Between Fundamentalisms

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 "Words can explode like bombs". So said Kathrine Aspass, a journalist for Norway's biggest broadsheet, *Aftenposten* in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo shootings. In the same paper, Kamilla Sadol, went further saying "If you ask for trouble, so you'll get trouble". The reaction was fast and furious. The comic strip Sharp Edges was quick to caricature such statements as a slap in the face for the victims. Around their cabin logfire, the two comic characters muse that their families would be 'so' comforted by these platitudes and their repetition by their political supporters, amongst others the Norwegian opposition leader Jonas Gahr Støre.

Do words explode like bombs? Can the pen actually strike like a sword? Can we draw such a parallel? Is this the voice of reason that seeks to both attack the shootings and express disagreement with cartoons that push the envelope on Islamophobia? Is it a way to straddle the binary Twitter hashtag world of #jesuischarlie and #je*nesuispas*charlie? Or is yet another simple example of tolerance and multiculturalism gone awry?

The notion of words as bombs is both very wrong and very right. And it's not because I am not trying to have it both ways; splitting the middle. It is partly because simple slogans, like most hashtags, have a tendency to overly mix morality responsibility with empirical causality. It's also because the debate has been overly focused on the virtues and limits of freedom of expression rather than the causes and consequences of violence.

The notion that words can explode like a bomb is clearly wrong in moral terms. The danger lurking in this metaphor is that it equates the most grotesque form of physical violence, murder, with acts of speech. It is a form of moral equivalence that is unjustifiable and unsustainable. Not only does it lack *actus reus* (the physical act) for murder it is also likely to be lacking in *mens rea* (mental intention). Even when we possess a deep or sympathetic empirical understanding for a particular act of violence, we must not let our moral faculties be absent in condemning violence on moral grounds. We need to properly pause to condemn violence before rushing to find explanations.

To condemn violence is not to embrace a mindlessly conservative political agenda of law and order. The political right has maneuvered successfully to appropriate the 'security' agenda for their own purposes. Yet, more progressive forces have a long and strong track record that goes beyond pressing societies to tackle social harms, address structural violence and uphold due process rights of unpopular criminal suspects. Campaigns for taking physical violence and crime *seriously* has been central to progressive causes.

Across the world, women's movements have struggled to make violence against women a criminal offence and prosecutions against perpetuators stick. Civil rights movements have fought to remove state-sanctioned violence in the form of the death penalty and other cruel and degrading punishments; and decried the 'collateral damage' of warfare from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. Criminal law reformers have attacked the common and absurd priorities in legal systems, which favour powerful elites over the marginalized; penalize property offenders more than rapists; and devote inordinate police resources to tracking down gay men, drug users and the homeless while the victims of real crimes are left puzzled and angry at the failure of states to effectively prevent and remediate violence.

Two hundreds ago my ancestor Hugh Hughes was imprisoned and loaded on a boat to Australia for life for stealing half a pound of lead. At the very same time, an English aristocrat was jailed for a mere thirty days for cold-blooded murder. We shake our head at the absurdity of such complacency about violence. We should not cease shaking our heads.

We must continue to name the farcicalities in our social orders that permit such equivalence on violence, whether we find it in Norway or Uganda, France or China. Equally, we need to unequivocally condemn violence that leads to the loss of life, whether it is two brothers storming Charlie Hebdo in the name of Islam or Anders Behring Breivik in the name of Christian civilisation. If we sign on as #Iamcharlie we must ready to sign on as #Iamthelabourparty, the target of Breivik's attacks, and vice versa. If we are going to speak of moral equivalence, we need to condemn violence in the name of any civilization or religion. The right to life is not absolute but it is more absolute than any other right.

At another level, words do function like bombs. Indeed, Aspass' statement was taken from a cartoonist for the tabloid VG who stated "I cannot go around exploding bombs all the time". But the metaphor is not quite right. Words lack the same immediate and explosive effect. Thye might be better described as the fuselage or gun powder, heightening or dampening explosive capacity. This is because research on the causes of violence reveals how important words and images are in shaping our behavior and our potency for violence.

