Debating nationhood through images: the visual language of French political cartoons

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Introduction

Comparable to the metaphorical 'struggle over domains of belonging and apartness in Africa at the founding of the Mali empire' (Fernandez, 1991), contemporary France, consistent with the current populist wave in Western Europe and the US, is experiencing a crisis of identity. This identity crisis, ignited by slowing economic growth, rising unemployment and a continuing influx of immigrants, has sparked nationwide debate about Frenchness and citizenship, and is widely apparent in French media, particularly in the readily accessible visual language of the political cartoon. Within these illustrations, disputes about identity and social hierarchy are negotiated through the use of metaphor in the figurative 'argument of images'.

The media, notable for its power to inspire and shape public opinion, is a crucial tool for imagining a nation. Featured regularly in French media, the political cartoon is a central art form in France. By utilizing the conventions of nuanced satirical media, the political cartoon contributes to the on-going debate on French nationhood, acting as a site wherein hegemonic relations are contested and power subverted. Within this space, I posit the analysis of metaphor as a useful approach with which to understand the differing argumentative strategies pertaining to national identity within the current socio-political climate of France today. At the outset, the ubiquity of metaphor in these cartoons can be understood by their capacity to condense complex political situations or issues through the deployment of humour and satire, serving as both a tool of propaganda and as of entertainment. A keener look reveals that, through this argument of images and play of metaphor, metaphoric constructions of the world are being disputed through metonymic negotiations of the source domain, and conventions are challenged and established hierarchies contested.

The central premise of this paper, therefore, is to decode the visual rhetoric of satirical media in France today, particularly pertinent given the evidence for the

explosive power of cartoons witnessed in Europe in recent years, and their implication for concepts of nationhood and identity. And in this way, reveal the workings of the rhetoric of French identity, or 'Frenchness', as conceived primarily through the use of metaphor in French political cartoons.

By analysing the metaphorical imagery of press cartoons, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the trope constructs social hierarchies and challenges power relations, supporting or rejecting the authority of the metaphor-producer to create a world. I will examine conflicting representations of Frenchness through an 'argument of images' evident in the country's media today. The political cartoon can therefore be grasped as a stage for negotiating national and cultural identities, and metaphor as a powerful prop. This will further inform 'the role and status of a hybrid but highly visual form [of the political cartoon] within the culture of France' (Wygant, 1999), and its implications for the identity-making process in France today.

Discussion

Comprised of condensed meaning, metaphors are built upon dense layers of intertextuality. In political cartoons, the content of metaphorical images often references popular culture, as a kind of 'visual shorthand' (Connors, 2007), connecting the reader with the cartoonist, as well as to the images depicted, through the deployment of a current, accessible vernacular. This cultivation of intimacy is further expounded by the nature of metaphor, functioning as 'an instrument of consensus and thus community' (Fernandez, 1991). This condensing of a social or political issue into an iconic representation allows for potentially greater persuasive power and influence through visual rhetoric (Moss, 2007). Although acceptance of a metaphor may mean acceptance of the authority of its producer, this is subject to manipulation as the metaphoric construction of the world can be disputed through metonymic negotiations of the source domain. Through this argument of images and play of metaphor, conventions may be challenged and established hierarchies contested (Fernandez, 1991).

(i) *Decoding the Image*

Coinciding with a pan-European and American rise in nationalism, and an ever-expanding cultural and economic globalisation, a desire to ascertain a national sense of self has been reinvigorated in France and is abundantly clear in its presidential campaigns for the recent elections. With the first round of the French presidential elections held in April 2017, candidates' campaigns depicted candidates' promises to address unemployment, which has risen since 2008 from 7.1% to almost 10%, and economic growth, which has slowed to 0.2% of GDP (tradingeconomics.com). Parties such as far-right Front National (FN), in particular, displayed a heavy reliance on nationalist and nativist rhetoric to appeal to the electorate by offering nationalism as a solution to their frustrations, promising 'a return to France's glory days' (edition.cnn.com, 2016).

