

John Ralston Saul Interview

PART TWO: 'Facebook has an enormous responsibility. They are associated with murder. Let's not be soft about that': Free Expression in A Global Era

RP: And you were International President when the New York PEN Centre decided to award a bravery award to the Editors of Charlie Hebdo and then there was a big furore that ensued because about 200 of the New York PEN members protested against that award. That to me was also a kind of global event, in the sense that you had a lot of prominent global writers who were living in New York protesting about the award by the New York PEN Centre to the French editors of the magazine and the issue encompassed all sorts of things around blasphemy and racist speech and offence and the rights of the Muslim population. What was your sense of the New York debate and has it changed since that time?

JRS: When Charlie Hebdo happened, I made a number of interventions. In Europe there were a series of emergency meetings to try to figure out how writers were going to deal with this. Of course, it begins with total condemnation of the murders. But you didn't want to open the door to right-wing extremist racists who would use this as an excuse to push an anti-foreigner line, or an anti-Arab, anti-muslim line. That was a danger. The strategy of all terrorism is the same. During the Second World War there were all those resistance groups. The strategy of terrorism is to change the debate and to change the way your enemies act. To create disorder within the country that you are attacking. So there's Europe sitting in a very delicate position - through its own fault because of its terrible exploitation of workers and lack of proper immigration policies over a half century period, its refusal to properly handle the end of the Empires, which have never really ended, because London and Paris wanted to continue having political, mining and industrial influence in the ex-Empire areas.

Suddenly you have these violent, murderous attacks which are totally and utterly unacceptable. At the same time, you want to make sure that you are not exposing hundreds of thousands of innocent people to racism and exclusion and perhaps violence. It is very difficult. The condemnation is not difficult at all. Ethical standards mean that violence is not acceptable. This is perfectly clear. It's the other thing which is the hard part. How do you deal with that? I saw that in a number of places. Right after Charlies Hebdo I was in Paris, to pay

PEN's respects at the site of the murders, and then to go to a large emergency meeting with journalists and writers. They were in a terrible confusion. They understood that there had been a massacre in which great wrong had been done. Yet reacting to it without understanding the possible unintended consequences might contribute to handing power to Marine Le Pen. That's the reality.

I would have to go back and see how I said it at the time, but people were in desperate need of ways of understanding what had happened in all its horror and how they could respond to it without victimising entire populations. I remember at the time in PEN – there was that enormous march through Paris and PEN made very strong comments on it. If you look at the first two rows of marchers, they were filled with people who were part of the problem; people who had draped themselves in horror, but were central to the causes of it. This is the complexity of reality. Plus there are many acts of violence that are equally terrifying in other parts of the world, in the Middle East for example. We all ignore them. If it's totally unacceptable in Paris then it should be totally unacceptable in Beirut. You can't have one rule for Europe or the United States or Canada and another rule for the Middle East or Africa. You have to apply the same rule. Which we're not. We're not applying the same rule.

Is it about us or is it about justice and human rights and free expression? I don't think the West has properly asked the question or answered that question. Sorry this is a long preamble.

My view of being International President is that you don't interfere in disagreements in PEN Centres unless those disagreements throw into question the Charter and what PEN stands for. PEN Centres have internal arguments all the time. Some are more dramatic than others, but they have the right to have those arguments and it's none of the business of PEN International to interfere in them. I made a very clear short statement at the time in one of my letters to members that what happened in New York was an interesting example of the complexities of freedom of expression. And so be it. I think that the Europeans – the French in particular – didn't really understand what was happening in New York. They saw it as you would imagine, through their eyes and their experience. But it was a very New York argument. It wasn't even very American.

RP: I think it raised some questions about the limits of free speech perhaps?

JRS: I don't know, did it?

RP: Well there was a debate about whether those cartoons were blasphemous or racist?

JRS: There's no easy answer to that question. I've said repeatedly that one of the great difficulties is that there is an enormous contradiction in comedy. Comedy is the single most powerful tool that literature has when dealing with authoritarianism or difficult issues. The more difficult the issue, the more powerful dark comedy becomes. It becomes the sharpest tool of literature, whether it's Jonathan Swift or Voltaire. It's hard to understand now that when Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal*, suggesting that the solution to the Irish Problem is to eat the children, that was as outrageous at the time perhaps as Charlie Hebdo today. All through history that use of very dark comedy has been an incredibly powerful political tool. And it always comes at the most difficult times. So you know when you see a rise of dark comedy that things are getting bad. And it comes in different forms and in different places.