Of course, one influential school of thought, which embraces both political realists and Marxist sociologists, asserts that that the causes of violence are material - a conflict over the distribution of resources. Any use of words is thus merely incidental to the instrumental end of securing territory, property or wealth, whether locally or internationally. This theory has some explanatory pull but it is overdriven. It fails to account for the numerous acts of violence which possess no material basis. It is the world's middle class that mostly fills up the ranks of terrorists that act in the name of various religions and ideologies. And the murderous regimes of Hitler and Stalin destroyed rather than maximized their resources as they respectively murdered Jews, Roma, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities and starved rural peasants to death.

In other schools of thought, violence is more intrinsic and finds its origins in psychology and social relations. It is a product of *othering* as we build our identity on the basis of other's difference. It is a product of *scapegoating* as we seek to find others to carry the blame for personal or social failures. It is the product of *social learning* particularly spiraling *narratives of hate* built assiduously by our peers or political and religious entrepreneurs whose ends may not be simply material. It is the product of our *neurons* and the structure of our brains. Our brains may not only be differently wired as to their propensity to commit harm against others but they also vary in their biological capacity to tolerate, accept and embrace differences amongst individuals. Each of these accounts vies for explanatory ascendancy but they are all compelling. Critically, words and images are essential to many of these causal processes.

Of all these explanations, the biological might seem the farthest removed. But even images can be important in shaping our neurally-driven perceptions of others. A new line of experimental studies in the United States on reactions to white and black faces showed that the participants all had stronger emotional reactions to black faces in the amygdala

region of the brain. However, those with more positive attitudes towards black people showed also stronger greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex—a region associated with greater self-control and rationality — and thus regulated those emotions. Additional studies have shown that this frontal cortical region can be also trained to be more egalitarian through the very use of images, for example seeing black individuals caring for children.

Now, a single cartoon does not a massacre make. But a series of cartoons combined with overarching narratives may contribute to the escalating tensions between the so-called Islamic and Western civilizations. Words and images form part of the casual apparatus that both boosts and reduces violence. If the Islamaphobes want to argue that religious texts cause violence, then they also need to consider their textual contribution to the problem.

This brings us back to freedom of expression. Is there a right to draw Mohammed? Is there a right to draw many pictures? Is there a right to denigrate the prophet? The reaction around the world to the Charlie Hebdo attacks seems to suggest that there is significant support for both a legal and moral answer of yes. The more difficult question is how we should morally exercise that right. Indeed, while half the world tweeted Voltaire's famous statement on the right to speech, few tweeted his consistently anti-Semitic statements and writings.

It is on this question that we need to draw in our empirical understandings, and be reflexive. We need to recognize that there are many of us who stand between the fundamentalisms of romantic secularism that advocates a muscular and defiant attack on all religions and a fundamentalism of religion that is shrill in its call for either strong self-censorship or forced censorship; both fundamentalisms eagerly feeding off each other and denying space for a reasonable middle.

In the second part of her article Aspass provides some useful daily tips before getting overly fired up over religion and needlessly polarizing: generating more heat than light.

In my view, a useful theoretical place to stand is captured by critical modernity. Critical modernity neither embraces all the liberating claims of modernity nor the full relativism of post-modernity. It accepts the existence of multiple modernities and identities without sacrificing reason and rationality. It is a perspective that is highly suspicious of any power or elite. It is sceptical of authoritarian and religious elites but equally suspicious of Western elites who seek to engage in battle against them. Are they really doing battle with powerful global Islamic forces or just marginalizing their own Muslim minorities? And how much legitimacy do they have to pontificate on freedom of expression? Politicians rushed to Paris to declare their support for the freedom of speech and returned home to their ongoing projects to limit it domestically, from the banning of begging in Norway to controlling the speech of Muslim youths in Australia. Critical modernity is also restless, experimental and demands evidence. If the muscular secularists claim that provocation of Muslims will lead to happier, healthier and enlightened societies, where is the evidence? If tolerant liberals argue the opposite, where is the evidence?

In condemning violence, we need to separate morality from the empirics. Yet, in preventing violence and finding a way between the fundamentalisms on freedom of speech, we cannot separate the two.

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