PART ONE

Traditions and Comparisons

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1 Comparing Freedoms: "Liberal Freedom of Speech" in Frontal and Lateral Perspective

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What might a comparative anthropology of freedom of speech look like? The question is slightly disconcerting in part because "freedom of speech" is a concern that is already laden with its own comparative thrust. Before anthropologists have had a chance to place them "in comparative perspective," liberal[1] invocations of and debates over freedom of speech are themselves multiply, pointedly, and normatively comparative. These comparisons, often cast in national or civilizational terms, echo anthropological modes of contextualization, yet deploy them in ways that many anthropologists would find unsatisfactory and uncomfortable.

One classic comparative vision arranges contexts (typically, nation states) in terms of the greater or lesser presence of freedom of speech within them. Here, freedom of speech operates as a single universal scale that makes social and cultural differences commensurable. Anthropologists are inured to this type of comparative device. This laying out of global cases side by side, along a linear scale indexed on a core "Euro-American" value, recalls the kinds of positivist ambitions of functionalist and evolutionist anthropologies we have forcefully left behind. That form holds little appeal, and I suspect many contemporary anthropologists are likely to agree with Foucault that

> comparing the quantity of freedom between one system and another does not in fact [make] much sense … We should not think of freedom as a universal which is

1 I use liberal here, initially, in the sense outlined by Talal Asad (2013, 26–7) when he writes: "Its theorists seek to present liberalism as consistent and unified, but it is precisely the contradictions and ambiguities in the language of liberalism that make the public debates among self-styled liberals and with their 'illiberal' opponents possible … I call the society in which political and moral arguments using this vocabulary are sited 'liberal.'" I will give a more precise account of this setting below. For an overview of the anthropology of liberalism, see Fedirko, Samanani, and Williamson (2021).

> gradually realized over time, or which undergoes quantitative variations, greater or lesser drastic reductions, or more or less important periods of eclipse. It is not a universal which is particularized in time and geography. Freedom is not a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time. (2008, 46–7)

In lieu of this comparative vision of freedom as a single quantitative variable, Foucault proposes another comparative view. This view examines multiple kinds and types of freedom, each sustained by and sustaining different material, political, and discursive formations. Throughout his later work, Foucault (2011) gave multiple instances of this vision of heterogeneous kinds of freedom that clash and overlap, sometimes intermingling and sometimes succeeding each other in time. This is a promising precedent for those of us seeking to develop a comparative anthropology of freedoms of speech. In doing so, anthropologists can combine relatively new forays into a comparative anthropology of freedom(s) (Humphrey 2007; Laidlaw 2014; Englund 2006; Heywood 2015; Zigon 2007; Venkatesan 2023), with the well-established comparative tradition on speech and expression developed by linguistic anthropologists and others. From considerations of language ideologies and semiotic ideologies, through to literature on voice, rhetoric, and oratory, we have extensive resources at hand to add something substantial to the often rather thin portrayal of "speech" entailed in popular discussions of freedom of speech (for an overview, see Candea et al. 2021).

In order to do so, however, we should distinguish this vision of multiple and overlapping freedoms of speech from another comparative imaginary. This imaginary is distinct from the two sketched out above, even though it echoes aspects of each. This is a comparative vision in which freedom of speech is mapped onto a contrast between two contexts: a familiar "us" (the anthropologist and their imagined readership), and an unfamiliar "other." This is a form I have elsewhere characterized as a "frontal comparison" (a comparison of "us" and "them"), in opposition to the "lateral comparison" of cases (this and that), which is evidenced in both the quantitative display of a global map of free speech and in the multiple formations of freedom envisioned by Foucault (Candea 2018). Unlike the quantitative vision of degrees of freedom, this frontal comparative mode retains significant appeal for anthropologists. Indeed, it is in this mode that some of the most influential anthropological engagements with freedom of speech (Keane 2009; Asad et al. 2013) have been articulated – as contrasts between (implicitly "our") liberal freedom of speech and other visions and versions elsewhere. While such frontal comparisons might seem to promise a radical critique or "provincialization" (cf. Chakrabarty 2008) of liberal preconceptions, I will argue in this chapter that this is not always or straightforwardly the case. Anthropologists engaging in a frontal comparison

of freedom(s) of speech are likely to be hampered by the fact that this is also one of the key comparative modes in which debates over freedom of speech occur in the liberal discursive fora they are seeking to provincialize. By contrast, a more lateral imaginary holds unsuspected radical potential.

A Maelstrom of Comparisons

On 7 January 2015, two men entered the offices of the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, France, and opened fire, killing twelve people. These murders were ostensibly committed in retaliation against the journal's publication of satirical drawings of the Prophet Muhammad. Across French media and social media, the event was met with a wave of public support for the victims of the shooting, for the journal, and for freedom of speech, which was cast as a universal and yet (somehow) also distinctly French value. A black sign stating "Je suis Charlie" became a ubiquitous fixture on social media, appearing on the front pages of newspapers and on public buildings across France. A public demonstration was organized by the president of the republic, the socialist François Hollande, at which over a million people walked side by side in support of *Charlie Hebdo* and freedom of speech. A number of French newspapers republished some of the cartoons as a statement of their support. These reactions were echoed internationally in many quarters, and indeed a raft of foreign heads of state came to walk alongside Hollande at the front of the march. The *Charlie Hebdo* killings thus reactivated a theme that has agitated public discourse in Europe and America periodically since the famous "Rushdie Affair" of 1989, namely, that of an incompatibility between "liberal freedom of speech" and certain kinds of "radical Islam." In this framing, freedom of speech is typically aligned with "the West," modernity, secularism, democracy, reason, and abstract principles, and contrasted with tradition, religion, community, affect, and particularist commitments. As Saba Mahmood (2013, 67) argued of the earlier instantiation of this debate around the publication of some of the same cartoons by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, "even the calmer commentators seemed to concur that this was an impasse between the liberal value of freedom of speech and a religious taboo"; and as Webb Keane (2009, 48) argued in his own comparative exploration of the Danish cartoons debate, "by linking purportedly secular language to concepts of freedom and of voice, some familiar ideologies of the press can manifest a certain moral narrative of modernity, a story of human agency emancipated from its captivation with fetishes and other unrealities."

