Letter from Paris

CrimethInc.

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Contents

We received the following report from the group that produced the French version of To Change Everything, *Pour Tout Changer.* They describe the situation in Paris before and after the attacks of November 13: the intensification of xenophobic discourse, the repression of homeless refugees, the declaration of a "state of emergency" as a way to clamp down on dissent, the preparations for the COP 21 summit at which demonstrations are now banned, and what people are doing to counter all this. It offers an eyewitness account from the front lines of the struggle against the opportunists who hope to use the tragedy of November 13 to advance their agenda of racism and autocracy. With demonstrations forbidden and the COP 21 summit around the corner, what happens in Paris will set an important precedent for whether governments can use the specter of terrorism to suppress efforts to change the disastrous course on which they are steering us.

Escalating Xenophobia

The attacks that took place in Paris several days ago, tragic as they are, are unfortunately not an isolated event. The capital city of France was simply another target in a string of bombings in Suruç, Ankara, and Beirut; it represents the continuation and expansion of the strategy ISIS initiated in the Middle East.

In France, these attacks exacerbate a political context that was already fraught. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the participation of the far-right party *Front National* in the second round of the 2002 presidential election, the political discourse has taken an increasingly conservative tone. For example, Nicolas Sarkozy, as *Ministre de l'Intérieur* from 2002 to 2007 and President from 2007 to 2012, openly adopted some arguments, topics, and symbols that were previously only used by the *Front National.* These discourses of "identity" and "security" have especially stigmatized Arabic and Muslim communities. In 2010, for example, a law was passed stipulating that it was forbidden to cover your face in public places in France. While not explicitly directed at those wearing a niqab or hijab, it resulted in more controls targeting Muslim women.

During this same time period, law enforcement groups were given new equipment such as Flash-balls (supposedly non-lethal anti-riot weapons) and Taser guns. The national DNA file, used since 1998 to collect the DNA of sexual offenders and abusers, has been extended to every person convicted of an offense. The "Plan Vigipirate," a governmental anti-terrorism security plan established in 1995 after several bombing attacks in France, was also updated three times between 2002 and 2006, and more recently in 2014 under current President François Hollande.

Before the Attacks

For years, refugees have been fleeing their countries to escape death, military conflicts, and constant political instability. Until last summer, the French government and its European counterparts didn't care about the refugee issue—witness the countless tragic deaths of people trying to cross the Mediterranean sea. In Paris, several groups of refugees have been living on the streets in precarious conditions for months.

Nevertheless, due to accelerating waves of immigration, the French government started to change its policy, taking part in the European political initiative "Welcome Refugees." This was

more of a political move than an expression of solidarity. During this period, refugees and migrants, left alone by authorities, began to create their own camps in several locations in Paris. They received some assistance from NGOs, collectives, activists, and others concerned about their difficult situation.

However, refugees faced aggressive state repression, as they still do. They are regularly harassed by police who intimidate, beat, evict, and arrest them or destroy their camps. In June 2015, the fascist group *Génération Identitaire* (Identity Generation) attacked a refugee camp in Austerlitz with stones and bottles. The Austerlitz camps were removed by the authorities in September.

At the end of July, another group of refugees and migrants decided to squat an old and abandoned high school in the 19th district of Paris: the *Lycée Jean Quarré.* Collectives and activists came to offer help; together, they began organizing demonstrations to defend refugees' rights. On the morning of October 23, police evicted the squat. Some of the migrants who occupied it have been relocated to centers or shelters in the suburbs or even further outside Paris. Others remained without a place to sleep, so they camped in front of the *Hotel de Ville,* the City Hall of Paris.

The day after the eviction, demonstrations were planned at the same time in England and in France under the slogan of "Freedom for the three migrants imprisoned in England—Papers and housing for all—Freedom of movement, no borders." At the end of the demonstration, some refugees were determined to block the streets until the Mayor found a solution to relocate everyone. They occupied a major intersection for approximately 45 minutes. Then, as usual, police showed up in riot gear. After discussing the possible consequences, the participants shifted to occupying a nearby theater. As they were forcing the doors, the police charged in a surprisingly disorganized and chaotic manner. Some demonstrators continued to confront the police as they were pushed back to a main street.

