wrote another editorial titled ‘Is my enemy’s enemy my friend?’, exploring past alliances involving the Russians, the United States, and Europe during the twentieth century and outlining their disastrous consequences (Charlie Hebdo, 2001e). Oscillating between two ultimatums which are in reality a false dichotomy: the rule of the Qur’an or the rule of the market, Val ended his editorial with a suggestion: that readers should think of a third option.

Val argued that ‘you cannot treat things in the same way after a tragedy like 9/11, unless you are a damned imbecile’ (Val, 2015b). Indeed, from this point onward, certain subjects related to Islam and French identity started taking prominence, partly because of their topicality but also because those directing Charlie Hebdo deemed them newsworthy. New members joined, and others left. Caroline Fourest and Fiametta Venner, both famous for their fight against the Islamo-gauchisme, arrived, while Olivier Cyran and Mona Chollet departed. Chirac, Sarkozy, and many other political figures including foreign presidents were recurrent subjects of discussion, criticism, and mockery. In addition, themes that occupied a central point were terrorism, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the banlieues riots, the veil, laïcité, racism, immigration, the left, and France’s colonial past. Val was motivated by the idea that terrorism should unite all democratic intellectuals against a single enemy, and
expressed his disappointment that the tragic events of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were not uniting people but rather dividing them:

I had a sad experience in the following years [after 9/11]. Every tragedy, every spectacular crime committed by the Muslim extremists, far from welding and reinforcing the democratic intellectual community against the unacceptable, had, on the contrary, transformed it into a scared game, furnishing excuses to the hunter, in the vain hope of not being one of the future victims. (Charlie Hebdo, 2001d)

‘Sad’ at the idea that Muslim extremism was not met with the firmness that was required, Val might have felt isolated due to his own political affiliations and those of his colleagues (such as Mona Chollet, Charb, and Siné, none of whom were swept up in the War on Terror propaganda). Moreover, Val did not choose his team initially when he relaunched Charlie Hebdo in 1992, but inherited them from La Grosse Bertha, an anti-war satirical magazine for which he was briefly an editor in 1991. Those who did not come from La Grosse Bertha worked in Cavanna’s Charlie Hebdo in the 1970s, so they joined what they thought was a continuation of that the old magazine in the same spirit. When he got the chance to recruit, Val chose journalists who shared his perspective. The new voices he employed included Caroline Fourest who joined Charlie Hebdo circa 1997, Fiammetta Venner who joined in 1995, Agathe André who joined in 2003, and Robert Misrahi among others. They all left shortly after Val’s departure from Charlie Hebdo in 2009. For instance, Misrahi contributed an article devoted to defending Oriana Fallaci’s controversial book The Rage and the Pride, a post 9/11 anti-Islam account so prejudiced that even Christopher Hitchens, a figure who would himself be labelled as a prominent proponent of ‘Islamophobia’, disapproved. Misrahi stated that

Oriana Fallaci shows intellectual courage [. . .] She not only protests against murderous Islamism [. . .] but also against a certain denial in the European mindset, whether Italian or French, that does not want to see or openly condemn the fact that Islam is leading a crusade against the Western world and not the opposite (Charlie Hebdo, 2002).

Misrahi et al. became champions of Val’s editorial line which focused on the perceived threat posed by Islam to Western values. Fourest at first focused on anti-IVF/anti-abortion movements and articulated feminist and anti-clerical views, and so did André and Venner. All three were vocal feminists who sought to tackle questions of gender inequalities, but at Charlie Hebdo they shifted their attention after 9/11 to questions of Islam, the veil, blasphemy and censorship in countries like Egypt or Afghanistan. These themes became more topical in the post 9/11 context where French readers and those across the Western world took an interest in questions of national security and terrorism. Immigration became a more prominent concern of public opinion, and so did questions of radicalization within Muslims communities in Europe. André was Charlie Hebdo’s reporter in Pakistan where she investigated the condition of Muslim women under the authoritarian regime of Musharraf (Charlie Hebdo, 2005f). Fourest published her Charlie Hebdo contributions under columns entitled ‘islamisme’ and ‘l’islam de France’ where she alternated between opinion pieces analysing the news, and interviews with personalities she considered exemplary liberal Muslims including politicians such as the Algerian secular opposition leader Said (Charlie Hebdo, 2005d), the Saudi female journalist Rania Al-Baz (Charlie Hebdo, 2005c), and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Charlie Hebdo, 2005a).