Concomitantly, however, another comparative framing came to the fore, turning on national rather than civilizational differences in approaches to freedom of speech. This centred on the observation that whereas a certain uniformity of public discourse reigned in France in the aftermath of the

killings, initial reactions elsewhere were rather more varied – not only in Niger, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Chechnya, where large public demonstrations took place against *Charlie Hebdo*, but also in other liberal democracies such as the United States and the UK, where public figures, cultural critics, and journalists questioned the cultural and racial politics of *Charlie Hebdo*'s publication of the "Muhammad cartoons" and worried about the stigmatization of Muslims in France, about French approaches to state secularism, and about the enforced univocality of the "Je suis Charlie" message (CM 2015; Fisher 2015; Karpiak 2015; Trudeau 2015). Instantly, many voices in France and elsewhere rushed to situate, explain, and defend *Charlie Hebdo* – and France's purportedly "Voltairean" tradition of free speech more generally – against "foreign misreadings." Some French commentators were dismayed by the refusal of American and British publications to reprint the cartoons, which they cast as a marker of the comparatively degraded state of freedom of speech in those "multiculturalist" countries.

Thus, alongside and seemingly at odds with the grand civilizational claims about "Western" liberal freedom of speech, another, equally recurrent debate bears on the comparative state of freedom of speech in different Western liberal democracies. In this particular case, a "distinctly French" approach to robust anti-religious polemics was contrasted (by detractors as well as by supporters) with the more cautious approach to religious controversy stemming from American or British "multicultural tolerance." In that vision, France was cast as a setting in which, for better or worse, speech was "freer" and less encumbered by civility and concerns for giving offence to religious sensibilities. Just as often, however, the shoe is on the other foot: discussions of freedom of speech in liberal democracies frequently pivot on a contrast between the American First Amendment's "exceptional" and "uniquely far-reaching" protection of freedom of speech and European legal regimes in which constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech are limited by legal provisions against hate speech, libel, or Holocaust denial. For a number of authors, this is a contrast that reaches beyond the realm of law, narrowly understood, into different sociological and historical imaginaries: a core commitment to "liberty" in the United States versus a tempering of free speech in reference to "dignity" in European (legal) cultures (Whitman 2000; Carmi 2008).

This nationalized framing of the debate was not unchallenged, of course. Just as *Charlie Hebdo* found supporters abroad (Chait 2015; Douthat 2015), there were also dissenting voices within France (Chemin 2015; Fassin 2015; Nunès 2015). These dissenting voices were rather muted in the immediate aftermath of the killings, when public support for *Charlie Hebdo* took on huge normative weight. Yet dissenting opinions did emerge, cautiously at first, then more fulsomely over the subsequent months and years, to the stated horror of other French commentators – including survivors of the *Charlie Hebdo*

killings – who saw this as a betrayal of an erstwhile national consensus and an encroachment of "Anglo-Saxon" thinking into France (Devecchio and de Nouël 2018; Gernelle 2020; Malka 2020). To others, such tensions speak to a generational struggle between an older republicanist left, which recognized its own 1968-style ethos in the indiscriminate and anti-systemic irreverence of *Charlie Hebdo*, and a newer progressive left more in tune with decolonial critiques and perspectives. What had briefly seemed to be an international debate was coming to look like a domestic one – or rather the question of the proper comparative framing of the debate (is there such a thing as a "French model"?) became itself a hotly disputed issue (Bacqué and Chemin 2016; Hazareesingh and Clarini 2017; Mahler 2017).

Indeed, outside of moments of self-consciously international discourse, like those following the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, contrasts between national or civilizational approaches to freedom of speech usually play second fiddle to a – once again comparative – contrast between differently situated political, generational, or philosophical positions within specific national contexts. In France, the US, or the UK, recurrent arguments rage over the proper relationship between freedom of speech and social responsibility in both legal and more broadly social contexts. Looked at carefully, comparative claims about different national or civilizational traditions of free speech often seem like they are primarily interventions into these domestic debates, in which the stakes are stated and restated, over and over again, in terms of a tension between freedom and its proper limits. International or civilizational comparisons emerge here as geographical mappings of these two "poles": the American First Amendment, French combative secularism, or quite simply "the Western liberal approach to free speech" epitomize the possibilities or the pitfalls of going further (going too far?) with freedom; conversely, "US campus culture," French Holocaust denial laws, or "Islamic tradition" are invoked to highlight the dangers, the necessity, or the promise of placing socialized limits on speech. These international framings are simultaneously comparative claims about the different ways in which freedom of speech is valued, "at home," by one's consociates and intimate others: people of different political persuasions and/or generations.

Given the pervasive essentialisms, the slippery scale-shifting, and the intense normative commitments discussed above, it is perhaps not so surprising that anthropologists have, so far, only dipped their toe into the comparative maelstrom surrounding freedom of speech. In the above debates, some of our best comparative moves seem to have been made for us – to a rather unsettling effect. Relativism? Here, freedom of speech is already contextualized as "cultural." It is already relativized and "provincialized" – which is not to say necessarily diminished, since one can, after all, be combatively and chauvinistically proud of one's province. Anti-essentialism? While essentialisms fly

around pretty freely, the fact that they recur on multiple scales challenges the coherence of various entities that seem to sit at cross-purposes (civilizational, national, political, and generational). This liberal debate seems to deconstruct its own certainties precisely as it articulates them.

