

'The blood on the streets is real. France is in terrible pain'

OFTEN, when I lived in Paris, I would steer my bike from our flat in the old furniture-makers' district of the Faubourg St-Antoine, where the French Revolution began, and across the Place de la Bastille to the Boulevard Richard Lenoir.

Although I did not know it, I would pass right by the offices of Charlie Hebdo, about seven minutes' ride from my home in the 11th Arrondissement, on my way up to Buttes-Chaumont Park.

Paris streets are kept clean through an elaborate waterworks system, fed by a network of underground canals. When the city's cleansing streams coursed alongside me on my rides, my heart would soar. But I always thought, too, of the blood that flowed along these cobbles, for this, after all, is the city that gave us the notion of revolution: the blood of sans-culottes and communards and later the soixante-huitards, the Parisians who fought street by street for their republic and its values.

Hard-won values draw backlash in the city that gave the world the notion of revolution, writes **Mark Gevisser**

How different is the blood that we have seen this week in the Charlie Hebdo massacre, spilt just off the Boulevard Richard Lenoir.

As I have lost myself, these last days, in Google Earth images of my one-time home, I have been thinking about how, like it or loathe it, the French satirical tradition of provocative anti-authoritarianism represented by Charlie Hebdo was successfully defended on these streets, too. The maxim attributed to Voltaire might as well be inscribed up there with *liberté, égalité, fraternité*: "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Complaint is as much part of French culture as satire, and demonstrations close down the city with alarming regularity: they are orderly and ritualised, and inevitably defended by phalanxes of fearsome riot police-

men. Whether on the streets of Paris or the pages of Charlie Hebdo, robust dissent is an institution in France; a rather toothless one, you realise, when you have come from a place like South Africa.

The enactments of the French

It was not so much an attack on freedom of speech as an al-Qaeda recruitment strategy

Revolution have become a ritual performance, but this week's massacre changed the game: the blood on the streets is real once again.

France is in terrible pain. This is not just because it is a civil place where you never hear a

gunshot and where even the dope dealers in our local square with their bling and their baggies would grunt "*Bonjour*" to me as I passed.

It is also because the terrorists hit where it hurt: critical culture is an edifice in France, representing the values of French society as much as the World Trade Center represented the grandiose capitalism of the US.

The cartoonists and the columnists who were killed are household names in a country where prominent intellectuals and artists are as much part of the language as common nouns.

Still, as I have been reading the commentary on the massacre, I find myself compelled by the arguments that it was not so much an attack on freedom of speech or Western civilisation or secular society as a recruitment strategy. As the Middle East scholar Juan Cole wrote this week: "This horrific murder

was not a pious protest against the defamation of a religious icon. It was an attempt to provoke European society into pogroms against French Muslims, at which point al-Qaeda recruitment would suddenly exhibit some successes instead of faltering in the face of lively Beur youth culture."

"Beur" is street slang for Arab, and Beur youth culture is more interested in hip-hop and rai than in the muezzin's chant or the gunfire of a Kalashnikov.

The alleged terrorists, the Kouachi brothers, were born in the 10th Arrondissement, just across the Place de la République from the site of the carnage they wrought.

Today, as I ride my imaginary bike across this threshold, I think about how people like me, the bobos, or "bourgeois bohemian" professionals, have pushed poor people out of inner-city *quartiers* and into the desolate concrete

canyons of the *banlieues*.

Beur youths might be secular, but they are increasingly disaffected, with education rates much lower and unemployment rates much higher than those of white French people. For a variety of social and historical reasons, French Arabs are the least devout Muslims in the Western world, but already, more Muslims from France have gone to fight in Syria than from any other Western country. The country is a potentially fertile recruitment ground. This is, in part, because of its uncompromising commitment to a secular orthodoxy.

Unlike Anglo society, which absorbs immigrants' religions and customs under the rubric of "multiculturalism", France puts immense stock in "*laïcité*": secular, republican culture. Any group identity within this is deemed "communalist", a threat to the republic's unity.

Even though this was de-

signed to bring equality into a society deeply divided by class and region, it has come to be felt as a form of racism, hence the bitter debates over whether French authorities are denying Muslim girls their own freedoms by refusing to let them wear the hijab to school.

My bike ride takes me into the 19th Arrondissement, traditionally the poorest part of Paris. The 19th is, in fact, a beacon of racial integration in this very segregated city: here Arabs share the streets and the hallways with Jews, Africans and Chinese; here, too, is where you will find the city's few racially mixed families.

This is where Chérif Kouachi, the younger of the two alleged assailants, lived, and where he was recruited into a network of jihadists known as the "Buttes-Chaumont" group — after the park where they met.

Things are not always com-

fortable around here: this is a neighbourhood where anti-Israel protesters went on the rampage and shouted "Death to Jews!" during the Gaza war last year. Still, Buttes-Chaumont Park is a special place. It is where large Muslim families, the women veiled, hold picnics next to gay men sunbathing in Speedos; where old Chinese women do their callisthenics while kids in yarmulkes kick a football about. It feels like Brooklyn's Prospect Park; a little Parisian enclave of multiculturalism.

Jihadists will meet on its benches and plot their terror. But they will gain little traction (and neither will Marine Le Pen's party of hate) if French society is able to recognise that Buttes-Chaumont — and what it represents — is the future.

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