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## The Power and Contexts of Cartooning

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*There is a centuries-long tradition in France of poking fun at the state and even the Catholic Church, but it is one thing to critique the rich and the powerful and another to satirise marginal immigrant communities.*

The first comics in American newspapers in the early 1900s were made for immigrants, who spoke little or no English. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was a huge influx of immigrants to the US, and newspapers realized that if they printed comics their circulation would surge.

The comics they printed were super popular with newly arrived immigrants who stood a much greater chance of understanding the contents when the stories told had pictures accompanying the texts. In fact, reading comics is a great way of learning a foreign language. Because these comics catered to an immigrant readership, they had a lot of references to different cultures. Many characters spoke an ethnically flavoured dialogue that was featured in their speech balloons, for example "The Katzenjammer Kids", in which the characters speak a German-flavoured English.



Source: "The Katzenjammer Kids" | [Wikimedia](#)

You might say that comics were the first art form to spring from a multicultural environment. But they weren't political; comics were multicultural family entertainment.

The French political satirical cartoon tradition...harks back to a period long before comics in newspapers were invented.

But to make a comparison between the comics or funnies, as they were called in the US with the political and satirical cartoons in France may not be correct. For instance, EP Unny in "Cartoons in our times need not be blunt instruments: Message has to be clear, not loud" compares the two. He first notes that the two forms are distinct, but then goes on to treat them as if they belong to the same tradition, drawing parallels between the immigrant friendly comics of the early 1900s with contemporary Mohammed caricatures which serve to alienate Muslim immigrants in France. This comparison does not stick in my opinion.

The French political satirical cartoon tradition is something completely different; it harks back to a period long before comics in newspapers were invented, and they flourished up until the French Revolution and after. The petit bourgeoisie that were at the forefront of the events leading up to the French Revolution had long had access to printing presses, and the political leaflets they turned out flourished in pre-revolutionary France. One very famous drawing depicts the French peasant carrying the nobility and clergy on his back who are flaunting their privileges. This is typical of the French satirical tradition, but the satire is aimed at the Church more than the religion itself.

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The gap between the church and the peasantry was great, economically, socially as well as intellectually insofar as the archbishop and bishops were mainly drawn from the aristocracy. By contrast, the parish priests came from peasant families and were often very poorly paid. The tradition of making fun of the powers-that-be, including the powerful church, dates back to the Enlightenment during which anti-king, nobility and church cartoons and pamphlets flourished. Many hold the view that political satire was a major influential force in the historical events of pre-revolution France.

In a useful introduction to the tradition of cartooning in France ([“Looking back at France’s Long tradition of Caricature”](#) ), there is the well-known drawing ‘The Pope’s briefing in 1791’, depicting a regular Frenchman wiping his behind with the statement issued by the pope. This was considered rather strong stuff at a time when the Catholic Church was still perceived as powerful and mighty.



Source: [Bibliothèque nationale de France](#)

