



Essay

# Caricatures, Canards, and Guignols: Satirical Journalism in France from the French Revolution to Fifth Republic

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**Abstract:** The special status of satire in France is examined historically from the French Revolution to the Fifth Republic. It is argued that satire in France functions with a normative reference to the secular, universalist Jacobin values (hostile to church, aristocracy, and monarchy) that underpinned the foundation of the French Republic. Since the French Revolution, French journalistic satire has, in different ways, perpetrated what can broadly be categorized as either *lèse majesté* or *blasphemy*. Given France's turbulent history over the past two centuries, satire has frequently been used as an instrument to reaffirm the Republic's values vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes with different characteristics. The symbolic connection between satire and the French Republic's founding mythology has conferred upon the idiom a special status that endures today. The Fifth Republic, however, has presented a unique challenge to satire because of its authoritarian institutional character with personal power in the hands of the head-of-state. Three case studies are examined: the newspapers *Le Canard Enchaîné* and *Charlie Hebdo* and the satirical television program *Les Guignols de l'Info*. Today satire has found expression on online social networks in the form of memes, gifs, and videos. This marks a shift from satire produced by journalistic elites to more diffused and socially distributed satirical mockery.

**Keywords:** satire; France; journalism; *Charlie Hebdo*; *Canard Enchaîné*; *Guignols de l'Info*



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## 1. Introduction

Satire enjoys a special status in French society. Even the most stinging satirical barbs in the media are received in a spirit of acceptance, albeit sometimes grudgingly, and occasionally with indignation.

France's time-honored satirical tradition was put to the test in January 2015, after terrorists stormed the editorial offices of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and shot dead twelve people, including the paper's cartoonists. The attack was revenge for mocking caricatures of the prophet Mohammed. In the days that followed, four million people marched in French cities chanting "liberty" and "freedom" to show solidarity with the satirical journal. French President François Hollande visited the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, where he denounced the "cowardly" attacks on free expression.

"This was an act against journalists who wanted to show that, in France, it is possible to defend ideas and exercise rights guaranteed and protected by the Republic", said Hollande.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie became a global message of support for freedom of expression. It was also polarizing, and the counter hashtag #IamNotCharlie appeared on Twitter (Melander 2015; Onishi and Méheut 2020). The *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy triggered debate in France—and outside the country—about the role of satire and its limits in a democratic society. Some asked: "Is nothing sacred?"

For defenders of satirical journalism in France, the answer was resolutely "no". Nothing is sacred, especially anything held to be sacred. Desacralizing the sacred is the function of satire in French journalism. In a secular French Republic that does not recognize the concept of blasphemy, satire violates no laws by targeting religions. *Charlie Hebdo* spares

no religion—Christianity, Judaism, Islam. They are all mocked, fearlessly. So are, more generally, all forms of pretension in the non-religious sphere.

Adam Gopnik, the *New Yorker* magazine's former correspondent in Paris, assessed *Charlie Hebdo* in the context of the French satirical tradition. The journal, he observed, represented "the true Rabelaisian spirit of French civilization, in their acceptance of human appetite and their contempt for false high-mindedness of any kind, including the secular high-mindedness that liberal-minded people hold dear. The magazine was offensive to Jews, offensive to Muslims, offensive to Catholics, offensive to feminists, offensive to the right and to the left, while being aligned with it—offensive to everybody, equally." (Gopnik 2015).

Satire has been defined and analyzed within diverse theoretical frames. Some definitions have emphasized its aggressive tone of denunciation of social norms that expose folly, hypocrisy, and corruption (Caufield 2008). Others have differentiated between conservative satire that defends dominant norms by mocking outsiders ("punching down") and another form of satire that attacks dominant norms ("punching up"). A typology of satire has been constructed with reference to the ancient Roman writers Juvenal and Horace: *Juvenalian* satire is caustic and excoriating, in contrast to *Horatian* satire that is lighter-touch and humorous (Pfeifer and Lee 2019). In the French tradition, satire stretches back to François Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* in the sixteenth century. Rabelais, a Christian humanist, used satire and grotesque depictions of characters to critique scholasticism and religious authority. Charles Lenient, in a nineteenth century work on French satire in Rabelais's period, categorized satire into four clusters: *satire philosophique*, *satire religieuse*, *satire politique*, *satire littéraire* (Lenient 1877). There is some evidence, for example, of Huguenot satirical pamphleteering—both political and religious—during the wars of religion, targeting the powerful Catherine de Medici, especially after the St. Bartholomew Day's Massacre in Paris in 1572 (Salmon 1975).