Hirsi Ali, a ‘global icon of the so-called clash of civilizations’ (Fassin, 2010) sought French citizenship in 2008, and Bernard-Henri Lévy was one of the main figures who argued that the Somali author who did not speak French should be granted French citizenship; he believed that Ali
is ‘already French, yes she is, in her heart, her values, and her mind’ (Cojean, 2008). Not only did *Charlie Hebdo* platform the anti-Islam discourse disseminated by these figures who enjoyed and still enjoy great coverage by mainstream media, but it also evolved over the years to permanently include within the editorial team voices that have become carriers of the islamophobic message, particularly ones from North Africa such as Zineb el Rhazoui, who joined in 2011. What is more interesting to observe at this point is that Val in *Charlie*, Levy in *Le Point*, and Fourest in *Prochoix*, all conveyed similar views on Islam and all three were hotly pursued for appearances on French TV. The War on Terror and the terrorist attacks provided current events through which *Charlie Hebdo* could discuss the question of Islamic extremism, particularly when Muslims and immigrants in France’s most segregated banlieues erupted in protests against decades of social injustice and institutional racism in 2005.

The riots, which erupted in October 2005, were heavily reported in *Charlie Hebdo*. Sarkozy, Minister of Interior Affairs at the time, was ridiculed by every contributor for his discriminatory policies and racist statements. In a show of false balance, Val attacked both Sarkozy and the protesters in his editorial, saying that ‘more than ideas, he [Sarkozy] likes the fight, the fame, and money. It is his common feature with his enemies from the banlieues’ (*Charlie Hebdo*, 2005e). The causes of the social protests are clear according to Val: failed integration, unstable city politics, unemployment, and ‘fantasmic importation of problems of the Middle East and Africa into France’. Ironically, Val himself imported images from the Palestinian intifada in his depiction of the riots: ‘here and there live bullets from protesters in the direction of the police . . . Throwers of stones [. . .] like in Palestine . . . methods of urban guerrillas’. Val concludes by warning that France will pay the very high price of letting imams lead these protests and play mediators between rioters and the government, and describes the protesters as a mob projecting foreign problems into the French context. Val said the protestors are motivated by ideological differences, particularly a certain belonging to the Arab and North-African framework, and their demands are stained by a certain Islamic religious mind-set.

‘This anticolonialism henceforth without colonies’

Val’s editorial line deviated from and discarded the pursuit of subversion and the cultivation of an anti-establishment position for its own sake, as was the case with the 1970s *Charlie Hebdo* under the editorship on Cavanna. Val’s agenda for *Charlie Hebdo* was stimulated by three convictions: his philo-Semitism, his anti-sociologisme, and his aversion to Islam based on the assumption that anti-Semitism is intrinsic to Islam and to the Arab identity. In 2017, Val published *Cachez cette identité que je ne saurais voir*, a pamphlet which encapsulated the politics he had been cultivating for decades and what he called ‘une identité bâtarde’. He argued that one of the major problems with European history, and French history in particular, is that it celebrates Greek civilisation but ignores the influence of the ‘pensée juive’ on European culture. The ‘bastards’, according to Val were those great thinkers (such as Spinoza and Montaigne) who over the centuries relinquished their Jewishness (out of fear of Christian anti-Semitism) for the sake of a universalist identity. Val called for a reappropriation of the Jewish memory through a revisiting of history, not through the Judeo-Christian prism but rather through a Judeo-Greek one. He stated,

> There is a Greek in every one of us, who, for the past 2500 years surveyed the agora for what is just and what is unjust, and a Jew who did not stop interrogating language to create a universal law. (Val, 2017)
Through the use of the Judeo-Greek formula, Val sought to secularise Judaism while stressing its superiority as a civilisation, removing the Christian component in an anti-clerical move (particularly in the light of the anti-Semitic Christian past).