The other factor very relevant to Charlie Hebdo is that comedy – dark or frivolous – is essentially local. It's very, very local. It's not even national. It can be national, but very often a joke and a nod depends on the accent and the nod.

The idea of humour in Paris is completely different to the idea of humour in New York or Toronto or London. I personally am not a great admirer of French humour, but then I'm not French. I've lived 13 years in Paris, over two periods, and I love it. I'm in France two months of each year. I love French literature. You can look at something like Charlie Hebdo as a local phenomenon and there's really no point in saying in London or New York or Moscow, I think or do not think this is acceptable.

Three: one of the effects of the internet has been to take this very local phenomenon of humour and make it international. Suddenly something which makes somebody in the sixth *arrondissement* [of Paris] or East London, or Moscow, laugh, is being seen in Tehran. And that creates a new situation and that's where we are. We don't have the answer to that. This wouldn't matter if people were not trying to make local political use of deeply local humour – from another place. Part of the argument in New York was that we don't have the answer

to this question. It's a very important question because humour is not going to go away. It is very valuable. And I could tell you that there are fabulous people on both sides of the argument in New York. I have very, very close friends on both sides and they were putting forward very serious things, but it was very much from a certain position in a certain place. And it's a terrible, terrible mistake to think that because it's happening in New York that it's important for the world. I'm sorry. Maybe people in New York would like you to think that, but I don't think that way. You asked me what was the effect of being President of PEN, I think that what happens in Djibouti, the value of what people think in Djibouti is just as important in its own way as what people think in New York, or Toronto or London or Paris or whatever. That is one of the great complexities we're going to have to live with. Very different information is sloshing around the globe, but globalisation has made people think that they all ought to respond in a similar way to things. That is not possible. That is deeply imperial.

Writers can have all of these arguments, but they also have to be conscious of trying to ask themselves...the really important thing; not what is true, but how are people going to live together. And what is justice? And what does it feel like to be there, to be the other. Empathy. These - not assertions of owning truth - they are the essential characteristics of a good novelist.

RP: Also when you look at the history of free speech debates you do see the coordinates shifting around about what people are preoccupied with in particular historical moments.

JRS: When the Fattwa was at its height against Salman Rushdie and he was being protected by the British Government, he was actually being held in incommunicado outside of London. The government wouldn't see him. It was a prison of freedom or a freedom prison. A group of us in Canada got Salman into Toronto. A film has just been made about it. We had to arrange to get him across the Atlantic - somebody had to fly him. He appeared on stage before 1,000 people who were not expecting him, because if they were expecting him it would have had to be cancelled. The police were as thick as they could be because it was the first really big case. And the level of fear was at its height. It was a very moving, astonishing moment when the Premier of Ontario came out on stage and embraced him - the first elected official anywhere to touch him. To actually dare to touch him and he kissed him. Then we took him on to Ottawa and had a private meeting, various private meetings. Nobody knew where he'd

gone. He just appeared out of nowhere in this hall, everybody went crazy, and then we went out of the hall and he disappeared again and we took him to Ottawa and he appeared on Parliament Hill. Secretly, off the record, we took him in to see the Foreign Minister, a woman, a Conservative. It was very interesting because this meeting lasted about an hour. He was going from there to the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, just down the hall. The Minister was very charming and very tough and Salman of course is very funny. I could see her shifting as the meeting went on. She's thinking 'why is this a secret?' You're in a room. You don't have time to call the Prime Minister to get permission. Yet it is a matter of delicate international policy. It's on your back. And you're the Foreign Minister and whatever you do will be the policy of the country and Britain doesn't have a policy. They're hiding him out in the country, yet he's a Brit.

So, just at the end of the meeting she said tentatively 'well what are you doing now?' and I said 'well we're taking him down the hall to the Foreign Affairs Committee' and I saw her just sort of go 'what the fuck?' Well she didn't say 'what the fuck'. But she was very much of that generation of women in politics who were beautifully dressed with high heels and lacquered shoes. She leapt to her feet, grabbed him by the arm and said 'Mr Rushdie come with me'. She decided just like that. The Canadian government was going to take a stand. She took him down the hall and opened the big door into the Committee room, walked in with him and said 'Gentlemen! Ladies! I hand Salman Rushdie over to you for protection!' And walked out.