The debate above may seem dizzying – yet it is far from unstructured. The confusing effect comes not purely from the diversity of objects, scales, and opinions but also from the way this diversity is traversed by the repetition of one single form, over and over again, like a backbeat. The contrast may be civilizational, national, generational, political, or some combination of the above; its amplitude and stakes may vary; yet its basic outline is fundamentally stable. In all its various iterations, this is a contrast between individual liberty and social responsibilities, between freedom of speech and its limits. Out of a maelstrom of controversy, a stable and limited vocabulary of argument emerges (Asad 2013, 27). The form is stable in another way also: over and over again, the contrast is cast in terms of a frontal comparison between "them" and "us." The positions are interchangeable: "they" may be obsessed by social control while "we" defend freedom, or on the contrary, "they" may be foolishly touting an irresponsible right to insult and demean, while "we" defend respect and care. But the form of the contrast, and the shape of its two poles, remains.

Where anthropologists have entered the fray, they have tended to miss the self-perpetuating nature of this formal dynamic, and thus been captured by it. Talal Asad's (2013) and Saba Mahmood's (2013) attempt to interrogate liberal freedom of speech in the wake of an earlier iteration of the "Danish cartoons" controversy is a case in point. Both deploy a familiar anthropological move, setting up a comparison between what they characterize as liberal notions of freedom of speech and certain selected aspects of Islamic tradition, a comparison intended to defuse triumphalist contrasts between liberal freedom and religious taboos. Asad's (2013) contribution insists on the fact that freedom of speech is nowhere unlimited. Liberal limits on free speech (in respect of copyright for instance), he argues, paint the contours of a self-owning individual; by contrast in some aspects of Islamic tradition – a point developed in greater depth in Mahmood's essay – the objection to insulting images of the prophet hints at an economy of relational entanglements. The "cartoons" are not, as liberal commentators assume, to be read as mere discursive challenges to propositional belief, but rather as attacks on a lived relationship between the faithful and the prophet.

Asad's (2013) and Mahmood's (2013) essays are sophisticated, complex, and carefully structured. And yet the comparative dynamic of free speech debates that I have sketched above exerts such a strong gravitational pull that their claims are constantly in danger of collapsing back into precisely the kind of civilizational contrast that they are seeking to work against. Even Judith

Butler – who is hardly an unsympathetic or unsophisticated reader – restates Asad's and Mahmood's case in a way that comes to sound worryingly familiar:

> So the critical question that emerges is whether ways of life that are based on dispossession in transcendence (and implicit critique of self-ownership) are legible and worthy of respect. It is then less a legal question than a broader question of the conditions of cohabitation for peoples whose fundamental conceptions of subjective life divide between those that accept established secular grounds and those at odds with secular presumptions of self-coincidence and property. (Butler 2013, 120)

Put like this, the question does little to unsettle the pervasive narrative of a clash between secular and religious "peoples" as a problem of cohabitation for liberal democracies.[2] More subtly, while Asad's and Mahmood's comparative moves go some way towards tempering visions of liberalism as committed to "unlimited" freedom of speech, they remain somewhat ambivalent about the place of freedom of speech in the Islamic tradition(s) they counterpose to this liberal model. As James Laidlaw (2014) argues in relation to Mahmood's portrayal of freedom more generally in her earlier work *The Politics of Piety* (2005), it is not clear whether Asad and Mahmood are suggesting that Islamic tradition as they characterize it offers an alternative vision of free speech or an alternative *to* free speech. What Asad and Mahmood propose, in fact, is not a comparison of freedoms of speech, but a comparison of ways in which speech is unfree, in the liberal West as much as elsewhere (see also the introduction and Bhojani and Clarke in this volume).

Frontal Comparison and Liberalism

The key issue I wish to surface here is that attempts to set up an anthropological comparatism along the lines suggested by Asad (2013) and Mahmood (2013) are overshadowed by their isomorphism with the particular kind of comparatism built into liberal debates about freedom of speech. Both kinds of comparison – all of the comparisons evoked in the previous section, in fact – share a distinctive structure. They are what I have described elsewhere, in relation to

2 By contrast, Keane's (2009) comparative framing of the Danish cartoon debates in light of Indonesian press bans is much less amenable to such reductive polarizing, even though his account of liberal semiotic ideology informs Asad's (2013) and Mahmood's (2013) later characterization – a point I return to below. This is due in part to Keane's attention here and elsewhere (see also Keane 2007) both to the multiplicity of language ideologies within any given setting and to what is shared, as well as what is not, across different semiotic ideologies.

anthropology's own comparative devices, as "frontal comparisons" (Candea 2018). To briefly reprise that argument, one can distinguish two modalities or valences within anthropological comparisons. One, which I term "lateral," involves setting up cases side by side, comparing this (and this, and this ...) and that. The other, which I term frontal, compares an "other" context with one marked as the context of a collective "self," which includes the anthropologist and their intended readership. From this simple formal distinction – including or not including "us" as one term of the comparison – flow a number of other differences that give each mode its own quite distinct epistemological and political affordances. The two forms of comparison are interwoven in most anthropological arguments (Asad's and Mahmood's included). I hold them apart heuristically before considering their interplay.

