

“I, you, he, she, we are all Charlie”: what feeling concerned means

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The attacks that took place in Paris in early January have affected French society in a way never seen before, as shown by the number of people that joined marches all over France on 11 January and the success of the message “I am Charlie”, which spread incredibly quickly and was widely adopted, reported, adapted – and subsequently criticised – immediately after the events of 7 January. How are we to make sense of the solidarity exhibited through this message? And what are the specificities of this solidarity with regard to other events, celebratory or tragic, that have affected us collectively?

In the wake of the attacks of 7, 8 and 9 January 2015, French society has experienced a rare moment of “collective effervescence”, to use Émile Durkheim’s (2008) term. For several days, we all focused our attention on the same thing and followed the latest developments, glued to our television screens and online newsfeeds, concerned about what was going on and keen to know what would happen next. Millions of us took to the streets to express our contempt for terrorism, chanted and brandished the same slogans, came together around the same symbols, and took part in the same “rituals of solidarity” (Collins 2004).

But what were the emotional impulses of this collective effervescence? And how is it that such a large number of individuals felt concerned to such an extent by these attacks? We live in an individualistic society, where the meaning of “I/me” generally wins out over that of “we/us”, so the answers to these questions are far from obvious. Indeed, some people were themselves surprised by the magnitude and intensity of their own reactions, as reflected by the feelings they expressed with regard to the victims, the testimonials they made to journalists, or the messages they posted on social networking sites.

What might be considered a wave of collective emotion that suddenly submerged everyone’s individual consciousness is in fact the result of a complex intertwining of impersonal and personal feelings, similar to those previously observed in the reactions to the attacks of 11 September 2011 in the United States, 11 March 2004 in Madrid and 7 July 2005 in London (Truc 2014). The show of solidarity with the victims of an attack does not just involve the assertion of a sense of “we”, but also an exacerbation of a sense of “I” – a fact made clearer than ever by the widespread adoption of the phrase “I am Charlie”.

Realising what we hold dear: an impersonal impulse

At first sight, one emotional impulse is immediately obvious: the feeling of a shared belonging to the French nation. It was along these lines that reactions in France were typically interpreted by French politicians and the media: as expressions of “national unity”. After all, did we not sing the Marseillaise and wave tricolour flags together? In the face of an unprecedented aggressive act, the French people appeared to have confronted the situation head on, united in their grief, temporarily leaving aside their divisions and disputes. “Shared suffering unites more firmly than joy,” wrote Ernest Renan. “When it comes to national memories, mourning matters more than triumphs”

(Renan 1997, p. 32). These events would once again have proved him right on this count – leading many commentators today to opine that there will be a “before” and an “after”, the French people having experienced something like a “French 9/11” (albeit on a much lesser scale).

However, it would be a mistake to think that this current of national feeling was there, present in each and every member of the population, ready to be activated at the first sign of an attack. Let us not forget that, in the 1990s, it was the joy of winning the World Cup that caused millions of people to take to the streets in France, and not the attacks on the RER¹ trains at Saint-Michel – Notre-Dame station on 25 July 1995 and Port-Royal station on 3 December 1996 (which, combined, caused as many deaths as the shootings at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices). What differed this time was that the attack was against the editorial team of a magazine, with the result that many people felt that one of the founding principles of the French Republic – freedom of speech – had been attacked. Whether or not they had previously read *Charlie Hebdo*, and whether or not they liked it or agreed with it, these people felt affected by an attack against the “nation of Voltaire”. To put it another way, their indignation was fuelled by a process of “rise in generality” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) that saw the first attack take on a symbolic dimension in the space of just a few hours. This symbolic dimension made the surviving members of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial team feel particularly uneasy,² as it almost resulted in the cartoonists killed in the attack – whose anti-military convictions were well known – being honoured as having died for France in the *cour d’honneur* of the Invalides military museum.