A few hours after the demo, some refugees and migrants, still without a place to sleep for the night, occupied the *Place de la République,* one of the major squares in downtown Paris. Since that day, they have been evicted several times and their camps and personal belongings have been destroyed and seized by the police. Several gatherings took place to help refugees and defend the square against eviction. The tension was always high during those actions and police forces were numerous. A few weeks ago, at one such gathering, an Afghan refugee explained to us that he and some of his friends have finally received housing for at least six months. Nevertheless, he also told us that newer refugees who had just arrived from Germany would sleep outside in the camp that night. On Friday, November 13, the police evicted the camp again just a few hours before the ISIS attacks took place in the same district.

At the same time, the authorities have been directing increasing surveillance towards anarchists and their spaces. Several anarchists have recently been arrested in the Paris area, demonstrating the European common political agenda of increasing repression against anarchists—as we have seen recently, on a larger scale, in Greece, Spain, and even Czech Republic. Members of La Discordia, a new anarchist library in the 19th district of Paris that opened in spring 2015, published an article in October showing that the police were monitoring and recording their activities. A device was found hidden in a room at the school facing the library, as its director had agreed to assist the police in their surveillance.

Meanwhile, the COP 21 was coming up. From November 28 to December 12, politicians from around the world will gather in Paris to pretend to discuss environmental issues; several demonstrations and events were planned by worldwide organizations to oppose this international mas-

querade. An appeal to participate to the anti-COP 21 in Paris has appeared in several languages and Paris is expecting an international mobilization.

The French government took steps to control and contain popular opposition even before the November 13 attacks. First, they decided to close the borders: contrary to ordinary Shengen practice, France will enforce border controls and refuse some people entry. The government has also refused visas to foreign activists and members of organizations. Furthermore, the police administration sent a message to all their employees at a national level asking them not to take vacations during the COP 21 in case they need to mobilize everyone against activists and "black blocks" (French media and politicians still misunderstand black blocs to be a distinct organization, not a reproducible tactic). In other words, the authorities fear that this international meeting will occasion fierce resistance.

After the Attacks

As soon as the attacks took place, and especially when people were taken hostage at the Bataclan, a major venue, Paris became an "urban warfare" zone: police forces were on alert everywhere along with special forces and tactical groups, while soldiers, emergency personnel, and firemen blocked all the streets around the sites of the attacks. Everyone in these areas was searched, had their IDs checked, and told to leave the streets and go home. Those who were at bars were forced to stay inside for hours before police ordered them to leave, some with their hands on their heads. In the moment, the violence of the images and events let us speechless, confused, and scared—not only about the attacks but even more so about what would come next.

Shortly afterwards, President François Hollande made an official statement on television saying that France was now at war against the terrorists, against ISIS. Hollande used the same rhetoric and vocabulary George W. Bush did in his speech after September 11, 2001. Hollande also explained that France was now increasing its emergency alert level to just below the ultimate level of war within the French territory. In the name of the "state of emergency" and in order to reinforce and maintain national "security," Hollande asked to deploy about 10,000 soldiers to help police officers carry out surveillance and control.

The "state of emergency" is a peculiar law passed on April 3, 1955 that provides civil authorities of a specific geographical area with exceptional police powers to regulate people's movement and residence, close public places, and requisition weapons. It enables the authorities to take all the decisions they want and to drastically reduce liberties and freedom. This law was created and used primarily during the war against Algeria. Between 1955 and 1961, the "state of emergency" was imposed several times on the Franco-Algerian territory. Later, it was used in New Caledonia in 1984–1985. Finally, and for the first time in the French metropolis, the state of emergency was imposed in 2005 after the uprisings that took place in our suburbs.

Once applied, this state of emergency can take several forms. The President and prefects can use it to impose curfews on their population. Car traffic can be forbidden in certain districts or zones at specific hours. Prefects can determine where people are permitted to go, establishing restricted areas and safety zones and even forbidding someone from going to or living in a specific zone if that person is considered a threat. Indeed, every person considered "dangerous" can be forced to stay at home without any option of going out, or only allowed to go out within extremely precise conditions such as being monitored by an electronic bracelet. Movie theaters,

venues, or any other place where people gather like bars and restaurants can be forced to close. Police officers can stop and check you without a specific reason—something they already do anyway—and any opposition can be considered a threat. Demonstrations, marches, and gatherings can be forbidden; searches and house raids can be made day and night without warrants; every single person who contests this situation can be punished with financial charges or prison according to stipulations built into the "state of emergency" legislation.

