

PARTI PRIS

The day after the November 13 Paris attacks: Why fear is our enemy

Wednesday 18 November 2015, by [PLENEL Edwy](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2015).

The terrorist attack in Paris and at the Stade de France on Friday November 13th targeted the whole of society; our society, our France, a France made up of diversity, plurality, of people coming together and mixing, argues Mediapart's editor-in-chief, Edwy Plenel. It is that open society that the terror wants to shut down, to silence through fear, to make disappear through horror. And it is this society, he says, that we must defend because it is our most secure and lasting protection against terrorism.

It was a mild autumn Friday evening. The weekend had arrived, and it was time to go out and relax. It was a time for friends to gather, for music concerts and sports matches. Men and women mixed together, young people from all walks of life and different backgrounds came out to enjoy themselves, whether it was to have a drink, smoke, dance, mingle with others, chat people up or enjoy each other's company. In short, a time to go out and meet other people.

One simply has to state these simple, unembellished words to share what we have all felt since yesterday: everyone, our children, our parents, our friends, our neighbours, ourselves, was in the killers' sights.

Because they were not targeting obviously symbolic sites, unlike during the attacks in January, when the attackers expressed their hatred for freedom (the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo) and their hatred of Jews (the attack on the Jewish supermarket), it has been said that the terrorists in Paris on Friday had no targets. That is not true; armed with a totalitarian ideology, whose religious views serve as an argument to kill all differing views, remove all diversity, deny all individuality, their aim was to frighten a society which represents the hope of the very opposite.

Over and above France, its foreign policy or that of its government, their target was this democratic ideal of a society that is free because it is based on a right: the right to have rights; equality of rights with no distinction as to origin, appearance or beliefs. The right to make one's way in life without it being based on one's birth or appearance. A society of individuals where the "us" is woven from an infinite number of "mes" all in relation with one other. A society of individual freedoms and of collective rights.

To accurately assess the scale of the menace of this unprecedented terror attack on French soil – they are the deadliest such attacks in Europe after the Madrid bombings of 2004 – obviously also means assessing the challenge that these killers and the people behind them have thrown down to us. It is this open society that the terrorists want to shut down. Their war aim is for this society to close in on itself, retreat, become divided, shrivel, stumble and lose its way.

Whatever the particular context, period or region of the world, terrorism always gambles on fear.

Not just the fear that it spreads through society but the politics of fear that it produces in the highest echelons of the state: a headlong rush where totalitarian terror prompts the undermining of democracy, a war without end, without fronts or limits, without any other strategic objective than its own perpetuation, with attacks and retaliations feeding off one another, and with cause and effect becoming intertwined ad infinitum, with no peaceful outcome ever resulting.

As painful as it may be, we must make the effort to grasp the terrorists' rationale. This is to ensure we can fight it better and avoid falling into its trap or ever proving it right, whether through lack of awareness or blindness. These are the self-fulfilling prophecies that arise from its terrifying, murderous logic: provoking even greater chaos through terror which in turn, it is hoped, will lead to greater anger, resentment and injustice. We know this from recent experience, for the headlong rush by North America after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 was behind the disaster in Iraq from where the organisation called Islamic State emerged, born amid the rubble of a destroyed state and the rifts in a society that had been torn apart.

Will we be capable of learning the lessons of these catastrophic errors or are we instead going to repeat them? It's an understatement to say that in the context of accumulated existing crises - economic, social, environmental, European and so on - our country is experiencing an historic moment when democracy rediscovers tragedy. When the fragility of the former is at peril from the latter. For what is at stake now is not something remote, but here in France itself. We knew, after the January attacks, that the real test was still to come. This autumn, when he stepped down as an investigating judge specialising in counter-terrorism, Marc Trévidic reminded us: "The darkest days are ahead of us." [1]. In a warning that did not spare our leaders he said: "Politicians adopt warlike postures, but they don't have a long-term vision ... I don't believe that the French strategy is well-founded."

Indeed, faced with this peril that affects us all, we cannot abandon our future and our security to those who govern us. Even if it is their responsibility to protect us, we must not allow them to do so against us, in spite of us, without us.

It is always difficult to raise awkward questions - questions which are at the moment inaudible - in the aftermath of events that grip an entire people, that unite them in compassion and dread. But collectively and in the long term we will not be able to resist the terror that confronts us if we ourselves are not in control of the responses that are brought to bear. If we are not informed, consulted and involved. Nor will we be able to resist this terror if we are denied the right to question a foreign policy of alliances with dictatorial or secretive regimes (Egypt, Saudi Arabia), or warlike adventures with no strategic vision (particularly in the Sahel), to question short-term and base political approaches (in particular over Islam and the repressed colonial notion that Muslims should be "assimilated") that divide more than they bring together, which express the fears from on high more than they mobilise the people below.

To face up to terrorism is to build a society, to make a bulwark of the very thing that they want to destroy. By defending our France, our Rainbow France, made strong by its diversity and plurality, this France capable of making common cause in rejecting scapegoats and the rejection of tarring people with the same brush. This France whose heroes, in 2015, were Muslims as well as atheists, Christians, Jews, Freemasons, agnostics, people of all origins, cultures and beliefs. This is the France of Ahmed Merabet, the police officer who gave his life outside the Charlie Hebdo building. And it is the France of Lassana Bathily, this former illegal immigrant who saved many hostages during the Jewish supermarket siege in January. It is also the France that, during the long Parisian night that has just passed, was highlighted by the role of so many rescue workers, carers, doctors, police, soldiers, firefighters, volunteers, carrying out a thousand acts of solidarity that also stemmed from this very same diversity - human, social, cultural, religious and so on - that gives France its richness.

And its strength.

After the 7/7 terror attacks in Britain in 2005, British society spontaneously stood together around a slogan invented by a young internet user: "We are not afraid." During the attacks in 2004, Spanish society clung together around a symbol: of hands raised with palms open, both unarmed and determined at the same time.

We are not afraid. Except of ourselves, if we give way to it. Except of our leaders if they lead us astray and ignore us. As for the society that the killers want to shut down, we defend its openness more than ever. And hold out our hands to each other. The symbol of this rejection of fear could be two hands that meet, shake and join together.

Two hands crossed.

Edwy Plenel

P.S.

* "Why fear is our enemy". MEDIAPART. 14 NOVEMBRE 2015:
<http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/141115/why-fear-our-enemy>

* English version by Michael Streeter. The French version of this article is on ESSF too.

Footnotes

[1] Read his interview with Paris Match, in French only, here:
<http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/La-France-est-l-ennemi-numero-un-de-l-Etat-islamique-837513>