These recent presidential elections in France provided a valuable opportunity to investigate constructions of a national imaginary, as, coinciding with these elections, a barrage of images representing Frenchness became apparent in verbal and visual political discourse. These election cartoons, in particular, due to their accessibility and wide distribution, are rich sources of coded information, revealing differing conceptions of national identity, in the context of the current political climate in France.

In order to understand the metaphorical content of a cartoon and its productive potential, I identified its source and target domains, as well as the metonymic entailments alluded to in the image. In this way, I hope to demonstrate how the source domain of a chosen metaphor relates to its target domain, and to show how the metaphor, and its corresponding metonymic extension through entailments, correlates to socio-political experience in France today. The selection was made using Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) four-themed framework, referring to content relating to political commonplaces (that is, tying the campaign to current events), personal character traits, situational themes, and literary/cultural allusions. The latter is defined as 'any fictive or mythical character, any narrative form, whether drawn from legend, folklore, literature, or the electronic media' (Connors, 2007).

Immigration is an increasingly contentious issue often at the centre of these debates. Traditional mechanisms of integration, such as the public school system, social benefits and the army (although historically successful for the most part), are

currently seen to be struggling under the increased pressure from the rise in immigration (Safran, 1991). The growing presence of Maghrebis on already strained systems, and the increased competition for schools, housing and welfare, has sparked resentment among indigenous French working classes, leading many to reconsider who is and who is not French. It would seem that the difficulty in the assimilation of this influx of immigrants is due to their cultural heterogeneity as well as their number, and their arrival has sparked a concern about the dilution of traditional French culture with supposedly conflicting Islamic values. This deculturalisation is further expounded by the perceived engulfing common Western culture, advanced by the EU.

I will look now at various constructions of the French citizen, as well as the contentious issue of Islamic assimilation, through the imagery of traditionally left-wing *Le Monde's* illustrator Plantu. The technique, through metaphoric construction, of manufacturing authenticity and nation-building, as well as its role in the *Je Suis Charlie* campaign, will be explored here. During this time, too, the nationalist rhetoric of FN loomed large in this discourse, and so will be analysed in this discussion.

(ii) *Plantu's 'Marianne'*

The recent presidential elections in France provided a valuable opportunity to investigate constructions of a national imaginary, as a barrage of images representing Frenchness was apparent in visual and verbal political discourse.

The election cartoons, in particular, as readily accessible and widely distributed media, are rich sources of coded information. Attempts to rouse national sentiment is evident in mediated national identity discourse in France today, wherein can be seen a collective need to perform the nation and redefine national identity, most notably in the nativist rhetoric of Le Pen and Le Front National. 'Nation-building' is one such process of generating national sentiment, which includes policies that encourage affective connection to one's nation above ethnic and regional identities. In countries with higher levels of ethnic diversity, '"nation-building" has been proposed as a mechanism for integration and conflict reduction' (Masella, 2013). Rhetoric to this effect is apparent in much political discourse, and is deployed to create both inclusive and exclusive definitions of French citizenship. As well as in the rhetoric of FN, this is evident in the recurring *Marianne* figure in Plantu's illustrations, depicted as the French

electorate as well as a *Je Suis Charlie* campaigner, as a symbol of France and of liberty, below.

6 February 2017: Plantu for Le Monde.
'I'm the most anti-system!'

Jean Plantureux, under the professional name Plantu, has been a regular contributing artist to *Le Monde* since 1972. Frequently featured in his artwork is the Marianne character, as a metaphorical construct of the French electorate, whose actions and reactions seem particularly pertinent in the context of the recent French election campaign. Along with the recurring Marianne in Plantu's cartoons, the figure of a small mouse can often be seen, representing the publication's reader as well as the normative national standard, against the seemingly absurd events and political characters in French public life. In the image above, both Marianne and Mouse are depicted, confused by the identical assertions of the candidates, Mélénchon, Le Pen, Macron, Fillon and Hamon, who each proclaim themselves to be the best choice to break from the establishment. Each candidate tries to appeal to the electorate, who presumably upholds the revolutionary ideals associated with Marianne, by addressing the undercurrent of dissatisfaction felt among the French populace of the status quo.

