

Reflexivity

Constance de Saint-Laurent and Vlad Petre Glăveanu

Do we need reflexivity in order to be creative? Many would probably be inclined to see a connection between a contemplative attitude and creativity, an image deeply rooted in our (frequently) romantic conception of the genius (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Rodin's well-known sculpture 'The Thinker' embodies this association, but it also opens up the question of what the creator is actually reflecting on. Reflexivity, as commonly defined in dictionaries, suggests turning towards oneself and, in this sense, if we assume Rodin's 'Thinker' is engaged in an act of reflexivity, perhaps he is deeply immersed in thought about his own condition. Is he self-absorbed? There is a crucial difference to be made between reflection and reflexivity. The old story of Narcissus tells us he was so much in love with his own image, his own reflection (in the water), that he drowned trying to reach it. Turning towards oneself, in order to foster creative action, needs, on the contrary, to create a *distance* between observer and observed, not collapse these two positions.

Here lies the paradox of reflexivity and, at the same time, the feature that makes it essential for creativity. The observer and the observed are one and the same person and yet, to avoid self-absorption, they need to be differentiated. We can think about other people and objects in the world but, in order to reflect on oneself, the self needs to become other to itself. This accomplishment both draws on our interactions with others and defines us as social beings (Gillespie, 2006; Mead, 1934). Our definition of reflexivity is thus fundamentally social – being reflective is not a solipsistic (as in the case of Narcissus) or solitary (as in the case of Rodin's 'Thinker') act. Reflexivity implies being able to take distance and look at one's self or action from an external position. This external position can be the one of another person that we are either in dialogue with or whose views we have internalised, or even our own self as we know

it from the past or imagine it in the future. All these positions facilitate *de-centration*, preventing us from becoming trapped in unitary, singular and egocentric views of self and world. Ultimately, such de-centration makes us flexible, creative (Glăveanu & Lubart, 2014), and capable of agentic action (Martin & Gillespie, 2010).

Reflexivity is important for creativity because it builds on our ability to develop new perspectives on reality (see also Chapter 13), while turning these perspectives *back* on the self and our ongoing action. This marks the difference between creative potential (i.e., being able to generate different novel ideas) and creative achievement (i.e., using these ideas to understand things differently and act in new ways). Our argument here is that engaging in reflexivity not only generates new potential understandings of self and its situation, but prompts the person to imagine and act upon these possibilities. Through this, we are not only postulating the crucial role of others for developing a position of reflexivity, but claim that such a position is intrinsically related to (creative) action. Being reflective supports creative expression precisely because it goes beyond constructing a Narcissus-like ‘reflection’ of the self; it places *multiple* positions about self and world in active *dialogue* with each other. This dynamic is crucial for the work of artists, scientists and inventors, but it also permeates creativity in everyday life and in the social domain. The illustration that follows explores the link between creativity and reflexivity within society. It focuses on a tragic event that shook public opinion in France and internationally, occasioning unprecedented levels of social mobilisation, engaging a wide range of positions and generating a variety of (socially creative) perspectives and responses.

‘Je suis Charlie’

On 7 January 2015, two armed men entered the offices of the French journal *Charlie Hebdo* and, on their exit, left behind 11 dead and 22 wounded. The satirical journal had published caricatures of Mahomet in 2006, leading its main editor and most famous caricaturist, Charb, to be identified by several Islamist terrorist organisations as a priority target. In the days following the attack, a policewoman and the clients of a kosher shop in Paris became victims of similar acts of violence.

These events led to reactions of an unprecedented magnitude in France and to a unanimous condemnation of the attacks from the international community. The public response culminated on 11 January 2015, when the French president and 50 other heads of state walked in Paris, followed by millions of people. Not even the end of World



Figure 15.1 Demonstration in Paris

Source: By Oliver Ortelpa, image licensed under the Creative Commons.

War II had brought so many demonstrators to the streets of Paris (see Figure 15.1). Around the world, people showed their support through the slogan '*Je suis Charlie*' (invented by a French designer in the early hours of the tragedy), and by organising local gatherings.

Moreover, both professional and non-professional cartoonists started publishing commemorative drawings expressing grief and resistance: men with pens defying armed terrorists became a common sight in newspapers and on the web. The image in Figure 15.2 uses the same general theme, of the pencil, to show solidarity with the victims. These impressive acts of individual and collective creativity in the weeks following the event included, besides cartoons, music, videos, and written pieces that reflected on what had happened. Beyond mourning the dead, many of these creative acts also expressed the need of their authors to understand why one could die 'just for a drawing'. Through their actions, these authors gave new meanings not only to the tragedy, but also to the simple act of drawing. Furthermore, their creativity was both occasioned by and gave birth to reflective processes, whose dynamic is discussed in the next section.

