

Politicizing powerlessness

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How might we intervene in the new situation created by the 13 November attacks in Paris and the various reactions they have provoked? Instead of trying to figure out what the government should be doing, social movements should determine what they can do and what *we* can do ourselves.

One of the most common reactions consists in celebrating the simple pleasures which the victims had been enjoying when they were killed. These appear to constitute one of the two kinds of 'our liberties' which are to be defended against the 'enemies of our way of life': the 'great liberties of our Republic', in the most abstract terms, which are, however, always ready to be suspended for 'emergency' reasons and the 'small' concrete liberties such as moving freely through the city, having a drink with friends or attending a concert. Such reactions were so ubiquitous in the initial days after the attacks that Prime Minister Manuel Valls didn't hesitate to evoke them early on, in his speech in front of the Senate, concluding: 'to resist is to keep on living'.

Granted, the liberty of walking down the street without risking one's life is by no means 'small'. That is precisely why, however, 'we' have no right to treat it as the attribute of any particular country or social milieu, as if 'those people' who don't benefit from it as much as we do could gain access to it just by imitating 'us'. Judging from the past, and from the first few weeks that have passed since 13 November, while some might feel at greater liberty to 'keep on living' in the presence of additional soldiers and armed policemen on the streets, others (migrants, ethnic minorities, but also participants in any street protest) would testify to the opposite. The same observation can be made on an international level concerning military 'solutions' to this crisis: as long as the defence of peoples' liberties 'here' (or wherever the next war is to be fought) are invoked to justify new bombing raids, then the grieving of *our* dead, *everywhere*, will have no end.

To make sense of this sudden celebration of the 'small' liberties of everyday life, it should be understood as a kind of retreat or fallback position. The zeitgeist demands one abandon all hope of genuinely controlling anything significant, anything 'big', about the course of the world. Decades of neoliberal policies with 'no alternative' and 'wars against evil' have taken their toll, and the whole world watched as the most recent experiments in popular self-government ended in disaster: with the disciplining of what might have been an anti-austerity government in Greece and the consolidation of the Arab counter-revolutions. Global warming elicits the very same feeling: that popular control over the world is both of vital importance and yet desperately out of reach – and all the more so as the French 'state of emergency' becomes a major obstacle to mobilizations motivated by environmental emergencies and climate negotiations, among other things. To quote a large piece of graffiti which appeared on the north bank of the Seine in late November, the government is using *l'état d'urgence pour cacher les tas d'urgences* (using the state of emergency to conceal masses of urgencies).

The crushing combined violence of capitalism, the environmental crisis and open-ended war in its various shapes and forms certainly solicits some resistance from those who suffer from it. Responses will remain distorted and inadequate, however, as long as they avoid trying to take back at least *some* real power.

In France, as elsewhere, the spectacle of the Arab uprisings of 2011 solicited great though distant enthusiasm. With their brutal repression in one country after another, an unbearable feeling of powerlessness spread among the spectators, which transformed part of people's solidarity with the rebellions into a demand for Western military intervention 'to end the massacres'. The 'good vs evil' discourse that has framed foreign policy in the years following 9/11 is not merely a matter of hawkish rhetoric, grossly disguising war with virtue; twenty-first-century wars have efficiently played on the lived experience of powerlessness shared by the exploited and the oppressed, and the 'war on terror' has been more effective in this respect than in reaching any of its longer-term goals.

Today, France is witnessing new instances of the same phenomenon. Everywhere people cry out for someone to just 'do something', hardly trying to hide how powerless they feel to defeat 'terror' in general or specific organizations in particular, or even simply to put themselves out of harm's way. This combination between the feeling of powerlessness and the refusal of inaction may be the deepest source of any popular demand or support for 'authoritarian' measures and wars, as much today as in the 1920s and 1930s. In the sphere of social movements, the clash between an entrenched and unaltered state of powerlessness and a sudden sense of emergency that calls on us 'to act' can all too easily produce a *reaction* in the political sense of the term: a submission to 'powerful' action premised on the further sacrifice of autonomy. This has been the case recently through various expressions of active or passive support for 'their' war and the state of emergency, with predictably catastrophic results.