As the philosopher John Dewey observed, the very idea of liberty – beyond the notion that, in a democracy, one has the option, if one so wishes, of participating every day in “free gatherings of neighbours on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day” (Dewey 1995, p. 45) – seems quite abstract for many individuals. It is only when they find themselves deprived of this option that they realise how much they actually value it. The same applies to what has been interpreted by some as a “republican awakening”: thousands of people took to the streets because this attack made them realise how much it meant to them to have the choice, by dint of living in France, of stopping at any newspaper stand on any street corner and deciding to buy (or not to buy) *Charlie Hebdo*, or indeed any other newspaper or magazine. Once in the street, they were able to see that they were not alone: they discovered companions, contemporaries and compatriots. Moreover, they understood that the things we hold dear are also the very things on to which we hold (Bidet *et al.* 2011): attacking these values is tantamount to endangering that which enables us to live together. More than ever, therefore, they felt part of a “we” – and not just an aggregation of individuals living separate lives alongside one another – and, for some, this has had the effect of stirring feelings of pride: pride in being out in the street, in being part of this “we”, in being French.

Various senses of “we” that come into play at other scales have also been heightened or activated among certain individuals, but without any shift from the specific to the general. One of these is, of course, the sense of belonging to the “community” of journalists, cartoonists, police or Jews, given the identities of the victims, but there is also the sense of being Parisian. Like the Madrid and London bombings before them, the attacks of 7, 8 and 9 January have first and foremost plunged a major European city into mourning: people who currently live in Paris, whether for years or for weeks, have for the first time felt as though they truly “belong” to this city and have something in common with their fellow Parisians. If they took to the street, it was partly to express their refusal to allow terrorists to jeopardise the “togetherness” of this cosmopolitan metropolis, along with their refusal live in a state of general distrust and fear of others. Furthermore, these inhabitants will no doubt remain permanently marked by the experience of living through these events in Paris, as taking part in a moment of collective effervescence in a society like ours engages our personal

¹ The RER (*Réseau Express Régional* – “Regional Express Network”) is the high-frequency express metro/suburban rail network that crosses Paris and the surrounding Île-de-France region.

² See the interview with *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist Luz on the website of cultural magazine *Les Inrocks*: www.lesinrocks.com/2015/01/10/actualite/luz-eyes-us-weve-become-symbol-11545347.

identity and can leave traces; even when there is a sense of “we”, this “we” still exists, to some extent, in the first-person singular.

“I am Charlie”: solidarity in the first-person singular

The public reaction to the attacks would not have been nearly as great if thousands of people had not shared the feeling that they were personally affected, each having his or her own reasons to feel concerned. This is true above all, of course, for all those who knew the 17 victims in some way: from relatives, friends and colleagues – such as the cartoonist Philippe Geluck, who compared the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting to an “intimate 9/11” – to people from the same towns or villages as victims, who know their family and have memories of them. But the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* were also famous: many people, in France and beyond,³ grew up with the drawings of Cabu, Wolinski and Charb, who therefore made an impact on their lives. They had a personal history with them, made up of laughter, memories and anecdotes (which the daily newspaper *Libération* began to collect the day after the shooting).⁴ In this way, many people will have experienced the death of these cartoonists almost as a personal loss, with some feeling the need, for instance, to go to the place where they were killed in order to pay their last respects.

This is perhaps what is primarily encapsulated by the phrase “I am Charlie”: I support the magazine, because this magazine is a part of myself. The phrase was invented by the artistic director of *Stylist* magazine, who posted it on social networks within hours of the first attack on 7 January,⁵ and it is interesting to note the way in which it was rapidly passed on from acquaintance to acquaintance, reappropriated and adopted by each in turn, whereas the first-person plural version – “We are all Charlie”, which adorned the front page of *Libération* the following morning – failed to achieve the same ubiquity. To date, there had never been such a clear demonstration of how it was possible for a sense of solidarity to arise from an exacerbation of a sense of “I”, rather than just from the assertion of an all-encompassing “we” in which individuals are invited to participate. The contrast is striking between this situation and the French reactions to the attacks of 11 September 2001 or 11 March 2004, whose watchwords came from government officials and editorial writers, at a time when social networking sites did not yet exist: “We are all Americans”; “We are all Madrileños”.

