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You've been framed! Charlie Hebdo and WikiLeaks – The Geoculture of Free Speech

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Abstract:

This article examines the issue of free speech as a part of what world-systems scholars call the *geoculture* of the modern world-system. It does so by comparing and contrasting responses from governing political and media institutions in the UK and the US to Julian Assange's Wikileaks revelations and the Charlie Hebdo murders. The purpose of this comparison is to show that the commitment to free speech on the part of these media and governing institutions is instrumental rather than principled since powerful vested interests are involved. The West's claim to be the defender of liberal values is contingent upon geo-political and economic circumstance. In short, power and interest tend to transcend liberal, universal principles in practice for reasons that the two cases demonstrate. The framing device of *worthy* versus *unworthy* victims (as set out by Herman and Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent*) helps to explain responses to the Hebdo killings and the treatment of Julian Assange/Wikileaks by UK and US governing institutions.

Free speech has become a central theme in the geo-culture of the post-cold war era. The West has defined itself in relationship to the defence of universal liberal values and these are seen to be threatened by external and internal opponents (Luengo and Ihlebæk, 2019; Garton Ash, 2005; Mondon and Winter, 2017: 32). For many critics, the rise of illiberalism and populism in Western nation-states exemplifies this development. Potentially, these trends could undermine liberal values such as free speech and democracy itself (Murray, 2017, 2022).

Here, I offer a critical analysis of these arguments by showing that the defence of free speech by governing elites in Western political systems tends to be instrumental and selective rather than based on principle. Intertwinement of governing political parties, media institutions and corporate institutions defines Western political culture (Ali, 2003: xii). The consequence of this in the 21st century, after the Cold War, has been the solidification of a system in which the political, economic and geocultural governing institutions and actors reinforce their wealth and power while controlling diverse forms of dissent (Ali, 2003: xii). The consequence of this in the 21st century,

after the Cold War, has been the solidification of a system in which the political, economic and geocultural governing institutions and actors reinforce their wealth and power while controlling diverse forms of dissent (Ali, 2003: xii). Such is not a mere assemblage or a contingent form of stratification. Rather, it reflects the history of governing institutions and dominant social classes that have shaped the development of the modern world-system. Equally it is not mere contingency that sees the core zone of the system comprised of dominant Western nation-states, now led by the United States. They were the architects of the inter-state system and the spread of capitalism, an economic system established through colonialism (Blaut, 1993). The core has experienced threats to its authority since the end of the Cold War.

In the two cases to be examined in this article, free speech has been used instrumentally as a form of propaganda to attack those viewed threatening to this institutional framework (which allows the West to intervene in other countries). Such was evident in the contrasting treatment given by this framework to the Charlie Hebdo killings in 2015 compared with the treatment of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Both cases involve the question of free speech and a free press, but they are also central to the geocultural conflicts in the post-cold war era and as such are what Eko describes as global events (Eko, 2019; Hirst, 2015). It is argued that when free speech is a threat to the governing institutional framework of the core, it is attacked as ruthlessly as it would be in any other part of the world-system.

The concept of *geoculture* has its origins in the work of scholars associated with world-systems research (Winter, 2019, 2021; Wallerstein 1991, 2011). Wallerstein's original conception was to view geoculture as a dominant ideological framework in the modern world-system. By this he meant a "set of ideas, values and norms widely accepted throughout the world system and that constrained social action thereafter" (Wallerstein, 2011: xvi). He traced their origins to the aftermath of the French revolution. Three broad political ideologies then emerged: conservatism, liberalism, and socialism (Wallerstein, 2011). On Wallerstein's reading, it has been (centrist) liberalism which has dominated the geocultural framework of the world-system. Both conservative and socialist ideologies generally adapted themselves to liberal ideas about capitalism, individualism, social reforms, and the role of the state. Further, as world-systems scholars have noted, the basis for geocultural power was rooted in colonialism and the subsequent production and control of the information and communication technologies that formed the system's infrastructure (Hugill, 1999). Critics have noted that Wallerstein's view reduces geoculture to one stable ideology emanating from the core whereas the world-system has always been engaged in geocultural power struggles between the core nation-states and those who have sought to challenge them (Vysotksyi et al., 2023). These struggles have become more pronounced since the end of the Cold War, especially with the rise of China as a potential hegemonic nation-state in the early 21st century (underpinned by the geocultural power manifested in its Belt and Road Initiative) (Winter, 2019, 2021). Additionally, the digital revolution which has transformed global communication practices complicates and undermines a global information and communication infrastructure which had been dominated by the core (Hugill, 1999; Castells, 2015). Periphery and semi-periphery countries are now major challengers to the core in the realm of geoculture. Such is clear in the following 2011 report on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's meeting with the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

> 'Let's talk straight realpolitik,' Clinton said. 'We are in a huge competition' for global influence and global markets. She described countries circling around huge new oil discoveries in the south Pacific. 'China is there every day, figuring out how they're going to come in behind us, come in under us,' she said. She also said the U.S. had to

> do more to communicate its values and spread its influence to the rest of the world through government-backed media, such as Al-Hurrah Television, which broadcasts in the Arab world. 'We are engaged in an information war and we are losing that war,' she said. China and Russia have started multi- language television networks, she said, even as the U.S. cuts back in this area. 'We are paying a big price' for dismantling international communications networks after the end of the Cold War, Clinton said. (Hall, 2011)

Geoculture can be understood as a form of soft power involving technology and ideological struggles over the meaning of the modern world-system itself. These struggles may take the form of diplomacy, propaganda, negotiation, and control over the production and distribution of news and information. As Hannerz and Winter have argued, geocultural forms, practices, and ideas circulate in everyday life and popular culture and can be viewed as forms of seduction and attraction concerning the values, beliefs, dispositions of contrasting ways of life in the world-system. As stressed, it is now the geocultural challenge from the semi-periphery that has caused such difficulties for the Western states of the core as they have sought to provide an alternative to the US-led Bretton Woods system (Hannerz, 2016; Winter, 2021; Desai and Hudson, 2021).

Thus, for governing elites across the core (the G7) and other parts of the world-system, geoculture is an ideological framework that guides and legitimises policy and norms. It needs to be stressed that although the modern world-system can be conceived as an evolutionary model of social change it is not a static one. Recent major challenges to nation-states of the core (the West, led by the US) also threaten their geocultural dominance. They are under significant challenge from the BRICS group and, especially, China as alternative geocultural frameworks for development (Winter, 2019, 2021; Desai and Hudson, 2021). Defining geoculture as a form of dominant ideology is to recognise that any social system has an ideological spectrum as a resource for legitimation (Piketty, 2020). It does not imply that there is generalised acceptance of these dominant ideas. On the contrary, the modern world-system has experienced a history of challenges to ruling orthodoxies as well the social relations and institutions that sustain them.