Some hold that satire is a response to vice (for example, in ancient Rome) or to extremism (religious zealotry during the Renaissance). Others argue that satire is a symptom of a moral order that is breaking down. Against these backdrops, satire can be regarded as a call for moderation and reason. More broadly, it is argued that the function of satire frames our normative understanding of the world, but can also have a persuasive function, hence methodologies that attempt to measure its "effects" (Holbert 2013). In democratic societies, it can be asked: does satire produce changes in behavior, for example, in democratic voting outcomes?

In France, as noted, satire has long served an ideological function, especially in the period before and after the French Revolution. In that respect, the French satirical tradition is more aligned with the "Juvenalian" model, characterized by caustic attacks on authority—monarchy, Church, aristocracy.

The special status of satire in France will be examined here in a historical context from the French Revolution to the Fifth Republic. It will be argued, using qualitative and content analysis, that satire in France functions with a normative reference to the secular and universalist Jacobin values (hostile to church, aristocracy, and monarchy) that underpinned the foundation of the French Republic. Since the French Revolution, satire in France has, in different ways, perpetrated what can broadly be categorized as either *lèse majesté* or *blasphemy*—targeting secular authority and religion.

Given France's turbulent history over the past two centuries—Bourbon monarchy, Jacobin republic, Napoleonic empire, Orléanist monarchy, Vichy regime, restored Republic—satire has been deployed as an instrument to reaffirm the Republic's values in the face of authoritarian regimes of different characteristics. The Fifth Republic has presented a unique challenge to journalistic satire because of its unique authoritarian character: it is a republic, but it is also a regime of personal power that elevates the head-of-state to the de facto status of elected monarch. Until 2013, it was a criminal offence in France to insult the head-of-state, and during Charles de Gaulle's time in office, six people were prosecuted

for this offense. Since 2013, defaming the French president is punishable by a €45,000 fine (Chrisafis 2013).

Satirical newspapers such as *Le Canard Enchaîné* and *Charlie Hebdo* still have an impact today with loyal niche readerships, despite the overall decline in newspaper circulation and sales. On radio and television, which reach mass audiences, satire has been more controversial, largely because they are regulated by the French state, which owns major television and radio outlets. Some satirists have learned that it is perilous to bite the hand that feeds them. Satirical comedians on the radio have been fired for their injurious sketches attacking politicians, especially the French president. On television, the popular satirical show *Les Guignols de l'Info* was taken off the air in 2018 after three decades. Despite controversies, the symbolic connection between satire and the French Republic's founding mythology has conferred upon the idiom a special status that endures today. Meanwhile, satire has found expression on online social networks in the form of memes, gifs, and videos. This marks a shift from satire produced by journalistic elites to more diffused and socially distributed satirical mockery.

## 2. Historical Analysis

It is frequently observed that the writings of Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau and Voltaire set the stage for the French Revolution. While the influence of the *philosophes* was undoubtedly significant in pre-revolutionary France, so was a low culture of pamphleteering and caricature that was aggressively satirical towards Ancien Régime authority (Darnton 1971; McMahon 1998). Already in the seventeenth century, *libelles* and scandal sheets attacking the monarchy were hawked in the streets of Paris. It is estimated that some 1500 pamphlets were circulating in France during this period, half of them attacking the king despite a draconian regime of censorship (Bonnet 2011). Targets of early engraving caricatures—often printed in the Netherlands to avoid censorship—included Madame de Pompadour, the Jesuits, Jansenists, and the French nobility.

Pamphlets and caricatures were still flourishing in the period leading to the French Revolution, which has been described as the biggest “media event” in history since Martin Luther's pamphlets during the Reformation in the sixteenth century (Reichardt 2012). Following the storming of the Bastille, freedom of expression was proclaimed on 26 August 1789. The result was an explosion in the number of newspapers, with roughly 1600 titles in print during the Revolution (Reichardt 2012). Most were sold on the street, sometimes recited (even sung) by vendors. About 40,000 pamphlets were in circulation, many produced and distributed via Jacobin clubs and other revolutionary associations.

