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Projecting Shadows: France Before the 2017 Elections. Crisis of "the Left"

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In comparative context, France has long been a source of inspiration for lefties and revolutionaries due to its history of successful or failed revolution from 1789 to 1968 and due to its role as an inadvertent point of contact for anti-colonial movements, from the Haitian revolution to the era of decolonization in the 20th century. More recent cycles of mobilization – movements against neoliberalism from 1995 to 2010 and the mass marches and revolts against racism and police violence from the early 1980s to 2005 – kept French politics in the radical limelight.

These traditions of struggle are not dead. One can detect elements of them in the current conjuncture, in the demonstrations, strikes, and occupations during the protests against the El Khomri labour law in 2016 and the ongoing street battles and other mobilizations against racism and police violence. Today, however, the image France projects is more frequently steeped in the reactionary traditions that have deeply shaped France's place in the modern world: histories of counterrevolution (monarchist, Catholic, or Bonapartist), living legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism and fascist or fascistic political currents. While distinct, these traditions are interrelated and sometimes converged, as during the collaborationist Vichy regime in the 1940s and during the Algerian war of independence.

After the election of President François Hollande and a nominally left parliamentary majority in 2012, strands of reactionary French politics quickly resurfaced. This happened first in the form of mass mobilizations named *Manif pour tous* against gay marriage and the inclusion of 'gender' in the school curriculum between 2012 and 2014, proliferating smaller extra-parliamentary initiatives by extreme right groups partly encouraged by these mobilizations, and the string of victories during the European, municipal and departmental elections in 2014 and 2015 by the *Front National* under Marine Le Pen and by the renamed bourgeois right-wing party *Les Républicains*.

In the following essay, I will discuss how the Hollande government itself contributed to the role of France as a place of reactionary political experimentation. I will do so not in order to ignore the continued differences among various political forces in France (let alone to minimize the specificity of the neo-fascist *Front National*) but in order to highlight the multiple sources of danger that feed the current conjuncture.

Part 1: States of Emergency

Vigilance?

In central Paris today, one cannot hope to spend a day outside without spotting an army vehicle or a platoon of four soldiers on foot patrol, semi-automatic weapons ready to be pointed at something, or someone. Soldiers can appear seemingly out of nowhere, when one steps out the front door, looks up from a cup of coffee in the local bistro, or turns the corner of a neighbourhood street.

Seeing soldiers patrolling Paris airports and train stations is not new. The phenomenon dates to the creation of *Vigipirate*, the programme organizing 'vigilance' against 'terrorism' since the mid-1990s. Since the murderous attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, a kosher supermarket and numerous restaurants and concert venues in January and November 2015, this programme has been complemented by operation *Sentinelle*, under which up to 10,000 regular soldiers patrol the streets of France, the majority of whom are in the Paris region.

What to make of this troop deployment? It is impossible to think that roaming platoons can stop or even deter attacks. In fact, they represent convenient targets for anyone looking for one. Is the troop presence a form of psychological warfare, getting inhabitants used to the idea that the 'enemy' is amongst 'their own'? Is it a way to train soldiers' eyes onto possible threats lurking in a crowd, as policemen are known to do? In any event, the daily troop presence reminds us that the distinction between war and policing, never complete historically, is particularly blurred today.

States of Emergency: 'Counter-terrorism' 1

Operation *Sentinelle* is one element in a galaxy of measures taken in 2015 and 2016 under the guise of 'anti-terrorism'. It adds a military element to the State of Emergency, which was declared in November 2015 and renewed by the French General Assembly five times since, thus contravening the European Convention on Human Rights. Even if the State of Emergency comes to an end in July 2017, as now planned, it would be the longest-lasting such measure since the 1961-63 period, when it was declared after the military coup attempted by the OAS (*Organisation Armée Secrète*) to stop Algerian independence.

