Democratic public spaces in the face of terrorism

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The collective harm inflicted by the terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday 13 November 2015 results in part from the fact that the perpetrators of these attacks took the specific qualities of urban public spaces and turned them against the city: hospitality, anonymity and the presumption of trust in others. All these characteristics form the foundations of civil exchanges in democratic public spaces.

The terrorist acts of which we were victims in Paris on Friday 13 November 2015 caused both pain and fear – two things that are difficult to disentangle, moreover. The acute sense of injustice that we feel today is in part due to the cruelly ironic fact that these acts made use of the virtues and the sheer scale of the democratic spaces targeted and turned them into weaknesses – or, more accurately, recast them as vulnerabilities. Indeed, it is in part from the hospitality of these public spaces, their openness and the presumption of trust between strangers that prevails in them that terrorism obtains its capacity for destruction. In this way, it transforms a cardinal virtue and an essential characteristic of our democracies – the *a priori* trust that prevails in encounters and gatherings among strangers – into a weakness.

Since that fateful Friday night, some have evoked the need to take stock of the danger, to "wake up" or to bring about a real "cultural change" within the French population. But what kind of change should this be? And what could the scope of this change be, in terms of what we want to defend? The call for ever greater vigilance is not without concomitants. We already know the drill when it comes to the prevention of petty crime. Indeed, some of the now routinized aspects of "situational prevention" in the city include the warnings issued by RATP (the public-transport operator in Paris) encouraging passengers to be wary of other metro users in certain stations where thefts are particularly frequent. This measure, which on the face of it appears to be nothing more than plain common sense (by calling for caution), in fact surreptitiously incites users to change the way they consider their fellow passengers, and indeed they way they behave in public: they are encouraged to "take care of [their] personal belongings", bearing in mind that "pickpockets operate in this station", which is hardly conducive to a relaxed carefree attitude. By replacing the presumption of trust with suggestions of risk and guilty carelessness in this way, announcements tend to reduce the legitimate scope of this *a priori* trust between metro users. Significantly, this context also creates very real reservations and reluctance among certain users.[1]

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[1] This was attested in interviews conducted in conjunction with colleagues (Alexandra Bidet and Erwan Le Méner) in the context of our seminar titled "Ethnography of Citizenship" (held at the École Normale Supéieure [ENS] in Paris in 2014/2015, and to be held at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [EHESS], also in Paris, in 2015/2016) on how relations in public are experienced. A number of female respondents, for example, pointed out that they refused to completely close their handbags in the metro, despite the reproaches and worried – and sometimes worrying – warnings that were directed at them on this subject. They justified this unwillingness to consider fortification and distancing as appropriate for urban life (moving around the city, cohabiting urban space with other people) in terms of a truly moral and/or political refusal. Here, we can see the refusal of an overly defensive definition of "public spirit".

It is important, therefore, to weigh up the possible implications of calls for vigilance. In order to reflect upon the ways in which such configurations of public safety issues induce risks, it would seem useful at this juncture to recall the elements that have defined urban public spaces – ever since their development in France in the 18th century – as democratic spaces.

Urban public spaces at the heart of democracy as a way of life

Taking the status and role of urban public spaces in democratic life seriously means distancing ourselves from narrow definitions of politics that are confined to the spheres of power and decision-making on one hand and those of activist and party-political action on the other. Indeed, from these perspectives, daily life is largely disconnected from the political world, with the street occupying an essentially secondary and instrumental role in the manifestation of power (policing) or the challenging of power (demonstrations, protests).