At the same time, some 1500 caricature engravings were published between 1789 and 1792. Most infamous were drawings of Louis XVI, often depicted in porcine traits, and Marie Antoinette in various animal forms, invariably referred to as “*L'Autrichienne*” (a word play on her Austrian origins and “bitch” for female dog). These grotesque depictions of the Bourbons evoked the satirical imagery of Rabelais nearly three centuries earlier. One caricature presented Marie Antoinette astride a Trojan horse filled with her favorites (Barker 1993; Hunt 1990). Other caricatures were anti-clerical. When Pope Pius VI condemned the Jacobins' civil constitution of the clergy, a caricature circulated in 1791 showing a typical Frenchman called “Jacques Bonhomme” wiping his ass with the papal paper (Duprat 2020). In Paris, crowds gathered at markets and in the arcades of the Palais Royal to gawk at displays of the latest caricatures satirizing current events. The royalist journalist Jacques-Marie Boyer-Brun, who was resolutely opposed to the French Revolution, described satirical imagery as “the thermometer of public opinion” that was mobilizing the “rabble” (Reichardt 2012, *ibid*).

The explosion of pamphlets and caricatures ended abruptly with the Terror after 1792, when the Jacobins imposed (often via execution by guillotine) a regime of strict ideological adherence to the Revolution. Nonetheless, the satirical culture of pamphlets and caricature during the French Revolution gave French journalism a political vocabulary that thrived in the face of different authoritarian regimes over the following two centuries (Darnton 1989).

The nineteenth century was marked by tremendous political upheaval in France—from Napoleon Bonaparte and a Bourbon restoration to the July Monarchy and Second Empire—until the Third Republic was durably installed in the late 1870s. Each new regime initially embraced values of a free press, but eventually, censorship was imposed as the regime adopted a more authoritarian character. This meant that, for much of the century, satirists worked under authoritarian regimes, whether Bourbon, Orléanist, or Bonapartist. Between 1815 and 1880, the French government banned about 20 French journals and virtually every prominent political caricaturist had drawings forbidden or faced prosecution and, in some cases, imprisonment (Goldstein 2009; Duprat et al. 2007).

During the Bourbon monarchy's restoration following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, there was particular anxiety about the effects of satirical caricatures. In 1822, the minister of the interior warned about the danger of caricatures: "If the licensing of the press has always a powerful auxiliary of the facts, the license of engraving is even dangerous, because it acts directly upon the people and could them to revolt, or at least to scorn for the most respectable things." (See Goldstein 2009, op. cit, p. 18). When the Bourbon monarchy fell for the last time in 1830, it was replaced by a constitutional monarchy under the liberal-minded Orléanist king Louis-Philippe. Pamphlets and caricatures quickly began satirizing the new monarch—and censorship just as quickly returned. Cartoonist Charles Philipon was arrested for his drawing of Louis-Philippe in the shape of a pear (*la poire* is French slang for "fathead") in *La Caricature* in 1831. Philipon and his journal were subjected to print seizures, arrested, fined, and put on trial for "outrages against the person of the King". During the trial, the prosecutor declared that "before overthrowing a regime, one undermines it by sarcasm, one casts scorn upon it." (See Goldstein 2009, op. cit, p. 31). Philipon was sentenced to six months in prison.

Another famous cartoonist of the era, Honoré Daumier, met a similar fate after depicting the king as a Gargantua—thus making a clear connection between Rabelais and nineteenth century satire. Like Charles Philipon, Daumier was jailed for six months. In 1835, the French government passed a law specifically targeting caricature on the grounds that "whereas a pamphlet is no more than a violation of opinion, a caricature amounts to an act of violence." (See Goldstein 2009, op. cit, p. 18). The satirical impact of the *poire* drawing was so successful, however, that thousands of drawings of the king as a pear could be seen on walls throughout the French capital (History Today 2006; Trouillard 2020; Forbes 2010).

A brief period of a free press followed Louis-Philippe's abdication in 1848 with the short-lived Second Republic, whose elected president was Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. He was the target of many caricatures while president of the Republic (Lo Feudo 2013). But the censorship boom came down again after his *coup d'état* against his own government and proclamation of the Second Empire with himself installed as emperor Napoleon III. This was the period when poet Charles Baudelaire and novelist Gustave Flaubert were prosecuted for obscenity in their works—the former fined, the latter acquitted. The theater in particular was heavily censored during the Second Empire, especially popular forms of theater for the lower classes, who were considered more susceptible to revolt against authority. A famous "melon" drawing by André Gill, which appeared in *L'Éclipse* in 1868, became notorious when the government prosecuted Gill for obscenity. It was believed that the melon resembled the face of a notoriously repressive French magistrate. Gill was acquitted for the drawing. However, his "Rocamboles" drawing of Napoleon III as a half-dandy, half-bandit, led to the banning of the journal *La Lune*, in which it appeared. The most famous satirical attack on Napoleon III was the pamphlet by Victor Hugo, titled *Napoléon le Petit*, suggesting that "little" Napoleon III was inconsequential compared with his illustrious uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte. Hugo paid a heavy price for his attacks on Napoleon III, including exile to London in 1851, followed by long stays on the British islands of Jersey and Guernsey in the English Channel.

