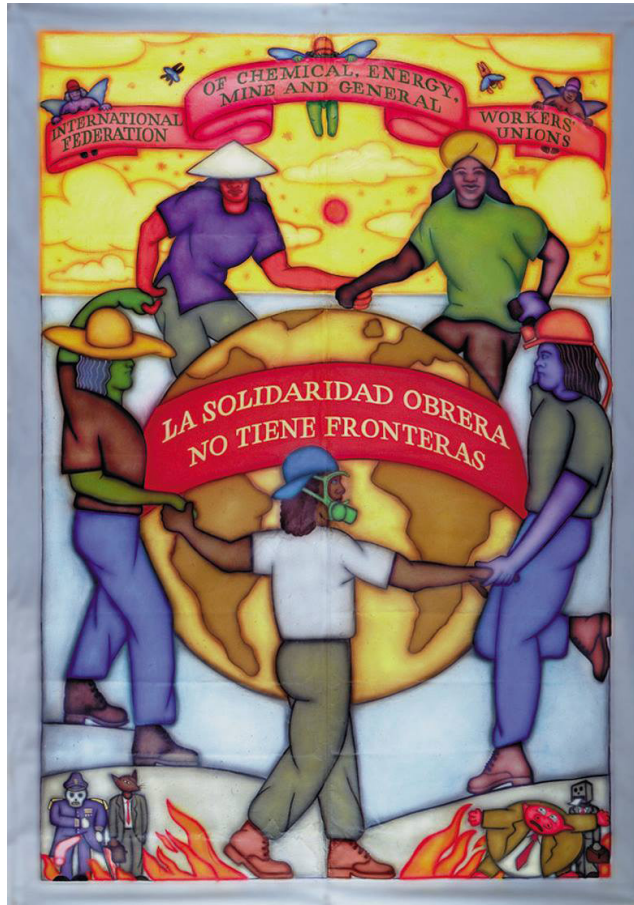


**CARTOONS, CARICATURES AND THE MYTH OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM**  
COMMENTARY ON CENSORSHIP AND ISLAMIC ANGER  
2005



# Cartoons, Caricatures and the Myth of Artistic Freedom

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*This was written following international unrest in September 2005, after the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published 12 editorial cartoons most of which depicted Muhammad. Such images are considered blasphemous by many followers of Islam.*

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MOST WORKING PEOPLE understand the inherent power of the cartoon – it’s one of the ways we can directly respond to injustice and exploitation at the workplace. Just fill in the balloon coming out of the boss’ mouth. Make the words as stupid as possible – its usually not a stretch. We diminish the authority of our overseers when we ridicule their arbitrary whims, greed and ignorance.

Published cartoonists do essentially the same thing, but frequently directed at the symbols of state power. Given the stumbling misspeaks of George Bush and the sleazy deceptions of his spokes-zombies, or their overseas counterparts, these determined artists face a daunting task. Yet they bravely forge ahead – attempting to reach and influence a large viewing public.

But can cartoonists, either here or abroad, mobilize millions of people or incite the destruction of foreign embassies? Do they wield such awesome power?

The mainstream media has presented an avalanche of muddled commentary and deliberate misinformation about the recent cartoon protests. Artists and activists need to take a critical look at these ongoing events and ask themselves: Is this really a confrontation between the insensitive-but-free-expression-loving artists versus the injured-but-misguided-conservative Muslims marching in lockstep to religious fundamentalists? Or, is there more to this than meets the eye?

## Something Rotten

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” — William Shakespeare, (Hamlet - I, iv, 90)

Western commentators were downright indignant at the angry response to the anti-Islam cartoons published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten. For it’s part, the paper invoked the mantle of freedom of the press - other European publications quickly proffered their solidarity by also printing the images.

All the sanctimonious talk of democratic rights is somewhat difficult to swallow. Racism and xenophobia are nothing new to Jyllands-Posten - the journal was openly supportive of Italian Fascism and ambivalent towards Nazism. Their ire is now directed at immigrant workers.