As to his religious convictions, Val declared, ‘even though I am not Jewish, I feel that I am a citizen of Israel, in the same way that I feel I am a citizen of all the great democracies which respect the laws and individual freedom’ (Radio Taf, 2016). Val’s admiration of the pensée juive, his affinity with the state of Israel, and his devotion to fight anti-Semitism is in fact intertwined with his convictions regarding what is perceived as the threat of Islam in France. The Hebron massacre, the assassination of Rabin, and the Second Palestinian Intifada crystallised an opinion held by many media intellectuals (including Val and Lévy): the anti-Israeli left is responsible for the rise of anti-Semitism in France (Dreyfus, 2011):

This anticolonialism – henceforth without colonies – which is the strange ideology of the anti-nationalist left was historically and ideologically constituted during the Algerian War, and remains a reference far more powerful than the Second World War. It is their little adventure. Many of them [the left] missed the opportunity to be alive during the war . . . Their intellectual and sometimes physical engagement on the side of Arabs profoundly marked them. The result is an unconditional attachment to the Arab cause. This left loves ‘the Arabs’ to such a proportion that it hates ‘the Americans’. Jew = colonizer, colonizer = Nazi, so Jew = Nazi, that is the syllogism, that runs through the public opinion in the Muslim world without any obstacles, and (discreetly for moral and legal reasons) travels through the alter-sovereigntist France. (Val, 2008)

The anti-Islam stance of Val’s Charlie is thus neither irrational nor haphazard. It is part of a worldview that has its own logic, positioned against the anti-colonial tradition of the left. Val’s hatred of Islam and Muslims extends to Arabs and to those who defend Arabs in France. In his hatred for Arabs and Muslims, Val used stereotype and lies to manipulate his readership into thinking that all Muslims and Arabs are anti-Semites, and the left that sanctions such behaviour or attitude does so in the name of rethinking its colonial past or the failings of its Republican system.

The critique of what Val (2015b) calls sociologisme was detailed in his book Malaise dans l’inculture. He rejected political correctness, and what he considered as sociologisme or ‘explanations sociologisantes’. According to Val, sociologisme is a derivative of sociology and consists of exonerating individuals from personal failures when blaming the ‘system’ for them. Val’s anti-sociologisme consists thus of refusing to explain an individual’s or a minority’s failure to fit into society through accounts of the deficiency of social structures. Rousseau, who believed that man is good by nature but corrupted by social institutions, is, for Val, the founding father of sociologisme (Rousseau, 1755). Val believed that the French Republican system was working well just as it was. In fact, it is against the primacy of the community that Val was trying to argue; according to him, it is through the ideal of individualism that individuals emancipate themselves and prosper.

Val’s commentary on the banlieues riots in 2005, dismissed intertwined discussions about racism, immigration, and colonisation (Murphy, 2011). He looked instead at communautarisme, a neologism that was deployed increasingly by French media after 9/11. The term, which was almost absent from the press before 1995 with fewer than 10 mentions per year in Le Monde, witnessed a resurgence between 2002 and 2008, with 148 articles for Le Monde, and 195 articles for Le Figaro (Dhume-Sonzogni, 2016). Just like Islamo-gauchisme, communautarisme is a term used by a majority group to deny the speech acts and political expression of minority groups (in this case Muslims) who are perceived as carriers of ‘infra-political demands’ vis-à-vis the French nation-state (Montague, 2013). Those who denounce communautarisme, like Val through his use of the term itself as well as through his critique of sociologisme, use a ‘catastrophizing’ discourse and present the school, society, and in more general terms the Republic as besieged citadels threatened
by an enemy within. This nationalist discourse authorises ‘a certain racism that was rendered respectable’ (‘racisme rendu comme respectable’) (Dhume-Sonzogni, 2016). Indeed, in the mindset of French media, communautarisme in France and multiculturalism in Britain function in the same way, and as such they both pose a threat to the French Republican model which promotes unity, fusion, and assimilation over integration. The French state and societal racist pronouncements including the charge of communautarisme are in fact derivative, in the sense that they already existed in France’s and Europe’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anti-Semitic rhetoric when Jews were perceived as unassimilable and communal (Massad, 2015). In other words, the politicisation of religious minorities, then Jews now Muslims is not new, nor are the accusations of their withdrawal into isolated communities.