By situating the position of the anthropologist as one term of the comparison, frontal comparisons lend themselves extremely well to the classic anthropological move of self-critique. Frontal comparison has long been the go-to device for relativizing, provincializing, and parochializing Western concepts and assumptions. From that perspective, frontal comparison has often been seen and valued as more radical, philosophically and politically, than the merely lateral consideration of cases side by side. On the other hand, lateral comparisons keep a multiplicity of cases in play, whereas introducing "us" as one term of the comparison tends to draw attention inexorably back towards a single overarching binary. Frontal comparisons as a result are regularly charged with overstating the coherence of the "us" and the difference of the "other," while essentializing both terms. More generously, one might allow that frontal comparisons rely on bracketing the question of where exactly one might draw the line, empirically, between "them" and "us," in order to draw an essentially theoretical or conceptual contrast between the two. Frontal comparisons are in this sense "not-quite-fictions" – one might think of them as empirically grounded thought experiments. The key device through which frontal comparisons achieve this is through a distinctive play on scale: "us" and "them" are scalar shifters, which allow anthropologists to move back and forth between the frontal moment of ethnographic encounters ("Whereas I assumed...") to grander contrasts ("Whereas Euro-American concepts of the person..."). This is not so much a sleight of hand as a performative effect. An anthropologist can succeed in this scaling up if they have correctly identified and can convincingly portray a difference that their readership will also recognize. The "us" of frontal comparison is thus a relational achievement.

This contrast between frontal and lateral modes of comparison was crafted in reference to the heuristics of anthropology, but it can help us recognize some patterns in liberal debates about freedom of speech such as those following the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. To begin with, one can note that, beyond the question of freedom of speech specifically, frontal comparison is deeply entwined with

the history of liberalism. As Duncan Bell (2014, 685) has persuasively argued, the currently popular vision of a single broad liberal tradition that can stand as "the constitutive ideology of the West" is surprisingly recent. Bell notes that "while claims about the intellectual coherence, historical continuity, and ethicopolitical superiority of 'the West' stretched back at least as far as the eighteenth century, it was only in the mid-twentieth century that this potent civilizational narrative came to be routinely classified as liberal" (705). Thus while the term "liberal" began to be used as a label for political ideology in the nineteenth century, its extension was significantly narrower than at present and the term was "barely visible in surveys of political thought written [before] the 1930s" (693). Locke himself was not characterized as a "liberal" before that period. The construction by political scientists of a broad liberal canon with Locke as its pivotal figure coincided with the emergence and spread of the term "liberal democracy" as a designator for the American and Western European states. Both moves were deeply entangled with the ideological war against totalitarianisms on the left and the right. The idea of an unbroken and coherent intellectual tradition of liberalism reaching back to the eighteenth century (or possibly to classical Athens) was, according to Bell, a late retroprojection. It was an instance of canon-building in which disparate intellectual and political positions and resources were grouped together and rendered as a characteristic cultural matrix that distinguishes "Western liberal democracies" from their fascist, socialist, or (one might add) theocratic alternatives. As a result, liberalism "came to denote virtually all non-totalitarian forms of politics as well as a partisan political perspective within societies" (705). It became "the metacategory of Western political discourse" (683), which somehow persists despite the often mutually contradictory positions taken up by self-styled liberals.

Returning to the terms I articulated above, we might say that, on D. Bell's (2014) account, liberalism as we currently know it emerged historically in the twentieth century as one term in a frontal comparison – it appeared as an "us" position, dialectically defined by contrast to a "them" position. Freedom of speech sits squarely within that history. Recruited as one central or even foundational feature of the emergent liberal "canon," freedom of speech was polemically defined against state socialist censorship throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Boyer 2003). It survived the demise of its totalitarian "other" by finding another "other" in radical Islam. As Paul Passavant (2002) observes, 1989 was a pivotal year in this respect, marking both the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "Rushdie Affair." The polemical contrast between liberalism and its "other(s)" papers over complexities and contradictions within. Similarly, in their frontal comparisons, anthropologists allow themselves the latitude to generalize about "Euro-America" in order to pick out heuristically some crucial differences that will unsettle their readers' assumptions. Of course, when anthropologists like Asad (2013) and Mahmood (2013) take

up "Western liberalism" as one term of their comparisons, they take it up with a critical intent, whereas the canon-builders D. Bell (2014) describes were articulating a triumphalist metanarrative. But the analogy of form – the frontal comparison device – has distinctive effects that are not always easily turned to one's intended purposes.

One of these effects is scalar: frontal comparison is a self-replicating, fractal form. Thus D. Bell's (2014) genealogy allows us to articulate a more precise account of the dynamic Asad (2013, 26) points to when he writes that while "its theorists seek to present liberalism as consistent and unified, ... it is precisely the contradictions and ambiguities in the language of liberalism that make the public debates among self-styled liberals and with their 'illiberal' opponents possible." The double meaning of liberal as a term, which points simultaneously to a civilizational metacategory (all political debate in a liberal democracy is thus – definitionally – liberal) and to a partisan political position within any given liberal political debate, gives it a peculiar scalar dynamic (cf. Latour 2005; Carr and Lempert 2016). Beyond mere "contradictions and ambiguities," there is a fractal, recursive pattern here, of the kind Susan Gal (2002) has identified in relation to distinctions between the private and the public. The fact that critiques of liberalism in Western public debate are themselves, on another scale, an instance of liberal discourse, is one effect of the way a distinction between liberal and illiberal replicates fractally within itself – just like private conversations can take place within a public space, or public figures can allow themselves private moments.

This recursive pattern allows critics to place themselves in a powerfully dual position, both inside and outside "us." Frontal comparison has long enabled anthropologists to speak simultaneously with two kinds of authority – the authority of one of "us," engaging in a self-critique of misconceptions rife in a conceptual world they share with their readers, and the authority of one who sees this world ("us") as merely one context among others.[3] In her comment on Asad's and Mahmood's texts, Butler (2013) (again not unsympathetically) makes explicit the exhortative charge of their comparisons, the appeals they implicitly make to shared moral intuitions. The pattern holds in popular critiques of the excesses of the American First Amendment, or French combative secularism, or quite simply of "the Western liberal approach to free speech." It is because "we" are assumed to share certain moral assumptions (which in the broadest sense could still, as D. Bell [2014] points out, end up being characterized as liberal), that "we" ought to be outraged by the hypocrisy of certain liberal double standards.