Reflecting on Charlie

Despite a feeling of 'national unity' that swept the country, divergent voices soon appeared. Beyond the foreseeable debate on freedom of

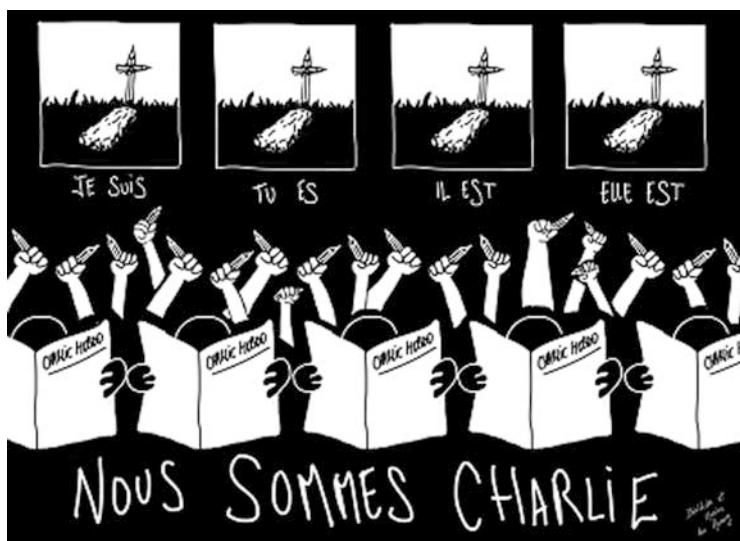


Figure 15.2 'Nous sommes Charlie' (We are Charlie)

Source: Marine des Mazery – homage by CESAN students; image licensed under the Creative Commons.

speech versus respecting others' beliefs, multiple lines of fracture started to emerge. Was it normal to march behind heads of state that would have jailed *Charlie Hebdo's* journalists in their own countries? Should we write new laws to prevent terrorism? Should we condemn those who did not show support to the journal? And what does it mean to be a laic country? As it soon turned out, marching together did not mean that people gave the same meaning to the events, especially in the poor suburbs such as the ones the terrorists came from. In the end, some people started saying that they did not feel, after all, that they were that much like 'Charlie'. While, for many, it was scandalous not to identify with the victims and 'become' Charlie, sadly, more than the dozen islamophobe attacks on mosques that followed the events did not cause the same outrage... Was this 'national unity' made against those who did not feel or think in the same way as the majority?

Although it is easy to ignore dissonant voices, especially in the wake of such a large movement of solidarity, it is undeniably necessary to engage with these different perspectives in order to avoid the sterile dichotomisation of the public sphere between 'us' and 'them'. Finding new solutions for society implies taking new perspectives on the world

and trying to understand what can lead some people to commit such terrible actions. Looking at ourselves *through the eyes of others* is a rare opportunity to see what kind of society our collective actions create for them and, thus, how we could change it. Unfortunately, not everyone takes such a position, and many even condemn the attempt to look at the world through the eyes of someone who did so much wrong, especially if it means considering them as victims, in one way or another. However, many attempts to become reflective were made, including one by a group of teachers working in schools from difficult areas. In the days following the attacks, they published a text in *Le Monde* entitled 'How could we let our students become murderers?' (for the original text in French, see Boussard et al., 2015). Their argument captures very well the dynamic of reflexivity and its connexion to creativity, as we now briefly explain.

In this article, the authors start by expressing their grief as they consider the journalists killed to be like brothers, sharing the same ideas and ideals. But, after hearing recordings of the terrorists talking to journalists, they realise that the other 'protagonists' of the attacks are also familiar to them:

If the crimes of these killers are unbearable, what is terrible is that they speak French, with the accent of suburban youth. These two killers are like our students. The traumatism, for us, is also to hear this voice, these words. This is what made us feel responsible.

Such a realisation prompts them to look at themselves through the eyes of their students: how else could they understand why their students would do such a thing? To do this, they start with a simple question: What do we look like for them? And they write:

But let us make the effort of changing the point of view, and let us try to look at ourselves as our students see us. We are well-dressed, have comfortable shoes, or at least we are very evidently beyond these material contingencies and we do not fantasise about the consumption goods our students dream of: we don't perhaps also because we would have the means to own them.

From a very basic observation – seeing that one is 'well dressed', just as you would notice after looking in a mirror – the authors move to a deeper reflection about what their appearance might mean to their students. They do not lose their own perspective – they still refer to their

own relation to 'consumption goods' at the end; neither do they ignore the perspective of their students. Instead, they build on the difference between them, which allows them to look at the situation from a new angle:

No one seems to want to assume responsibility. The responsibility of a state that lets imbeciles and psychotics languish in prison and become the toys of manipulators¹; of a school that we deprive of means and support; of a city policy that bounds and coops up slaves (without official papers, elector cards, names nor teeth) in suburban cesspools. The responsibility of politicians who do not understand that virtue is only taught through example. [...] So, let us open our eyes on the situation, to understand how we arrived here, to act and to build a society free from racism, anti-Semitism, a laic and cultivated society, more fair, free, equalitarian and fraternal.