The depiction of the contemporary French electorate as Marianne, as well as the Revolution imagery in the *Je Suis Charlie* solidarity cartoon, to be discussed, frame the growing preoccupation with what it means to be French as a renewal of an old debate about national identity and nation-building. Although, during the *ancien régime*, Frenchness was acquired ascriptively from Gallo-Roman ancestry, the Revolution effected a change in the acquisition of French identity, which could now be derived from 'a voluntary commitment to common political values and a common fate' (Safran, 1991). Concepts of post-French Revolution nationalism and nation-building are symbolised in Renan's 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', wherein the historian proposes that a nation is a sentiment, based on both 'a common possession of a rich inheritance of memories…and a common consent, a desire to live together' (ibid.). Resulting from the upheaval of the Revolution, considerable importance was therefore placed upon the construction of a collective memory, which sought a fusion of the various assortments of group identities, united under one national culture. Recalling the Revolution and Republican values through imagery is commonplace during the current presidential election campaigns in French media. In this way, the nation's collective memory is stirred by referring to previous regimes, a common method of constructing an 'authentic' national identity and cultivating national imagination.

Alongside these images in contemporary French media, the nationalist rhetoric of le Front National provides additional context. Through the mediated political discourse of FN, an attempt to create an authentic national identity through a sense of timelessness and embodiment is made by the deployment of 'regimes of authenticity'. Much like the romanticisation of the rural Singaporean 'heartlander' (Chong, 2011), the non-elite French citizen is a frequently recurring image, and is seen to embody traditional French values and ethnicity. Like the 'heartlander heroes' who struggle against state institutions and structures, depictions of 'authentic' and 'virtuous' rural French can be perceived as 'metaphors for rebirth, self-awakening and self-purification for a nation of consumers' (ibid.). Depictions of the country's pastoral practices can therefore be understood as metaphors for life and 'the formation of the self' (ibid.).

Here, authenticity is manufactured by placing these 'heartlanders' in contrast to the elite Parisians and to the politics of globalisation. In this way, the party's populist rhetoric is arguably contributing to the growing divide in France between urbanites

and rural dwellers. Ideas of 'authentic Frenchness' are conflated with pastoral scenes, a signifier of unpretentiousness and traditional French values and morality, and are appropriated into FN's image. Far from what Le Pen describes as the 'brouhaha' of Paris, the rural French belong to the real France, contrasted against a dismissive urban elite. This 'real France', *La France Profonde* (Deepest France) or 'Peripheral France', account for up to 60% of the French population (Astier, 2014), and it is on the fears of this group that FN capitalises. Conceivably a nationalist FN heartland, Le Pen contested the usage of the term *La France Profonde*, preferring instead 'to think of it as deeply patriotic' (Willsher, 2016). Le Pen toured this 'forgotten France' of the rural areas and small towns suffering social deprivation ('Tour des France des Oublies'), describing the sacrifice of the 'small people' to multinationals and globalisation (Astier, 2014), whilst valorising the farmer and the worker as the embodiment of morality and integrity, (Nowak and Branford, 2017). Perhaps not unexpectedly, omitted from this anti-EU, 'France for the French' discourse is the significant funding the region receives from the European Agricultural Fund as well as any reference to the relative scarcity of immigrants in the region (Willsher, 2016).

Notwithstanding this omission, related party rhetoric may be interpreted as attempts to decry a 'deculturalisation', alluding to trends of Westernisation and a departure from a 'traditional' French way of life, with the intention of encouraging a sense of loss and disorientation (Chong 2011). Under the slogan 'In the name of the people' ('Au nom du peuple'), Le Pen has claimed during her campaign that the French have been 'dispossessed of their patriotism', with supporters heard to shout 'This is our country!' ('On est chez nous!') (Nossiter 2017). Posing the question 'Will our children live in a country that is still French and democratic?' the party's rhetoric is emphatically nationalistic. Nationalist rhetoric ascertains that the national move towards globalisation, industrialism and urbanisation 'undermined the traditional authority structures and social anchors of French national identity: the peasantry, the family, and the church' (Safran 1991). FN discourse locates this nostalgic imagery and metaphor conjuring rural life and family alongside the depiction of a France that is modern, secular and economically strong, arguably conflating it with the more favourable outcomes of globalisation. By fostering loyalty through nostalgia, these images can be powerful persuasive tools at the disposal of political parties.