Val’s politics were reflected in his management of Charlie Hebdo. He allowed space for other opinions but within limits, just enough to display a certain respect of free speech, but not too much, lest it redefine the paper. For instance, Charb’s pro-Palestinian convictions were allowed because Charlie Hebdo was committed to free speech, but pro-Palestinianism was not allowed to redefine Charlie Hebdo. This question was particularly important because it created internal conflicts and because pro-Palestinianism in France was associated with the label of Islamo-gauchisme. Charb himself was accused of being an Islamo-gauchiste. The Islamo-gauchisme of the left is usually positioned against the secular left, which is not at all accurate since in Charb’s case as he was a strong believer in and defender of laïcité. Val’s favourable opinions of Israel occupied the central space in Charlie in terms of covers and editorials, and while Charb’s ideas echoed those of Siné (and vice versa), Val’s stance was reproduced by other contributors, such as Caroline Fourest and Uncle Bernard, who regularly focused on the topic.

Val’s editorials mirrored an ideology that wanted to sound socially progressive and economically liberal, advocating free trade, open borders, and anti-nationalism. He was very critical of the anti-globalisation movement, supported the Maastricht treaty in 1992, was strongly in favour of a military intervention in Kosovo, and voted Yes in the European Constitution Referendum in 2005, unlike most of the left which remained predominantly on the No side, as did the majority of his editorial team (Shindler, 2014). A free speech warrior, he also held a libertarian stance towards media regulation and denounced any control over the press or media through his recurrent attacks against the Observatoire Français des Medias (OFM), and Acrimed (Action Critique Médias). In his attacks on the OFM and Acrimed, Val accused the two organisations of giving in to conspiracy theories, anti-Americanism, and anti-Semitism. He repeatedly attacked the far left for not being firm on questions of anti-Semitism, for not being able to admit to or get rid of its anti-Dreyfusard past (Harris, 2011), and for being too cosy with Islamists (Charlie Hebdo, 2005b).

On 22 April 2018, Val drafted a highly controversial manifesto ‘against the new anti-Semitism’ signed by 250 personalities in France including Nicolas Sarkozy, Manuel Valls, Jack Lang (former Minister of Culture and head of Institut du Monde Arabe), Julia Kristeva, and Gérard Depardieu, condemning the ‘silent ethnic cleansing’ [l’épuration ethnique à bas bruit] of Jews by Muslims in certain parts of France (Le Parisien, 2018). ‘Before France is no longer France’, the manifesto pointed to a Muslim anti-Semitism and criticised a reluctance among the left to condemn it for fear of stigmatising the Muslim community in France and Europe. When faced with accusations of Islamophobia the writers of the manifesto argued that many of the signatories were Muslims, a dangerous fallacy that proposes that a person with a Muslim name or culture or heritage cannot be Islamophobe. It fits the tendency in the French press including Charlie Hebdo of recruiting ex-Muslims, or atheist Muslims or secular Muslims, to vehicle the anti-Muslim discourse in an attempt to sound and look more credible and somehow to position itself outside the debate.
Conclusion

Philippe Val left *Charlie Hebdo* in 2009. Nonetheless, his imprint remained through Charb, the person who was repeatedly accused of being the *islamogauchiste*. Vincent Geisser argues that the French exception on the subject of Islamophobia resides in the fact that when Islam started to become a national French reality, a rejection of religious references started to polarise, as if ‘ordinary racism’ was looking for its new xenophobic capture (Geisser, 2003). One of Geisser’s major hypotheses is that Islamophobia is not simply a transposition of anti-Arab racism, anti-Maghreb racism, or anti-jeunes-de-banlieues racism. Instead, it is mainly a religiophobia; in fact, many Islamophobes are Arabophiles. This helps explain how Charb and many of his colleagues in *Charlie Hebdo* presented themselves as anti-racists and pro-Palestinians sharing great affinities with their Arab monorities in France. Geisser concludes,

Islamophobia constitutes a profoundly modern anti-Muslim racism, which takes shape in a racialist post-revolutionary ideology, gradually evolving into a universalism that is missionary. The imperial politics of France, in particular, the colonization of Algeria represented the ‘moment fort’ of the putting in practice of an institutional Islamophobia as a modality of domination and exploitation of indigenous Muslims compensated, in reality, by paternalist and Islamophile gestures.

