

France - Investigation

Police violences in France - 'I'm suffocating': the final words of Cédric Chouviat, arrested by French police

Sunday 28 June 2020, by [PASCARIELLO Pascale](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2020).

On January 3rd 2020 deliveryman Cédric Chouviat, aged 42, was stopped on his scooter as part of a routine roadside police check in Paris, arrested, put in a chokehold then held face down on the pavement. His own mobile phone reveals that seven times he repeated the words "I'm suffocating" [1] before falling unconscious and later dying. The episode inevitably has echoes of the American George Floyd whose last words when being held down by a police officer in Minneapolis were "I can't breathe". These revelations about the final words of Cédric Chouviat, contained in a report seen by both Mediapart and Le Monde, will put even greater pressure on the authorities to shed light on the nature of the arrest and the controversial techniques used by the French police to restrain the father-of-five. Pascale Pascariello reports.

The last words spoken by a man arrested and restrained by French police in Paris in January 2020 were "I'm suffocating", Mediapart can reveal.

The words, which were repeated seven times by 42-year-old deliveryman Cédric Chouviat as he was held face down on the pavement, will inevitably invite comparisons with the final words of American George Floyd who cried out 'I can't breathe' as a police officer knelt on his neck in Minneapolis, a death which sparked protests around the world.

Cédric Chouviat's final desperate words are contained in a report from the investigation into his death, a copy of which has been seen by Mediapart and *Le Monde*, and which sheds vital new light on the circumstances and manner of his arrest.

They show that, just as in the United States, the restraint techniques employed by French police officers can suffocate people. They also show that, just as in the United States, French police officers can hear an arrested person's cry for help and do nothing.



Cédric Chouviat, still with his helmet on, held on the ground by three police officers in Paris on January 3rd 2020. © Document Mediapart

The arrest took place during a roadside police check [2] near the Eiffel Tower on January 3rd when the deliveryman was on his scooter. Cédric Chouviat was put in a chokehold by one officer, and then

with the help of two other officers he was held face down on the ground and handcuffed.

According to the report, the father of five can be heard saying “I’m suffocating”, a phrase that was picked up seven times by his own mobile phone via a microphone in his helmet. Cédric Chouviat had recorded his conversation with the police when he was stopped and checked, and because of the speed and violence with which he was put on the ground he did not have time to turn off the phone or take off his helmet. Indeed, his helmet was only removed when he was unconscious.

When first questioned by the police watchdog the Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale (IGPN) on the day of the arrest itself, the police officers said Cédric Chouviat had been “disrespectful towards the team”, “aggressive” and “threatening”. They said they decided to arrest him after enduring a number of insults. The arrested man resisted and “struggled” while on the ground and continued to insult them, according to the woman police officer who was there with three male colleagues.

Then on June 17th the four officers were formally taken into custody for questioning as part of the judge-led investigation into the case. The question is: did the woman police officer go back on her initial version of events? For as the transcript of the recordings now show, Cédric Chouviat was not hurling insults but was instead calling for help - seven times.

This new evidence handed to the judicial investigation into “manslaughter” that was launched in January will only increase the criticism that has been made in recent years about police arrest techniques in France [3]. This involves the chokehold and the technique of holding a suspect face down on the ground with an officer applying weight and pressure on that person.

Detectives have transcribed the recordings made both by the victim and the police in order to verify, in the words of their instructions, the “circumstances of an arrest carried out in an alleged context of insults and resistance”. They have transcribed not just the words exchanged during the police check but also the sounds of the arrest themselves: the “impact of objects, fall to the ground, use of all equipment or objects and in particular the handcuffs”.

Piecing together different elements from the investigation, Mediapart has been able to recreate the events of the arrest. We were able to see the video filmed by the police and read all of the transcript of the recording made by Cédric Chouviat, with the audio itself under seal.

At 9.54am on January 3rd 2020 four police officers, two of them trainees, began a roadside check on Cédric Chouviat, who had just stopped his scooter.

According to the IGPN report, Cédric Chouviat “provoked the police officers by pointedly filming them during the entire check”. However, examination of the transcripts and videos shows a more nuanced chain of events. Unhappy that he is filming them with his phone, the police officers lose their cool and push Cédric Chouviat several times. “How great to make a spectacle of yourself,” says one officer, to which the deliveryman replies: “I’ve got the right to film.” Then as one officer pushes him with his hand several times he says: “Don’t touch me” and “You there, don’t push me, you don’t have the right to push me like that, mister.”

The police check, which lasts 12 minutes, goes badly but there is no sense of danger or risk to the officers.

According to the IGPN report the police officers were then “subjected to insults” and having noted this decided to “proceed to arrest Mr Chouviat, who tried to obstruct it”. Once again, that is not exactly what the recordings show.