By establishing a certain distance from such approaches, it is possible to consider urban public spaces as essential to democracy, provided we consider democracy to be a way of life and not just a type of political regime or mode of government. While it is common today to consider urban public spaces as purely material, physical environments, with inherent properties that are independent from the practices that take place in them (as urban planners are sometimes wont to do, equating them with the interstices that separate open spaces from streets and highways), the opposite stance that holds, on the contrary, that the use of the term "public space" to designate urban areas as "metaphorical" (Joseph 1998; Terzi and Tonnelat 2013) also seems unsatisfactory. In reality, reflecting upon urban public spaces means thinking about the ways in which concrete spaces of coexistence between strangers allow practices that fall within a public regime and the ordinary exercise of concern for others and for the world in general, between people who have no other link than the fact that they live together in society. As I have argued elsewhere (Gayet-Viaud 2011, 2015, forthcoming), civil interactions and urban public life as they take place in the street, on public transport or on café terraces are an opportunity for activities and for forms of attention and involvement that represent the most basic exercise of citizenship: the formation and testing *in situ* of categories of mutual perception, daily demonstrations of concern for our common world, definitions of our individual responsibilities with regard to the world and the things that happen there, conditions of normality, and criteria for "intervention" concerning and within the common world (Bidet *et al.* 2015). Citizenship understood in this way, as manifested concern for the consequences and scope of acts and situations, is considered in isolation from its legal or administrative definition, ahead of the eruption of collectives and of publics, so dear to Dewey (2010), that come into being in order to more systematically deal with the consequences for the common world.

Considering the central role of urban public spaces in democratic life means re-establishing the often broken link between "social" forms of existence and forms of "politics" in the strictest sense of the term. It is therefore a question of putting mores – whereby norms are not just expressed but also tested – back at the heart of questions relating to democracy. As the philosopher Claude Lefort pointed out, the *politeia*, before meaning a constitution in the formal sense, designated "the constitution of experiential points of reference that holds a political community together". Moreover, Lefort regretted that *politeia* was often translated as "regime". Citing Leo Strauss, he asserted that "the word [regime] deserves to be used only if we ensure it retains all the resonance that it gains when employed in the expression *Ancien Régime*. It then combines the idea of a type of constitution and the idea of a style of existence or a way of life" (Lefort 1986). What is meant here by "way of life", "type of constitution" and "style of existence"? Lefort goes on:

> "These terms should evoke everything that can be encapsulated in an expression such as 'American Way of Life': mores and beliefs that reflect a set of implicit norms commanding the notion of what is just and unjust, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, noble and low. For example, the questioning conducted by Plato in *Republic*, far from fixing the limits of politics,

posed questions concerning not just the origin of power and the conditions for its legitimacy but also the relationship between command and obedience throughout society; the city's relations with foreigners; the nature of social needs and the distribution of professional activities; religion; the respective purposes of the individual and of society, to the point where recognition is obtained of an analogy between the constitution of the *psyche* and the constitution of the *polis*; and lastly, but no less remarkably, going as far as to suggest that the discourse on the *politeia*, and dialogue more generally, called into question relations of a political nature." And yet "Plato, as we know, did not think that everything was political" (Lefort *op. cit.*, p. 9).

Mores, as understood in this way, are an integral part of the political investigation (as they were for Tocqueville, and for Montesquieu before him). They are not the "other" of politics, but the very place in which politics develops, emerges or retreats. From this perspective, these ways of doing things, and of relating to others and the world, which continually develop and manifest themselves in our urban public spaces, form key aspects of co-citizenship considered in its most basic sense – in the sense that everything that appears and works towards co-citizenship forms part of the "civil link" (Pharo 1985) that connects people who share no other link other than the fact that they live together in society.

The presumption of trust: at the basis of democratic public spaces

By indiscriminately shooting innocent bystanders, terrorists turn one of democracy's characteristics against itself. Moreover, it is a characteristic that occurs in civil exchanges every day: the presumption of trust. For, no, we do not *a priori* distrust others when we move about the city. These daily accomplishments of minimal mutual goodwill, which some today would perhaps rename "naivety", are consubstantial with the democratic nature of spaces. Indeed, these spaces are all the more democratic when everyone, regardless of their characteristics and affiliations, is able to find in them unconditional hospitality combined with the right to move around, the right to stand still (Joseph 1998) and the right to act freely among others, without having to be accountable to anyone regarding who they are or where they come from, as statuses and identities are "suspended" in their potential relevance. All that remains is that we are accountable for what we do, as historian Alain Cottereau demonstrated in relation to the birth of democratic public spaces in 18th century France (Cottereau 1992).

