

Joyce Carol Oates, Russell Banks and 143 other writers protest free speech award for Charlie Hebdo

David Walsh
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The list of authors opposing the decision by PEN American center to bestow its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to the French satirical and anti-Muslim magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, whose offices in Paris were attacked by terrorists in January, has grown to 145.

Among the more prominent of the signatories are novelists Joyce Carol Oates and Russell Banks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Dominican American writer Junot Díaz, playwrights Eve Ensler and Craig Lucas, writer and actor Wallace Shawn, short-story writer Deborah Eisenberg, actor, playwright and monologist Eric Bogosian, Serbian-American poet Charles Simi?, Nigerian author Chris Abani, fiction writer Nell Freudenberger, writer and teacher of fiction Janet Burroway, historian and journalist Russell Shorto, and short-story writer Lorrie Moore.

Peter Carey, Teju Cole, Rachel Kushner, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose and Taiye Selasi, scheduled to be table heads, had already announced that they were dissociating themselves from the PEN gala dinner May 5.

In their letter of protest, after condemning the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* as “sickening and tragic,” the 145 argue that the decision to confer the award for “courageous freedom of expression” on the French magazine as well as the criteria PEN officials used to reach the decision are “neither clear nor inarguable.” The protesters go on to point out that “there is a critical difference between staunchly supporting expression that violates the acceptable, and enthusiastically rewarding such expression.”

The 145 PEN members assert that the elements of “power and prestige” are present in the production of any sort of work, including satire. “The inequities between the person holding the pen and the subject fixed on paper by that pen cannot, and must not, be ignored.”

They continue: “To the section of the French population that is already marginalized, embattled, and victimized, a population that is shaped by the legacy of France’s various colonial enterprises, and that contains a large percentage of devout Muslims, Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons of the Prophet must be seen as being intended to cause further humiliation and suffering.”

The letter and campaign of opposition take a degree of independent thought and courage. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo*’s offices was the signal for a vast flood of hypocritical and self-serving commentary in the North American and European media.

We were told repeatedly that the Islamist terrorist assault in Paris represented a fundamental threat to free speech and the principles of a democratic society, rights and principles held dear by Western governments, and that it demonstrated, once again, that fanatical Muslims hated our “freedoms.”

Accompanying this outpouring of rubbish by governments and political establishments in the process of shredding democratic rights, was an acceleration in the efforts across Europe in particular to implement police-state measures. The repressive actions proposed or taken in France, the UK, Italy, Germany and elsewhere were prepared long before the January 7 attack, which merely served as a pretext. Furthermore, the *Charlie Hebdo* affair inevitably became part of the general argument in favor of imperialist intervention in the Middle East, to “root out” the terrorist threat.

The PEN decision to award *Charlie Hebdo* has to be seen in this political context, as part of the effort to legitimize anti-Muslim bigotry and build public support for the “war on terror.”

The political biography of Suzanne Nossel, PEN’s executive director, a former US State Department official, makes clear the sort of operation this was intended to be. Nossel is on the record as a supporter of “combining both hard power, military force, coercion with what has been called soft power; diplomacy, the appeal of American culture, its people, economic ties.” She advocates “wisely choosing between a wide array of different tools,” i.e., between bombs and propaganda. The *Charlie Hebdo* award is an instance of the latter.

The 145 PEN members have thrown a monkey wrench into the works, and this has provoked screams of outrage from affluent ex-left and ex-liberal circles. The protesting writers’ action deserves to be commended and, moreover, has a certain objective significance. It has been some time since a body of artists or intellectuals took a stand on such a question.

The political situation is beginning to break up. Certain people are taking a stand; others, including individuals who postured as “leftists” for decades, are being revealed for what they are, little more than mouthpieces for the establishment and the state apparatus. A political and moral polarization is taking place before our eyes.

The defense of the award to *Charlie Hebdo* by *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt is note-worthy, if not especially shocking. Pollitt, like

every other apologist for the French publication, chooses to ignore the political context, the rise in anti-Muslim racism and the legitimization of the neo-fascist National Front in France, the unending “war on terror” and imperialist interventions in the Middle East.