Hugo did not return to France until after Napoleon III was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and abdicated in 1870. The collapse of the Second Empire and the birth of the Third Republic in the 1870s brought back the Jacobin values on which the French

Revolution had been founded. This period marked a revival of newspapers and satirical caricature, especially after a press freedom law was passed in 1881 (Ducatel 1975; Tillier 1997). The law triggered what many regard as a great era of political satire in France, provoking indignation with mockery (Tillier 2013). In a period when political and financial scandals were frequent, public figures were attacked in caricatures with depictions that deformed their physiques, often with the intention of debasing politics to its bare condition of scabrous corruption. Satirical journals that prospered during this period included *Le Trombinoscope*, *Le Nain jaune*, *Le Touchatout*, *L'Eclipse*, *Diogène*, *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, *L'Assiette au beurre*, and *Le Journal amusant*. *L'Assiette au beurre*, for example, appealed to bourgeois readers with caricatures that mocked authorities, the Church, Army, police, as well as targeting the British and Germans.

In the early twentieth century, satire took on a different form at a time when anti-republican and anti-parliamentary movements were gaining momentum in their attacks against the Third Republic. Catholic nationalist newspapers, nostalgic for the old monarchy and Bonapartist regimes, assailed the secular Third Republic. Caricature also took a dark turn towards anti-Semitism, especially after the Dreyfus Affair, which began in 1894 and did not end until 1906 when Alfred Dreyfus was exonerated. The journal *Le Sifflet* featured pro-Dreyfus drawings, while anti-Dreyfusard journals included *Psst!* and *Le Rire*.

Satire was virulent on both sides of the “republican” question (Tillier 1997). To make messages easily accessible, it exploited the familiar symbolism of the era: *fleur de lys* (Bourbon monarchy), pear (Orléanist monarchy), eagle (Bonapartism), and the French Republic (Marianne). Anti-republican satire often targeted freemasons, who were associated with the drive to secularize the French Republic. The *Panache Royaliste*, for example, published a caricature showing figures representing Jews and freemasons ready to physically beat pious Catholics (Guydo 2003). During the First World War, most satirists backed the French government’s propaganda against the German enemy. One exception was *Le Canard Enchaîné*, which was pacifist, anti-clerical, and anti-capitalist.

Following the wartime Vichy regime and the unstable Fourth Republic in the 1950s, the Fifth Republic posed a new problem for satirical journalism. While a successor to previous Republics, the institutional dynamics of the Fifth Republic were unique. Instead of a parliamentary system dominated by political parties, the Fifth Republic was tailor-made for the oversized personality of Charles de Gaulle. The Fifth Republic borrowed aspects of the Orléanist monarchy and Bonapartism to construct a new regime of personal power that was, in effect, an elected monarchy. Historical experience in France had demonstrated that regimes of personal power—from Napoleon Bonaparte to Louis-Philippe and the Second Empire—were not fertile terrain for freedom of the press. The unique institutional character of the Fifth Republic—and the authoritarian personality of Charles de Gaulle—put satire in an uneasy position. The events of this period were turbulent—notably the Algerian War and the Paris riots of May 1968—but criticizing of the French state was perilous. This was especially so on radio and television, including evening newscasts, which were heavily censored by the Gaullist state (Bourdon 1994).

Newspapers enjoyed more freedom than audiovisual media. Charles de Gaulle was often depicted by newspaper satirists as either Louis XIV or Napoleon. In 1960, the *Canard Enchaîné* initiated a new rubric titled “La Cour” to critique the new regime as a sort of royal court with Charles de Gaulle as monarch (Le Monde 1961). The cartoonist Moisan frequently drew De Gaulle as Louis XIV—thus reconnecting satire with the Jacobin spirit of denouncing absolute monarchies in the Bourbon tradition.

