

Interview with
François Héran

LETTRE AUX PROFESSEURS SUR LA LIBERTÉ D'EXPRESSION

This interview was carried out by AOC
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*François Héran, LETTRE AUX PROFESSEURS SUR LA LIBERTÉ
D'EXPRESSION
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What is the book's point of departure?

The book's point of departure is the assassination of Samuel Paty and the discourse that ensued. I was struck at the time by the extent to which discrimination, and inequality generally, were underestimated and ignored. Another oversight was the complete absence of empirical facts or surveys in the discourse of the sloganeers who seized center stage, proclaiming themselves the guardians of laïcité and the French Republic. In the days following Paty's assassination, we ought to have talked about jihadism, about radicalization, about Abdoullakh Anzorov's trajectory. We ought to have focused on the teacher's intentions, and asked ourselves what he was addressing in his class on Moral and Civic Education (EMC). Instead, we made him a martyr, not so much to freedom of expression—which he indubitably is—but rather a martyr to an absolutist notion of freedom of expression, which I think is far more questionable. I therefore strove to understand why some among us had 'shifted the scene of the crime,' as it were.

How did you go about writing the book?

I was approached directly by several teachers who had to prepare a tribute to Samuel Paty and teach the EMC course from November 2 onwards, after the All Saints Day holiday. I realized that it was first necessary to loosen the stranglehold so that one could think freely about freedom of expression, and free oneself from the moral blackmail that made it obligatory to show the worst of the Charlie Hebdo caricatures, on pain of being called a coward. I therefore pursued the old, but still fascinating, debate about whether the thrust of a caricature lies in the illustrator's pen or in the beholder's eye. This brought me to the opposition—somewhat forgotten—between the two satirical weekly newspapers Charlie Hebdo and Le Canard enchaîné. I also focused—and this is central to the book—on the history of freedom of expression, through a close reading of the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. I show that this notion, which we tend to think is utterly French, is in reality the product of cultural transfers of ethical, moral and political ideas that are far more complex than we realize.

How is this book relevant today?

The book never loses sight of its target, viz. the teachers. I show that, ultimately, as far as freedom of expression is concerned, what they need, what the judges need, what all of us need, is discernment. We must not satisfy ourselves with the lazy solution that consists in turning the knob all the way in one direction, letting ourselves down that slippery slope argument, as per which we must necessarily subscribe to one or the other extremity of the debate. In reality, there is an immense interval between these two extremes. And social life, respect for the other, mutual respect, all consist in trying to find a compromise somewhere between freedom of expression and freedom of belief. Right now, the one overshadows the other, even to the point of crushing it. I think there is a balance to be restored and that this balance is integral to the exercise of democracy.