She blandly asserts that *Charlie Hebdo* “is a small satirical magazine run by aging sixties leftists” and that it “doesn’t mock Muslim people.” In fact, as a Perspective column in the WSWs noted in January, “*Charlie Hebdo* has facilitated the growth of a form of politicized anti-Muslim sentiment that bears a disturbing resemblance to the politicized anti-Semitism that emerged as a mass movement in France in the 1890s. In its use of crude and vulgar caricatures that purvey a sinister and stereotyped image of Muslims, *Charlie Hebdo* recalls the cheap racist publications that played a significant role in fostering the anti-Semitic agitation that swept France during the famous Dreyfus Affair.”

Pollitt, like a number of others angered by the protest of the 145 writers (the ex-liberal, pro-war Nick Cohen in Britain, for example), identifies with these “aging sixties leftists” who have turned sharply to the right and who view the impoverished Muslim population in France and the working class as a whole with contempt. They are birds of a feather.

She suggests that the “left” is “hopelessly confused about Islam: half the time we’re reminding each other that violent fundamentalists like the ones who committed the *Charlie Hebdo* murders are a tiny fraction of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims, who are ordinary, nonviolent people of good will, and the other half of the time we talk as if the murderers are out to redress real wrongs—and understandably so, even if the target is poorly chosen. Which is it?”

It is significant what Pollitt sneers at here, both the possibilities that the majority of Muslims might be “ordinary, nonviolent people of good will” and that there might be “real wrongs” to redress. In fact, terrorism *is* a politically bankrupt and reactionary response to “real wrongs,” the long history of colonial oppression in the Middle East and the continuing ruthless plundering of the region by the Great Powers, as well as the hostility and brutality of the French political establishment, right and “left” alike, toward the immigrant population.

If terrorism, in fact, is not a response to “real wrongs,” then what is it? There must be some “terroristic” quality inherent in the Muslim population or Islam as a religion. Is this what Pollitt believes? She should tell us more. Her demagogic references to “violent fundamentalists” and “murderers” echo the language of the right-wing gutter press.

Socialists fight the influence of religion on masses of people through the exposure of and opposition to the social misery that generates ideological backwardness, not through cynical and demeaning “satirical” attacks on those holding religious beliefs. Pollitt speaks as a representative of the self-satisfied American petty bourgeois, thoroughly indifferent to the conditions and feelings of the oppressed.

To be blunt, *Charlie Hebdo* was a filthy, racist provocation. Its emergence as an anti-Muslim sheet has something in common with the appearance of pro-war, pro-CIA films such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, David Ayer’s

Fury, Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* and others. The most corrupt elements are aligning themselves, in defense of colonial war and imperialist violence.

Pollitt’s defense of *Charlie Hebdo* is contemptible.

Her blindness and hypocrisy are almost overwhelming. Writing of *Charlie Hebdo*, she comments at one point, “Indeed, it is blasphemous. Is that not an honorable left-wing thing to be?” And later, she argues, “[D]on’t we need writing and artwork that pushes the boundary of what the acceptable is?”

Yet this is the same columnist who joined in the campaign to smear and discredit Julian Assange in 2010, in the face of bogus allegations of sexual assault aimed at shutting down WikiLeaks’ exposure of US imperialist and corporate criminality.

In the face of someone whose activity was genuinely “blasphemous” and “honorable” and genuinely “pushed the boundary of what the acceptable is,” and as a result faced persecution by the US government and its allies, by innumerable intelligence and police forces, by the most powerful media outlets, Pollitt sided with the persecutors. Where was her zeal for “free speech” then?

On the basis of the trumped-up allegations of sexual assault against Assange by Swedish authorities, Pollitt wrote that “when it comes to rape, the left still doesn’t get it.” Incredibly, the *Nation* columnist suggested that the WikiLeaks founder belonged in the category of “world-class celebrities” trying to get off scot free for their crimes. Her hostility to Assange jumped off the page.

Class instinct is infallible. The ex-left Pollitt participated in the campaign against Assange, who has legitimately earned the enmity of the global ruling elites. On the other hand, she champions *Charlie Hebdo*, which mocks the poor and powerless. Such is the logic of her evolution and that of an entire social layer.



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