The symbol of a blue rose has been used by FN during the presidential campaign to unite the French electorate by using the flower emblem of the Socialists and the colour of the politically right, but also, as party officials have stated, to denote the current possibility of realising the impossible. Referring to the recent unforeseen successes of nationalism, this poetic metaphor, framed as a chance occurrence in nature rather than a feat of genetic engineering, suggests that the current surge in nationalist and nativist discourse is a naturally, albeit unusually, occurring, unpredictable event in nature, one outside of human control. With this investigation into the rhetorical devices of identity and nation-building discourse, perhaps the metonymic repudiations of this supposed naturalness may be discovered, revealing the true socio-political roots of FN's rose.

Constructing a national identity that combines the aforementioned nostalgia with the concept of a progressive, modern France, also creates grounds for the exclusion of non-European immigrants in particular who do not share either traditional French values and memory or its modern values of individual liberty and secularism. Furthermore, metaphors depicting the above-described rural 'heartlander' as 'true' French in ascriptive views of national identity argue metonymically against the inclusion of non-nationals without needing to state explicitly this sentiment. In this way, nationalist parties 'fallaciously transfer modes of reasoning to more problematic arenas' of government policy (Sahlane, 2013), such as those that would normally be categorised xenophobic, thereby naturalising the exclusion of immigrants from concepts of nationhood. The conclusions drawn from this metaphoric reasoning can enable the perpetration and naturalisation of xenophobia and justify ethnic discrimination. However, ostensibly, the Front National disputes the legitimacy of the inclusion of Islam into French identity more resolutely on the basis of the perceived incompatibility between French and Muslim values. These grounds for exclusion, then, are based on the professed belief in the latter's inability or reluctance to assimilate into French secular society, rather than on the grounds of FN's ascriptive view of national identity, perhaps so as not to reaffirm the connection with the previous xenophobic incarnation of Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN. The inclusion of Islamic identity into French nationhood is therefore doubly negated.

(iii) *Challenges of Islamic assimilation into French national identity*

As we have seen, by organising our understanding of an argument, the metaphor informs 'how we will experience and *carry on* rational argument' (Fernandez, 1991). More than aiding in the understanding of a complex problem, then, the metaphor, by way of entailments, offers previously unconsidered dimensions to an issue, drawn from the source domain, thereby governing reasoning (ibid.). The potential power of a metaphor lies in its ability, through its metonymic entailments, to inform our understanding of a target domain by transferring meaning from the source domain.

The attacks at the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* are a particularly pertinent example of metonymic reasoning. A strong proponent of the political cartoon, *Charlie Hebdo*, along with *Le Canard Enchaîné*, form part of 'a distinctly French blend of journalism, politics, satire, art and unrepentant provocation known as the *Journaux irresponsables*, or irresponsible press' (Philips, 2015). Although historically choosing its targets from diverse sections of French life, religion has increasingly become the preferred subject of satire for *Hebdo*, frequently stoking controversy and debate about freedom of expression and religious tolerance. The attacks at the Hebdo office by extremists as a response to the publication of cartoons depicting Muhammad, appear as a challenge to hegemonic secular France and its corresponding definition of national identity. French media are thereby an assertion of French cultural control, which was metonymically opposed in the violent attacks. Conversely, the vilification of Muslim immigrants is supported in nationalist rhetoric in part by a synecdochic construction of Islam. By conflating isolated fundamentalist acts of terrorism with the entire Muslim population, and through its transmission by mass media, a reductionist argument for ethnic discrimination takes hold in public discourse. This synecdochic formulation can therefore be deemed politically explosive, as it may, as Friedrich asserts, 'suggest, trigger, or catalyse feelings that…together with legitimating ideologies, can change and even revolutionise or decimate the (political) economy' (Friedrich, 1989).