Political elites and commentators from the core have defined the post-Cold War era in terms of two contrasting but complementary narratives: the end of history and the clash of civilisations (Wilkin, 2023; Ali, 2003; Huntington, 2011; Fukuyama, 2006). The former describes the market and, by extension, neoliberalism as the only set of values that has not fallen victim to the test of history (in comparison with communism, fascism, socialism, theocracy, military dictatorship, and so on). In this vista, a world-system is evolving towards a single form of global social order shaped by markets, democracy, and central liberal values. In the latter context, the individual capacity for free speech can be empowered by the digital revolution against the all-powerful state. Former US President Reagan expressed the idea in his June 1989 London Churchill lecture:

> More than armies, more than diplomacy, … the communication revolution will be the greatest force for the advance of human freedom the world has ever seen. The biggest of big brothers is … helpless against communications technology. Information is the oxygen of the modern age. The people of the world have increasing access to this knowledge' (Wilhelm, 2017: 129-130). The role of a free press, then, is holding powerful institutions to account before the public. Logically if all nation-states adopt neoliberalism (capitalism, democracy, liberalism) as the narrative suggests they will, then a world of peace, prosperity and individual freedom will ensue. (Wilkin, 2023)

In contrast with this liberal utopian depiction of the post-Cold War world was Samuel Huntington's conservative dystopian thesis of *The Clash of Civilisations* (Huntington, 1996; Ali, 2003). On this account, culturally determined conflicts were pitching civilisations into irresolvable and presumably eternal battles. Liberal values should not be viewed as being universal but as intrinsic to Western culture. On this view, free speech is not a universal value, merely a cultural one (Huntington, 1996). Despite the contrasting metaphysics of the two dominant narratives, they ultimately shared the idea that the West was the bedrock of liberal values. What differentiates them is the extent to which these values are seen as universal or simply culturally constructed. In any case, these twin narratives are crucial to understanding the self-image of Western (core) elites in the post-Cold War era. For Wallerstein, universal liberal values, historically, included the idea that progress was attainable for all nations who followed the path that the West had taken in becoming modern. To this end, reform directed by the state was possible and political power could be rendered accountable through elections and not violence. Crucially, values embedded in the United Nations Universal Declarations of Human Rights were to be the foundation for a new international humanitarian order (Wallerstein, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1994).

I will show that such commitments represent a geocultural, ideological picture that serves to obscure a basic reality: when free speech threatens powerful interests and institutions in the core it will be curbed or punished. The primary and *necessary* goals of core institutions remain the accumulation of wealth, political and cultural power, and the preservation of social hierarchy and privilege—not the promotion of universal liberal values. The latter are *contingent* possibilities often expressed by social movements in civil society (their rights may be withdrawn or circumscribed at any time by governing institutions). It should be stressed that, as with the case of Assange, such actions can generate resistance from citizens in civil society as well as intra-elite conflicts. To draw out the discrepancy between espoused values and actual behaviour, two main research questions are addressed:

1. How can we explain the differences in treatment between Charlie Hebdo and Wikileaks/Assange by politicians, corporations and media in the US and the UK?

2. What does this tell us about the geoculture of free speech in the modern world-system?

The relationship between free speech and a free press for democracy is considered before turning to the geocultural importance of the Charlie Hebdo and Julian Assange cases in regard to political and media institutions in the West. In doing so, I will draw upon the framing concept of *worthy* versus *unworthy victims* advanced by Herman and Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent*. As they explained, "only political factors can explain the differences in quality of treatment of worthy and unworthy victims" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: xx). The usefulness of Herman and Chomsky's framing concept is that it addresses what they call the elite agenda-setting media in the US. This focus has been taken up by scholars in several other countries in order to compare coverage of events that impinge upon the governing interests of the core nation-states. Both the Hebdo and Assange cases exemplify the geocultural battle for soft power between states of the core and in particular the semi-periphery.

Words are not deeds: Free speech and the free press

In modern Western philosophy the concept of free speech is most strongly associated with the Enlightenment, a diverse and often conflictual body of thought which emerged in several European countries from the 18th century (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Revolutionary social changes taking place in European societies, culminating in the French revolution, were motivated by the idea that societies could be transformed, and progress established, through the use of science, experience, evidence, and reason. Traditional forms of authority were thereby displaced (Smith, 2006). Central to the Enlightenment was the natural right of people to free speech and by extension, freedom of expression. Potentially, this meant opening all existing social institutions and forms of authority, social hierarchy, and privilege to critical scrutiny. Hitherto, religious and monarchical power and their ideas of truth and morality had rested on unquestioned belief. Open challenges were likely to end in execution, imprisonment or other punishments. In contrast, social relations and knowledge itself were to be open to the possibility of transformation or revision in line with the exercise of Enlightenment reason. One radical implication was that knowledge could be employed in the service of human liberation (since all individuals possessed the capacity for reason and were the bearers of rights). Consequently, the centre of the social universe shifted away from traditional forms of authority (monarchy, church) as individual human beings were placed at the centre of history (Bronner, 2004; Hind, 2020). The search for a just society as a major theme in the Enlightenment was immediately challenged by proponents of what Sternhell has called the anti-enlightenment tradition. These were social groups and institutions who regarded the possibility of universal values as a threat to habit, tradition, custom and culture (Sternhell, 2010). Public spheres grounded in Enlightenment values evolved in a number of radical directions nationally and globally in movements for socialism, anarchism, trade unions, women's rights and anti-colonial struggles. However, the modern world-system is shaped by social hierarchies which have generated myriad forms of resistance to public sphere expressions (Arrighi et al, 2012; Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Morelock and Narita, 2018).

Both Charlie Hebdo and WikiLeaks have claimed to defend free speech as a universal principle (derived from Enlightenment thought). However, many free speech supporters do not do so absolutely. Here, the limits to free speech are often viewed in terms of incitement to criminal action even though in practice, this might be difficult to prove (Bracken, 1994; Winfield and Tien, 2015). The French constitution makes this clear when it defines incitement as encouraging of "discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or a group of persons because of the origin, and membership or non-membership of these persons in an ethnic group, a nation, race, or specific religion" (Eko, 2019: 133). This is an important point since critics of Charlie Hebdo and of other provocative forms of satire make the point that racist or sacrilegious speech can be viewed as an incitement to action. Incitement, as a broader issue, cannot be explored further here, but it must be acknowledged in regard to the Charlie Hebdo murders and the Julian Assange case (Bracken, 1994; Hirst, 2015). In the former, sacrilegious and ironically 'racist' cartoons were said to have incited the murder of cartoonists and other staff. By contrast, Assange has been accused of inciting terrorist attacks against US intelligence officers and soldiers by releasing classified documents through WikiLeaks (McNair, 2012). There is no standard position on the issue of free speech and incitement across the core states of the world-system. Countries such as the UK and France possess severe laws to curb the press and free speech, while the US has constitutional rights of free expression that

should, in theory, protect the media (and individuals such as Assange) from state censorship and control.