De Gaulle was somewhat tolerant of satirical caricature in newspapers and frequently asked about articles in *Le Canard Enchaîné*. But there were limits. The satirical journal *Hara-Kiri* learned this the hard way. Launched in 1960, two years after the Fifth Republic was born, *Hara-Kiri* was willfully provocative, often displaying questionable taste that appealed to its youth readers. After De Gaulle’s unexpected death in 1970, *Hara-Kiri* provoked scandal with the headline: “*Bal tragic à Colombey—un mort*”. It implied that the death of Charles de Gaulle, war hero and founder of the Fifth Republic, was not significant because

only one person had died (in contrast to another event in the news, a fire at a ball that killed 146). The headline was considered tantamount to *lese majesté*, even if posthumous. *Hara-Kiri* was immediately shut down by ministerial decree (Mazurier 2006). From *Hara-Kiri*'s ashes rose a new satirical journal: *Charlie Hebdo*. Some claimed the "Charlie" in the title was a sly allusion to Charles de Gaulle; others argued that it was, in fact, a reference to the famous cartoon character, Charlie Brown (Vauclair and Vauclair 2016).

While censorship of radio and television continued after Charles de Gaulle's death, satirical newspapers such as *Le Canard Enchaîné* became increasingly aggressive—mixing satirical attacks, damaging leaks, and investigative journalism—as the Fifth Republic gradually moved out of the shadow of its founder.

### 2.1. *Le Canard Enchaîné*

The *Canard Enchaîné*, launched in 1916, was a product of the burst of pluralism in French journalism during the Third Republic. The date of 1916 is significant because the newspaper was launched during the First World War. Its title was an allusion to journalist-turned-statesman Georges Clemenceau's newspaper *L'Homme Enchaîné* (the "chains" were a reference to wartime censorship; the paper's previous title had been *L'Homme Libre*).

The era, as previously noted, was notorious for political and financial scandals and the Dreyfus Affair. Against this backdrop, the *Canard* adopted a posture of moral integrity and a commitment to expose corruption. Its main targets in the early years were militarism, capitalism, and the Church. Thus, its satirical spirit was perfectly aligned with the Jacobin values underpinning the French Republic. In the same spirit, the *Canard* promoted freedom of expression and secularism (Coullomb-Gully 2013). As Catholic nationalism and anti-parliamentary movements emerged in the first decades of the century, the *Canard*, resolutely leftist in the tradition of Victor Hugo and Emile Zola, took aim at right-wing nationalists and fascists (Martin 2000). The *Canard* shut down after 1940 during the collaborationist Vichy regime, when Jacobin values were the enemy of the new Nazi-allied government. The newspaper was reborn after the war and promoted the same values, even if hampered by hard economic times. The paper regained momentum during the Fifth Republic when, as noted, Charles de Gaulle's regime of personal power gave a new purpose to the journal's satirical mission.

The *Canard* owed its success to its mocking attitude, clever puns, and amusing cartoons. Its spirit was resolutely secular and its target was human folly, taking aim at the spectacle of politics and business as an "amiable farce" (Cariguel 2017). Political figures, including Charles de Gaulle, were portrayed as arrogant monarchs. As noted above, rubrics in the paper—"La Cour" and "La Régence"—made unmistakable references to the Fifth Republic as a monarchy. By the 1970s, the *Canard* had transitioned from strictly satire to investigative journalism aimed at the corrupt exercise of political power. The journal published prime minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas's tax returns and later revealed that French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had received a gift of diamonds from the Central Africa's self-proclaimed emperor Jean-Bédel Bokassa. Those revelations seriously harmed Giscard d'Estaing's reputation and contributed to his defeat in the 1981 presidential election.

The *Canard*'s loyal readership gave the paper financial autonomy. It was highly profitable, mostly from subscription revenues. It took no advertising, therefore was under no pressure from business. In the 1980s, the paper was printing more than 700,000 copies. In the internet era, it was printing 400,000 copies and counted some 70,000 subscribers in 2017. This is a remarkable success story against a backdrop of declining print subscriptions for most newspapers and magazines.

One key to the *Canard*'s success has been its commitment to its foundation values of secularism. As Paul Cohen observed in an article on the newspaper: "It leans consistently to the left, taking particular aim at power, privilege, inequality, and intolerance; it is resolutely anticlerical in the way only French leftists and republicans can be. And in recent years it has become a strong environmental advocate." (Cohen 2018).

Also, the *Canard's* clever cartoons and puns, understood only by insiders with a strong knowledge of French politics, creates a sense of community amongst the paper's loyal readers, almost as if they belong to a secret club. "Built on the premise that its audience is both fluent in the sophisticated literary and visual idioms in which it is crafted and already familiar with France's baroque political landscape," observed Paul Cohen, "the *Canard's* content erects formidable cultural barriers to entry for new readers. Part of what unites the fellowship of *Canard* readers is the shared pleasure of decoding, of parsing *contrepèteries* and making sense of the hermetic twists and turns of the political plot. This is the joy that comes with being part of a cognoscenti, in on linguistic games and literary allusions, political gossip and politically esoteric jokes, a heady exercise in newsprint-mediated social distinction. Some have observed a similarity between the *Canard Enchaîné* and *Private Eye* in Britain, both of them practitioners of satire for educated readers with a subtle understanding of politics. The *Canard* may lean left, but it does so with a decidedly elitist posture." (See Cohen 2018, op. cit).

