

The French 9/11

CrimethInc.

December 14, 2015

A dialogue with members of the French news source Lundimatin comparing the aftermath of September 11, 2001 with the situation in France today. For more background on the situation in France, read our Letter from Paris; for our perspective on how this relates to the so-called migrant crisis, read The Borders Won't Protect You, But They Might Get You Killed.

Bonjour, France, and welcome to team War on Terror! For fourteen years, you've looked askance at us across the Atlantic, raising your eyebrows at US foreign policy. Now you get to have your own state of emergency, your own far-right party in power, your own warrantless wiretapping and waterboarding scandals and Department of Homeland Security. Where will you put your Guantanamo Bay? (Finally, French fries and Freedom fries will mean the same thing!) For maximum effect, consider starting a new war that has nothing to do with the cause of the attacks, so you can destabilize another region and draw additional populations into the conflict.

We Americans know all about this stuff. For decades now, the US has been the policeman of the world, while social democratic France has been its comfortable bourgeoisie. But in the 21st century, everyone has to take part in policing. To preserve France, the liberal alternative to the US, it is now necessary to copy the US model of anti-terrorism. Permit us to show you the ropes.

[Lundimatin:] The day after the Paris attacks, Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared, "What I want to say to the French people is that we're at war." He would repeat the word "war" nine times within a nine-minute speech.

"Because we are at war, we're taking exceptional measures. We will strike in France but also in Syria and Iraq and we will respond on the same level as those attacks with the determination and will to destroy."

Within a few days, France was bombing Syria. This war rhetoric is coming back again and again. However, and this is even more palpable two weeks later, this war (outside and inside the country) doesn't imply a general mobilization of the population. Or, on a minor level (no enlistment campaign, no war efforts): be watchful, tell on your neighbors, let us handle this, endorse our security measures. "Be cowardly," to sum it up. Of course, there's a slight rise in enlistment in the army, but in a general way, the "Bataclan Generation" is left powerless.

On a TV show, the day after the attacks, a dandy Parisian writer speaks: "It is no longer possible to be indifferent. I have absolutely no solutions. So we have some sort of drive for violence that grows within oneself... Just like the Marquise de Merteuil puts it: 'So it will be war.' So here it is, it is the war of our generation. I spoke about 9/11 but the second time is in my town. And I have no idea of what could be a solution. I feel powerless..."

Of course, it reminds us of Bush's speech on 9/11: "We're united to win the war against terrorism." What did it mean for American citizens then to engage in a war against terrorism?

September 11, 2001 was the last great televised event of the twentieth century, the apogee of a half century of spectatorship. Everyone from staunch Republicans to inveterate anarchists huddled in front of the television awaiting updates with a sort of passive

urgency. Every conversation in every city, state, and nation focused on New York. The fallen towers were the epicenter of reality, and the zones radiating outward from them were less and less real.

Much of the US population felt more stunned than bellicose. Yet certain politicians had prepared a flood of new legislation and military interventions in advance for precisely such an opportunity. This was the context in which Bush made his famous open-ended declaration of war.

Both the media coverage and Bush's declaration must be understood as complementary military operations on the field of public attention, preparing the ground for what came next. It was not just a question of spreading fear and vengeance; it also caused the average viewer to feel insignificant, sidelined by the spectacle of world events. As the World Trade Center attacks monopolized public discourse, everything else receded from view: the chain of events leading up to the attacks, the lives of the Afghans and Iraqis threatened by reprisals, and the agency of the spectators.

This was the same intersection of war rhetoric from above and feelings of powerlessness from below that you are describing in France today. Participating in the War on Terror looks a lot different than what our grandparents did in the Second World War.

To understand this, we have to go back a bit and look at the changes that are taking place in society at large. The industrial era was characterized by the total mobilization of the populace in the processes of mass production and mass destruction. From the *Levée en masse* through the First World War, massive segments of the population were mustered into the military machine. Of course, this *total mobilization* was risky for the people at the helm: just as an economy that depended on the industrial proletariat could be paralyzed by the general strike, a form of warfare that involved arming a considerable part of the population entailed the risk that the army would give way to "the people in arms." From the Paris Commune to the global wave of uprisings starting in 1917, this repeatedly threatened the institutions of power.

In the post-industrial era, new technologies have rendered the majority of the population redundant on the factory floor and the battlefield proper. But contrary to the utopian promises of 19th century social reformers, this hasn't freed us of the need to work or the dangers of warfare; rather, it renders everything factory, everything battlefield. Thanks to capitalist globalization, all that was previously separated now interpermeates: populations, economies, conflicts. Today's world is not so much divided into rival nations as into concentrically circled gated communities; the increasingly precarious and volatile job market in the United States and France mirrors more dramatic instability in North Africa and the Middle East, which can no longer be quarantined outside the gates.