Free speech was seen by its Enlightenment proponents as a natural condition of being human. For many figures (Descartes, Leibniz, Rousseau) the capacity to use language was perhaps the most distinctive hallmark of human nature. This standpoint was subsequently developed by figures associated with romanticism of which Wilhelm von Humboldt is perhaps the most important (Chomsky, 2009). Thus, the case in defence of free speech was not to be an instrumental, utilitarian or a functional one (e.g., that it served, say, a political purpose). Rather, it was a fundament principle in its own right. If free speech was a natural attribute of human beings, then it made no sense to justify it primarily in other terms. The natural right to free speech certainly has broad social and political implications, but that right, as such, is not dependent upon them.

In the period of European Enlightenment, the idea of a free press began to take root in civil societies. It is here that the relationship between free speech and socio-political issues begins to develop. The principle of an independent and critical media that would act to both inform and help construct the idea of an autonomous public and civil society has been chronicled by Jurgen Habermas (Habermas, 1991; Hume, 1758/1987; Smith, 2006). In his account, a free press would investigate and inform the public about the practices of governing institutions, to hold them accountable to democratic processes, including the rule of law. Thus, the precept of no free press, no democracy emerged. This precipitated a continuous battle between the demands of a newly assertive and wealthy bourgeoisie and working-class aspirations for political and economic power (Wilkin, 2021; Habermas, 1991; Garton Ash, 2016). In response, states and governing institutions sought to curb and constrain media organisations by using laws of libel and slander, requiring a license to publish, and through taxation which undermined the capacity to publish. Where deemed necessary, journalists were arrested and persecuted.

This Enlightenment idea of reasoned and scientific analysis, most bracingly encapsulated by Karl Marx's reference to "*the ruthless criticism of the existing order*" has been fundamental to the idea of a free press and the journalist as investigator of the criminally powerful (Berkowitz and Eko, 2007). Free speech was a weapon a free press could use against the powerful governing institutions precisely because they could undermine nascent democracy and individual liberties. The targets of ruthless criticism were those in authority claiming to possess the legitimate right to govern and exercise power. Hence, there are many examples of early European newspapers using sometimes scatological satire to mock and ridicule the hypocrisy of the ruling classes and the bourgeoisie. This idea of holding the powerful to account (and ridicule) was a radically unsettling action whose legacy is still with us.

However, debates around free speech have changed significantly since this classic Enlightenment period. With the impact of the digital revolution, widespread moral panics about free speech and the coercive nature of language have occurred throughout the world-system. This has foregrounded the theme that 'words are not deeds'—saying something is not the same as doing something and cannot be judged in the same way by law (Bracken, 1994). Since the 18th century, meaningful free speech has been seen to exist when those you disagree with can air their views. Thus, the right to free speech is universal and is not just for those that one might agree with. However, contemporary debates around free speech (mainly in core countries) have morphed into 'culture wars' in which the political right claim the mantle of being defenders of free speech against progressive movements (Rolfe, 2021). This claim is made on the grounds that institutions such as universities have denied platforms for individuals accused of racism, sexism, homophobia,

transgender phobia, holocaust denial, and so on. Of course, the political right has no inherent sympathy with oppressed groups, but they do want to be able to defend the right of people to air racist, sexist, and homophobic views.

By contrast, social movements, influenced by postmodernism, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, intersectionality, queer theory, and disability theory, have shifted from the Enlightenment's defence of free speech as necessary for the criticism of power to a position shaped by a rejection of the division between words and actions (Feldman, 2001). This division is said to overlook the mental and physical harm that words cause, and to not recognise that language (understood as discourse) is constructive of social reality. If there can be no meaningful distinction between speaking and acting, then the task of progressive movements is to pressure institutions and the state to legislate against harmful speech. This objective has led some progressive movements into an anti-Enlightenment position which ironically merges with traditional right-wing arguments that free speech as such can cause social harm (Neiman, 2023).

The culture wars can be best understood as offering useful enemies or scapegoats for liberal and conservative elites in the core who want to divert attention from the class war that has fundamentally restructured social life across the world-system under neoliberalism (Klikauer, 2023). For these elites (and far right social movements), right standpoints within the culture wars place the blame for social inequality and poverty on the unemployed, migrants, refugees, and woke culture, rather than capitalism.

The issue of words, deeds and harm has always been central to satire and its relationship to free speech, as the case of Charlie Hebdo has shown. The classical tradition of satire has tended to criticize the corruption, vice, depravity, and idiocy of the powerful (Channel 4 News, 2015). By contrast a modern tradition, which begins with Jonathan Swift, has a misanthropic tone which tends to damn humanity in general (Gibson, 2017). Charlie Hebdo in its second incarnation tends towards the latter. Despite its claim to be a left-wing journal, there are mocking depictions of both the oppressor and the oppressed, politicians and religions, alongside those of ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, the working class, rape victims, and refugees (Todd, 2015).

Liberal values and the idea of universal natural right, law and justice that the Enlightenment has bequeathed were undermined by the realities of social power in the world. As Dan Hind notes, the universal values of classical liberal (for which, read Enlightenment) thought were both appropriated and distorted by the institutions that have come to dominate the modern world-system. These institutions serve class interests and state power rather than universal human emancipation (Hind, 2020). As the cases of Hebdo and Assange will illustrate, this co-optation of liberal values is an important part of geoculture's ideological framework in the 21st century. In this respect, free speech has become a weapon with which the governing elites in the core states can assert their moral superiority and legitimise the punishment and condemnation of those they consider to be transgressing these values. The core established the geocultural benchmark against which other nation-states can be judged and has reserved the right to apply sanctions against those who are deemed to transgress it (though far less frequently against themselves). Against this background, I turn now to the case of the Charlie Hebdo murders in relation to the geoculture of free speech.

Charlie Hebdo – Stop me if you've heard this one

In 2015, 12 cartoonists and journalists at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris were murdered (plus 5 more people over the next 3 days in what seemed to be clear anti-Semitic attacks). Across the core

states of the world-system were calls to defend free speech from its enemies. In France particularly, this involved defence of the right to be sacrilegious (Sreberny 2017; Berkowitz and Eko, 2007). Since the French Revolution, this has been worn by many politicians as a badge of political courage in their defence of Republican ideals (Rolfe, 2021; Wolfreys, 2017). President Macron later reaffirmed the point in 2019 when schoolteacher Thomas Pattey was murdered in response to his showing the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in a high school civics class addressing free speech. The Hebdo murderers, two French Citizens, claimed to be members of Al Qaeda who said that they were taking revenge against Hebdo as an exemplification of the West's humiliation of Islam and Muslims around the world (Liu and Shafi, 2019; Saeed, 2015).

Immediately, then, there was a geocultural context to the murders that saw many Western politicians and commentators seeking to uphold liberal traditions as universal values against attacks from fanatical opponents of these beliefs. Such commitments often became entangled with the idea of defending Western civilisation. This idea tended to move between our two major narratives: the end of history (in which liberal, universal values triumph); and the clash of civilisations (involving the defence of core Western liberal values (Marlière, 2015; Boe, 2017). Here, it should be recalled that post-Cold War US hegemony had been weakened against challengers from the semi-periphery who began to articulate a geocultural worldview different from that which the US and its Western allies were able to impose after WW2 (Ali, 2003: 255-289; Desai and Hudson, 2021). The Hebdo murders were drawn into this geocultural struggle as the West sought to preserve its position as upholder of international humanitarian order in an increasingly chaotic and multipolar world-system.

The satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo was initially founded in 1970 before folding in 1981. Its original incarnation was part of a left-wing French satirical landscape dominated by the much bigger, more famous, and longer established *La Canard Enchaine* (Martin, 2005; Marlière, 2012). Hebdo established an audience for its satirical work by confronting important and powerful targets including the recently deceased President de Gaulle. In 1992 Charlie Hebdo was relaunched with a modified ideological outlook. As critics have noted, Hebdo became an outlet for satirical attacks on the poor as well as the rich, cruelly depicting refugees, victims of rape, Muslims, and other minority groups in French society as objects of ridicule and contempt (Klug, 2016). The only exception to Hebdo 2's approach, as it turned out, was when one of its well-known contributors Siné was sacked for comments about President Sarkozy's son that were construed by editor Val as being anti-Semitic (Burke, 2008). As Davidson notes, if Hebdo had portrayed Jews in the way it portrays Muslims it would have long been open to prosecution by the state for antisemitism (Davidson, 2015: 22).

Despite taking a broader approach to satire, Hebdo 2 did not generate major weekly sales. Up until the time of the murders, it had a small and declining audience numbering around 60,000 and faced significant financial problems (Boe, 2017: 170). Hebdo 2 can be situated in the context of social and political conflicts that had been taking place across Europe after the Cold War. Of particular importance here was the successful right-wing strategy of moving the European focus of politics toward a fear of Muslim immigrants (Wodak, 2020). The neo-fascist right in France depicted this as a *Great Replacement/Disappearance* whereby white Christian France would be replaced by Arabic Muslims and Black Franc-Africans (Ekman, 2022). This general idea became embedded within the right-wing political culture of core states (under the perceived need to defend white Christian civilisation from multiculturalism). The far-right Presidential candidate Eric Zemmour took up this theme as did Michel Houellebecq, an associate of Hebdo 2, in his best-

selling novel *Submission* (Houellebecq, 2015). The significance of this cannot be overstated. Neo-fascists in Europe saw the Hebdo murders as a manifestation of the 'civilisation war' that was engulfing the continent (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). To that end, the far right, as noted, were claiming to defend free speech against the threat of Islam (a position that contradicts historical fact that the political right and fascism had been hostile to free speech) (Titley, 2020). Drawing upon Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* thesis, contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment has seen the normalisation of far-right ideas within states in the core of the world-system and beyond (Wodak, 2020). World-systems scholars have argued that racism in its modern guise as a legacy of colonial systems has been one of the structural foundations of the modern world-system. Put simply, the non-white population of the world is perceived to be a threat (Blaut, 1993). As the West has declined in economic, political and cultural terms, the far right has exploited the situation to scare and mobilise populations behind increasingly fascist policies and parties (Ali, 2003, Ayers, 2023; Martins, 2023; Patnaik, 2020). The consequence of what Tariq Ali refers to as a *Clash of Fundamentalisms* has seen the core, under US direction, wage war and violence against important parts of the periphery and semi-periphery (as a means of advancing strategic objectives such as the control of energy resources) (Ali, 2003). To sustain such openly imperialist violence requires a geoculture that is minimally able to legitimise such actions and to present their central importance.

Thus, Hebdo 2 became embroiled in controversies around the place of Islam in French society. With a Muslim population of around six million, this was to become a major political issue. This followed the 2005 precedent of the Danish publication *Jyllands-Posten*, which had published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad as a figure of ridicule. These were republished in *France Soir* in 2006 (Boe, 2017; Khan et al, 2021). [1]

Hebdo 2 claims to be anti-racist but often uses racist humour as a weapon that would resonate with a fascist audience. As Lentin argues,

> For example, the cartoon of a simianized Christiane Taubira, the Justice Minster, may have had the intention, as the 'Understanding Charlie Hebdo' website attempts to argue, of ridiculing the Front national. Likewise, the more widely criticized cartoon of drowned refugee toddler Aylan Kurdi as an adult rapist, published a year after the attacks on the magazine, may have been meant as a call for open borders. However, the use of racism to negate racism can only be a strategy of those for whom racist caricature has no personal purchase (2018: 60).

In a society where oppression of the Arab population is longstanding, it is hard to see how such humour can be interpreted as something other than racist. This is a perennial problem facing satire, that the alleged irony of its humour is lost, buried under the weight of its apparent meaning. A front-page cover by Charlie Hebdo (issue 1166) depicting pregnant Boko Haram sex slaves calling for defence of their welfare benefits is meant to be a joke *against* the political right, who oppose welfare. However, whatever the intentions of the cartoonists, it suggests a lack of political judgment or, at worst a form of nihilism. Free speech, then, comes with an obligation to take responsibility for one's actions and, as Garton Ash notes, to face the consequences (Garton Ash, 2016: 370; Mondon and Winter, 2017: 40). Claiming that everything is an ironic joke can also be a means of trying to evade any responsibility for one's speech. For the political right, it is a common trope to criticise their progressive opponents for not laughing at racist jokes because they lack a sense of humour. Thus, the ironic racism of Hebdo 2's cartoons, such as the cover of issue 1166, has been singled out by critics who don't find it funny to laugh at such racism, ironic or not (Rolfe, 2021; Verjus, 2017;

Todd, 2015; Lentin, 2019; Neffati, 2021). This is not to say that the state should not allow racist or sexist material to be published or spoken; after all, that is the basis of a *genuinely* liberal society. Rather it is simply to recognise that defending the right to free speech also means defending the right of others to say freely what such speech or print *means*. To paraphrase Karl Marx, free speech. understood as the ruthless criticism of all that exists, also includes the ruthless criticism of Jyllands-Posten and Charlie Hebdo. This is especially important when debates around free speech and satire have been appropriated by the political right to defend their belief systems: racism, sexism, homophobia, class hatred and so on. In this respect the culture wars are better understood as a manifestation of the debates and conflicts that have taken place since the Enlightenment between its adherents and opponents. Put another way, satire and free speech have become weapons by which the powerful can demonise, mock, and attack their enemies. Such a development misses the crucial principle that the Enlightenment bequeathed, and which Marx expressed, the need for *ruthless criticism*. The latter is almost entirely absent in Charlie Hebdo's humour and its defence by supporters.

Charlie Hebdo's publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad was not just a critique of Islam as a religion but also of a faith held by the most impoverished section of France's population. They had been subject to all manner of persecution since their arrival in significant numbers from the late 1950s to the 1970s. As is well documented, France's Muslim communities, long subject to discrimination, harassment and murder by the police and the far right, became scapegoats for France's economic problems. They were denied decent housing and jobs by the state and employers. Their religion was mocked and subject to state intervention (Marlière, 2017; Wolfreys, 2017). Hebdo 2 could not help but add to the levels of insult and mockery experienced by French Muslim communities. This is doubly problematic given Hebdo 2's claim to be anti-racist. Again, this illustrates the danger of satire that fails to make its point—it ends up reinforcing the very thing which it claims to oppose. The French government's call to defend secularism, free speech and the Republic was significantly easier than addressing the socio-economic conditions of France's Muslim communities.