And that was that. At that point Canada was the first country that had actually taken an official position. And then she went back to her office and called Douglas Hurd [UK Foreign Minister at the time] and said 'Douglas! I've just received officially publicly one of your citizens Salman Rushdie' and they had a terrible row. Because you know, the UK government wouldn't have anything to do with him. Anyway, about two months later they received him here. But the turning point was on that stage in Toronto where Bob Rae, the Ontario Premier, kissed him and the next day in Ottawa with Barbara McDougall, the Foreign Minister.

We all stayed that night in a hotel when the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] took the floor above us and the floor below us. Literature was the jam. What matters is how we respond to these issues, of freedom of expression and the violence which is increasingly attached to it in a new way. How we respond in every city or country. I've been thinking about it for a long

time. You have to be very careful, but determined and clear. You have to get your ideas straight. You can't be self-indulgent. You have to know why you're doing this, why you say what you say; whether it will help. It's not about my personal emotions, it's about the lives of real people.

RP: Just one more question: So just in terms of what's happening now, what do you think the big challenges are? There's an argument that seems to have emerged fairly recently, that hate speech should be defended on free speech grounds. There's often appeal to the first amendment and to me it seems like that quite a politicised claim to the history of a free speech tradition being a Western tradition that is somehow under threat by non-Western cultures and that's why I say it's a politicisation of free speech. What do you think of that, do you think that complicates one's defence of free speech?

JRS: First of all, the lines are never clear. First, PEN has its Charter. That means we have been developing an approach to this since the late 1920's. We're writers. Could we actually write down and say clearly what we believe about free expression. Galsworthy wrote the first draft of the Charter and he was very good at this stuff. H.G. Wells came next and he was good at it too. The Charter clearly says: On the one hand we believe in totally unfettered freedom of expression. On the other hand, writers should not be fomenting hatred between people. Somebody will say 'well isn't that a limitation on freedom of expression? The answer is simple: writers never require the creation of hatred between people in order to produce great literature. That doesn't mean that it becomes soft in any way shape or form. But you look at all the great political books, the poetry, the novels, the plays, the essays. They don't foment hatred between people. They may attack power and they may change mores and they may be devastating, they may be insulting, they may be attempting to destroy careers, etc., etc. But they don't provoke hatred between people. That is not a characteristic of literature or of freedom of expression. That's a very clever - in the good sense of the word clever - parsing of things.

Now, when we are caught in the moment, by this provoking of hatred, what are we to do about this? Often we have to err a little bit on the side of defending things that we detest, because we don't want to be shutting things down when we are, not quite sure what is happening.

In some cases I've found myself protecting space for people I wouldn't have a cup of coffee with, not even if you paid me. But, in the long run, hatred is aimed at killing people and doing evil in every possible way. I suppose you could say that over the last century we have become experts in recognizing the line between literature and hatred.

When you come to the question of should there be laws? What should the laws be? That's a lot less clear. My own gut feeling is that, and this is in an ideal world; my gut feel is that writers have a job, that editors have a job, that publishers have a job. Let's call that job 'responsibility'. You could even call it professionalism. Our job is to write, but to stand as a barrier to hatred.

We're seeing this with Facebook right now. Just because you're thirty years old and wearing a t-shirt and pretending you're eighteen and you are the head of Facebook and you talk like somebody who is not very sophisticated and 'Golly-gee we're just an organisation that allows people to have communities'...like hell. You have a responsibility. You have a responsibility as an Editor and as a Publisher. You have a responsibility to ensure that your system of distribution is not used to provoke hatred. That is a responsibility. We don't need a law for you to be obliged to do your job. The job of a newspaper editor, you should know - that's why it's such a tragedy that newspapers have saved so much money by cutting Editors - the job of a newspaper editor is to look at each article and when necessary say 'That's racist! I'm not publishing that!' We can't have a police wandering around newspaper buildings telling journalists what to publish and what not to publish.

Yes, there are libel laws. Usually they are far too severe. But libel is an endlessly complex issue. Far more complex than the identification of attempts to provoke hatred. All the same, many of our countries still have criminal libel laws, which is political and unacceptable, as opposed to civil libel.