There are hundreds of covers and stories where the question of Islam in France and Islam de France was a constant fixation in *Charlie Hebdo* week after week. And these were helpful in assessing the intensity of certain narratives. However, it is very important to look beyond the individual covers of the magazine. The initial media framing of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in 2015 produced an absolutist interpretation of the Republican values of free speech and free press, when Val himself did not believe in an absolutist free speech (Neffati, 2020). It shows that there is a ‘fetishization of the right to offend’, and a ‘depoliticization of the right to be offended’ in the sense that French media’s concentration on free speech overshadowed other possible frames of cultural difference and counter-speech (Dawes, 2015). *Charlie Hebdo*’s move from the irreverent anti-establishment left to a neoconservatism at the service of power was through a cohesive – though fallacious and incoherent – worldview informed by a certain imagined Judeo-Greek tradition, and a dislike and deliberate misunderstanding and misrepresentation of post-colonialism – in fact, even a denial of neo-colonialism (Keese, 2008). Val’s fight against anti-Semitism may have been justified, but his belief that anti-Semitism is intrinsic to Islamic identity is dangerous and Islamophobic. Through his denial of socio-economic analyses, Val prioritised the individual over structural forces and communities, and told his readership to not think of themselves as part of an oppressed community, whether a Muslim community or an Arab community, or a community of immigrants. This article showed that since the expression of political opinion is evident in the structure and selection of stories and the hierarchy of sources within a publication, it was important to look at how opinion and preferred readings were inserted into the stories chosen by the editor of *Charlie Hebdo*. This includes the manner in which certain social questions (in this case religion, specifically Islam) were singled out and foregrounded above others as a way of promoting a certain political perspective. Val’s anti-*sociologisme* shows that prejudices are not only through the race question, but also through social and economic questions. In other words, rather than being sucked into a debate about free speech, it is more important to ask what kind of political and social system *Charlie Hebdo* has supported and promoted in its pages, and what place the powerful, the rich, the poor, and the under-privileged occupy within it.
Notes

1. Askolovitch evoked the possibility of Charlie Hebdo being hit with a lawsuit for anti-Semitism and reflected any suspicion from Val. Askolovitch claimed that Val hated Siné so much that he no longer read or checked his columns before publication. see <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x65qrl>

2. Siné sued Charlie Hebdo for wrongful dismissal and the court decided in his favour, sentencing Charlie to a 40,000 Euro fine. The court declared that the mediatization of his dismissal and Siné’s humiliation given that it was publicly announced to his readers caused the journalist moral injury for which he should be compensated with 20,000 Euros.

3. Guy Bedos wrote an open letter to Philippe Val, published in Le Nouvel Observateur, in which he compared Sarkozy to Val though highlighted that while the first was elected, the second came to power through a coup. Gisèle Halimi also supported Siné and observed that a lawsuit over anti-Semitism does not stand a chance of winning. Furthermore, a petition written by Éric Martin, Benoît Delépine, and Lefred-Thouron (the latter also left Charlie Hebdo in protest at Val’s censorship) was published in Le Nouvel Observateur on 30 July 2008, and was signed by 2,000 people including prominent artists and intellectuals in support of Siné. Val on the other hand received the support of his friends, led by Bernard-Henri Lévy, in an article published in Le Monde titled ‘De quoi Siné est-il le nom?’ LICRA (La Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'anti-Semitisme) and SOS racisme offered their support to Val (Brocard, 2009).

4. Le Monde revealed that Val’s promotion was blessed by Sarkozy himself, (Bacqué, 2010).

5. The term bête et méchant (stupid and mean) was first coined by François Cavanna to label the monthly magazine Hara Kiri’s satirical ethos. Bête et méchant humour subsequently became directly associated with Hara Kiri and then Charlie Hebdo when it was first launched in 1970 to distinguish their brand of humour (Mazurier, 2009).

6. The 12 signatures are by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Chahla Chafiq-Beski, Caroline Fourest, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Irshad Manji, Maryam Namazie, Mehdi Mozaffari, Taslima Nasrin, Salman Rushdie, Antoine Sfeir, Philippe Val, and Ibn Warraq.

7. The term was first popularised in France in 2002 by the sociologist Pierre-André Taguieff in his book La Nouvelle Judéophobie. The author used the term to show that a certain leftist tiers-mondisme [third-worldism] exists within the pro-palestinian mobilisations especially among diverse Islamist groups. The author condemns the antizionism of the ‘new tiers-mondiste, neo-leftist, neo-communist configuration, better known under the label of ‘anti-globalisation’ movement […] Some Jews could be tolerated, even accepted in this isalmo-gauchiste movement as long as they demonstrate an unconditional palestino-philia and a fanatic antizionism’ (Taguieff, 2002).