The police officers seem to be waiting for the slightest loss of control, sometimes going back over Cédric Chouviat's words to check if they were insulting. "Go on, get worked up," one of the trainee officers even says to him at one point. The deliveryman himself says: "It's you who are the clowns" and "You're the ones who are a laughing stock." That is the extent of what he says.

The police officers also mock the deliveryman by calling a car driver as a witness. One of the officers even says to Cédric Chouviat: "You think I'm going to get down on all fours and suck your dick too?" If there is an insult during this exchange then it comes from the police side.

The time is 10.06am. The police officers go back to their vehicle. The check could end there. But the senior officer thinks he has heard a new insult. "What did you say?" he asks. "You piece of ...? ... son of a bitch?" he queries, getting out of the vehicle again. In fact Cédric Chouviat had said no such thing, simply "loser".

Having been pushed again by an officer, Cédric Chouviat says several times that he will make an official complaint. As his voice gets louder, his fear and anger can be heard. As one of the officers calls the control room, another asks if they can check if "bunch of clowns" is an insult that justifies an arrest.

Then Cédric Chouviat calls one of them a "muppet". "We're bringing him in," says the officer. It is 10.07am. Everything then moves very fast. Only Cédric Chouviat's phone is still on.

In their initial statements the police officers told the IGP that the deliveryman resisted arrest. He was then put on the ground. At 10.09am, after a chokehold by "holding his head" - a detail mentioned by an officer during questioning - three officers held him face down on the ground.

The recordings do not indicate what happened afterwards. "We hear different noises that we're not able to formally identify. They could be due to rubbing on the microphone," say the detectives investigating the case.

The exception is the sound of the handcuffs which are clearly identifiable, followed by an officer saying "it's fine, it's fine, cuffs ok". And then the final words uttered by Cédric Chouviat. He says: "Stop", "I'm stopping" and then seven times he says: "I'm suffocating."

According to the recordings Cédric Chouviat remains like that on the ground for five minutes, face down, still with his helmet on and handcuffed. By around 10.13am he is unconscious. The police attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). According to the hospital report, when the emergency team tried to resuscitate him, he showed signs of severe brain damage, due to oxygen deprivation. He died on January 5th, in the intensive care unit at the Georges-Pompidou European hospital in Paris.

Contacted by Mediapart, the lawyers for Cédric Chouviat's family, Arié Alimi, William Bourdon and Vincent Brengarth, said that he had died as a result of the chokehold and being held face down on the ground.

"Cédric Chouviat's awful words before dying are a universal cry. Despite his cries, the police maintained their suffocating pressure. Cédric Chouviat could have been saved," said William Bourdon and Vincent Brengarth. This latest evidence from the investigation showed that "this method of arrest leads to a technique of harassment of which Cédric was undoubtedly the victim".

The three lawyers are now calling on the French government to "ban the use of the chokehold" and restraining people face down on the ground immediately. "Now that we know that these techniques kill, any police officer who practices them should face murder proceedings," said Arié Alimi.

"I am deeply hurt," said Cédric's father Christian Chouviat. "My son warned them several times but they carried on killing him. Yesterday [editor's note, June 21st] was Father's Day, Cédric wasn't there with his children, his family. I will suffer until my dying day," he said, overcome.

"They took my son from me and it wasn't an accident," Christian Chouviat continued. "The [interior] minister Christophe Castaner met us. He promised us he'd do things but didn't do anything. He needs to stop mocking us with this PR. He must ban these practices. And justice must be done for my son and for others," he concluded.

On June 8th 2020 Christophe Castaner announced that the chokehold would no longer be taught in France's police academies. But the practice can still be used "with moderation and judgement", the director general of France's national police service, Frédéric Veaux, said a week later in a note to his officers. The technique could be used when there was "excitement and/or aggressiveness on the part of the person who is physically resisting the arrest, threats to police officers or third parties".

But how can you demonstrate "moderation" and "judgement" when using a chokehold? How can you demonstrate this "moderation" and "judgement" when holding a handcuffed man on the ground, face down in a position which stops him breathing, which then makes him agitated and thus brings extra pressure from the police officers? Is it not the case that "moderation" and "judgement" are simply contrary to the very nature of these practices?

Pascale Pascariello

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. June 24, 2020:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/240620/im-suffocating-final-words-cedric-chouviat-arrested-french-police>

- English version by Michael Streeter.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2Z74yfiXAQ>

[2] <https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/100120/french-police-restraint-techniques-criticised-after-paris-arrest-death>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/09/french-police-restraint-techniques-criticised-after-paris-arrest-death>