Similar to a recent investigation (Sahlane, 2013) into the controversy surrounding the Danish cartoons of Muhammad, a 'strategic manoeuvring' of political metaphor may be identified in disputes about *Charlie Hebdo* in Western media. This strategic manoeuvring, he argues, is accomplished by the framing of the debate as a

'conflict between the advocates of 'free speech' and 'religious sensitivity'' (ibid.). By manipulating metaphor in this way, the discussion focuses on Islamic fundamentalism, largely ignoring a growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Western Europe (Hussain, 2007; Sahlane, 2013). Giving due consideration to the extent to which the cartoons resonated with, and were appropriated by, an Islamophobic ethos in Western cultures is important in this study. Similarly, the potential misappropriation of the subsequent *Je Suis Charlie* counter-terrorist movement to bolster anti-Islam discourse is an important consideration. A rising anti-Muslim sentiment and nativism trend has been further explored in a recent Danish study, which has highlighted the role of media 'in popularizing a neo-racist discourse that positions the Muslim identity as a direct negation of 'Danishnes' (Muller et al., 2007). This apparent exclusion of the Islamic identity from dominant concepts of Danishness elicits a more nuanced reading of the Danish and French Muhammad cartoons, one that possibly exposes an undercurrent of 'Islamophobia' or anti-Muslim discourse in the two countries.

The supposed 'solidarity' cartoons of the *Je Suis Charlie* campaign that arose in the wake of the Hebdo attacks are an abundant source of metaphorical constructions of national identity. These have been distributed mostly via social media platforms, and will be analysed as conceptions of French identity are here profuse. As seen in the image on screen, these illustrations also use the aforementioned techniques of nostalgic imagery for nation-building. In this recreation of Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People', Liberty (or Marianne) is seen waving the tricolour with its pencil flagpole, drawing an unambiguous comparison between freedom of speech and French values. Her vibrant red Phrygian cap, symbolising liberty, serves to further emphasise this. In her other hand, the pencil replaces a musket, metaphorically framing the medium of the cartoon as a weapon in the defence of freedom. The dove, symbol of peace, too, carries a pencil in place of an olive branch, its newspaper wings further portraying the publication as an instrument of peace, as well, perhaps, as referencing the slang term for newspapers, *canard* [duck]. Of note, too, is Plantu's Mouse, here depicted brandishing the pencil in support of this new revolution, anticipating the reader's response.
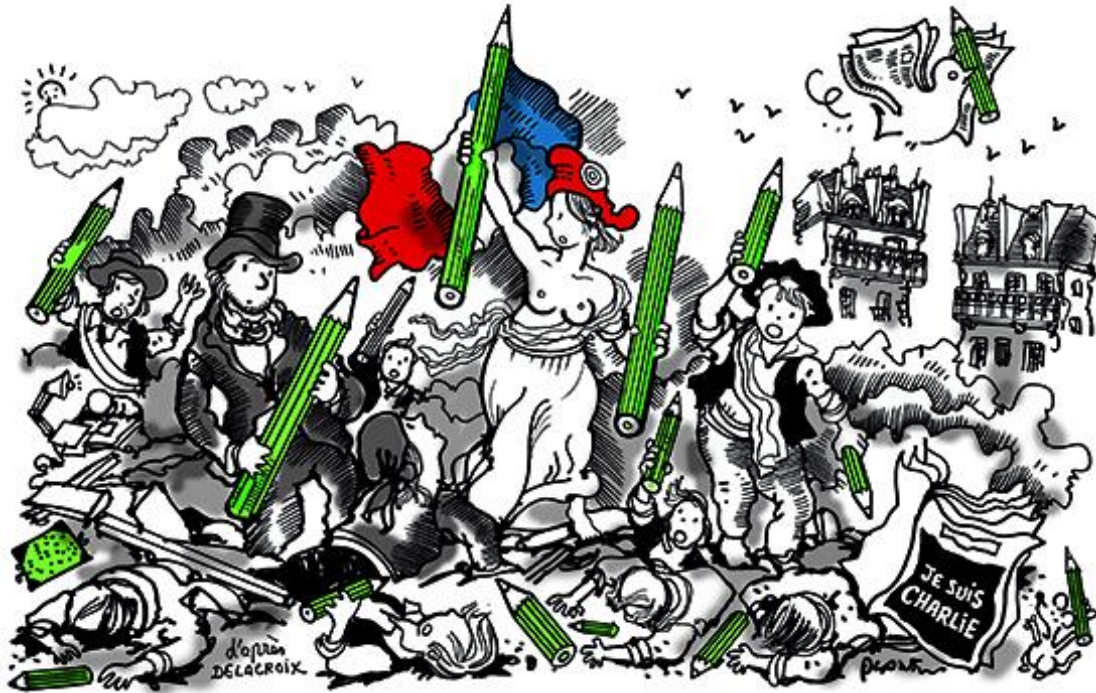
7 Jan. 2017: 'Charlie Hebdo: Il y a deux ans' ['Charlie Hebdo: Two years ago'].
Originally published in Le Monde and in L'Express, January 2015.