Since the original law was passed in 1955, a year into the Algerian war of independence, the law was declared five times: in 1958 (in the transition period from the 4th to the 5th Republic), in 1961, in 1984-1985 (against the independence movement in Kanaky/New Caledonia), and in the fall of 2005 (during the revolts that spread through many French suburbs after three boys who fled the police, Bouna Traoré, Zyed Benna, and Muhittin Althu, were electrocuted in a power station close to Clichy-sous-Bois in the eastern suburbs).

A legal regime of exception, the State of Emergency allows the executive and administrative branches of the state to breach individual liberties with limited or no judicial oversight. Why? To detain and prosecute those considered security threats on the basis of mere suspicion, not on the basis of concrete evidence of past infractions. For example, the State of Emergency allows prefects (local representatives of the central state) to order house searches, and, in a measure that was added to the 1955 law, condemn individuals to house arrest when 'serious reasons' exist to believe that people in particular places engage in 'behaviour that threatens public order and security'. For warrants to be issued, intelligence officers need not substantiate what such 'serious reasons' might be.

Since the end of the 2015, more than 4,000 often violent and humiliating, even traumatizing

raids and searches were undertaken. More than 600 people were condemned to house arrest, that is: forced to stay at home overnight, remain within a specified geographical perimeter and report to the police up to three times a day. A number of mosques were closed. Curfews were placed over some neighbourhoods. Demonstrations were prohibited. And hundreds of people were detained, including squatters and environmentalists preparing to protest the COP 21 Climate Summit in Paris in December 2015.

The repressive actions undertaken under the State of Emergency yielded very few concrete leads in specific 'anti-terrorism' investigations. Already one of the most extensive in the world before 2015, France's existing legal apparatus was more than sufficient for this purpose, as Laurence Blisson has pointed out. Most searches, arrests, prohibitions, curfews and house arrests pursued under the State of Emergency provisions affected many thousands of people that had nothing to do with those involved in the mass murders perpetrated in France in 2015 and 2016. The exceptional measure did however foster a culture of suspicion and recrimination. It encouraged citizens to denounce their neighbours, colleagues or family members as possible suspects. And it made banal everyday acts of verbal or physical aggression against Muslims and migrants (real or perceived).

As Vanessa Codaccioni has pointed out, the State of Emergency has allowed the police, the intelligence services and the interior ministry to 'test the danger levels' of those that count as 'internal enemies': non-white youth, anarchists, and those described as Muslims. The new extra-judicial powers were applied by casting a wide net over mosques, areas of petty street crime, and 'sensitive' neighbourhoods that were already on the radar of security forces as the *Collectif contre l'islamphobie en France* and *Human Rights Watch* documented. The emergency law thus has added a new layer to the forms of state racism already targeting Muslims and non-white inhabitants. Not surprisingly, some of these forms – racial profiling and regularly fatal police violence against non-white youth – are challenged with increased intensity right now by protests and high school occupations in Paris and beyond.

Furthermore, the State of Emergency endowed front-line police with a heightened sense of impunity in policing dissent even when they did not take recourse to emergency provisions. 'We can do whatever we want' is an expression activists hear more frequently when confronted by police. Such has been the case with migrant workers who tried to organize solidarity actions with the refugees in Calais and Paris that were facing the destruction of their camps there; and such has been reported by the students and labour organizers who faced heightened police violence and new levels of punitive court action during the protests, occupations, strikes and *Nuit Debout* actions against the El Khomri Labour Law in 2016.

Rather than just a time-limited affair in response to concrete threats, the State of Emergency helps institutionalize further doctrines of preemptive justice. In June 2016, after having already made the State of Emergency a constitutional provision earlier that year, the Hollande government turned some emergency measures (administrative detentions, partial house arrest, house searches) into regular legal clauses. This step normalizes laws of exception that undermine judicial oversight (and thus the separation of powers) while formalizing inequalities before the law.

The June law added to some twenty 'anti-terrorism' laws passed since 1986. Codaccioni's research has shown that this body of laws and legal practices are based on an open-ended and slippery notion of 'terror'. Also, since the 'preventative' legal turn in the 1990s, they target not just past actions but behavior 'associated' with the preparation or intended preparation of such actions, indeed, even just 'apologizing' for such actions in public or on

the internet. In this topsy-turvy legal universe, principles contravening basic freedoms (of association and expression) and protections (against arbitrary state actions) apply: 'when in doubt, detain' (Blisson).