Some remain critical of *Canard* for its "insider" status and treating powerful figures—for example, French president Nicolas Sarkozy—too lightly in its lampoons. It is claimed that the *Canard* has a symbiotic relationship with its sources in the corridors of power, which has blunted its satirical barbs. If true, this marks a shift from the Juvenalian model of satire to a Horatian model of humorous satire that does not insult, defame, or discredit. Nonetheless, French government ministers anxiously read the *Canard* before attending the weekly cabinet meeting on Wednesday morning. The paper publishes on Tuesday night for that reason: at cabinet meetings the following morning, ministers are anxious that they might have been spoofed, lampooned, or worse, in the pages of the *Canard Enchaîné*.

## 2.2. *Charlie Hebdo*

*Charlie Hebdo* emerged from the anti-establishment culture of the May 1968 student protests in Paris. From the outset, *Charlie Hebdo's* attitude was irreverent and provocative. Its subtitle ("*Journal irresponsable*") made it clear that its main purpose was mischief. Another slogan was "*bête et méchant*" (silly and nasty), an evocation of the Juvenalian model of satire. The journal has been described as "anarcho-libertarian" (Duprat and Bihl 2015).

If the *Canard Enchaîné*, like *Private Eye* in Britain, offers elitist satire for sophisticated insider readers, *Charlie Hebdo* is closer to schoolboy humor—or "*mauvais goût revendiqué*" (self-proclaimed bad taste). In contrast to the witty puns and clever cartoons in the *Canard Enchaîné*, *Charlie Hebdo's* language is crude and vulgar, for example, this headline: "*Votez con, vous n'avez pas le choix*" (Vote Like an Arsehole, You Don't Have a Choice) (Weston 2009). In 2016, after nearly 300 people were killed in an earthquake in Italy, *Charlie Hebdo* published cartoons depicting victims as pasta dishes.

On a deeper level, the spirit of *Charlie Hebdo* has been aligned with what has been described as the "*esprit de la communauté nationale*"—in other words, a deep connection with France's national values. As with the *Canard Enchaîné*, there is a clear connection between the function of *Charlie Hebdo's* satire and the fundamental values of the French Republic, including secularism (or in French, *laïcité*). Editor Philippe Val described the editorial line this way: "It demands loyalty to *laïcité*, the defense of ecology, democratic principles, the ideals of the Enlightenment, the struggle against racism and anti-Semitism and the condemnation of cruelty to animals." (See Weston 2009, op. cit., p. 125).

*Charlie Hebdo* went through a period of decline in the 1980s. Its cheeky notoriety in the 1970s had been driven by its rebellious, counter-culture spirit. By the 1980s, however, those battles had been won. The 1980s was a period of relaxed morality and removal of censorship under French president François Mitterrand. The new climate gave a satirical journal like *Charlie Hebdo* less relevance. The left was finally in power. There was no authoritarian Gaullist regime to mock and lampoon.

*Charlie Hebdo* began thriving again after 9/11, which brought religion back into the frame as a satirical target. A number of cartoons lampooning Islam provoked outrage from Muslim organizations, which instigated a lawsuit accusing the newspaper of defamation.

*Charlie Hebdo* won the case on the grounds that blasphemy is not illegal in France. The ruling, based on a distinction between defamation and blasphemy, was upheld on appeal in 2008. Another surge of indignation came when *Charlie Hebdo* was accused of offending Islam for cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. The paper's editorial offices were firebombed in 2011 after the paper claimed that a *Charlie Hebdo* edition had been "guest edited" by the prophet. In 2012, *Charlie Hebdo* offended Muslim sensibilities yet again with mocking cartoons of Mohammed. This time, French embassies and culture centers in twenty countries had to be closed for fear of reprisal attacks.

It is sometimes argued that French satire is "punching down" when it attacks religion—notably *Charlie Hebdo's* attacks against Islam—because the targets are a minority Muslim population. However, *Charlie Hebdo's* target is not Muslims per se, but religion more generally. By definition, religions are based on belief in the supernatural. Religious authority comes from above—*supra* in supernatural means "above". It could be argued, therefore, that *Charlie Hebdo's* satire is "punching up" against religion, which claims to be a higher authority. And, as noted, *Charlie Hebdo* spares no religion. All religions are targets.

*Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons, and the violent reactions they provoke, have divided opinion. In France, there is wide solidarity behind *Charlie Hebdo* for reasons already underscored: shared values about secularism, rejection of the concept of blasphemy, and a profound belief in press freedoms. There was also a #JeNeSuisPasCharlie reaction on the internet from those who, while opposed to the terrorist murders of cartoonists, objected to the newspaper's politics. Some were traditional Catholics and reactionaries who object to the newspaper's leftist values. In another category, some French Muslims regarded the newspaper as "Islamophobic" (see [Badouard 2016](#); also see [Garnier 2016](#)). French sociologist Emmanuel Todd likened *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons to "spitting on the religion of the weak". Todd also argues that France's secular culture, essentially atheistic, has designated an enemy in Islam and seeks to exclude Muslims from the Republic ([Todd 2015](#); [Lambert 2015](#)).

Outside of France, especially in the Anglo-American cultural sphere, support for *Charlie Hebdo* has been tempered by the same belief that the newspaper is "Islamophobic".<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have been critical of *Charlie Hebdo's* "racist" and "sexist" images as political discourse targeting Muslims. Sandrine Sanos, for example, observed that "paying attention to *Charlie Hebdo's* sexual and racial politics illuminates how contemporary French political discourse marks some bodies as inassimilable to the French nation." ([Sanos 2018](#)). Others have argued that reactions to the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* were motivated by a desire to reaffirm the dominance of Enlightenment—and thus Western—values. "The event was no longer only concerned with freedom of speech", observed Axel Rudi, "but also with civilization, rationality progress, and truth—the West and 'other'. The effect that was mobilized through the transgression of the sacred—the European Enlightenment symbols—became funnelled into all other sorts of societal debates, leaving people more entrenched and invested in the question of what is French (or Western) and, more importantly, what is not." (See [Rudi 2015](#)).

When *Charlie Hebdo* was nominated for a freedom of speech award at a PEN Literary Gala, six prominent authors boycotted the event in protest. One of them, Peter Carey, lamented that "PEN's seeming blindness to the cultural arrogance of the French nation, which does not recognize its moral obligation to a large and disempowered segment of their population." Novelist Salman Rushdie blasted the dissidents as "Six Authors in Search of a Bit of Character" (a reference to Pirandello's play "Six Characters in Search of an Author") ([Flood 2015](#)).

The international solidarity in the wake of the terrorist attack helped *Charlie Hebdo's* financial fortunes. Previously, the newspaper was selling 30,000 copies a week and counted 10,000 subscribers. Following the terrorist attack, sales soared to more than 250,000 subscriptions, which put millions in the bank ([Aloisio 2015](#)). Five years later, however, *Charlie Hebdo* had only 30,000 subscribers and was selling about 25,000 copies weekly ([Woitier 2020](#)). In the summer of 2023, the newspaper was selling roughly 17,000 copies weekly on newsstands.

*Charlie Hebdo's* satire, sometimes vulgar and always provocative, is not meant to forge consensus around humor. It is caustic mockery aimed at those who occupy a moral terrain outside the sphere of the French Republic's values. This explains why many outside that sphere of values resent the newspaper and, in extreme reactions, are sometimes driven to violence.

### 2.3. *Les Guignols de l'Info*

The television show *Les Guignols de l'Info*, which was on the air from 1988 to 2018, brought satire to prime-time television in France. The show, at least in its form, was inspired by puppet satire in the British program, *Spitting Image*.

This foreign inspiration for *Les Guignols* was not surprising in the 1980s. At that time, the French television landscape, shifting from state-owned and censored to deregulation and privatization, was looking abroad for successful concepts and formats. *Les Guignols* was massively popular on Canal+, one of France's new private channels. At the same time, another satirical puppet program, *Le Bébête Show*, was on the privatized TF1 network. (Doyle 2012). In this context, French satire on television was influenced by similar trends in the Anglo-American world where political satire was a form of mass entertainment.