3 On the mutations of this double authority, from *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* through to *Provincialising Europe*, see Candea (2018, 279–304).

Yet this double authority also comes at a cost. However radical one's critique of liberalism, it must still, on another scale, remain within liberal proprieties in order to be heard as a frontal self-critique – as a critique of "our" familiar liberalism. Even as they seek to provincialize "liberal freedom of speech," Asad (2013) and Mahmood (2013) are still, after all, exemplifying it. Their work stays within the eminently "liberal" mode of academic disquisition on political matters, in commenting on others they observe proprieties of liberal debate, as well as, of course, the liberal expectations of intellectual ownership in their practices of citation and in the copyright they retain on their own words. The same is true of even the most radical critical positions taken up in the swirling public debates over *Charlie Hebdo*. Insofar as they are cast as critiques of "our" liberalism, they necessarily find themselves exemplifying, on a higher scale, the very principles they critique.

These paradoxes are familiar (cf. Barbara Smith 1993). A more interesting effect of the recursive structure of frontal comparison is that it tends towards a certain kind of repetition in terms of content. This point has been made a number of times of the most frontally oriented anthropological approaches. Critics charge that frontal comparatisms map onto "us" and "them" contrasts and concerns that are actually internal to Euro-American intellectual and political debates – such as contrasts between individualism versus holism, dualism versus monism, or Descartes versus Deleuze (see, for instance, T. Turner 2009; Murray 1993). As a result, anthropology's frontal contrasts tend towards a certain kind of repetitiveness. Not to put too fine a point on it, once one has decided – reductively – that "we" are essentially Cartesian or individualist, one always keeps discovering that "they" happen to be fundamentally Deleuzian or relational (see Holbraad 2017 for an attempt to rebut this critique).

A similar dynamic emerges in the public debates around freedom of speech. Under the dizzying variety of concrete contexts evoked in the *Charlie Hebdo* debates above (the West/Islam, America/Europe, France/America, multiculturalism/republicanism, older progressives/younger progressives, etc.), the same conceptual form in the end keeps replicating. Despite the diversity of situations, characters, and scales, all of these contrasts are polarized around a tension between something like a decontextualized individual freedom and a contextualized social or relational responsibility. Battle is engaged around the respective value of each of these poles and around the nature of the contrast: Are they necessarily interwoven or mutually exclusive? Do they stand to each other as ideal to pragmatic accommodation or as ideology to reality? But the general polarity of the debate is preserved as scales shift up and down. This is how "American campuses" and "Western civilization" can be smoothly deployed in domestic arguments between French republicanist and decolonial leftists. This is how, despite the diversity and multiplicity of issues and framings, the pervasive sense that these multiple debates are after all just "one"

debate, in which the only real choice, in the end, seems to be about what balance to strike between two given poles: individual freedom and social limits. Anthropologists building on Louis Dumont's theories of value encompassment have shown in other contexts how a binary between seemingly incompatible values can be shuffled and reshuffled to produce such patterns (Robbins 2015; Iteanu 2015; Moya 2015). In the case of freedom of speech, in end, this binary framing circles back to the quantitative comparative form with which we began, in which different contexts can in principle be *ranked* along a sliding scale between the two bogeys of "First Amendment fundamentalism" (absolute, irresponsible freedom) and "totalitarianism" (total social control).

Of course, Asad and Mahmood are seeking to unsettle this binary between freedom and social context. Following Foucault, they urge that freedom is an effect of social and cultural context, not its opposite. And yet, the form of Asad's and Mahmood's comparison, in which "Western liberalism" is opposed to "Islamic tradition," undermines this worthwhile goal. For once it is recast in these binary terms, the Foucauldian glimpse of multiple social formations of freedom collapses back into a contrast between abstract freedom as a foil (the false story "we" liberals tell ourselves about ourselves) and socialized freedom as an empirical reality (the real truth of liberal freedom as merely possessive individualism). Furthermore, what we find contrasted to liberal visions of freedom as self-ownership and self-sufficiency is once again a more relational reality – a world of persons entangled in affective links that belies the abstractness and detachment of liberal language ideologies. This is a contrastive vision in which, as I noted above, the question of an alternative version of freedom of speech (rather than an alternative to it) fades out of view.

The dynamic is perhaps clearest in Mahmood's (2013) critique of Stanley Fish's response to the Danish cartoons controversy, which begins in terms almost exactly analogous to my own arguments about frontal comparison above, yet ends up restating that comparison in a different mode. The passage deserves quoting at length.

> For [Fish], the entire controversy is best understood in terms of a contrast between "their" strongly held religious beliefs and "our" anemic liberal morality, one that requires no strong allegiance beyond the assertion of abstract principles (such as free speech). I want to argue that framing the issue in this manner must be rethought both for its blindness to the strong moral claims enfolded within the principle of free speech (and its concomitant indifference to blasphemy) as well as the normative model of religion it encodes. To understand the affront the cartoons caused within terms of racism alone, or for that matter in terms of Western irreligiosity, is to circumscribe our vocabulary to the limited conceptions of blasphemy and freedom of speech – the two poles that dominated the debate. Both these notions – grounded in juridical notions of rights and state sanction – presuppose

> a semiotic ideology in which signifiers are arbitrarily linked to concepts, their meaning open to people's reading in accord with a particular code shared between them. What might appear to be a symbol of mirth and merrymaking to some may well be interpreted as blasphemous by others. In what follows, I will suggest that this rather impoverished understanding of images, icons, and signs not only naturalizes a certain concept of a religious subject ensconced in a world of encoded meanings but also fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign – a relation founded not only on representation but also on what I will call attachment and cohabitation. (2013, 69–70)