Jyllands-Posten enjoys widespread popularity in Denmark. The Danish ruling elite has fostered deep divisions in its society by promoting vicious anti-immigrant policies. Recently it became illegal for native-born Danes to marry “foreigners” until age 24. There is a growing ultra-rightist movement led by the Danish People’s Party.

Artists often perceive European governments as more enlightened than Washington, but anti-war and pacifist

posturing by these countries is just a mask for their own competing economic interests. Their refined cultures are based on bloody conquest and exploitation, epitomized by museums bursting with the plundered art of Asia and Africa.

Despite its patina of civility, Denmark is no different from other imperialist countries that reap enormous corporate profits from racism and imperialism.

### **Behind the Protests**

The Boston Tea Party was not about tea, the civil-rights sit-ins were not about Woolworth's hamburgers and the cartoon protests are not about cartoons.

The underlying causes of this social explosion are foreign occupation of Arab lands, western support to reactionary Mid-East regimes, lack of education, social services and healthcare and the degradation of millions of people. Protests are fueled by the knowledge that the developed nations of the world possess enormous wealth – vast riches that come, in good part, from the exploitation of the people and natural resources of Africa and the Middle East.

The mass mobilizations are part of a global struggle for human rights. Some of the largest demonstrations have occurred in Iran and Syria - countries that face the imminent threat of economic sanctions or US military action. Syrians and Iranians need only look across their borders to observe the blessings of democracy: over a million deaths of their Iraqi neighbors and the destruction of that once prosperous nation.

At the heart of the public outcry is opposition to the US occupation of Iraq – a perspective shared by the great majority of the world's population, including the American people. Anti-war sentiment in the US is greater than at any time in recent history. Opposition to the war is so great that a Zogby International/Le Moyne College poll recently found that only 23 per cent of US troops believed that the occupation should continue. 72 per cent said that the US should either pull out immediately or withdraw within 12 months.

The arrogant policies of the US government continue to unite the world's working people as never before – there is a deepening global resistance to the occupation. The banners may be in different languages, but they all say the same thing: US Out of Iraq.

### **Anti-Arab Campaign**

In an attempt to bolster the diminishing support for their war, the Bush administration has consistently promoted anti-Arab sentiment. Not to be outdone by Republicans, liberal Democrats like Charles Schumer have led the opposition to granting port operation contracts to Dubai Port World (DPW) of the United Arab Emirates (UAE,) a thinly veiled, racist scare campaign.

And, just when you think that no one could get any lower, there is always a Clinton that comes along.

Senator Hillary Clinton has moved to the right of Bush in pandering to backward anti-Arab sentiments. The UAE had previously donated over a million dollars of support to Bill Clinton. The Clintons had returned the favor by providing their stamp of approval for a regime that keeps the vast majority of its people in virtual servitude - denied any form of citizenship or basic human rights. In her quest for personal advancement and to prove her loyalty to the oil corporations, Hillary Clinton has turned on her former UAE friends. But don't worry – it will all be forgotten later on.

Along with the politicians, key religious leaders in the US have fueled the international anti-Muslim campaign. Reverend Franklin Graham — heir to the mantle of Billy Graham and spiritual advisor to President Bush -- publicly asserted, "The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different God, and I believe a very evil and a very wicked religion." Reverend Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, called Prophet Mohammed "a demon-possessed pedophile."

These types of remarks have been echoed throughout Europe. Is it any wonder that anti-Islamic images are widespread?

### **The Growth of Religious Fundamentalism**

At the heart of the racist campaign is the stereotyping of all Arabs as religious zealots. In reality, it is the policies of the US and other occupying forces, particularly Israel, that are the key factor in fostering the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.

The recent election victory of Hamas has evoked condemnation from Washington and other western powers. But it was Israel, after the 1967 occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, that initiated and supported Hamas - promoted as an opposition current to the then secular and militant Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO.) Israel encouraged the growth of the Islamic right, fostering political and military confrontations between the religious and secular tendencies.

