

France at “War”

Richard Greeman

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Dear Friends,

Faced with the shock of the bloody attacks in Paris on Friday the 13th, the overall reaction of the French people (and media) was humane and peaceful, in a spirit of unity and solidarity. Muslim religious leaders gathered at the Grand Mosque in Paris to denounce the attacks and disown the jihadist Islamism that inspired them. Citizens flocked to hospitals to donate blood. They turned to social media to comfort each other and to debunk wild rumours, with less divisive chat than after the Charlie attacks. In every city people gathered in central squares in large, peaceful, silent assemblies in order to mourn together, to exorcise fear and demonstrate a kind of peace of citizens. When a group of far-right National Front militants attempted to politicize a spontaneous gathering of a thousand people in Lille on Saturday, they were driven off with shouts of “fascists go home!”

On Saturday and Sunday, the radio, TV, and social media frequently evoked the negative example of George W. Bush’s reaction to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks: the Patriot Act and the U.S. “global war on terror” that eventually led to the disintegration of Iraq and the incubation of today’s Islamic State. The French are proud of having opposed the U.S. Iraqi invasion in 2003, and hopefully assumed that the Socialist government of François Hollande would be smart enough to avoid such a disastrous response to the Nov. 13 attacks. The stakes here are higher, for in the context of today’s France, such a “war against international terrorism” would automatically be coupled with a civil war within France itself between “Muslims” (sic) and “true Frenchmen.”

Such a civil war is not unimaginable. My generation still remembers the so-called Algerian war of the 50s and 60s, which was actually a civil war – since at the time Algeria was an integral part of the “indivisible” French Republic. That long and bloody civil war ended with De Gaulle overthrowing the Fourth Republic and granting the independence of Algeria (which sparked another civil war with right-wing French-Algerian military). Such a chaotic result was precisely the stated goal the Isis-inspired organizers of Friday’s attack were seeking. The French weren’t buying it.

Sunday the 15th was a beautiful day all across France, and everywhere the grieving French people went out of doors to breathe the air and mingle in cafes, on the squares, and in the autumnal sweetness of nature. They spent the day enjoying their beautiful country, unwinding from the distress, and affirming their commitment to life and conviviality. The temperature hit a record high for November, unseasonable flies and mosquitoes were buzzing the crowds of strollers at

the seashore, and people alluded, with a disabused smile, to “global warming.” The admirable nonchalance of the French, a sunny day of national defiance of fear. An example of a civilized population.

Sunday evening, returning from our hike, we found our next-door neighbor Geneviève standing on the landing, haggard, in tears, incoherent (it’s true that she drinks a bit). Trembling with fear, she was sobbing “Richard!” “War!” Familiar with Geneviève’s hysterics and totally oblivious of President Hollande’s bellicose declaration of “war against barbarism” and France’s nighttime bombardment of Raqqa, Syria, we tried to reason with Geneviève and then, exhausted from hiking, went inside to sleep in peace.

Monday morning, we woke up to a country “at war.” With martial solemnity, President Hollande addressed a rare joint session of the French legislature, declared an open-ended “state of exception,” promised to fight “without mercy” (!) and, paraphrasing George W. Bush in 2001, declared war on a “terrorist army” of “barbarians.” With this policy of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” we’ll all end up blind and toothless. Poor France! Poor world!

Moreover, while declaring war, the Hollande government has outlawed anti-war demonstrations and peace assemblies, thus quashing any possible popular opposition and ending the national dialogue begun over the weekend. Although the ban was limited to the Paris region and soon to expire, they are already preparing to prevent mass demonstrations and other outdoor activities during the upcoming climate summit, allowing the “deciders” to continue to cook the planet in peace. Thus, in the name of protecting freedom, freedom of assembly has been effectively abolished in France. In the name of French openness, French society has been closed. In the name of unity, France has been divided. Not by the jihadists, not by Le Pen and the racist right, but by the nominally Socialist government. Why?