For a population to be militarized in this context, it is not a question of pressing a gun into every pair of palms and setting a helmet on every head. Rather, it is a matter of inducing the population to identify with a certain kind of order, the imposition of which takes place within the national borders as much as outside them. From the speech that Bush made on September 11, it was already clear that the same National Guardsmen that were to be sent to Iraq would sooner or later be deployed in the United States as well. Bush's task, on that

day, was not to persuade his countrymen to enlist to fight overseas so much as it was to maximize the number of people who would acquiesce to the militarization of their daily lives.

This declaration of war served to obscure the possibility of *any other war*, any other stakes for which we might fight outside the framework of defending the state against its rivals. You could be for the state or against it, to paraphrase Bush, but it was the only struggle conceivable. Thus the authorities in the United States and France and their symmetrical adversaries in al-Qaeda and ISIS hope to assert their conflict as the only one in history, sidelining “the people in arms”—the demonstrators who shut down the Seattle WTO summit in 1999, the crowds who occupied Tahrir Square and Taksim Square, the protesters who oppose the COP 21.

In the speech that I just quoted, the Prime Minister précises that “we will strike in France,” and that “exceptional measures” will be taken. On the very day of the attacks, President Holland declared the state of emergency. That means an imbalance within the power structures (a transfer of power from the judicial to the executive, or rather, the administrative). However, this state of emergency, declared everywhere in the country, doesn’t look how one would imagine of a state of siege, with curfews, restrictions, and the like. On the contrary, it takes the form of a call to go out for drinks and to consume. (“Consume, it’s the festive season, spend money, live!” declared Valls). The day after the attacks, in the “provinces” (all cities that aren’t Paris), and even a week later in Paris, in the streets of the city centers, you couldn’t “feel” the state of emergency, or at least the atmosphere that is supposed to go with it.

The state of emergency actually seems to work in a really selective manner: this demonstration is banned, that neighborhood is under curfew, this person is put under house arrest or in jail, etc. Moreover, the state of emergency allows the police (freed from certain judicial constraints) to accelerate certain investigations: arrests in the organized crime milieus, in drug dealing cases, raids at activists’ houses. Finally, these additional powers given to the police set loose a certain police violence, like we saw at a demonstration against the state of emergency last week in Paris. And that, even in operations that have nothing to do with the state of emergency.

Immediately after 9/11, Bush arrogated himself full powers. That took place within the very first days, that is, even before the Patriot Act was voted through. What did that change, concretely? In terms of “atmosphere,” police operations, or the general behaviors of the police?

Here is what you can expect in France, based on what we experienced in the United States after September 11. In the wake of the attacks, the authorities will stage *spectacles of preparedness*, clumsily showing off their security apparatus. At the same time, they will urge you to show your courage in the face of terror—by going out shopping. (For a clue to what caused this mess, take note that the best thing you can do to support the war effort is to carry on with what you were already doing.) The police, too, will intensify what they were already doing—all the profiling, surveillance, and repression directed at the general population—while partisans of civil liberties focus on symbolic outrages against “the innocent.”

The first changes will be cosmetic: checkpoints on the train, security alerts on the news, highly publicized investigations of suspected terrorists. It will take months or years for the

long-term effects to set in. By that time, there will be a phalanx of armored riot police at every demonstration, a host of new state organizations prying into every aspect of your life, and an array of new laws to deploy against anyone who is concerned about these things.

They will justify all this by saying that state security is in danger. In fact, if we understand state security as a methodology for maintaining control, we see that the security of the state thrives in these conditions. This is another sense in which the ambitions of the United States and France coincide with the goals of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The control that all of these parties seek can be expressed by killing, but it can also be expressed by making us live in a certain way (and no other). The underdogs are more likely to rely on butchery, while the dominant powers can present themselves as the guardians of life—in the same way that a weak army will destroy resources it knows it cannot hold, while a powerful army will preserve them intact for its own use. In both cases, our lives are reduced to playing pieces in conflicts that have nothing to do with our safety.

Pundits will celebrate the victims as martyrs who were killed for being ordinary: in the media narrative, they become *the martyrs of daily life*. But the authorities intend to invade daily life, too, no less than the attackers did—an invasion paralleling the interventions they propose to carry out overseas. And all this invasive action, from bombings in Syria to racist raids and regulations in Paris, will only generate more resentment, leaving more frustrated young people ready to martyr themselves and others for revenge.