"We are at war": 'Counter-terrorism' 2

Days after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, President Hollande declared France at war. He promised to ramp up operation *Chammal* by intensifying air strikes against Daesh strongholds in Syria and Iraq. He fortified the image of a 'war chief' he built for himself in 2013, during the two French military incursions in Africa: operation *Serval* in Mali and operation *Sangaris* in the Central African Republic.

While Hollande's aggressive militarism in Syria and Iraq received much attention (and some critical commentary), few noted what the NGO *Survie* documented, namely that between 2013 and 2015, before and after the attacks in France, a range of African countries (Mali, Cameroun, Djibouti, Chad, Tunisia, Niger) declared states of emergency very similar to the one instituted in France itself.

African countries walking in lockstep with France points to the fact that French politics is never just about France proper, the hexagone. In this case, 'anti-terrorism' scenarios have a transnational dimension that escapes any easy distinction between domestic and international affairs. In fact, transnational 'anti-terrorism' attests to a geopolitical vision that links social spaces in Europe to territories off the continent on a geographical continuum of security threats. It goes without saying that this geographical vision borrows more than a detail or two from French colonial history.

Roughly following the path prepared by the U.S. neoconservatives under Bush junior, the Hollande government entrenched a trend that took off under Sarkozy: using 'terrorism' and 'insecurity' to justify military intervention abroad. As Fabrice Tarri and Thomas Noirot have pointed out, 'anti-terrorism' and 'national security' serve strategic purposes in French efforts to re-legitimate and deepen its presence in Francophone Africa and beyond. After the Cold War, this presence had come under increased scrutiny and has since faced competitive pressures from the USA, China and the Gulf states, among others.

In 2014, operation *Bharkane*, which spins a web of military bases and new secret military assistance contracts across and beyond the Sahel region (including Mali, Chad, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso), consolidated and made permanent the previous operations *Serval* and *Sangaris* on the assumption that the war against 'terrorism' has no time limits. *Serval* and *Sangaris* were originally defended in public as strictly time-limited and punctual military campaigns.

Bharkane and its predecessors were buttressed with laws that further insulate military personnel engaged in official or secret foreign missions from legal challenges (in December 2013) and that broaden the surveillance powers of the secret services (in May 2015). The urgency of these measures was made clear when journalists revealed that President Hollande, too, orders extrajudicial killings of French citizens abroad.

Bharkane helped expand and deepen *Françafrique*, the neocolonial economic, military and political relations that tie France to many of its former African colonies. *Françafrique* plays a strategic – and unapologetically aggressive – role within the superordinate U.S. imperial networks in Africa. Indeed, as Claude Serfati has pointed out, a

revamped *Françafrique* shapes European Union policy on security, defense and foreign affairs in Africa and beyond. More broadly, this is also true for France's military industry, which has benefited from Hollande's militarism in the form of expanding defense budgets and rapidly increasing arms exports.

As in the case of the State of Emergency, the Hollande government's approach to international affairs did more than passively reproduce initiatives undertaken under Sarkozy. One can say, following Mathieu Rigouste's argument, that they have actively strengthened the branches of the military, the police, and the interior ministry (as well as the arms industry) most committed to counterinsurgency doctrines. In so doing, they also help recreate the very grounds – war, imperialism, neocolonial state racism – upon which 'terrorism' can grow.

Part 2: 'A Most Catastrophic Presidency'

"A Most Catastrophic Presidency"

The cases discussed so far speak to Etienne Balibar's verdict of the Hollande Presidency as "one of the most catastrophic" ever. Balibar's point is not that Hollande's record is objectively worse on all grounds than that of right-wing governments in the past (or, for that matter, the future). He does however insist on the disastrous implications of Hollande's contributions to the vitality, the hegemony even, of the traditions that define counter-revolutionary France.