Amongst Western politicians and media, there was an overwhelming show of support for the victims and an open declaration of the defence of free speech as a universal value. This resonated deeply across French culture and in many countries around the world. The phrase 'je suis Charlie' was created as a statement of solidarity with those that had become martyrs to free speech. This led to a massive march involving one million French citizens and 50 world leaders from governments, the United Nations, and the EU through Paris on Sunday 11 January 2015. It was led by then President Francois Hollande and included many politicians who had actively suppressed free speech and harassed journalists in their own countries (or were proposing to do so) (Klug, 2016; Rolfe, 2021; Rudi, 2015; 25-26; Wolfreys, 2017: 19). France itself has severe restrictions on free speech, particularly when abuse is aimed at public officials (Amnesty International, 2020). Although the right to be sacrilegious is a strong part of French political culture, it is the Republic itself that has now assumed the role of a sacred institution of progress and unity, which cannot be subject to abuse (Mondon and Winter, 2017: 33-36). The Hebdo 2 attacks were seen by the media and political class in France as an attack on the values of the republic (liberty, equality, fraternity) (Moran, 2017; Dawes, 2015).

The speeches of politicians defending Hebdo carefully avoided asserting that the West was possessed of superior values, though several media commentators were quite happy to make that point (Luengo and Ihlebæk, 2019; Liu and Shafi, 2019). The countermovement which emerged in

the form of the 'je ne suis pas Charlie' protests seemed to reaffirm this with many Muslim schoolchildren in France refusing to mark a minute's silence for the victims (Saeed, 2015). At the same time mosques and Muslim communities across France and other parts of Europe were subjected to violent racist attacks and abuse (Luengo and Ihlebæk, 2019: 287; Wolfreys, 2017).

For some this appeared to be a clear example of the culture wars: free speech vs its illiberal enemies (Rudi, 2015). As Nathalie Saint-Cricq, the chief political editor of France 2, the main public service broadcaster said, "We must locate those who are not Charlie… they are those we have to spot, treat and integrate or reintegrate into the national community" (Fassin, 2015: 3). For the far right and others across the French political system it illustrated the dangers of an alien enemy lurking within the French Republic (Marlière, 2017: 50; Wolfreys, 2017; Wodak, 2020). The social impact of the Hebdo killings appeared to run deep in French culture, even though the French government moved swiftly to pass new laws curbing free speech for those deemed to be inciting hatred in the aftermath of the killings (Moran, 2017). Nonetheless, despite these contradictions there was a powerful unity amongst most of the prominent political and media institutions and actors in this period. The murders became part of the geocultural debate as framed by the institutions and representative elites of the core countries. At the time, Hebdo took on the appearance of the most important geocultural free speech issue in the post-Cold war period, transcending the dreadful persecution of Salmon Rushdie by the Iranian government. Having set out the context and reaction to the Hebdo killings we can now compare this to the case of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in order to further reflect on the geoculture of free speech.

Assange: Murdering the truth

James Goodale, Vice President and General Counsel to *The New York Times* declared in December 2018 that, "The charges against Assange for 'conspiring' with a source is the most dangerous I can think of with respect to the first amendment in all my years representing media organisations" (Timm, 2018).

The WikiLeaks case reveals just how far institutions in the core that claim to uphold liberal values are in practice prepared to abandon them in defence of class power and state authority. As Stone notes, in the US, sections of the political classes have sought to violate the First amendment protecting press freedom to prosecute Assange (Stone, 2011). Launched in 2006, WikiLeaks subsequently won numerous high-profile awards for its contribution to journalism and has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel peace prize. While the idea of whistleblowing preceded WikiLeaks, there is no doubt that the digital revolution opened up new and unprecedented possibilities for the disclosure of what would normally have been classified and top-secret state and corporate information (Olesen, 2019). Wikileaks very quickly attracted media and political attention. The CIA viewed it as an organisation that represented a threat to US National Security, thus plans would need to be developed to destroy it (Maurizi, 2022).

Wikileaks' stance derived from the well-known Quaker idea of speaking truth to power in the hope of transforming the public realm into a genuinely informed and critical democratic arena. As Assange has said of Wikileaks, "we do not have national security concerns. We have concerns about human beings" (Sharpe, 2021: 29). In this respect WikiLeaks is a 21st century version of Enlightenment free speech ideals. Looking forward, Benkler goes so far as to describe WikiLeaks as the pioneer of what will become a standard feature of 21st century media—a networked 4th Estate (Benkler, 2013). We now examine the reactions that this has elicited from the US and UK states and

their political classes. Reactions from the mainstream media and the digital corporations in the US and UK will also be considered. They have, in theory, a vested interest in defending the activities of Wikileaks from state prosecution.

Wikileaks has acted as conduit for classified or secret information disclosed by whistleblowers who have exposed numerous crimes, forms of corruption and disinformation from states and corporate actors (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2014). The role of the whistleblower is enshrined in both international and national law and is often, rhetorically at least, strongly defended by politicians. It is also standard policy for corporations and public sectors around the world to have a defence for whistleblowers in their policies. President Obama, for example, was a strong defender of whistleblowers before he became President. He said of the free flow of information that, "I think that the more freely information flows, the stronger the society becomes, because then citizens of countries around the world can hold their own governments accountable" (Obama, 2009). Yet, as President, he punished more whistleblowers and investigated more journalists than any previous President. He initiated the campaign against WikiLeaks and the persecution of Julian Assange, describing the former as a threat to the International Community (Melzer, 2022; Parmar, 2014; Sharpe, 2021; Maurizi, 2022). In any nation-state, the reality for whistleblowers is far different from that set out in law. They face a precarious and often extremely dangerous existence if their actions are uncovered (Olesen, 2019). The information released by WikiLeaks came from many sources and concerned countries around the world. In 2011, their disclosures helped to trigger Tunisia's Jamine Revolution (Pieterse, 2012; Benkler, 2011; Sharpe, 2021). The most controversial leaks by far have implicated the US, the hegemonic state in the world-system.

The ethos of WikiLeaks is clearly stated by the organisation and has been expressed by Assange in interviews. They view themselves as journalists, a critical 4th Estate, and uphold the idea of 'scientific journalism'. According to Assange this means that in practice the information that WikiLeaks releases into the public domain reveals the train of documents and details from which it is derived. The public can then see with clarity the evidence behind the publications. As Assange has commented,

> I have been pushing this idea of scientific journalism - that things must be precisely cited with the original source, and as much of the information as possible should be put in the public domain so that people can look at it, just like in science so that you can test to see whether the conclusion follows from the experimental data. Otherwise the journalist probably just made it up. (Assange, 2016: 126, as cited in Sharpe, 2021: 15-16)

WikiLeaks provides the idea of *transparency* such that citizens can see exactly what their governments are doing in their name or what corporations have done in secret. Perhaps the most important example of this was WikiLeaks exposure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreements which had been carried out in secret. Their consequences would have empowered corporations at the expense of any elected government's capacity to protect the environment, workers' rights and consumers. These agreements would also have been a threat to freedom of speech on the internet (Kampmark, 2016).