I couldn't agree more with Mahmood's initial characterization here of the limits of Fish's frontal contrast, which she reiterates in an endnote to this passage: "It is because of this rather impoverished view of liberal ideology that Fish does not appreciate the strong and visceral reactions among secular liberal Europeans against Muslim protests" (95n10). However, Mahmood challenges Fish through a reiteration of a frontal contrast. She recodes the poverty of Fish's view as an instance of what she later characterizes, drawing on Keane (2007, 2009), as a Protestant-inflected, modern semiotic ideology, which she contrasts with "Islamic" relational semiotic ideologies of attachment and cohabitation. Keane's (2009, 58, 60) own account stresses the internal multiplicity of liberal language ideologies. In its rendering in Mahmood's (2013, 72) argument, however, the "dismay that Protestant Christian missionaries felt at the moral consequences that followed from native epistemological assumptions" (in Keane's work on the colonial Dutch East Indies) echoes fairly directly "the bafflement many liberals and progressives express at the scope and depth of Muslim reaction over the cartoons today." Where Fish characterizes liberal ideology as anaemic (by contrast to Muslim strength of belief), Mahmood in the end characterizes liberal semiotic ideology as impoverished (by contrast to a more relational and embodied Muslim alternative). These contrasts are not the same, but the structure of the recursion is clear. Like a phoenix from the flame, polarization between individual abstract liberal free speech and the relational, concrete sociocultural contexts that challenge it seems impervious to deconstruction.

Going Lateral

Impervious to deconstruction, that is, as long as our comparisons remain primarily frontal. What might a more lateral comparative anthropology of freedom of speech look like? So far, I have left lateral comparison in the shadow of its putatively more radical counterpart, frontal comparison. The former has been defined negatively, by the fact that it is not mapped across an "us/them" contrast. But this absence opens up a number of radical possibilities.

As I have noted above, frontal and lateral comparisons are complementary and indeed interwoven within most anthropological arguments. Yet the precision and multiplicity of lateral comparison, its refusal to toe the line of any simple us/them contrast, can also temper, or in a critical mode, challenge and debunk some of the wilder claims of frontal comparison. In particular, lateral comparisons of multiple settings within contexts routinely characterized as Western or Euro-American, can be used to unpick the mechanism through which frontal comparisons project outwards, as a contrast between "us" and "them," binaries and alternatives internal to Euro-American debates.

A striking recent instance is James Laidlaw's (2014) exploration of the multiplicity of notions and forms of freedom in both "liberal" philosophical literature and the ethnographic record, which we discuss at length in the introduction to this volume (see also Venkatesan 2023).[4] Following Laidlaw's example, we might begin by acknowledging the multiplicity of philosophical arguments for (and against) freedom of speech even within the restricted and recondite space of academic liberal legal and philosophical discourse. As outlined in the introduction, canonical liberal philosophical discussions of freedom of speech have come to parse a complex and entangled literature into three fundamentally different justifications for freedom of speech (Stone and Schauer 2021a): the argument from truth turns on the thought that protections from the imposition of orthodoxy by the state or other social pressures are the most effective means of collectively discovering truth and eliminating error; the argument from autonomy sees in freedom of speech a crucial means of self-development for individual persons and a fundamental aspect of their dignity; the argument from democracy links freedom of speech to the possibility for and legitimacy of democratic self-government. These different justifications of freedom of speech rely on different versions or visions of what persons, polities and language are, what matters about them, and the proper relation between them. Furthermore, each of these justifications has been substantively countered and debated, leading to a host of counter-visions and counter-proposals. Thus, even within the limited frame of liberal legal and philosophical discourse around freedom of speech, an anthropologically informed exploration can identify a variety of implicit understandings of how persons, knowledge, and politics are made and unmade through speech.

But this is only a starting point. In seeking to expand and multiply our lateral apprehension of "liberal visions of freedom of speech," we can also reach beyond the legal and philosophical scholarship to historical accounts that are beginning to diversify and reconstitute histories of freedom of expression. Some

4 The move also parallels Robbins's (2013) call to multiply the contrast between monism and pluralism.

of these studies highlight the ways in which various distinctly non-canonical visions and versions of liberalism emerged in colonial settings (Hunter 2017; Bayly 2011). Others focus on revising and recasting the canonical settings and periods to which contemporary liberal visions of free speech are indexed, such as ancient Athens (Saxonhouse 2006), the French Revolution (Walton 2011), seventeenth-century Britain (Colclough 2009), or rereading canonical texts against the grain (Peters 2005). All of these studies can radically expand our sense of what has been and, in many cases, continues to be at stake in liberal understandings of and struggles around freedom of speech.

For instance, David Colclough (2009), in his study of freedom of speech in early Stuart England, scans a variety of cultural and philosophical resources and reference points at play in seventeenth-century debates about freedom of speech. In conceptualizing free speech, Colclough argues, classically trained seventeenth-century British subjects engaged with a tradition in which the figure of *parrhesia* – frank counsel to princes – was an established and formalized trope, explicitly laid out in manuals of rhetoric and illustrated through famous classical examples of oratory. Colclough traces the fascinating problems that arose once *parrhesia*, initially seen as the epitome of a risky and unpopular type of sincerity, was characterized as a rhetorical form. Frank and fearless speech, once it is characterized as a formal style, is immediately open to the suspicion of being exactly the opposite: a flattering and calculated appeal to the sympathy of one's audience, as a preface to telling them precisely what they want to hear. As Marcel Proust (1982) wrote in a different context, "The courage of one's opinions is always a form of calculating cowardice in the eyes of the other side."