Balibar's main focus is on France's role in the European Union. Hollande failed to act as a counterweight to Germany in the EU's austerity-driven economic regime (and the brutal structural adjustment regimes imposed on Southern Europe, Greece above all). He also effectively contributed to the vilification of refugees as a threat to the EU. After reintroducing national border controls in 2015, France refused to make more than a minimal contribution to the EU refugee intake system, thus undermining Chancellor Merkel's then statements against the rapidly spreading idea of closing the doors entirely on the refugees arriving on the continent.

In 2012, Hollande promised not to rock the boat. At the end of Sarkozy's frantic right-populist term, which was shaken by mass mobilizations against pension reform, an 8-month strike by workers without status, and a string of scandals, Holland presented himself as a 'normal' President with a few pragmatic promises: a moderation of austerity, a stop to the haemorrhage of plant closures, a strategy to ramp up housing construction, voting rights for immigrants with status, and a policy that would force police to give out receipts when checking people's identity.

Except for a penal reform that includes provisions for restorative justice and the gay marriage law, which survived right-wing mass mobilization, most of these promises were abandoned or watered down. Hollande responded to economic stagnation, low rates of private sector investment, and electoral setbacks by replacing ministers in charge of key portfolios with others committed to a combination of law and order, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism, and economic liberalism. Most important among these: Manuel Valls, who was promoted from Interior Minister to Prime Minister in 2014, and investment banker and committed neoliberal Emmanuel Macron, who replaced Arnaud Montebourg as Minster of Economy and Industry in the same year. A sort of Socialist Sarkozy, Valls has made a career out of whipping up hysteria about Roma camps, undocumented migrants, radical labour

activists, and the threat Islam poses to (his conception) of the French republic.

The Valls government became increasingly preoccupied with insulating itself from internal opposition: those Socialist and Green deputies that took issue with its strategy to all but close ranks with the right on matters of security and economic policy. To discipline their own deputies, the government invoked article 49.3 of the constitution to force the passage of two bills that faced the most internal dissent: the *Loi Macron* (which deregulated professions, the transportation sector, and restrictions on Sunday shopping in 2015) and the *Loi El Khomri* (the labour law reform that faced mass resistance from March to September 2016).

To say that the Hollande administration "abandoned the working classes," as Balibar does, is not an exaggeration. Next to its obsession with security, war and Islam, it followed supply-side economic policies: reducing employer contributions and corporate taxes, entrenching budgetary constraint, supporting the marketization of public services, and encouraging various forms of labour-market flexibility. These could not but reinforce the highly uneven, deeply racialized and polarizing effects of capitalism in austerity mode. Here are some examples:

- The total number of unemployed, under-employed and precariously employed people, continued to rise during the Hollande years. Despite increasing arms exports, plant closures and the decline of industrial jobs continued also, albeit at a slower rate than under Sarkozy. Rates of poverty are still higher than in 2008, with the number of people in deep, structural poverty also on the rise.
- According to the latest report by the *Fondation Abbé-Pierre*, inadequate housing conditions are endemic in French society. About 15 million inhabitants (23% of the population) experience one or several of the following conditions: difficulties paying housing charges, overcrowding, couch-surfing, a lack of proper heating, inadequate sanitary conditions, or outright street-level homelessness.
- Social housing authorities and the French state continue to produce social housing and mandate all except the smallest municipalities to having a minimum of 25% social housing in their total housing stock. However, these measures have not been sufficient to meet the Hollande government's social housing production targets. Fewer and fewer units with high subsidy levels get produced. Waiting lists for social housing keep growing.
- The number of people facing housing evictions keeps growing. In 2014, a law encouraging private rental housing construction and imposing moderate forms of rent control and tenant protection was finally passed. It was however watered down in substance and in geographical scope in the face of protracted opposition from property owners and the real estate industry.
- As far as citizenship and migration are concerned, the numbers of immigrants acquiring citizenship under Hollande rose again after a sharp drop at the end of the Sarkozy Presidency. There was a very modest increase in the number of migrants without status who were regularized. Deportations of migrants without status continued to rise until 2014 before they dropped to levels before the 2012 election.
- Irrespective of these numbers, Hollande and Valls's record on migration and citizenship will likely be remembered for a range of actions that helped entrench racialized fears and divisions in France: failing to meet the modest target for refugee intake agreed to by the EU, the decision to dismantle refugee camps (notably those in Calais and Paris), and their proposal to strip dual citizens