To summarize this a single phrase: *state security endangers*.

Let's go back to what the rhetoric of war on terrorism allows. After the Parisian dandy, on that same TV show on November 14, a right-wing Franco-Israeli lawyer offered "a message of optimism": "France has defeated many enemies within the last 1500 years. That's why we must be optimistic, and galvanize ourselves... We must choose in which state we are, at war, then we must act like it. It was done before in the 1960s and '70's, in England with the IRA, the European Court for Human rights had validated it. A direct and imminent threat to national security was needed, and we are in such a situation right now... All the people on file as dangerous Islamists must be put in retention centers just like De Gaulle did with the FLN [Algerian Liberation Front] and OAS [Secret Armed Organization, a right-wing underground movement that fought in Algeria and France against the independence of Algeria]. If we are at war, we act as if we actually are, or else we are just not at war."

He is probably right on to speak of the struggle against FLN or IRA. The tradition of antiterrorism is identical with the lineage of counter-insurgency. The last time the state of emergency was declared in France was during the 2005 banlieues riots. And before that, it was during the Algerian war. Today, antiterrorism doesn't seem to be directed against a whole territory—it is more selective—nor against a precise enemy; rather, it is directed against the general population.

In the United States, despite all the efforts to preserve the amnesia upon which this nation is founded, it was not long before it came out that the attacks of September 11 were the result of the previous round of counter-insurgency, during which the CIA funded the same mujahideen that became enemy number one. Whether you call it counter-insurgency or anti-terrorism, relentlessly interfering with a target population tends to produce iatrogenic

effects—though this is not necessarily a disadvantage for those in the security business. In 2001, even as critics charged that the War on Terror would only produce more terrorists, no one could imagine that fourteen years later a vast swath of land previously governed by essentially secular Ba'athist regimes with no ties to al-Qaeda would be controlled by Islamic fundamentalists determined to bring about the Apocalypse.

Opponents of this protection racket would do well to unearth the backstory of the attacks, seeking the sources of the social tensions that produced them. Not for the sake of changing state policy (a hopeless endeavor) nor simply to discredit it (as we are not simply in a PR contest), but rather to figure out who might make good allies in the struggle against the state, if only there were an option other than complete submission or fundamentalist jihad.

Think of the refugees fleeing ISIS right now, who le Pen wants to trap in Syria. (Imagine French politicians sending refugees back to Hitler in the 1930s!) Caught between fundamentalists to the East and nationalists to the West, they have reason to find common cause with anyone who opposes both sides of this dichotomy. Here, once more, the politicians and their ostensible opponents concur that the refugees should be forced to choose between them rather than forming a third side against them both.

And Syria is only the most obvious case among many. In addition to the examples you cite, a state of emergency was also declared in 1984 in French territory in New Caledonia, where Louise Michel was exiled after the Paris Commune. That forgotten theater of contemporary colonialism completes the triangle with Algeria (the former colony) and the banlieues (the internal colony). If you pan back from these three examples of ongoing French economic and military intervention, it is not so hard to understand why some people might be angry enough to join ISIS.

Like the United States, France is not a discrete people occupying a specific body of land, but a worldwide colonial project drawing in resources at great human expense. French corporations backed by French troops are still extracting resources in nations like Mali and the Central African Republic; you can't compare the parties responsible for the November 13 attacks in Paris and the November 20 attacks in Bamako, but both events are the result of the French government deploying the military in conflict zones to pursue economic objectives. The same counter-insurgency strategies that are already in use in Mali, CAR, Chad, Libya, and elsewhere could cause any one of them to metastasize into another Syria, justifying further anti-terror measures within France proper.

It's been said before, but it's worth saying again: the greater the imbalances that are imposed on a society, the more control it takes to preserve them.

This state of emergency (which allows raids, searches, and house arrests without the permission of a judge) could be extended for six months and added to the constitution (which will make it impossible to contest juridically). Furthermore, some measures could be sustained—house arrests, for instance. Finally, new antiterrorist laws might be voted soon. The government talks about allowing police raids and night searches without even the oversight of a prosecutor, and the creation of a new felony: obstruction of a police search. They discuss gathering and making accessible all types of files (including social security files), extending video surveillance.

All rented cars would have GPS, police custody would be extended to eight days in terrorist cases, and so on.

All these are temporary measures that will probably become permanent—the full power of the police (and not only in terrorist cases) inscribed in law. We can't help but think about the Patriot Act, the military order, and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Here, after two weeks, a few left-wing politicians began to worry about what they call a “permanent state of emergency.” It's the least they could do, after having criticized the Patriot Act for more than ten years. How were all those measures instituted in the US? Was there a general assent? Indifference? Were they contested?