On a day-to-day basis newspaper editors and television editors and writers and filmmakers, we all have an obligation to look at what we're writing and distributing and ask ourselves 'is this an expression of loathing and hatred for other people?' Because if it is, that's not literature. Not journalism. Not information. Not freedom of expression. We have an obligation not to distribute it. That's not self-censorship, that's a matter of professionalism, of quality, of ethics and of empathy. I have no difficulty with that.

People like Facebook are not doing their job. I'm sorry. These internet organisations are trying to get away with murder. I do mean murder. The racist Buddhist monk in Myanmar who has led the violent actions against the Rohingya has done this to a great extent through the internet. He sets up accounts on Facebook and says these incredibly untrue and racist things, which cause riots and cause murder. Eventually Facebook shuts him down and he simply sets up another page. I'm terribly sorry, Facebook has an enormous responsibility. They are associated with murder. So let's not be soft about this.

On the one hand you're asking me, what's my view of a New York internal literary argument and you find me giving you a very very complicated reply. But then I look at something which really is complicated, the answer is easy. People are making billions and billions of dollars out of not doing their job, out of pretending they are just a facilitator of information when actually their methodology includes facilitating the distribution and encouragement of hatred between people. They are pretending they are not editors, when they are editors and publishers. They're pretending they're not because they can make more money that way. And that is evil.

Some of them are spending money on the side, going around giving small grants of \$20,000, \$30,000, \$50,000 here and there to NGOs and Freedom of Expression organisations. Why? To shut them up. We're very careful. We don't take that kind of money. But I've been exposed to it. And I said 'Really? Under what conditions could we take your money. And they reply, there are no conditions. And I say 'what do you mean there are no conditions if we you're your money? Then you ask about three questions and it's over. Because what they are really doing is trying to buy your silence.

I think this is enormous. The destruction of privacy, which is one of the key elements of freedom of expression, the lack of responsibility over ethical issues, pretending that you are making the delivery of information possible when in fact you don't give a damn about it. It's really only about the advertising. Everybody wants some advertising. That's not the same thing as actually being driven by the advertising. So I think this issue is gigantic. And I think this is the outcome, if you like, of a half a century of globalisation which has led to an increased passivity among individuals when it comes to issues like freedom of expression. Many people have become incredibly passive about all this. For a half century you've had corporations and governments saying oh 'freedom of expression it's not really that important, there's a lot of

that'. Now you have people on the Left saying that maybe freedom of expression is getting in the way of things. And you say, well wait a minute, you're just mimicking what your enemies on the hard right have been saying for half a century. I'm sorry, this is not a new Left wing position. This is the old position of Exxon and big corporations that freedom of expression is an over-rated tool. They just want to get on with making their money.

Having beaten back the monopolies and the oligarchies in the pre-1970's, we're seeing them return over a half-century to the extent that they're now all over the place. Under a discourse of the return of capitalism, you've actually seen the opposite: the return of monopolies and oligarchies. One of the big internet people is saying that what we need is to avoid competition. Just monopolies! So if you have monopolies, you don't have freedom of expression. That's what happens. That's the outcome. There is an enormous battle to be fought, which is the battle, yet again, to put in place regulations and laws to break all these large bodies into smaller pieces. To force the market to compete. To be far more transparent. To reassert the role of the public place. The argument of the last fifty years was leave the corporations alone; they'll compete. They didn't. They have slowly limited with competition so now we need to go back and put in place very strong regulations at international and national levels and force them into competitive situations. That will be a partial protection of freedom of expression and individual rights. You can't have free expression under monopolies and oligarchies. That's why people like Facebook and Google get away with what they get away with. There are few public regulations and no competition.

I find it astonishing that the political argument from the Right is that 'we must have more and more competition, we must have capitalism. You look at the marketplace and you see it's dominated by these same people who in reality don't believe in competition. Single source organizations control whole sectors of communication and no one is saying 'wait a minute, We didn't think it was acceptable for oil and gas and we didn't think it was acceptable for electricity. Why would it be acceptable to allow communications - our ability to talk to each other - to be controlled by monopolies?' Do you believe in democracy? Do you believe in freedom of expression? The answer is they don't. That's an enormous battle. It's like starting all over again. We haven't lost everything but we've lost a lot of it. And people coming up now are going to have to fight that fight. They are going to have to put together, re-do, takeover political parties, struggle against people who control communications. Struggling

against the oil industry is one thing. But these people are communications. So it will be tough. But it will also be exciting.

END OF PART 2

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