convicted of 'terrorism' of their French nationality. Long advocated by the *Front National*, this latter proposal was abandoned only after internal opposition and legal hurdles appeared on the scene.

Under a Cloud: the 2017 Electoral Campaign

The early phase of the Presidential campaign has confirmed the disastrous nature of the Hollande years. In light of record-low approval ratings, Hollande himself decided not to run for a second turn. Meanwhile, Emmanuel Macron quit the government to run for President as an independent. Manuel Valls lost the Socialist Party primary against Benoît Hamon, the Education Minister who left Valls' cabinet within a year of being appointed and then joined those opposing various planks of the Valls-Hollande legislative programme from within the Socialist caucus in Parliament.

The Hollande-Valls alignment with crucial neoliberal and right-wing principles was an act of cannibalism perpetrated on the Socialist Party and its allies. So far, this has benefited the hard right, not the far left. Hamon has concluded an electoral agreement with the Greens but not with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the former leader of the *Front de Gauche* (an alliance between the Communist Party, the *Parti Radical de Gauche*, and *Ensemble*). Mélenchon is running his own left-populist campaign with little concern for the components of the *Front de Gauche* and separate from smaller left parties like the *Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste*.

Two months before the election, the Presidential campaign is volatile. So far, it is largely dominated by right and far-right candidates: the frontrunner Marine Le Pen from the National Front; Emmanuel Macron (who positions himself as a centrist even though he has close links to big capital and promises to deepen the neoliberal strategies he championed while in government), and François Fillon (Sarkozy's Prime Minister and Republican candidate of the big bourgeoisie who runs on a Thatcherite programme and is supported by the Catholic far right).

Should the right or extreme right win the Presidential election in May (and the subsequent Parliamentary elections in June), they will be in an enviable political position. Not only because of the Hollande Presidency but due to more than two decades of shifting social and political forces and many rounds of experimentation in security-oriented state intervention, the distinction between what Nicos Poulantzas called 'authoritarian statism' (creeping authoritarian dynamics within a formally liberal democratic capitalist state) and an exceptional form of state is more blurred than ever in a generation. While this fact attests to the deepening of contradictions, not the monolithic solidification of power in our conjuncture, it also opens institutional and ideological paths toward explicit authoritarian rule.

The point Chris Hedges made about the USA before Trump's inauguration (that basic elements of an "authoritarian police state are in place") also applies to France. A recent Amnesty International (AI) report identifies the leadership role of France in the trend toward legal regimes of exception (and the increasingly common idea that "Europe faces a perpetual emergency" because of 'terrorism' and migration). With reference to the European Union, thus without having to mention Turkey, Russia and the Ukraine, *AI* underlines the relative ease by which right nationalist or neo-fascist governments may push existing states into an explicitly post-democratic direction. In the EU, this is what is currently happening in Hungary and Poland.

An Anti-Fascist Political Constellation?

In his short essay "After Trump," Robin D.G. Kelley insists on the urgency of building anti-fascist capacities by deepening, in non-sectarian fashion, networks of existing struggles. There is no space here to discuss the actors that may yield such a counter-constellation in France. One can, however, highlight a few basic priorities that will survive the outcome of the spring elections: (1) countering the consolidation of an authoritarian state; (2) foregrounding the struggles of those most immediately affected by authoritarian state intervention (migrants, non-white residents, Muslims, activists facing repression); (3) refusing to separate these struggles from mobilizations against neoliberal austerity and precarity, and (4) embedding this constellation in broader European and international(ist) efforts and strategies. •

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