8. In 1996 Garaudy published Les Mythes Fondateurs de la Politique Israelienne translated into English as The Founding Myths of Modern Israel. He was accused of historical negationism, specifically of the Holocaust, which is forbidden by French law.

9. Val’s favourable position towards Israel came hand in hand with his support for the NATO military intervention in Kosovo in 1998, in the sense that Charlie Hebdo started adopting and voicing partisan political opinions. In supporting a war, Val went against one of the fundamental principles of Charlie Hebdo, ‘a magazine against all wars’, and divided his editorial team. He recalled the tension inside the publication where ‘universality of fundamental rights was never an issue’, and his analysis of the dilemma. One the one hand, there was the pacifist antimilitaristic tradition of the publication in the face of the disastrous situation afflicting the Kosovo population, threatened as they were with mass execution and thus in dire need of military intervention. On the other, in order to save ‘the Muslims of Europe’ there needed to be an engagement of the US army, at a time when anti-Americanism, ‘a historic part of the French intelligentsia since the nineteenth century’, was in resurgence. Val claimed that the first editorial he wrote exposing the complexity of the situation raised discontented questions among Charlie Hebdo’s readers, but pleased the theorist Pierre Bourdieu, who called Val to tell him how much he appreciated
‘la mesure’—moderation—of his editorial. Encouraged by Bourdieu’s feedback, in his next editorial, Val expressed full-blown support for military intervention, with the blessing of two of his journalists, ‘Cabu and Oncle Bernard’ (Val, 2015a).

10. Running from January 1991 to December 1992, *La Grosse Bertha* was created by the dessinateur François Forcadell and the editor Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, who were joined by Gébé (ex-member of *Charlie Hebdo* between 1970 and 1981). The new project was intended to address the lack of satirical publications in the spirit of *Hara Kiri* and *Charlie Hebdo* that had been evident since the 1980s.

11. Val became the editor-in-chief of *La Grosse Bertha* in April 1991, and appointed Cabu, Charb, Gébé, Peroni, and Tignous as his editorial team. Bernard Maris, Xavier Pasquini, Albert Algoud, Olivier Cyran, Luz, and Riss joined afterwards; they would later become permanent members of *Charlie Hebdo*. Under Val, *La Grosse Bertha* gathered a battalion of dessinateurs de presse and journalists from different generations, but offered a diluted editorial line. Sales numbers dropped to a catastrophic 15,000 copies a week between April 1991 and June 1992. Godefroy decided to remove Val and establish a decentralised committee of editors. Godefroy invited Val to become one member of the new committee, but the latter declined and announced on the radio that same day that he intended to launch a new magazine with Cabu. Four days later, *Charlie Hebdo* was again available in kiosks. Denis Robert argued that this incident was the origin of a fracture between two clans inside the editorial team: former *Charlie Hebdo* contributors who wanted to bring back the *bête et méchant* humour of the 1970s, versus Philippe Val who preferred a political and cultural newspaper with illustrated humour on the side (Robert, 2015).

12. In 1997, Fiammetta Venner founded with Caroline Fourest the magazine Prochoix devoted to the defence of women’s rights, especially the right to abortion, and gay rights. Prochoix itself, like *Charlie*, evolved from an anti-FN anti-Catholic publication to an anti-Islam one.

13. Such a view is also a feature of many other political philosophies that prioritise the role of the individual over the role of social structures, going back at least to many of the nineteenth century classical liberals. This has become a dominant feature of right-wing politics in the west over the past few decades with the ascendancy of neoliberal—or, alternatively, ‘New Right’—movements and their focus on individual responsibility over structural critiques, and their accompanying policies such as ‘workfare’ programmes (Lukes, 1985). Thatcher, of course, famously declared that ‘there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’ (*The Guardian*, April 2013). Interestingly, perhaps due to how individualism and social structural explanations have become so aligned with each side of the political divide, a recent study found that most sociologists in the US self-identified as left leaning. As a focus on systemic explanations is central to the discipline this makes sense, and is likely true in other nations as well (Horowitz et al., 2018).

14. L’Observatoire Français des Media stemmed out of the World Social Forum held in Brazil in 2003 and which aimed at developing an alternative future in a globalised world. The OFM itself aimed at monitoring big media companies, and promoting the right to access free and pluralistic information.

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