This "credit" of trust and respect is the equivalent, in terms of everyday sociability, of the presumption of innocence in the judicial sphere. It takes account of the equality of citizens and allows the reciprocity of perspectives and interchangeability of positions (most often, we interact with others as if our roles could be reversed) that lie at the heart of democratic coexistence. In practice, these factors reflect the political principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. This trusting, suspicion-free sociability of our urban public spaces therefore represents a political quality of our lives that is altogether priceless – a luxury usually forgotten as it is so easily incorporated, accepted and granted – but which makes us easy victims: targets that it is possible, albeit not necessarily easy, for someone to come along and execute.[2] The irruption of malevolence should not lead us to deny or underestimate the value and meaning of this presumption of mutual benevolence, even though it was a condition of the possibility of its expression.

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[2]   The emergence of terrorists, even when hidden among passers-by, users of a space, or participants at an event, always occurs from outside the public spaces in question, as opposed to what would otherwise be an endogenous rise in violence (i.e. generated by processes internal to the situations in question). For the act of terrorism is premeditated and perpetrated from a position of radical exteriority, built on ideology and indoctrination, that alone makes it possible to consider these spaces of communal life as pure objects, reifying them in absolute terms. This explains the metaphors that came to everyone's mind: the feeling of "being shot at like sitting ducks". It is no longer simply a matter of denying the equality of those co-present, but rather of denying their very humanity, and of treating them as "things".

Of course, even in times of "normality", the enjoyment of this characteristic of civil sociability (*a priori* trust, interchangeability of positions, suspension of statuses and affiliations) is never perfect: it does not benefit everyone fully. Furthermore, it is in this regard that instances of discrimination suffered in the most ordinary interactions, regardless of the motive – gender (Gardner 1995), colour (Jobard *et al.* 2012), religion (Tavory 2011), sexual orientation or disability (Goffman 1975; Revillard 2015), etc. – represent serious attacks on democracy: they impinge upon individual freedom and deny equality by suspending this right to benevolent anonymity, this credit of trust and respect due to everyone, by giving relevance to certain characteristics in the civil exchange that have no legitimacy to be so.

Distrusting distrust

It is here that one of the potentially damaging aspects of these terrorist acts comes into play – that is, in these spaces and in these interactions. The threat lies in their possible performative effects, namely by taking the false premises claimed by such acts and making them true in terms of their consequences, and by making these criteria of perception of others and these forms of categorization real in terms of the interactions that follow. This happens, for example, when men talking among themselves in Arabic or veiled women are subject to sideways looks, reflecting suspicion, anxiety and defiance; or are the subject of comments, criticisms, calls upon them to justify their actions, or even sometimes insults and worse. Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks of January 2015, civilian interactions had attested not just to this – real – risk but also to the concerned rise in awareness of such opportunities: people[3] kept an eye out, watched one another, checked and corrected themselves, and talked to others about these exchanges of looks, these unjustified categorizations (Gayet-Viaud 2015). This vigilance and reflexivity regarding categories, which can generate forms of pedagogy, but also disputes,[4] is crucial.

It invites us to be wary of calls to wariness themselves, when such calls mean transforming the way each of us looks at one another in public by attacking the presumption of trust (and of innocence) that prevails, and which must continue to prevail, among citizens. This is also what terrorism threatens, beyond the direct safety of our lives alone. For, after all, the opposite of this trust is the regime of suspicion, characteristic of the Terror, amply documented by historians and analysts of both the French Revolution[5] (Lefebvre 1932; Jaume 1989) and the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (Lefort 1971).

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[3]   In the observations conducted by our students and ourselves in urban spaces in Paris and several other towns in the Paris region, from January to March 2015.

[4]   Unfortunately, this did not suffice to prevent growing numbers of Islamophobic acts being committed in 2015 (CCIF 2015).

[5]   The "passion for surveillance" marked the entry into the Terror of revolutionary France (Jaume 1989). Closer to the present time, the systematic practice of denunciation, and of suspicion more generally, characterized the operation of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

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