What changed in the work of the police? And in the general assent of the population to surveillance that was later known (cf. Snowden) to be more and more total? How is it that once the state of emergency is declared, its suspension is no longer possible, and there is no turning back?

From this vantage point, it's difficult to distinguish which of the changes in policing that have taken place in the US over the past fifteen years should be attributed to the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, and which would have taken place anyway. I'm inclined to believe that they would have occurred regardless, as it would be impossible to maintain the inequalities in this society without ever-increasing police violence and control. But the discourse of anti-terrorism was instrumental in legitimizing these changes and consolidating support for them.

The narrative of anti-terrorism certainly helped to speed the introduction of military technology into US police forces. Today, the ongoing militarization of the police is justified with a discourse of security, often without reference to terrorism. Even small town police forces often have at least one tank in their arsenal. What begins as an exception continues as the new normal.

We have also seen changes in the ways that police and FBI pursue cases. Rather than simply going after radicals who play an important role in organizing or direct action, they seek easy results by entrapping inexperienced individuals who had no prior intention to break the law—especially peripheral targets who don't know how to protect themselves from agents provocateurs. Muslims have by far gotten the worst of this treatment.

Another sign of the changes in policing is the sheer numbers of officers deployed at demonstrations. When the famous summit of the World Trade Organization took place in Seattle in 1999, only 400 policemen were charged with maintaining control of at least 40,000 protesters—a ratio of 1:100. By contrast, when the G20 met in Pittsburgh in 2009, at least 4000 police augmented by National Guardsmen converged from around the country in response to a couple thousand protesters—a ratio of 2:1 at best. A year later, at the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto, protesters faced off against more than 19,000 security officials with a budget of nearly a billion dollars. As Canada has not witnessed anything on the scale of the September 11 or November 13 attacks, this underscores that these changes are systemic rather than incidental, even if the anti-terror narrative has smoothed the way for them.

Today, the most significant protests in the United States are not occurring at mass mobilizations or as a part of activist campaigns. Rather, they are spontaneous responses to the police violence that kills over a thousand people every year. The same National Guardsmen that were deployed in Iraq have been sent to Ferguson and Baltimore to quell these uprisings. Here we see the security promised by the state in its ultimate form: the police shoot you, then the National Guard occupies your city. The authorities end by doing to their own citizens what the terrorists first did to them, only with the full protection of the law.

We know this old tune: the exceptional laws against “extremists” (terrorists, pedophiles, hooligans) always end up being applied to the whole population. An example often put forward in France is the use of DNA files. At first, this was promoted as only targeting pedophiles, then all sexual crimes, then criminals... and now, if you even steal a piece of chewing gum, they will take your DNA and keep it for 20 years.

We said it earlier: the administrative raids and searches (more than 2500 were conducted within the first two weeks) had no direct link with the Paris attacks, and they also concerned other forms of criminality (drugs and guns). And finally, they ended up targeting political activists or people considered as such: 24 people were put under house arrest during the COP 21, while many more were subjected to police raids and searches. The justification of these operations is really vague—for example, “having relationships with the violent anarchist movement” or “being willing to go to Paris for the COP 21 demonstrations.” Political demonstrations are forbidden all over the country on the pretext that demonstrators could be targeted by terrorists and that they require too much police mobilization—while all Christmas events and other sports events are allowed. The only COP 21 demonstrations that were tolerated were on the condition of having no slogans or banners. Last Sunday, 5000 people gathered in Paris to defy the state of emergency. At that occasion again, the attacks of the 13th were used to discredit demonstrators who were accused of having soiled the memory of the victims. (Some candles that were on the Place de la République ended up being thrown at the police.)

2001 was a peak in the anti-globalization movement. It was right after Seattle and in July there was Genoa. How did 9/11 affect the movement in the US in terms of police measures, as well as call for national unity, war, the memory of the victims, and so on?

Immediately after the attacks of September 11, social movements of all kinds froze up around the United States. Radicals were afraid that the authorities would take advantage of the opportunity to mop them up. Participants in the so-called anti-globalization movement, accustomed to seeing themselves portrayed on television as the primary opponents of the status quo, weren't prepared to be pushed out of the headlines by a bigger, badder enemy. Momentum gave way to demoralization and malaise.