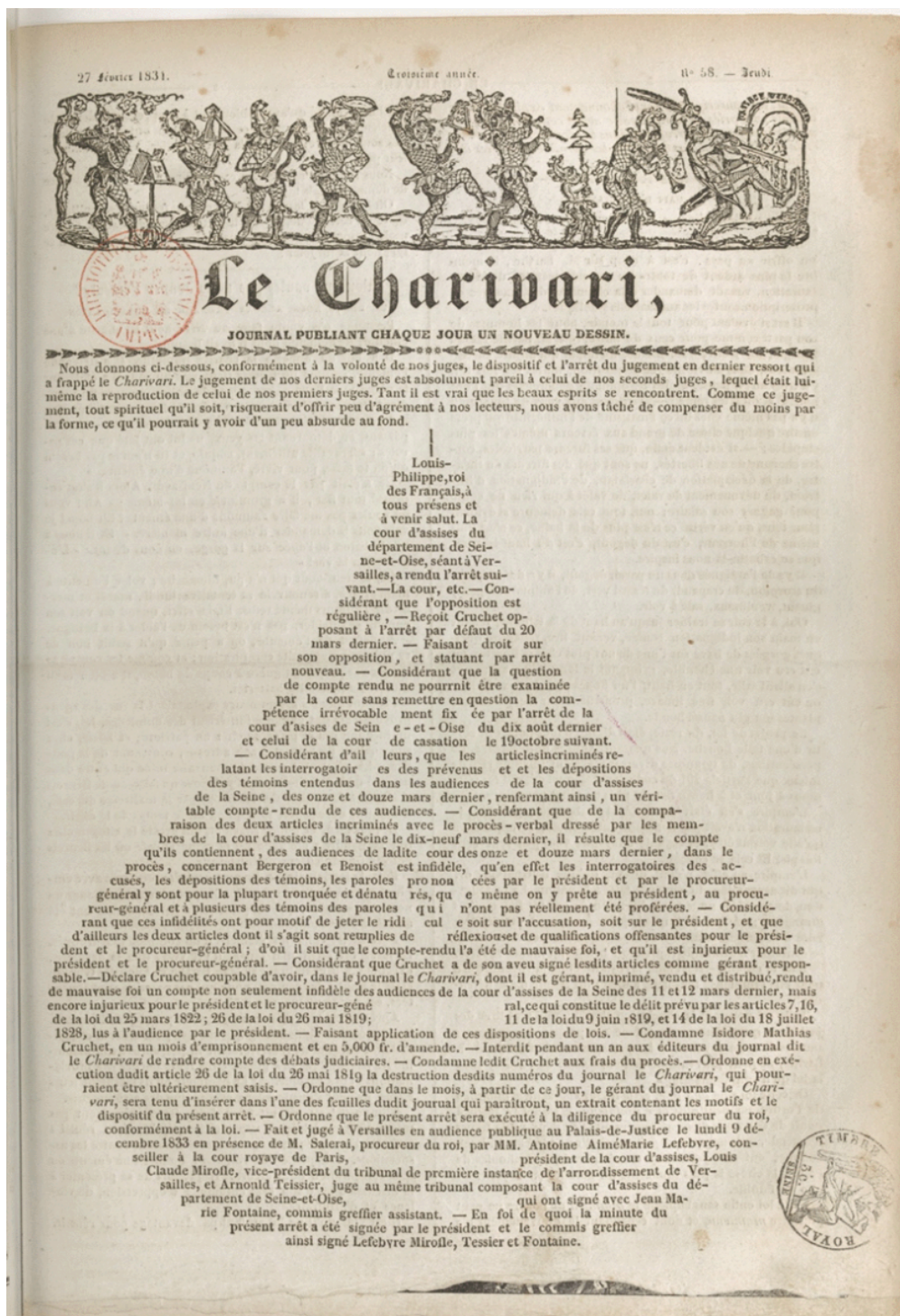
To be prosecuted by the inquisition was no joke. What is important to note is that the satire (and offence) depicted is aimed at the upper echelons. In the long run, however, this mostly urban anti-clergy sentiment alienated the religiously minded French peasantry, which was quite traditional despite being poor and exploited by the very same landowning church.

After these events, political upheavals in France continued throughout the century and cartooning also flourished. Many believe that the art form of political satirist drawing, not only in France, but elsewhere in Europe, reached its peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the



most celebrated satirical campaigns against the power elite in France was the case of King Louis Philippe with his pear-shaped head (the lead illustration above in this article). Daumier and other artists depicted the king as a pear or in the process of transforming into a pear. Publications were regularly seized, and artists and publishers were jailed for their disrespectful attacks on the crown.

Because *Le Charivari* had published pictures of the king in the shape of a pear, the publishers were brought to court. Part of the verdict was that the magazine was ordered to print the contents of the verdict on the front page. This they did, but the typography took the shape of a pear (see below).



Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France

I am convinced that the French cartoon magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, which is discussed at the end of the article cited above, feels that it is very much part of this anti-authoritarian tradition. They feel that satirizing Islam is an integral part of this proud tradition, which celebrates free speech and the right to criticize and make fun of power. But perhaps, and this is a difficult question, when you mock the religion of a minority in your country, you are not aiming at the powerful elites, such as the king and clergy, but at ordinary Muslim immigrants. True, there are Islamic autocratic regimes, very powerful indeed like in Saudi Arabia or in Iran, but this is not the situation in France.

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It would perhaps make a difference if, for example, Muslims in France were better organized, and had actual political power, if the French National Islamic Front existed. But these do not exist. Muslims in France are, in fact, an underprivileged minority making up a French underclass subject to discrimination, unemployment and social stigma, and where most come from countries that were colonized by France. To be clear, there is no justification for committing murder. The point here, however, is that unlike Islam, the Catholic Church has a pope at the top of its hierarchical structure; it is the leader of all Catholics no matter where they live in the world, and the Catholic church even has its own autonomous city state. Isn't aiming one's satire at such a tremendous political and social force perhaps a bit different than going after a poor, underprivileged minority?