But *parrhesia*, even thus complicated, was not the only cultural resource available to contemporaries. Preachers and pamphleteers, Colclough notes, drew on a different Christian tradition in which freedom of speech was the attribute of the true believer when facing persecution. Parliamentary procedure and precedent was another setting in which the possibility of and need for freedom of speech was forcefully debated. Finally, Colclough explores a vibrant culture of manuscript miscellanies and "libels" that evaded the system of licensing laws applied to print, and enabled individuals who collected and circulated them among neighbours and acquaintances to experience and shape themselves as participants in the political life of the realm. These various visions overlap and recombine in some key respects, yet they each elicit different types of concern around the nature of the free speaker, the social relations and types of power within which they are constituted, and the nature and effects of speech. In this one single setting, freedom of speech emerges as fundamentally different in its implications, whether one is speaking freely because compelled by faith; or whether under the protection of a formal precedent one is seeking to curate and sustain; whether self-consciously demonstrating one's courage

through public frankness; or whether one is privately circulating challenging material to like-minded acquaintances. Some of these modes map neatly onto the semiotic ideology of subject/object separation, abstraction and arbitrariness (Keane 2007), others call up other understandings of language as an affective and embodied vector of attachment and cohabitation. Some of these seem to evoke an egalitarianism familiar to contemporary liberal sensibilities. Others embed freedom of speech within existing hierarchies, in ways that recall alternative versions of freedom articulated in and through community in mid-twentieth-century Africa (Hunter 2017).

Arlene Saxonhouse (2006) shows that classical visions of *parrhesia* that loomed so large in Colclough's (2009) seventeenth-century Britain had a different valence in their original formulation. The key opposite of *parrhesia* in Classical Athens was not state control so much as *shame* – a pervasive sense of deference and keeping one's place in the social order. Cast in opposition, not to external coercion but to senses of propriety, *parrhesia* as "shameless" speech takes on a more complex ethical shading than simply as "speaking truth to power." On the one hand, as shown in Saxonhouse's (2006) account, *parrhesia* was praised and valued as essentially democratic in its irreverence for (some aspects of) sedimented social order, and its concern with the present and future; on the other hand, some measure of decorum and concern with the past continued to be understood as an important feature of any balanced polity. In adapting *parrhesia* to the parliamentary politics of seventeenth-century Britain, and in worrying over the calculations embedded in its rhetorical frankness, Colclough's (2009) subjects were thus moving in a distinctly different direction from the classical sources they were emulating. And yet a concern with decorum and "propriety" as a counterbalancing form to frankness was still woven into the debates that Colclough tracks. It emerges also in the long-standing concern with libel and honour, which fundamentally shaped, for instance, French revolutionary reticences around unbounded freedom of speech (Walton 2011) and continues to inhabit legal cultures of freedom of speech to this day (Candea 2019a; Candea, forthcoming; Post 1986; Whitman 2000). In a different way, this tension between *parrhesia* and decorum, having one's say and retaining a polite consensus, speaks to the different imaginaries of free speech described by Harri Englund (2018a) in his study of a Finnish radio talk show.

As for the religious strand of freedom of speech in the face of persecution, John Durham Peters (2005) offers a fascinating genealogy of its transformations through his rereading of some of the liberal classics such as Milton, Locke, and Mill. Peters tracks the emergence of a liberal vision of freedom of speech that is deeply rooted in an ambivalent and profoundly non-secular concern with evil, not as something that needs to be eradicated, but indeed as a positive test and challenge through which the goodness of the self can be strengthened and shaped. "There is something satanic," Peters (2005, 15)

argues, "about many liberal arguments in favour of free expression-satanic not in the sense of gratuitous evil but in the Miltonic sense of confronting or even sponsoring an adversary whose opposition provides material for redemptive struggle." Tracing a line from these Miltonic sensibilities through to contemporary debates over the First Amendment, Peters provides a distinctly unfamiliar yet highly convincing vision of liberal arguments over freedom of speech as fundamentally "enchanted" in their concerns with questions of evil, sin, catharsis, courage, compassion, and pity.

Back to the Present

One might think of the above as "counter-histories" of liberal freedom of speech, which cut against the classic modernization narrative, and this is often how their authors themselves portray them. But it would be a shame to allow this to collapse once again into a (now temporal) frontal comparison. The key value of these backwards glances lies rather in the multiplicity and heterogeneity they uncover. There are many distinct and often mutually contradictory visions of the person, of the polity, and of the nature and effects of language entwined in the history of liberal freedom of speech and these versions and visions continue to shape current debates. Attending to this recombinant multiplicity expands our comparative imaginary. Asad's (2013) observations about possessive individualism can be productively added to this sense of a teeming multiplicity of types and forms of personhood entailed in the imaginaries of liberal freedom of speech. The interweaving of authorship and ownership adds another context – but it is no longer the only context – for understanding and situating liberal freedom(s) of speech.

Tracing echoes and analogues of these different modes of imagining, valuing, and experiencing freedom of speech might help us expand the comparative imaginary of what is at stake in liberal debates around cases such as *Charlie Hebdo* (see Candea, forthcoming). Alongside the "moral narrative of modernity," with its image of "words and pictures [as] vehicles for the transmission of opinion or information among otherwise autonomous and unengaged parties" (Keane 2009, 57)[5] and its vision of subjects as self-owning authors (Asad 2013), lie a number of other aesthetics and semiotic ideologies of free speech. Some of them are at cross-purposes with these familiar delineations of the modern self. For instance, the repeated references to courage and bravery in justifications for publishing the cartoons draw their conviction from a well-established, yet very different vision of free speakers to that of disengaged,

5 Keane (2009, 58–60) himself acknowledges the multiplicity of language ideologies in liberal settings.

abstracted transactors of meanings. Conversely, the move through which critics of *Charlie Hebdo* (or earlier, *Jyllands Posten*), dismiss such appeals to courage as empty rhetoric, recall the concerns over the parrhesiastic style as a route to flattering one's audience, while safely reaffirming its prejudices. Similarly, the frequent discussions of taste and aesthetics that gravitate towards *Charlie Hebdo*'s "ugly, ugly" drawings (CM 2015), feed off of concerns with decorum, moderation, and shame that have never left the ambit of liberal discussions.