During the three days of national mourning imposed by François Hollande, the government made their first decisions responding to the attacks. First, they decided to increase their military strikes on ISIS positions in Syria; they are trying now to form a coalition with the US, Great Britain, Germany, and Russia to wage a total war against "terrorism." Then our *Assemblée Nationale,* the official building where our deputies discuss and make laws, voted almost unanimously (551 pros vs. 6 cons) to extend the "state of emergency." Now it will last three months, until February 26, 2016. Of course, it could be extended again after that.

Moreover, the government decided to keep the COP 21 in Paris—at least its official meeting and discussions—but forbade the demonstrations and activities organized by anti-COP activists. This can be seen as an attempt to muzzle the people taking part in the social movement to counter these meaningless meetings and political negotiations. It is also interesting to note, considering the three-month extension of the state of emergency, that in 2016, the construction of the new airport at *Notre Dame des Landes* is scheduled to resume—the airport that has thus far been blocked by the occupation known internationally as la ZAD. The authorities might try to control the opponents of the airport under this supposedly "exceptional" law.

During the past few days, the authorities have made some other major decisions: starting now, our police officers are allowed to keep their weapons with them even after working hours in the name of national safety. The government has also asserted a closer surveillance of online activity. In addition, President François Hollande is trying to add new elements to the law governing the state of emergency, including policies such as stripping French citizenship from people recognized as a threat to national security, or closing mosques preaching a conservative interpretation of Islam.

Dark Days, Unwritten Futures

In the aftermath of the Paris' attacks, we are sure to face even darker days than before between the increasing power of the government, the crushing of our liberties, and intensifying xenophobic and racist discourses among politicians and part of the population. Indeed, only a few hours had passed after the attacks before the first racist attacks took place in several towns around France. For example, on Saturday, November 14 in Pontivy, Brittany, while taking part in a demonstration, members of "Adsav," a fascist group defending Breton identity, beat an Arabic man. The weekend following the attacks in Paris, mosques were tagged with red Christian crosses and racist sentences; some Halal butcheries have also been targeted. In Marseilles, a Jewish professor and a woman wearing a headscarf were assaulted.

The attacks also reinforced French nationalism. The "Marseillaise," the French national anthem, has been sung during many gatherings since the attacks; the national flag has been ubiquitous, even on social media profile pictures. All this nationalist momentum produced a spike in applications to join the French military, as some recruiters explained to journalists. All these events offer

a great opportunity for the *Front National* to increase its influence once more across the French political spectrum, and to gain more electors during the municipal elections in December.

It is alarming how readily the majority of the French population accepts the policies of the "state of emergency" and the restriction of their movement and liberties. For anarchists and activists, these emergency measures raise several questions: What will happen if we violate the state of emergency by demonstrating? How will the police forces react? Will the government end up using this "exceptional law" to repress anarchists and other radical activists and carry out mass arrests? One thing is certain: since the attacks of the past January in Paris, most of the police forces haven't been able to take vacations due to a lack of personnel. Some high-ranking members of the police explain that their troops are exhausted and on edge, which means that the tension during future actions including the COP 21 protests will be extremely high.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that nothing is ever written in advance. As individuals, we have the capacity to make choices that could change the current inertia of the world.

On Sunday, November 22, several hundred people gathered in the *Place de la Bastille* to express solidarity with refugees and to contest the "state of emergency" declared by the government, despite the gathering having been prohibited following the attacks. When we arrived, police forces were present but were standing back from the increasing group of activists. We took this opportunity and started walking in the middle of the road, determined to demonstrate no matter what. Police forces ran after us, faced us in a line, and tried to turn us away from our principal objective of taking a major boulevard to reach *Place de la République.* Their first attempt failed, as some activists got around the police line and kept walking on the boulevard, chanting "Solidarity with all refugees!" There followed a chase between police and activists. At one time, they succeeded splitting us in two groups, and clashes broke out as people tried to break through their lines of separation. They answered with tear gas and truncheon blows. Nevertheless, their attacks didn't stop us. In the end, we succeeded in breaking their lines, and once again we were demonstrating together, heading to our objective. Finally, after approximately 30 minutes marked by clashes with the police, we arrived at the *Place de la République,* which was full of people who had come on that Sunday afternoon to lay flowers and pay homage to the victims of the attacks.

The success of this spontaneous demonstration in defying the "state of emergency" shows that we can still act on our own strength, refusing to surrender to the general state of fear and to the new laws imposed in the name of national security. More than ever, we must help and take care of each other, we must keep organizing, we must stay focused and continue defying authority. This is what we should keep in mind as the COP 21 will start in few days in Paris. The struggle continues.

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