*Les Guignols* distinguished itself from its early competitors by its massive success, capturing as much as 15% of the television audience. After a shaky start in the late 1980s, by the 1990s it was a national institution in France and widely regarded as a "must watch" program for anyone interested in French politics. The show's format took the form of a news program, with a puppet anchorman (called "PPD") modelled on a well-known news presenter known as "PPDA" (Patrick Poivre d'Arvor). The anchorman "PPD" interviewed puppets of French politicians who invariably came across as scheming, self-serving, stupid, and sometimes corrupt. Though the lampooning was frequently merciless, some politicians regarded having their own puppet as a badge of honor. A puppet on *Les Guignols* was a sign that a politician, worthy of satire, was a major figure in French politics. *Les Guignols* also satirized America as a vulgar empire threatening France's national values. The embodiment of imperial America was a Sylvester Stallone puppet who was shown boasting and threatening violence against anyone who irritated him. The global context was the Gulf War in 1991, when the United States was regarded as an imperial power policing the world.

French historian Jean-Noel Jeanneney observed that *Les Guignols* was similar to the plays of Aristophanes in ancient Greece in its denunciation of demagogues and mocking of intellectual pretenses (Darras 1998). Others compared the show to harlequin theater in seventeenth century Italy. As with American satirical news programs, such as Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, *Les Guignols* blurred news and entertainment to the point where many viewers confused the two and formed their opinions of French politics based on the puppet satire. Professor Waddick Doyle observed that *Les Guignols*, by distorting the news program format, gave French television audiences "a different model of truth." (Doyle 2012). The fact that it was programmed at 8 p.m., when the real network news shows were airing, was another gesture of irreverence. The "truth" of real news programs was one of the targets of the satire. French television viewers did not need network news to stay informed; they could get the real "truth" from satirical puppets on Canal+.

A test of the influence of *Les Guignols* came in 1995 during the French presidential elections. Early in the campaign, prime minister Edouard Balladur was far ahead in the opinion polls and was expected to win handily. On *Les Guignols*, however, Balladur's puppet was distant and haughty, portrayed as a Louis XVI figure (evoking the anti-monarchy Jacobin spirit of the French Revolution in the public imagination). By contrast, the puppet of Balladur's main rival, Jacques Chirac, was sympathetic and down to earth. In one episode, the Chirac puppet was a character from *Pulp Fiction* shooting dead all his political enemies. Balladur was given the undesirable role of the Bourbon monarch; Chirac had the likeable role of the common man. Chirac won the election. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Chirac was

a huge fan of the *Les Guignols*, though the program later portrayed him as a character called “*Super Menteur*” (Super Liar), though it too had a way of making him more human.

After twenty-five years on the air, *Les Guignols* began to decline, though some claimed that it fell out of favor with the owner of Canal+, Vincent Bolloré, a close friend of politicians targeted on the show. Whether Bolloré took *Les Guignols* off the air to spare his political friends from the sting of satire cannot be known for certain. At the same time, however, French satirical comics were frequently fired from their spots on the radio after mocking attacks on politicians that some regarded as vicious. One comic, Stéphane Guillon, was fired from both Canal+ and radio station France Inter for targeting politicians. As France Inter was owned by the French state, it was widely assumed that Guillon was fired for attacking French president Nicolas Sarkozy. In one sketch, Guillon mocked Sarkozy with the expression “*Je sod. . . Nicolas Sarkozy*” (roughly translated: *fuck Nicolas Sarkozy*) (Berretta 2010). When firing Guillon from his spot on France Inter, Jean-Luc Hees, the president of France Inter, said Guillon had crossed the line between *humour* and *injure*—between mockery and defamation (Libération 2010). It was evidence that, though censorship had been greatly relaxed over decades, there were still limits imposed on satire in the Fifth Republic.

### 3. Conclusions

Satirical journals such as *Le Canard Enchaîné* and *Charlie Hebdo* still thrive in the Jacobin spirit that animated French satire a century ago—mocking authority and religion and denouncing vanity and corruption—despite the declining fortunes of newspaper sales. These publications appeal mainly to small niche audiences in the French elites. Other papers and websites have joined their ranks, notably *Mediapart* and *Franc Tireur*. They are not primarily driven by satire, but by polemical arguments and investigative journalism, though the cover of *Franc Tireur* features mocking caricatures.

Meanwhile, satire has virtually vanished from television and radio where it once reached mass audiences. It might be argued that, in the Fifth Republic, satire is tolerated more willingly when confined to elites and does not influence mass opinion on television and radio. If satire has retreated from French radio and television, it has found new forms of expression on online social networks as memes, gifs, and videos. This marks a shift from satire produced by journalistic elites, and working under political pressures, to more diffused and socially distributed satirical mockery that more easily can escape the heavy hand of censorship.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Euronews (2015). For the facts of the Charlie Hebdo case, see (Ervine 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Trench (2016); also in the same edition, (Cox 2016).

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