However, framing a campaign for freedom of speech as a French Revolution, in this context, not only metonymically depicts Islamic fundamentalism as the oppressor of the French people, it may also be interpreted as a rejection of moderate Islamic values generally. Though often portrayed bare-breasted, Marianne is in stark contrast to the veiled bodies of Muslim women and so here may signify the exclusion of Islamic values from conceptions of French identity, whilst reaffirming Republican ideals. In this way, this cartoon, while seeking to unify and bolster the nation against terrorism, may be interpreted as supporting the argument for the incompatibility of Islam with French nationhood.

Conclusion

From the pre-revolution cartoons of 1789 mocking French royalty, the cartoon or comic is of considerable import in French political and cultural life. Similar to the carnivalesque, as observed by Rabelais, the power of the political cartoon lies in its ability to 'subvert the social order through acts of parody, poking vulgar fun at the mystique of political rulers and stirring rebellion in their audiences' (Hall et al., 2016).

The counter-narratives of the political cartoon act as 'instruments of resistance that undermine, demythologise and demystify governmental political mythologies and narratives' (Eko, 2007). In this way, they resist and subvert hegemonic ideologies, stimulate debate about political decisions, and challenge dominant configurations of the 'Other'. The political cartoon can be interpreted, then, as a kind of liminal space, a site wherein power relations can be contested. Recalling Goffman's conception of humorous performance, the artist is given license to apparently break rules without breaking them (Goffman, 1959). It is also a particularly effective and 'popular communication tool that critically engages popular sentiment and political ideologies' (Purcell et al., 2010).

As we have seen, these struggles over hierarchy are played out in the political cartoon as metonymic reorderings of social order (Fernandez, 1991). The deployment of power is thereby interpreted and resisted in constructions of identity and place in these political ephemera. Although this construction of identities is central to the human condition (Fernandez, 1986), the current socio-political climate in France has placed this as a particularly pertinent issue of contention. Arguing metonymically within an authoritative metaphor, then, is a powerful tool with which to imagine and reconceptualise perceptions of identity. By envisioning new creative metaphors and through new metonymic reimaginings, the ways of understanding our experience can be reconfigured, new meaning given to our pasts, to our concepts of self and to our belief systems. Like Sundiata in ancient Mali, by 'weaving new metonymies into and so subverting his adversary Soumaoro's metaphoric domains of self-assertion', thereby reorganizing his society (Fernandez, 1991), national imaginaries may be enacted and disputed. Situated within a particularly sensitive time in French history, careful consideration is required, I maintain, of the ways in which manufacturing authenticity and the metaphorical negotiations of French identity are accomplished in France today.

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