

PEN Gala pays homage to Charlie Hebdo

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Tuesday's PEN literary gala at Manhattan's American Museum of Natural History awarded the organization's Freedom of Expression Courage Award to the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The event showed the alignment of broad layers of the intelligentsia, including its nominally "left" and liberal wings, with the turn by US and French imperialism towards war in the Middle East and attacks on democratic rights at home.

At the ceremony, two members of *Charlie Hebdo*'s editorial staff received a standing ovation for their "fearless" slanders of Muslims, who are routinely depicted in the French satirical journal with scraggly beards, hook noses, ill-fitting sandals and enormous turbans. The same day, the French National Assembly rammed through a sweeping, draconian law legalizing virtually limitless spying powers for French intelligence and police agencies (see: French National Assembly passes draconian electronic surveillance law).

The overwhelming support for the law within official French political circles—the bill passed 438-86—as well as the near total lack of public debate, was prepared by the chauvinist hysteria stoked up after two Islamist gunmen killed ten members of the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* in an attack in January. The new law, one of the most sweeping legal attacks on democratic rights in French postwar history, was passed under the hypocritical guise of upholding "free speech."

None of these burning political questions impinged upon the proceedings in New York City, or upon the well-heeled crowd of roughly 800 who paid \$1,250 per plate to attend the ceremony and rub elbows with various luminaries. The event was protected by a cordon of two dozen NYPD officers outside the building, some of whom were "heavily armed," according to the *New York Times*.

The security was redolent of the outsized police presence at the anti-Muslim provocation in Garland, Texas last Sunday, where participants were invited to compete for the best cartoon of the prophet Mohammed. In any event, only one single protester with a sign demonstrated outside the PEN gala, according to the

Times, despite the preparations by NYPD for an armed confrontation.

PEN's leadership and the various people who spoke at the gala were at pains to defend their decision to give the free speech award to *Charlie Hebdo* and to dismiss the courageous stand taken by around 200 writers, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz, and novelists Joyce Carol Oates and Russell Banks. The protest was precipitated when six writers who were previously scheduled to be table hosts at the event pulled out in April. They were since replaced, among others, by the well-known comic writers Art Spiegelman, whose graphic novel *Maus* dealt with the crimes of the Nazis and the Holocaust, Neil Gaiman, of *Sandman* and *American Gods* fame, and the feminist cartoonist Alison Bechdel.

The six writers issued an open letter condemning the award that declared, "[T]here is a critical difference between staunchly supporting expression that violates the acceptable, and enthusiastically rewarding such expression." It continued: "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."

Before the ceremony, PEN president Andrew Solomon wrote a letter to the organization's trustees defending their decision, which all but exposed the organization's political solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo*'s involvement in inciting anti-Muslim racism. Solidarizing himself with arguments typically associated with the extreme right, Solomon declared, "*Charlie Hebdo*'s intent was not to ostracize or insult Muslims, but rather to reject forcefully the efforts of a small minority"—that is, France's impoverished and oppressed Muslim population—"to place broad categories of speech off-limits, no matter the purpose, intent or import of the expression." He continued with the self-contradictory statement, "We do not believe that any of us must endorse the contents of *Charlie Hebdo*

's cartoons in order to affirm the principles for which they stand."

At the gala, after jokingly referring to the protest as the "whale in the room," ironically referencing the whale model hanging above the gala's room in the Natural History museum, Solomon declared, "The defense of people murdered for their exercise of free speech is at the heart of what PEN stands for. So is the unfettered expression of opposing viewpoints." The organizers then threw open the door to several supporters of *Charlie Hebdo* to absurdly portray the magazine as "anti-racist."

"There were no taboos when it came to exercising free speech," declared the Congolese writer Alain Mabankou. Dominique Sopo, head of the French group SOS Racisme, who made an apparently unannounced visit to defend the magazine, declaring provocatively that the protest was tantamount to "[killing] those who died a second time by raising a polemic like this," before calling on the audience to "remember that *Charlie Hebdo* stands for anti-hatred."

While presenting the award, PEN Executive director and accomplished human rights imperialist Suzanne Nossel smugly declared in reference to the protesting writers, "Tout est pardonné," a reference to the cover of the first *Charlie Hebdo* issue after the attacks, a comment that implicitly compares them to the *Charlie Hebdo* gunmen.

Novelist and former PEN president Salman Rushdie played one of the most strident and scandalous roles in attacking the principled stand of the writers in the lead-up to the event. On social media, Rushdie called the authors who had pulled out of the PEN gala "six pussies" and "fellow travelers" of "fanatical Islam, which is highly organised, well funded, and which seeks to terrify us all, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, into a cowed silence." He made no mention of the incomparably better organized and funded operations of American and world imperialism, which attempting to terrorize the entire world, including its own domestic population, into "cowed silence."

Rushdie continued, referencing the fatwa placed on him by Iran in the 1980s over his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, "What I would say to both [Peter Carey and Michael Ondaatje, two of the protesting authors] and the others is, I hope nobody ever comes after them."

In her response to Rushdie's screed, Francine Prose, one of the original six authors who withdrew from the gala, correctly drew the connection between Rushdie's use of the term "fellow traveler" and the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s, "when it was used to smear and

ruin the lives of many innocent people [one might add, writers and artists in particular] by suggesting a relation with the communists plotting to bring down our country."

A section of the literary supporters of *Charlie Hebdo* have attempted to deflect allegations of racism by comparing the magazine favorably to Pamela Geller, the head of the right-wing American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI) which organized Sunday's Prophet Mohammed cartoon contest in Garland. In an article titled "Why 'Charlie Hebdo' Is Not Pamela Geller" published Tuesday on the website of *Nation* magazine, Stuart Klawans declared it "egregious nonsense ... muddleheaded, and worse, to think of the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* as if they were the odious political operative Pamela Geller, whose most recent achievement is to have provoked a deadly attack in Texas."

It is not in the least troubling to Klawans that the writers have made no such comparison. Klawans, as so many have in his milieu, then declares without any evidence, as though it were patently obvious, that *Charlie Hebdo* is "proudly and actively anti-racist to the last woman and man." He rounds out his intellectual obscenity by declaring that the right to "enjoy honestly vulgar satire" such as can be found in *Charlie Hebdo* would have been supported by none other than Karl Marx!

The rank hypocrisy of this left-liberal milieu over the *Charlie Hebdo* affair is yet another expression of the movement of these layers ever further to the right. As demonstrated previously in their support for imperialist proxy wars in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, as well as their support for the austerity program of the Syriza government in Greece, these demoralized layers have responded to the crisis of capitalism by openly supporting the crimes of imperialism.



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