Similarly, the US promoted the right-wing Mujahideen in opposition to the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. That support brought Osama bin Laden and like-minded figures to prominence, and the US turned a blind eye to the formation of Al Qaeda and similar groups in the late 1980s.

By engaging in consistent attacks on secular, progressive movements and trade unions, the US and Israel have created a political framework in which those who wish to oppose the occupations have no choice but to join with reactionary religious organizations. Islamic fundamentalism and western imperialism are united in their opposition to Arab and Palestinian nationalism and secularism.

While they have occasional squabbles, generally the Bushes, Sharons and bin Ladens of the world are delighted to do business together and get along quite well.

### **Anti-Semitic Caricatures**

In the current falling-out, Democratic and Republican politicians have done a lot of finger pointing about an anti-Semitic component of the protests. While both Arabs and Jews are Semitic peoples, anti-Semitism is generally used as a term for anti-Jewish. This ideology should be opposed in all its forms - but you don't have to travel halfway around the globe to find a much greater threat to the Jewish people.

The US has a real, if quiescent, history of anti-Semitism. After all, the fortunes of such leading families as the Bushes and Kennedy's were made in large part due to their business dealings with the Nazis. Companies like IBM provided the machinery to implement the extermination of European Jewry. The slurs by Richard Nixon, recorded in his White House tapes, reveal the anti-Jewish sentiment that lies just below the surface of polite society. Anti-Semitism is an ideology that the ruling powers are quite prepared to resurrect when it suits their purposes - Kissinger or Lieberman notwithstanding.

Anti-Jewish and anti-Arab ideologies go hand in hand, and the mainstream media has facilitated such doctrine by creating an enormous caricature of the Arab people. Artists and entertainers are put to work creating stereotypes in the media - images of crazed Arab terrorists being gunned down in their dozens by steroid soaked creeps like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The stereotyped visual portrayals of Arabs are mirror images of the caricatures of Jews from an earlier time: hook-nosed, stubble bearded, thick-lipped, shiftless, ugly, dirty and evil. Anti-Semitism is truly anti-Semitism.

An accurate portrait of Arabs would reveal a people that made some the greatest contributions to the development of art, agriculture, literature, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and science in human history. The creation of the Arab empire provided a huge impetus to world development. The depiction of Islamic culture as barbaric and inferior to western enlightenment is a cruel slur that flies in the face of history.

### **Democratic Rights**

One of the more remarkable aspects of the current controversy is the counter-posing of western democracy to a conservative and religious culture.

Even as Bush and Congress are giving lip-service to free expression, they are implementing far-reaching attacks on democratic rights through massive illegal domestic spying operations. It seems particularly obscene for US politicians to lecture the world about democracy while power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of an erratically-behaving, imperial, graft-ridden, fundamentalist executive branch of government.

"Liberty" is an empty phrase in the mouths of those who have promoted the use of torture at the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. "Freedom" is a meaningless term when uttered by supporters of such horrendous regimes as the Shah of Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, Papa Doc Duvalier, Saddam Hussein and many other brutal dictatorships.

Liberal faith in constitutional democracy is belied by the enormous struggles of the civil rights and women's movements, free-speech fights and labor battles. Unfortunately, blind belief in the law has led some activists to mistakenly call for restrictions on right-wing speech. European governments have already used the cartoon incident as an excuse to further erode free expression by attempting to expand bans on so-called hate speech. In the long run however, these restrictions will be used, not to curtail the extreme right, but against progressive forces.

Divine intervention or legislative action does not create democratic rights and free artistic expression. Free expression, to the extent it exists, is the product of enormous human struggle. The right to assemble in public or organize unions was never granted – it was conquered. We can only expand democratic rights by exercising them – an ongoing process that takes place each day in every country of the world.