So why did WikiLeaks cause such controversy? One explanation became apparent in the extended conversations between former Google co-founder Eric Schmidt and Julian Assange when the latter was under house arrest in Norfolk during 2011. A fundamental conflict between the two was over the issue of state power and democracy. Whilst Schmidt defended the idea of free markets

creating a more cosmopolitan world under the leadership of a largely benevolent US state, Assange clearly felt the opposite was the case (Assange, 2016). For Assange, without Wikileaks or some equivalent, state and corporate power in liberal democratic societies had grown so strong that they were able to evade accountability on issues which were threatening democracy (Assange, 2015).

In the history of Wikileaks, the release of the tranche of documents known as *CableGate* and the *Afghan War Diaries* in April 2010 was a key development (Arce, 2015; Pieterse, 2012; Wahl-Jorgenson, 2014; Lynch, 2013). Most controversial was the 2010 release of the video entitled *Collateral Murder*. It showed US helicopter gunship pilots in Iraq murdering children, civilian adults, and two Reuters journalists in 2007. The release of this video dramatically enhanced the public image of WikiLeaks in the US (Assange, 2016: 159-160). Given the politically sensitive nature of this and related material Wikileaks had sought to develop links with news organisations who would defend the right to expose state secrets. These included *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *El Pais* and *Le Monde*. After an initial release of unredacted documents, for which WikiLeaks was criticised by friends and enemies alike, it accepted the ethic of redacting the names of those that might be endangered by their disclosures (Ali and Kunstler, 2019; Leigh and Harding, 2011; Benkler, 2011; Arce, 2015; Peters, 2011).

However, WikiLeaks' relationship with the mainstream media outlets fell apart quickly as the latter began to publish *ad hominem* attacks on Assange as early as December 2010. Remarkably, a *New York Times* editorial described Wikileaks and Assange as one of the major threats to democracy, alongside China (Benkler, 2011: 326-327; MacLeod, 2019). Although initially supportive of Wikileaks disclosures, many mainstream news organisations such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* have failed to make any sustained, principled defence of the organisation, or of Assange, on free speech, free press grounds. Indeed, Benkler notes that many news outlets became part of the sustained attacks against Wikileaks and Assange (Benkler, 2011). He faced accusations of releasing further unredacted material which purportedly endangered the lives of US informants in Iraq and Afghanistan (Garton Ash, 2016: 344; Peters, 2011). In fact, the tranche of unredacted materials was revealed online because *Guardian* journalists had published the password to unlock access to it, according to a book account of their relations with Wikipedia (Assange, 2016; Leigh and Harding, 2011: 150-151).

At the same time, WikiLeaks had already been subject to covert actions by US intelligence agencies looking to destroy the organisation (Dorfman, et al, 2021). Free Speech in the hands of a free press such as WikiLeaks was causing geocultural problems which seriously jeopardised the self-image of the major Western states. The revelations of Wikileaks, combined with those of whistleblower Ed Snowden, revealed that the US had been surveilling the phone conversations of nominal allies, such as German Prime Minister Angela Merkel. The US was also surveilling companies in other Western nation-states to advance industrial warfare in defence of its own corporations (Parmar, 2014). Early plans proposed by the US sought ways to either close the WikiLeaks website or to destroy its reputation and credibility by smearing the main individual behind the organisation: Julian Assange (Hedges, 2019). To this end there is a strong tradition within the US intelligence services of recruiting journalists worldwide to disseminate propaganda and as a means of attacking official enemies (Johnson, 1986; Schou, 2016). Regarding the smearing of Assange, Caitlin Johnstone has challenged all of the accusations against him in a systematic manner (see her contributions to Ali, 2019).

The argument made against WikiLeaks by its critics was two-fold. Firstly, their disclosures were not journalism in that they had colluded in the theft of top-secret documents (Benkler, 2011: 331).

Secondly, WikiLeaks was a threat to national security in the US and had endangered the lives of soldiers and field agents (Maggs, 2017). The second of these claims began to be made publicly and were repeated, largely uncritically, by many mainstream media organisations across Europe and North America. An investigation carried out by the US State department found that there was no evidence to support these allegations, and that the leaks were embarrassing rather than damaging. Subsequent academic scholarship has tended to support the view that Wikileaks caused minimal cost to the US in terms of security or finance (Arce, 2015; Fenster, 2012; Hosenball, 2011; Benkler, 2011: 312). Regarding WikiLeaks journalistic credibility, most major news organisations accepted that what they did was akin to investigative journalism, though some academics have disagreed on this point (Peters, 2011; McNair, 2012). As *The New York Times* stated editorially, "Mr. Assange is not a traditional journalist, but what he does at WikiLeaks has also been difficult to distinguish in a legally meaningful way from what traditional news organisations, like *The New York Times*, do every day: seek out and publish information that officials would prefer to be kept secret, including classified national security matters" (Savage, 2019). The question as to why established mainstream media organisations had not done this investigating themselves remains a troubling one for them.

The attacks on WikiLeaks very quickly centred on Julian Assange. Allegations of rape against him were made in 2010 that saw his initial house arrest in the UK (Harrington, 2018; Benkler, 2011). This process was to carry on for a decade with no charges ever being brought. The UN Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer described this as a form of torture (Melzer, 2022; Maurizi, 2022: 144-150). In fact, what was revealed through further leaks was that the UK secret services were pressuring their Swedish counterparts to pursue the case against Assange even though they had no grounds for making the charges formal. In fact, Swedish authorities wanted to drop the case. Melzer, who had read all of the Swedish documents around the case, also noted that no allegation of rape was ever made by the complainant. Rather, this was an allegation from the police themselves and the complainant said that she did not support it (Melzer, 2022: 101-163). Assange had agreed to being interviewed in the UK by Swedish police but refused to travel to Sweden for fear that he would be extradited to the US and tried in a secret military court. This was a reasonable fear given the treatment of American whistle-blower Chelsea Manning who was convicted and imprisoned through a similar process (Maurizi, 2022; Johnstone 2019). Assange's fear was perhaps greater than Manning's in that formally he could face up to 175 years in a US maximum security military prison (Ellsberg, 2019).