In 2007, a Parisian court cleared *Charlie Hebdo* of having broken the French freedom of the press law for (re)publishing cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad (see Candea, forthcoming). This same court is also the setting in which French intellectuals and public figures come to settle their affairs of "honour and consideration" in a legal tradition that harks back self-consciously to the late-nineteenth-century culture of duelling (Candea 2019a; cf. Whitman 2000). As part of their decision in the *Charlie Hebdo* case, the judges noted that some of the drawings could be taken to damage the "honour and consideration" of Muslims, yet that *Charlie Hebdo* was not seeking to "wound" (*blesser*) Muslims but to take part in "a public debate which was in the general interest" (Pasamonik 2007). Thus when Mahmood's (2013, 76) Muslim interlocutor says that the *Jyllands Posten* drawing of the prophet "felt like it was a personal insult," they were speaking in a language that French law recognizes perfectly well. Something important is lost in the argument that such claims are inaudible because of a liberal semiotic ideology that "fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign – a relation founded not only on representation but also on what I will call attachment and cohabitation" (71). There are extensive resources within the broad cacophony of liberal semiotic ideologies for acknowledging attachment, cohabitation, and the relational injuries made through speech. In a detailed analysis of the court case (Candea, forthcoming), I have suggested that one might distinguish at least three modes in which freedom of speech was envisioned and enacted. At the risk of caricaturing them, one might briefly describe these as, respectively, a Habermasian concern with reasonable public discourse; a Bakhtinian passion for untrammeled excess; and a Foucauldian commitment to daring relational honesty. These modes entail very different semiotic ideologies, visions of personhood, and understandings of freedom, even though they coexist, ally, and clash within the discourses of liberal defenders of the cartoons and echo also among some of the cartoons' most vehement critics. While I do not have space to pursue this argument in detail here, the broader point is that, in asking why this particular relational claim to injury was so difficult to hear and could so easily be trumped by other concerns, we need to reach beyond stark contrasts between "our" representationalism and "their" relationalism, if only because contrasts cast in those terms are still, after all, "our" contrasts (cf. Strathern 1988, 19).

Freedom, Freedom Everywhere?

I have mainly focused in this chapter on one restricted problem: how to multiply our comparative account of the variety of liberal freedoms of speech. Important as this question is to anthropologists of Europe and America, this may seem a parochial concern for anthropologists more broadly. Worse, expending so much effort on elucidating and taking seriously "our own" complexity may seem like precisely the kind of navel-gazing that anthropology was built to unmake and move beyond. Critics will object that "we want anthropology to reach and remain in the far territory, out in the open, away from the ironical recesses of the liberal intellect and thus faithful to the project of exteriorizing reason – the project that, nolens volens, insistently takes our discipline out of the suffocation of the self" (Viveiros de Castro 2011, 132). Yet this parochial concern has the critical potential of unmaking certainties about the "us" and the "self." In doing justice to the complexity of liberal understandings of freedom of speech, we also allow ourselves to encounter – as something other than a counterprojection of "our own" concerns, other visions of freedom of speech, and alternatives to it, beyond that liberal conversation.

In closing, I should reiterate that I have here overdrawn, for the purposes of argument, the contrast between frontal and lateral comparisons. The two forms are deeply imbricated within anthropological arguments: grand frontal contrasts build on more modest lateral collections of instances; lateral comparisons work from and across cases each of which is often grounded in a frontal comparison on a smaller scale. Indeed, the forms themselves are variations of each other – as I have outlined elsewhere, one might think of frontal comparison as a special case of lateral comparison, a "mutation" that nonetheless retains many of its original features (Candea 2018).

The distinction is rather a matter of emphasis, a matter of where the account and the narrative are made to come to rest. Thus, one could easily draw together the various historical and philosophical strands outlined in the previous section into a singular account of liberal freedom of speech, particularly if we hedge this account with plentiful acknowledgments that there are exceptions, and order it internally by adding a direction of travel (away from enchantment, or honour, or shame, and towards the detached, self-possessed individual, for instance), or a contrast between "dominant" and "minor" strands. Or one could, as I have tried to do here, hold these various strands apart, bracket questions of priority or historical direction, while of course acknowledging that there are family resemblances and recombinant connections across these different liberal imaginaries of freedom of speech. The difference between these two comparative sensibilities is not likely to be amenable to empirical resolution – how do we finally settle the amount of real difference within and between conceptual traditions? Rather, which comparative device we choose

to emphasize is a matter of purpose. I have argued in this chapter that lateral comparison provides a more effective way of challenging the self-similarities of liberal debates over freedom of speech than a frontal comparative challenge, which in the end risks repeating the logic it seeks to undo.

This matters because, as I have noted above, there is a surprising kinship between frontal comparisons that reiterate a sharp contrast between "us" and them," and the quantitative visions of a world of contexts arranged along a single scale of degrees of freedom. The kinship is less surprising perhaps if we recall the way in which, in anthropology, critical visions of frontal comparison emerged out of, even as they sought to challenge, the gradualist visions of nineteenth-century evolutionism in which "we" played the role of an endpoint in a trajectory through multiple "thems." If there is fundamentally just one kind of difference (Heywood 2018), then it is an easy step to imagine it as a matter not of absolute or heuristic contrasts but of a scale of more or less.

By contrast, the lateral sensibility I have tried to evoke here challenges – in a more stable and reliable way than a frontal critique – the quantitative mapping of freedom from which this chapter began. These multiple versions and imaginaries of freedom of speech are not mutually fungible, either in putatively liberal contexts or anywhere else. There is no single scale along which the above cases can be ranked, as in a global index of freedoms. There is no single scale, not because evaluation is somehow abandoned and politics forgotten, but precisely because evaluation and politics are multiplied. There is no single scale because there are many scales.