### **The Myth of Artistic Freedom**

Workers and artists in the US have waged historic struggles to overcome censorship and repression. But a lack of overt censorship is not the same as free expression. In this country, artists are muzzled by denying them access to the media or forcing them into self-censorship. Those who have fundamental criticisms of society are marginalized and vilified.

Visual artists are free to create work that promotes progressive struggle, or even revolution – as long as it stays safely in the gallery for purchase by wealthy buyers. Artists who create work that is actually a weapon in the hands of workers, however, simply cease to exist. Like an invisible force-field, you may approach and stick your finger into the class struggle – but cross the line and you disappear – removed from art magazines, galleries and museums.

The smug, self-proclaimed “radical” radio stations, alternative press and progressive electronic media are also exclusionary. And the bureaucratic jackals that pose as labor leaders are the most craven of all – denying union members access to any art that expresses their aspirations for a democratic, militant workers movement.

Occasionally, a cartoonist like Tom Tomorrow is allowed – in order to provide evidence of a free society. But don't be expecting Gary Huck and Mike Konopaki to be replacing Heathcliff any time soon. For every Michael Moore, there are thousands of talented artists who are prevented from practicing their craft.

Far from being free, artists are forced into producing an ever more mind-numbing mass culture of cop shows, amusement-park theater and formulaic music. The huge art and entertainment business is structured to prevent challenging and penetrating work from emerging. Film artists must degrade themselves by prancing down red carpets like trained monkeys. Visual artists must hang vacuous art on the walls of galleries and fawn over their wealthy patrons. Cartoon art is epitomized by Charley Brown.

The majority of artists who are lucky enough to be employed are used to create advertising that sells drugs, wars, racism and blind obedience to authority.

There have been, and currently are, serious threats directed against artists. Federal authorities pose the greatest danger, as the frame-up of Steve Kurz and the Critical Art Ensemble has indicated. Religious zealots have threatened other artists, like Salmon Rushdie and Christoffer Zieler, the racist cartoonist. Such threats, regardless of their source or target, must be exposed, protested and defeated. Artistic expression and free speech must be defended absolutely and without qualification - there is nothing to fear from images or words.

### **International Solidarity**

The demonstrations taking place throughout the Muslim world do not lend themselves to simplistic analysis. There are conflicting currents to be sure: repressive Arab regimes attempting to deflect anger away from themselves, right-wing fundamentalists seeking to expand their influence, and competing capitalist governments with their own separate economic agendas. But a key element in these mobilizations is the attempt by millions of Muslims to capitalize on a small political opening to advance their struggle for social and economic justice.

In most countries of the Middle East, public demonstrations are rarely allowed. Officially sanctioned protests against the Danish cartoons allow the working people of these countries to take advantage of a political opportunity that rarely exists. Massive street actions open the possibility to expand the political space and democratic rights of working people – a concrete advance for free expression.

Most importantly of all – these demonstrations provide an opportunity to build the international movement in opposition to the occupation of Iraq – the central political question that faces the working class. Millions of

people, previously disenfranchised, can join in demanding an end to the war. Such unity could help to save the lives of our brothers and sisters in uniform, as well as countless Iraqi civilians. An end to the occupation of Iraq will be an enormous victory for world peace and justice.

There is a daily battle for artists to develop genuine meaning in our work. We can use our creative talents to expose and educate about the divide-and-conquer campaigns of the imperial powers and to support the struggle to extend artistic and working-class freedom of expression - in whatever form it may take.

We must not let the attempt to caricature a people go unanswered. We need to reject the racism (and mediocrity) of Christoffer Zieler and Jyllands-Posten, even as we defend their, and our, civil liberties.

Cartoonists have frequently played an important role in the struggle for artistic freedom, since many of them view their mission as being critical of existing political and social conditions. While this posture is generally frowned upon by the authorities, it is an example that many other visual artists should consider following.

Over a billion Muslims in the world are struggling for basic human rights. These mobilizations provide an opening to organize a secular and democratic opposition to the imperial powers. Artists and activists have nothing to fear, and much to gain, by extending solidarity to such initiatives.