A 2020 Yahoo news investigation revealed the US intelligence agencies had planned to either abduct Assange from the Ecuadorean embassy in London where he had sought asylum since 2012, or to assassinate him on UK territory (Dorfman et al 2021; Kampmark, 2018; Värk, 2012.) Indeed, assassinating Assange was an idea expressed amongst commentators and politicians across core countries since the organisation released its Cablegate documents (Assange, 2020; Pieterse, 2012: 4; Benkler, 2011: 313; Springer et al, 2012). It appears that the UK government objected, and the plans had to be dropped in favour of the legal route of extradition and trial in the US. The degrading treatment of Assange has been well documented. He endured a form of solitary confinement in the Ecuadorean embassy for seven years with limited access to the outside world, where effectively he was a political prisoner (Melzer, 2022). Even here it was subsequently revealed that his activities were illegally monitored and bugged by the CIA in collusion with the embassy for fear that Assange would be able to orchestrate more revelations (Dorfman et al, 2021)

The case of WikiLeaks goes to the heart of free speech and free press issues. In theory, these principles should elicit only support from the private sector who often present themselves as being

ideologically resistant to extensions of state power and censorship (regulation). This is even more the case for major digital corporations who often present themselves as being techno-libertarians (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen, 2020). In fact, support for Assange and WikiLeaks from both corporations and mainstream media across the core of the world-system was limited right up to the aftermath of the UK High Court ruling in June 2022 decreeing that he could be extradited to the US to stand trial. Private companies such as PayPal, Visa, Mastercard, Bank of America, Microsoft and Google worked with the US state to close methods of public funding for WikiLeaks activities in order to destroy the organisation (Assange, 2016; Daly, 2014; Benkler, 2011; Pieterse, 2012). In short, in the two main countries of the core, the US and UK, the state and parts of the corporate sector worked together against the organisation.

More surprising has been the treatment of Assange by mainstream media outlets. As the journalist Patrick Cockburn has written, on a number of occasions the lack of media support for Assange was self-defeating, "The silence of journalists in Britain and the US over the extradition proceedings against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is making them complicit in the criminalisation of newsgathering by the American government" (Cockburn, 2020; Pilger, 2020). Further, regular attempts to smear Assange in the very same media outlets was equally shocking. He was presented on numerous occasions as: a sexual predator, a supporter of terrorism, a spy, someone working with Russia to destroy American democracy, an ego maniac, a supporter of the Trump Presidential campaign, a supporter of the Putin regime, and a supporter of the right-wing Brexit campaign in the UK (Maggs, 2017; Roy, 2019; Maurizi, 2022). Added to this were numerous *ad hominem* attacks against Assange, mocking him during his confinement and making light of it. Suzanne Moore writing in *The Guardian* was typical, jokingly suggesting that the only person imprisoning Assange was himself and that he was a "most massive turd" (Edwards and Cromwell, 2018: 44). For such attacks it seems that no actual evidence was needed to make an allegation in the press (Maurizi, 2022).

When Assange was finally seized from the Ecuadorian embassy by British police in 2019 and imprisoned at the high security Belmarsh prison he was subject to what UN Special Rapporteur Melzer has described as inhumane and cruel treatment (Melzer, 2022: 276-278). The trial itself led to a rejection of the demand for Assange's extradition on the grounds that he might commit suicide. As John Pilger noted, during the trial Assange was subject to punitive actions by Judge Baraitser:

> the defendant was caged behind thick glass and had to crawl on his knees to a slit in the glass, overseen by his guard, to make contact with his lawyers. His message, whispered barely audibly through face masks, WAS then passed by post-it the length of the court to where his barristers were arguing the case against his extradition. (Pilger, 2020)

By this stage and after a decade of persecution Assange's mental and physical health was seriously damaged (Glass, 2019; Melzer, 2022; Maurizi, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the ruling in January 2021 that he could not be extradited to the US, Assange was not released. He was subject to an appeal by the US government to the UK High Courts which saw the initial verdict overturned in January 2022. Only in the wake of this latter ruling did the mainstream media in the UK and the US begun to speak out in defence of Assange. [2]

The geoculture of free speech: Framing worthy and unworthy victims

> If **…** the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about, and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard [liberal-pluralist] view of how the media system works is at serious odds with reality (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: xi).

I want to conclude this article by drawing out more clearly the significance of these two cases for an understanding of the geoculture of free speech in the core states of the world-system. I will do this by utilising the idea of worthy and unworthy victims set out in Herman and Chomsky's book *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman, 2018; Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Doing so offers a plausible explanation as to why the two cases draw such radically different responses from governing political elites across the core, important sections of the media and the libertarian digital corporations (as was chronicled by Benkler and Ali) (Benkler, 2011; Ali et al, 2019). This explanation is rooted in an analysis of power and interest that connects governing institutions in the core and which helps to insulate them from critics.

Manufacturing Consent describes US mainstream elite media in terms of what the authors view as its propagandistic relationship to US state and corporate power. To do this Herman and Chomsky analyse and explain coverage patterns of major events as they are presented in US mainstream media. They focus upon how the media frame stories to support rather than criticise powerful US institutions. Perhaps their most important framework rests on the distinction between worthy and unworthy victims. Herman and Chomsky argue that the elite mainstream US media tend to frame stories of importance to powerful US institutions in this way. When a major event appears to present US political and economic institutions in a bad light (war crimes, human rights abuses, climate change and pollution) then such stories are *framed* in specific ways to mitigate, justify or obscure the actions (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Luther and Radovic, 2014). This is also the case when coverage involves allies of the US. Thus, the victims of these abuses of power are not deemed to be *worthy* of coverage in the mainstream media.

Conversely, the actions of what are termed 'official enemies' are always judged as being worthy of coverage, often uncritically and without need for substantiating evidence. Drawing upon this framework shows that viewing Hebdo 2 and Assange as examples of worthy and unworthy victims, respectively, is a plausible way of comparing the different framings advanced by political, corporate and media institutions in the US and the UK. As Entman notes, the essence of framing is selection and salience, which means that certain concepts, elements, images, or facts are emphasised and prioritised over others such that one interpretation of events becomes the most prominent (Entman, 1993). In short, audiences depend upon the way that news media frame stories to interpret and understand them. As Herman and Chomsky make clear in their concept of worthy and unworthy victims, this gives the news media great power to construct a narrative around an issue which serves to frame any ensuing public debate.

The analysis here says that while Hebdo were deemed to be worthy victims by governing elites of the core, Wikileaks and Assange have generally been viewed as unworthy victims. The reasons why illuminate the geoculture of free speech in the post-cold war era. As has been stressed, throughout in the 21st century, the authority and power of the core nation-states, including the hegemonic US, has been weakened by both economic crises and declining political and military strength. This has been partly caused by the emergence of geocultural alternatives from the periphery and semi-periphery. These include alternative forms of media whose reach has expanded

globally as a challenge to the narratives of Western media corporations. Hebdo 2 was a suitable rallying point for core country governing elites around the issue of free speech because it entailed no cost to them. Whatever Hebdo 2's satire meant in practice, it was no threat to the power of governing institutions, be they public or private. So neutered has satire become that political elites are often involved in it to illustrate their normality and sense of self-mockery. By contrast Assange and WikiLeaks were unworthy victims precisely because their exposés really did cause harm to governing institutions in the core and across the world-system.