On Monday, the Belgian writer and historian David van Reybrouck published an open letter to the President of the Republic on Médiapart, which concluded:

Mr. President, you fell right into the trap [laid by Isis] and you fell with your eyes wide open. You fell into the trap because you feel the hot breath of hawks like Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen breathing down your neck, and you’ve long had the reputation of a weakling. You fell into the trap. Elections are being readied in France. They’ll take place on December 6 and 13. They’re only regional elections, but after these attacks there’s no question that they will take place under the sign of national security. You fell into the trap with both feet, because you pronounced word for word what the terrorist were hoping to hear from you: a declaration of war. You enthusiastically accepted their invitation to jihad. But this response, which you wanted to be firm, runs the monstrous risk of even further accelerating the spiral of violence.

Van Reybrouck’s analysis is worth reading.¹ Among other things, he points out that the jihadists described by M. Holland as a “terrorist army” commanded from the “headquarters” of the Islamic State in Raqqa, was not very professional. One suicide bomber blew himself up in front of MacDonalds, killing only one bystander. The group that attacked the Stadium missed the President and forgot to block the exits. Moreover, the Isis bulletins taking credit for the attacks were contradictory, appeared well after the events, and could have been constructed on the basis of news reports.

¹ <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/151115/monsieur-le-president-vous-etes-tombe-dans-le-piege>

Further, Hollande's spectacular "declaration of war" was somewhat redundant, as France has been at war with Syria (a former French colony under a League of Nations mandate) since 2011 with several air strikes since September. Curiously, unlike in the U.S., the French media never report these military actions, which are also being carried out in Iraq along side of U.S. forces. Nor does the French Army post communiqués on its site. The place to find them is Wikipedia. One could add that Raqqa is a city of 200,000 civilians, that Isis moves its "headquarters" every few days, and that hundreds of Syrian civilians in schools and clinics were killed by the French reprisal attacks. Don't Arab lives matter?

There are about ten million Arabs living in France today. The European French media refer to them systematically as "Muslims," which they are nominally, although not that many pray five times a day or go to the mosque on Friday.² So as Arabs and "Moslems," French people of North African origin are subject to both racial and religious prejudices and tend to be excluded from mainstream French society. Unemployment is high, and most Arabs grow up in massive anonymous housing projects on the outskirts of Paris and other cities, the banlieues, where there are no banks, public services, or even supermarkets. In 2005, these ghettos erupted in rioting after police caused the death of the fleeing teenagers.³ Almost all the jihadists of Friday the 13th were French Arabs who grew up in these desperate ghettos, felt excluded, turned to "crime," converted to Islam in prison, and then went off to fight in Syria before filtering back into France and carrying out their suicide attacks. If the French Republic, instead of moving to include its Arab minority, provokes a racial/religious war with them, homegrown jihadist cells like last Friday's crews would rise up by the hundreds and the nightmare vision of an endless racial/religious civil war in this beautiful, peaceful country would come true.

This nightmare is Isis' vision, and the danger today is that the Hollande government – by playing with fire – will breath life into it. Until now, President Hollande has been seen as a hack center-left politician whose lack of charisma was pitiful. Apparently, he has seized on this crisis to play the great war leader in the hope of outmanoeuvring the far-right National Front and getting re-elected in 2017. It won't get him re-elected, of course. The French people are too wise to fall for the posturing of a cynical politician pretending to be a De Gaulle. But that is hardly the matter. People are dying under French bombs in Syria, and those chickens are bound to come home to roost in the banlieues of France.

One can only hope that unity in diversity, the intelligence and the courage manifested during these tragic days by the real France profonde, will survive the Hollande government's suspension of basic freedoms and its devious, provocative rhetoric designed to build up patriotic fever and silence critics. Discussions about peace are already beginning to take place in associations and on line. The real debate about war, peace, and the exclusion of France's Arab population will continue. This is a tragic time here in France. Only time will tell the outcome.

Yours in Solidarity,
Richard Greeman

² By comparison, no one calls the white European French "Christians."

³ Sarkozy, who was then Minister of the Interior (Security) insulted the rioters "scum" and then officials invited conservative Moslem immams to help restore order in the projects.

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