This turned out to be a mistake. At the time, for all their absolutist rhetoric, the authorities were still disorganized and unsure how broadly they could apply the category of terrorism without turning the population against them. The real danger came later, after all those movements had splintered and died down and the authorities could target the former participants individually. The full force of military technology wasn't deployed against demonstrators un-

til the Miami Free Trade Area of the Americas ministerial in November 2003; the eco-terror and entrapment cases now known as the Green Scare didn't begin until the end of 2005; the SSSS classification limiting the flying privileges of certain individuals without recourse didn't become widespread until later than that. All the things we had feared came to pass, but not immediately. Ironically, our best hope would have been to intensify our organizing, making connections with the other populations that were being targeted and challenging the public discourse of anti-terrorism before it took root. Even today, we are still struggling to build ties of solidarity with immigrants, Muslim communities, and others on the receiving end of state repression who should be our natural allies in taking on the state.

In some cases, we didn't trust the general population enough to imagine that others might also reject these impositions on their freedoms. This was another role the media played, representing the views of "average US citizens"; we should not have taken those representations at face value. As a consequence, when ordinary people stood up against additional gratuitous security measures for air passengers—what some dubbed "the war on moisture"—it caught us flat-footed.

In the long run, the greatest challenge was to keep the new security measures from becoming normalized as an inevitable part of life. You can refuse to go through the X-ray machine, forcing the security personnel to search you in full view of the rest of the people waiting in line, but eventually such sights become so familiar that they produce resignation rather than outrage.

The other mistake we made was to fall back into rearguard, reactionary struggles, letting the authorities and their liberal critics define the terms of the conflicts of our time. In the days leading up to September 11, anarchists across the country were preparing for the protests at the International Monetary Fund meeting scheduled to take place in Washington, DC at the end of September. When the attacks occurred and that meeting was cancelled, some people went forward with what became the first anti-war protests—but as with the COP 21 protests, they were smaller and less fierce than they would have been otherwise. Liberal organizers took advantage of the opportunity to make an argument against confrontational tactics, and for the most part anarchists complied, fearing the police would have a free hand to employ violence.

The anti-capitalist movement, which had assertively set its own agenda and discourse since at least 1999, quickly gave way to a single-issue anti-war movement dominated by authoritarian socialist and liberal groups. This was the reaction on the level of social movements, paralleling the reaction carried out by the authorities. For years, anarchists had to struggle yet again against resurgent doctrinaire pacifism (for isn't the opposite of war—peace?) and to regain the territory ceded in the discourse of opposition. Even the most militant anarchists ended up adopting a role as the risk-tolerant front lines of a movement that was fundamentally reformist, in hopes that more confrontational tactics would necessarily convey a more radical critique.

Eventually, of course, the Bush administration burned up all of its political capital and the liberal backlash began. Leftist democrats appropriated the critiques we had formulated and the symbols we had invested with meaning, draining them of our values. We had made this easy for them by toning down our politics and focusing on establishing a common front—not

realizing that sooner or later, the tide was bound to turn, and we would be better positioned if we continued to assert our own agendas and priorities, even contra mundum. Obama took office utilizing a watered-down version of the rhetoric about hope and change that had first arisen from our networks—and once again this paralyzed radicals, who didn't know how to take a stand against the first black President when he seemed to be bringing such a difficult era to a close. In fact, he carried on practically all the policies Bush had initiated.

Despite all our errors, the escalation to war overseas and anti-terror policies at home ultimately did not pay off for the Bush administration or its successors. The hegemony that the patriotic pro-government position seemed to enjoy in 2002 was squandered entirely by 2008, and by 2011 a new anti-capitalist movement with fewer illusions had picked up momentum. During Occupy Wall Street, it was typical to see veterans of the Iraq war facing off against police lines, screaming belligerently at the officers opposite them. By any metric, the stability of the US government has eroded since 2001. Every time the authorities escalate the conflicts they expose us to and the control they hope to subject us to, they are taking a big risk.

Looking at the COP 21 and the ignominious cop-out of all the official organizations that cancelled their protests on orders from the state, we can see that it is becoming more and more difficult to straddle the middle ground between docility and opposition. Even the tamest environmentalists should be able to work out that the choice between being killed by terrorists and being killed by climate change is no choice at all. The more the authorities grasp for total control, the more every attempt to adjust some small aspect of life will inevitably become a confrontation with the forces of control in their entirety. As the stakes get higher, we may find huge numbers of people unexpectedly pushed into our camp.

To our comrades in France, we wish you the courage to stick to your convictions, the confidence to choose your battles on your own terms, and the good fortune to find others alongside whom to fight. *Bonne chance.*

find each other.



CrimethInc.
The French 9/11
December 14, 2015

Retrieved on 2nd December 2020 from crimethinc.com

lib.edist.ro