This social critique ends with a proposition for the future: we need to open our eyes to the social conditions of others and how we might be responsible for them. But these teachers do not stop here; they also propose a new way of understanding the situation:

Those in *Charlie Hebdo* were our brothers, as were the Jews killed for their religion, Porte de Vincennes, in Paris: we mourn them. Their killers were orphans, placed in foster care: wards of the nation,² children of France. Our children thus killed our brothers. This is the exact definition of a tragedy. In any culture, it provokes a feeling that has not been evoked in the past few days: shame.

By using a cultural tool familiar to them – the genres of literature – they give a new meaning to the situation: it is a tragedy, because their students, the children of the state, killed their brothers, their ideological equals. This allows them to name and legitimise what they feel: shame. It also permits the integration of the multiple perspectives into a single narrative, making what happened more 'comprehensible' in some ways. But, most interestingly, their discursive move renders both perspectives inseparable and, through a powerful metaphor, allows people to rethink the notions of responsibility, belonging, and otherness. Instead of collapsing all perspectives into one – a single '*Je suis*' where dissonant voices are isolated outside the group – they create, through reflexivity, a metaphor that encourages all to be, in turn, reflective. It is a call to find new solutions to social issues, solutions that bear

the ethical mark of understanding self and other as interchangeable positions.

After Charlie

The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and its aftermath illustrate both an unexpected crisis, and the individual and collective efforts made to overcome it. If creativity is required within situations where there is no learned or practised solution (Torrance, 1988), then the tragedy in France certainly qualifies as such a situation. It is perhaps too soon to appreciate fully whether many of the individual and collective answers to *Charlie Hebdo* are 'creative'; they certainly are unprecedented and, as shown, invite people to reflect on the events, on themselves and on the society in which they live. To answer such events by engaging in reflexivity, as citizens and as communities, is already a rather creative initiative. It avoids two other common but unproductive 'solutions': on the one hand, self-indulgence in a glorified image of the in-group and denying that society itself has any problems (a Narcissus type of answer); on the other, aggressively blaming minorities and other ethnic or religious groups for the tragedy (finding scapegoats). To be reflective means, here, to accept the complexity of self–other relations and to be able, simultaneously, to see *the self as other and the other as self* (see also Chapter 11). This is the basis for a creative way of dealing with this crisis and, perhaps, of making it a turning point towards a better future for all. The fact that neither revolutionary creative outcomes can be expected to emerge from situations such as *Charlie Hebdo*, nor easy solutions accepted by everyone, is specific for societal creativity (see Glăveanu, 2015). Collective problems are defined by the multitude of positions they involve and, as such, being creative in the social domain is intrinsically linked to being reflective and questioning one's own perspective.

But is there any use for reflexivity in creative action outside societal, inter-group, or inter-personal problems? *Charlie Hebdo* might seem like a rather extreme and particular example on which to focus. What about the activity of painters, of scientists, or of teachers and students in school, and so on? Regardless of domain, the need to engage with and understand the perspectives of others is always present. What reflexivity does it prompt us to look at our own position from the standpoint of others; in this way, reflexivity can help us envision new possibilities of action within any given situation. If creativity draws on noticing and acting on difference (see Chapter 5), then reflexivity helps us engage with difference creatively, without collapsing different positions into

a single perspective, that of the self, or dichotomising them, in a ‘us versus them’ dynamic. And, if the above is the case, then a key question emerges: how often do we become reflective about our relation to others and the world around us? And, more importantly, how can we support reflexivity in ways that are conducive for the creativity of both individuals and societies as a whole?

Notes

1. The investigations that followed the attacks revealed that prison had played an important role in the radicalisation of the killers.
2. Two of the killers were orphans, placed in foster care and made wards of the nation while still very young.

References

- Boussard, D., Louys, V., Richer, I., & Robert, C. (2015). ‘Comment avons-nous pu laisser nos élèves devenir des assassins?’. *Le Monde*, 14 January, p. 12.
- Gillespie, A. (2006). *Becoming other: From social interaction to self-reflection*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2015). Developing society: Reflections on the notion of societal creativity. In A.-G. Tan & C. Perleth (Eds.), *Creativity, culture, and development* (pp. 183–200). Singapore: Springer.
- Glăveanu, V. P., & Lubart, T. (2014). Decentring the creative self: How others make creativity possible in creative professional fields. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 23(1), 29–43.
- Martin, J., & Gillespie, A. (2010). A neo-Meadian approach to human agency: Relating the social and the psychological in the ontogenesis of perspective-coordinating persons. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 44, 252–272.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self & society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Montuori, A., & Purser, R. (1995). Deconstructing the lone genius myth: Toward a contextual view of creativity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 35(3), 69–112.
- Torrance, E. P. (1988). The nature of creativity as manifest in its testing. In R. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 43–75). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.