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State of Emergency: The Spaces of the French Colonial Continuum

Léopold Lambert

On October 30, 2017, the French Parliament approved the law "reinforcing internal security and the fight against terrorism" by 415 votes to 127. This law was drafted by the Macron administration to crystalize into common law most of the exceptional measures the state of emergency enables. After almost two years of application in France and the so-called "overseas territories,"

the state of emergency thus ceased, but it was replaced by a normalized legal regime, thereby confirming the cliché that the exception always becomes the rule. The law immutably implies the territory of its jurisdiction, as well as the physical means through which



it materializes and enforces itself. There is therefore an architecture of the state of emergency, and through this ratification of permanent emergency most architectures that make up the cities of France are affected and in turn affect how they are experienced by the bodies they organize in space. To understand the nature of the political order they implement, it is crucial to examine the genealogy of the French state of emergency.

Originally drafted to be applied immediately to a situation that was perceived to require hypertrophied executive and police powers, the first state of emergency, approved on April 3, 1955, by a vote of the French Parliament, came into effect solely in the colonial territory of Algeria for eight months, five months after the anticolonial offensive of the National Liberation Front (FLN) began. It was later replaced in March 1956 by an equivalent measure that gave “special powers” to the French government. During that time, the French army muzzled Algiers’s Casbah, from where the FLN was operating, setting up checkpoints to control the movements of residents. Meanwhile, in rural areas, the colonial army emptied entire villages and forcefully relocated their residents to camps whose architecture was fully oriented toward surveillance and control, as described by Samia Henni in her book *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria* (2017).

On April 23, 1961, a state of emergency was declared in both the colonial Algerian territory and in France. Although the exceptional measures were triggered by the attempted French military coup, the bodies they targeted were mostly Algerian. Prefect of Police for Paris Maurice Papon, whose experience in colonial counterinsurgency was deemed adequate to run the police of the French capital, used the state of emergency to intensify his operation targeting all Algerians suspected of acting in solidarity with the FLN. On October 5, 1961, he declared a curfew for

Algerians in Paris and its banlieues. Twelve days later, the FLN organized massive evening demonstrations against this racist measure. The massacre that ensued is usually remembered as locally and temporally situated. According to this officialized narrative, a few dozen Algerians were thrown by the police into the Seine from the Pont Saint-Michel in the heat of the moment. In reality, the massacre was systematic and occurred in multiple spaces and temporalities as shown by the precise research of Jean-Luc Einaudi in *La bataille de Paris* (1991). Algerians living and working in Paris's banlieues would have had great difficulty reaching the center of the city in order to join the demonstrations. Bridges and subway stations were particular sites of violence — places where Algerians were arrested, beaten with batons, or even shot and thrown in the Seine — as their narrowness aided police efforts to exert tight, systematic control. Later that night and in the following days, the beatings and killings continued in various Parisian buildings that had been turned into improvised detention centers. An estimated two hundred to three hundred Algerians were killed in a massacre for which no one in the police force has been held responsible.

Colonialism controls its own critique in order to ensure its perpetuation while manufacturing the myth of its past historicity. The independence of Algeria on July 5, 1962, is interpreted in the French national history as marking the end of "the colonization." What this narrative deliberately omits is the

colonial reality experienced in territories that were never decolonized and still remain under the vague appellation of “overseas departments” (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, Réunion, and Mayotte) and “overseas collectivities” (Kanak-New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, Tahiti Nui, Saint Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, and Saint Pierre and Miquelon) — statuses that all nonprotectorate colonies shared from 1946 until the date they became independent. Insurrections and general strikes in these overseas territories have occurred regularly since their annexation.



Some were bloodily suppressed by the French police (e.g., in Guadeloupe, 1967, or Martinique, 1974), and in 1985 French *gendarmes* in Kanaky-New Caledonia killed Éloi Machoro, one of the leaders of the indigenous Kanak revolt, a few hours before a state of emergency was declared in the Pacific archipelago.

The state of emergency was next applied in a geography relating to the “French colonial continuum”: the banlieues of twenty cities in France (including the five largest: Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Lille, and Toulouse), where many former colonial subjects and their families had been assigned to live in the modern, large-scale social-housing complexes segregated

from the city centers. In October and November 2005, some of the banlieue youth revolted against the profound social inequalities to which they were subjected. They burned many cars, as well as a few buildings, and responded to the police violence deployed against them. The state of emergency declared in reaction to this uprising made explicit the target of the legal measure of exception; it thus inadvertently interrogated the nature of what has been called postcolonialism, revealing the colonial logics at work on territories where nonwhite populations live. Ten years later, the two-year-long state of emergency declared after the murderous attacks on Saint-Denis and Paris reconfirmed such a targeting. Yes, its capacity to muzzle demonstrations and opposition was on full display during the 2015 COP22 Summit and during the numerous demonstrations against the new labor legislation in the spring of 2016. And, for people whose social and economic status enables them to live in French city centers, the state of emergency was manifested by the threatening presence of fully armed patrolling soldiers and police officers. Away from city centers, however, in the banlieues, the police suppressed demonstrations with less restraint. And the most intense violence did not occur in public space but in the five thousand Muslim-owned apartments, houses, offices, restaurants, and religious buildings that were searched by police, sometimes in the middle of the night and often with a high degree of physical or verbal

violence, but seldom with the state taking further legal action: 99.6 percent of these searches were not followed by any prosecution (Hassina Mechai & Sihem Zine, *L'état d'urgence (permanent)*, 2018).

Studying the French state of emergency is therefore useful because it mobilizes the multiplicity of geographies and temporalities of the colonial continuum. Through its regime of exception, it renders particularly visible the French state's efforts to sustain the political, social, economic, geographic, and cultural essentialist inequalities between white and nonwhite bodies through which colonialism enforces itself. Architecture is not simply the neutral frame in which this violence takes place. Rather it has a full part in the struggle between the colonial order, which it enforces with great efficiency, and the anticolonial resistance, to which it can occasionally contribute.

figs. 1 a–c "Chrono-cartography of the October 17, 1961 Massacre of Algerians in Paris," *The Funambulist*, May 22, 2017, <https://thefunambulist.net/history/chrono-cartography-october-17-1961-massacre-algerians-paris> (accessed August 16, 2017). Illustration by Léopold Lambert, 2017.