To think that all this started out as an attempted defence of liberty! On the contrary, it is by this sacrifice of all other liberties (and the liberties of 'others') that 'we' hope to preserve the few liberties left. Trusting in the French army's bombs in order to keep enjoying Parisian cafés is an obscene and revolting bargain; tragic, too, as it is doomed to fail. As Churchill's famous verdict on the Munich pact is being wheeled out once again in support of yet another Western military intervention in the Middle East, 'they have chosen shame, and will get war', it is tempting to turn it against those who cheer the idea of faraway bombings. Our first priority should be to understand the reasons for this pitiful choice.

This situation carries a tremendous threat to any project of social and political emancipation. In order to make sense of it and to act effectively, it is necessary to recall the decades of destabilization of the Middle East by the imperial powers, from the prehistory of al-Qaeda to that of Daesh, and to support resistance movements as they struggle to defend themselves from the ruthless guerrilla organizations that have emerged from the chaos of successive years of war. It is also necessary to remember the calamitous experience in France of earlier calls to restrict liberty in the name of security, so as to better defend ourselves against the militarization of society, political repression and racism.

Social mobilizations of all kinds, however, will also need to have something to offer to those who demand that 'something effective' be done. They will need to make concrete proposals that can rally decisive popular support every time the same old policies lead into another dead end, as they surely will with yet another war. They must start by connecting all the different forms of loss of control: loss of liberty and of genuine democracy in economic relations (on the job market, in the workplace), in political relations (in the French Republic, in the European Union), as well as in the prosecution of war and responses to mass murder. The essential point to make is that

all these forms of loss are connected and mutually reinforcing. To take a closer look at Daesh is to rediscover a lack of democratic control over what is being produced and sold in the world, with the arms and oil trade as only the most obvious of many examples, to say nothing of the lack of any popular control over financial flows, whose opacity is as essential to multinational corporations as it is to criminal organizations. Even the very war now being waged against Daesh testifies to the imperial powers' own unwillingness to confront the networks that support Daesh among their own allies in the Gulf states, illustrating a lack of democratic control over international relations.

If the response to a loss of control is to result in anything other than an aspiration to another and deeper loss of control (for 'us' as much as for 'others'), it needs to be demonstrated that the problem is precisely this lack of control *in all its social and economic forms, without exception*. This requires, in other words, a return to the old project of democratic control, on all fronts. The naked exercise of power that has brought Greece to its knees may at least have made the stakes clearer in this respect, in debates about austerity and the EU. But a similar breakthrough has not yet happened in other areas, for example in French debates over how to address the legacies of racism and colonialism, and the way these continue to obstruct the democratic project in general.

Encouraging and direct, a powerful reversal of the feeling of powerlessness requires inventing new truly democratic responses to acts of violence and war. We need to politicize this feeling of powerlessness and the factors that give rise to it, against those who produce it and cultivate it. If we fail, it will continue to be politicized only by and for them. This feeling haunts us, and most of the time we live with it without thinking about it. But we know that the time has come to confront it when, as in the aftermath of 13 November in Paris, we suddenly experience it as intolerable.

Note

An earlier version of this text was published online as 'Guerre ou démocratie: politiser le sentiment d'impuissance', *Contretemps*, 30 November 2015, www.contretemps.eu.

An apology for French republicanism

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When the attacks of 13 November in Paris are used by the French government to criminalize activists and protesters, when fear is pushing its population deeper into the arms of the Front National, and when the radical Left has almost disappeared from the political landscape, can one retain any hope that the country will find the necessary resources to be true to its ideals? The answer I receive from most of the Anglo-Saxon world is 'no'. Indeed, I hear, the ideals are themselves part of the problem: France's self-representation as the beacon of the Rights of Man has hidden for too long the true nature of its society.