In this case, though, solidarity was expressed essentially in the first-person singular, with the slogan subsequently adapted to include all the victims and communities affected by the three attacks (“I am Charlie, a cop, Jewish, Muslim...”). This can be explained by the fact that this particular emotional reaction, while usually less visible, plays a vital role in moments of collective effervescence experienced in individualistic societies. It is not so much a sense of belonging as a feeling of proximity between one singular person and another, which may – as in the case of those who grew up with *Charlie Hebdo* – even become a feeling of familiarity. These feelings are therefore primarily linked to the act of considering oneself to be in some way connected to the people killed, even if we did not know them directly. But it may also, more generally, be linked to the impression that their death has in some way become intertwined with our own lives, whether it is because we were familiar with the place where they died (e.g. because we walk past the Hyper Cacher supermarket or the *Charlie Hebdo* offices every day), because the date of the attack has some special meaning for us (e.g. our birthday or that of a loved one), or because the events echo traumas we have ourselves experienced (such as the loss of a loved one in tragic circumstances).

³ See, for example, the testimony of Fernando Savater (in French): “Merci à Georges Wolinski... et aux autres” (“Thank you, Georges Wolinski... and the others”), *Libération*, 18 January 2015 : www.liberation.fr/chroniques/2015/01/18/merci-a-georges-wolinski-et-aux-autres_1183387.

⁴ “Racontez-nous votre ‘Charlie’” (“Tell us what ‘Charlie’ meant to you”), *Libération*, 8 January 2015: http://ecrans.liberation.fr/ecrans/2015/01/08/racontez-nous-votre-charlie_1176251 (in French).

⁵ See: www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2015/01/09/je-suis-charlie-c-est-lui_4552523_4497186.html (in French).

However, these emotional impulses only come into play on one condition, namely that the victims appear to us to be unique, specific individuals, like ourselves or our loved ones, with a first name, a last name, a face and a story. That is why, on this occasion, the emotional impulses will have been much greater for the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists, who were well-known public figures in France, than for the other victims – and indeed it is for this very reason that the French media very quickly sought to emphasise the identities of the other victims, too; *Libération*, for example, in its special edition on Sunday 11 January, used the phrase “I am Charlie” in conjunction with each of the victims’ names in alphabetical order: “I am Frédéric Boisseau, Philip Braham, Franck Brinsolaro, Jean Cabut known as Cabu, etc.”. The *New York Times* did the same thing after 9/11, publishing an obituary for each victim containing anecdotes and illustrated with a photograph chosen by the family (Wrona 2005), as did the Spanish press after the bombings of 11 March 2004 and the British press after those of 7 July 2005. Conversely, if we are able to react to news of a massacre of 2,000 people perpetrated by Boko Haram in Nigeria with relative indifference, it is precisely because none of these lives appears to us in the singular: for us, these victims are nameless and faceless.⁶ Their deaths, in addition to being more distant, are presented to us only in numerical form. While some people may nevertheless feel concerned and connected by a sense of “we as fellow human beings”, it is unlikely that they will ever be truly concerned on a more personal level.

A revealing moment

The testing times that France has experienced seem destined to be commemorated as a historic moment. But they are also, in sociological terms, a revealing moment: they showed that the reinforcement of social cohesion following an attack not only involves the reassertion of a “we”, but increasingly also the exacerbation of a sense of “I”. Modern societies, according to Durkheim, see mechanical solidarity gradually replaced by organic solidarity (Durkheim 2007). The former, he explained, is the type of solidarity that leads members of a society to share the same mindset and the same surges of emotion, even to the point of forgetting themselves. The latter, by contrast, supposes that they set themselves apart and assert their individual personalities, sometimes even forgetting other people and the things they have in common. The moments of collective effervescence that these societies continue to experience are often seen as occasional resurgences of mechanical solidarity that go against the tide of the now-dominant individualism. While this particular moment experienced in Paris in January has brought various senses of “we” to the fore, it also attests to a growing organic solidarity that connects many singular senses of “I” – of which the phrase “I am Charlie” has become the visible symbol.

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⁶ On this point, see the now famous critique by Judith Butler in *Vie précaire : les pouvoirs du deuil et de la violence après le 11 septembre 2001* (translated by J. Rosanvallon and J. Vidal), Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2005 [2004].

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