The attempts to destroy WikiLeaks and extradite Julian Assange to the US are well recognised in the journalistic profession as being fundamental threats to free press principles. What has been absent from the political classes and the mainstream media is any consistent and sustained attempt to defend Assange and Wikileaks on free speech and free press principles. Indeed, as critics have shown, Assange and Wikileaks have been attacked *ad hominem* style and smeared by journalists and politicians. It is also clear that the US and UK intelligence agencies have been working covertly against the organisation and Assange. The extent to which they have been able to influence journalists is at this stage unknown. However, the strong relationship between the US intelligence agencies and journalists both in the West and beyond are beyond doubt as evidenced by the revelations of the Pike Commission in the 1970s and about Operation Mockingbird in 2007 (the latter case occurred in 1962 and was uncovered retrospectively 45 years later) (Constantine, 2014; Wilford, 2008; Ulfkotte, 2019).

Shortly before the Home Secretary Priti Patel in the UK said in June 2022 that Assange could be extradited to the US, the US Sectary of State Anthony Blinken tweeted a message in support of a free press which illustrates the point being made here about worthy and unworthy victims:

> Honored to have met with Nobel Laureate @MariaRessa to discuss the need for independent media & the work governments must do to protect journalists. Independent media is a cornerstone of democracy—an essential tool worth protecting in this critical moment for defending democracy (Blinken, 2021).

This is an important statement as at the very moment that the US was culminating its attempts to extradite Assange and effectively challenge the basis for a free press across the world-system, it was criticising other states (its official enemies) for curbing press freedom. This is a good illustration of the geoculture of free speech when it is instrumentalised as a weapon in the service of power. It is not a principled defense of free speech and still less of a free press. On the contrary it can be better explained as an example how governing institutions in the core view the defense of free speech in instrumental terms. That kind of defence can be extended or withdrawn according to the circumstance and in line with perceived interests, changeable as the latter may be. WikiLeaks and Assange became a problem for governing elites in core states precisely because they were a meaningful threat to their institutional power and authority. They challenged the legitimacy of geopolitical and corporate power in the world-system (Springer et al, 2012). In exercising the right to free speech and defending the idea of a free and critical press, Wikileaks is a challenge to the authority of all powerful institutions. In this sense, WikiLeaks express a genuine commitment to universality.

By comparison, the case of Charlie Hebdo illustrates how the murdered journalists became an example of worthy victims for governing elites in the UK and the US (and more broadly in other core countries). Hebdo 2 in its satirical and ironically racist commentary on French society and beyond was upheld by its supporters as proof of the West's commitment to free speech. However,

in comparison with WikiLeaks, Charlie Hebdo offers a form of satire that is a mockery and ridicule of society from top to bottom—in short it is a politics of despair, not a reasoned criticism of power. Indeed, Hebdo 2 was also an exponent of *ironically racist and misogynist* free speech, often targeting the same groups that many right-wing Western politicians have sought to attack (Muslims, Roma, Refugees, Migrants, the homeless, the unemployed, victims of rape). To reiterate, the right to free speech in a democratic society must be defended, including that of racist free speech. However, the fact that Hebdo 2 runs what it views as ironically racist and sexist cartoons is rarely commented upon by its supporters who seem to regard these as a joke which is above any social context. On this point Zagato observed that,

One should note that many of the cartoon strips published by Charlie Hebdo are of an explicitly racist nature, for example, mocking Arabs by portraying them with stereotypical facial features and mannerisms. I find it pointless to say that for parity's sake the artists also treat the Pope and the Christian God similarly, because these refer to the dominant religion in France, not the demonized one, which has been the object of decades of political attacks in the name of republican and democratic universalism and which represents a disenfranchised minority. When it comes to 'black-faced' Africans, everything is somehow clearer. 'I mock black people, but I do the same with whites' is a disclaimer for racism that simply does not work, because it does not take into account history and the current social realities of oppression. Satire should criticize power, but it should not fuel hatred toward the oppressed or ridicule them. (Zagato, 2015: 49)

As noted, one consequence of the Hebdo murders was that the French state increased restrictions on free speech in France, an interesting and uncomfortable irony.

The comparative political responses in the cases of Hebdo 2 and WikiLeaks/Assange are revealing. For example, unlike the aftermath of the Hebdo murders, no politicians, corporate executives, or editors of major newspapers have lined the streets of London, arm-in-arm, in defense of Assange and WikiLeaks over the past decade. Assange is an unworthy victim and illustrates very clearly the instrumental commitment to liberal values held by governing elites in the US, the UK and across the core. As Assange's supporters have argued, the onus has fallen upon civil society to defend him and WikiLeaks, as political and corporate actors have failed to do so.

As the experience of Wikileaks and Assange has shown, it is possible for free speech to be a universal value which can sustain the idea of a genuinely free and critical press (which treats all governments in the same manner). This Enlightenment principle is a threat which states have sought to constrain since its inception. When the case of Assange and WikiLeaks is set against reactions to the Hebdo 2 murders, the geoculture inconsistencies of the free speech defence become clear.

In postscript, the horrifying murder and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi Arabia's security forces in October 2016 at the behest of Crown Prince Muhamed bin Salman is a chilling example of how free speech and a free press can be subordinated to the geocultural and geopolitical interests of core states. After a suitably short period of time, and despite protests from within the media industry worldwide, the Crown Prince has been readmitted into the realm of acceptable rulers as a loyal ally of governing institutions in core countries. In effect, he has been given a form of immunity from prosecution (Kirchgaessner, 2021). Exposing cases such as this from a WikiLeaks free speech standpoint undermines the geocultural self-image of Western institutions.

Author Bio

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Endnotes

[1] The earlier Jyllands-Posten cartoons had been published at a time of political tension in Denmark over Muslim migration into the country, although actual numbers were very small. The Danish general election campaign of 2005 was marked by openly racist verbal attacks on Muslims and Islam by mainstream parties and the media (Hervik, 2011; Rolfe, 2021; Winfield and Tien, 2015). Two hundred and forty deaths have been recorded worldwide during protests since the publication of the cartoons (Garton Ash, 2016: 19). As critics have noted the conservative Jyllands-Posten newspaper was less interested in free speech than it was in provoking Denmark's largely peaceful and law-abiding Muslim community. Henkel argues 'More importantly, the solicitation and publication of the 'Muhammad cartoons' was part of a long and carefully orchestrated campaign by the conservative Jyllands-Posten (also known in Denmark as Jyllands-Pesten—the plague from Jutland). It backed the centre-right Venstre party of Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen in its successful bid for power in 2001. Central to Venstre's campaign, aside from its neoliberal economic agenda, was the promise to tackle the problem of foreigners who refused to "integrate into Danish society" (Henkel, 2006: 3). In fact, the Danish constitution has severe restrictions on free speech including a blasphemy law that could have been used by the state to punish the newspaper (Winfield and Tien, 2015).

[2] More recently, the UK High Court decreed that Assange could be extradited to the United States conditional upon the US confirming that he would not be subject to the death penalty. He would not be prejudiced in legal terms by his nationality, and he would have First Amendment rights. These assurances appear to have been given on 16 April 2024 by the US. This would appear to have exhausted the possibilities of Assange avoiding extradition. Assange's only hope now would appear to be either public pressure forcing the US to drop the case, or a deal being made between the US and Australian governments. At the time of writing, the judges have not made any further announcement to their final ruling.

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