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Marianne Maeckelbergh : « *The Unimaginable: My Night of Violence at the Hands of the Belgian Police* »

Dr. Marianne Maeckelbergh is a professor and researcher at the University of Leiden in Holland. She is the author of *The Will of the Many - How the Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy* and a long-time global justice, political prisoner solidarity, environmental, and animal rights activist. Marianne worked with Wetlands as a volunteer in the nineties, eventually joining our staff as the coordinator of our Animal Rights Action Team.

Last Friday [October 1st, 2010, **NDLR**], during the No Border Camp, « a convergence of struggles aiming to end the system of borders that divide us All », Wetlands veteran Marianne Maeckelbergh was arrested for taking pictures while police were making arrests in Brussels, Belgium. Having just entered Belgium two and a half hours earlier, she was on the terrace of a café with friends when she witnessed violent arrests on the street. She went to take pictures and was herself arrested by the police chief. She was taken into police custody where she was violently dragged by her hair, chained to a radiator, hit, kicked, spat upon, called a whore, and threatened with sexual assault by the police. She also witnessed the torture of another prisoner also chained to a radiator.

This took place not in a dark corner of the police station but out in the open, directly witnessed by police station authorities who gave the impression that this was standard practice. Police removed her ID card, USB stick, the camera with the photos on it, and 25 euros in cash from her property and have refused to return them. Roughly 500 people were arrested, many preemptively, including people involved in the No Border Camp and other protest activities including an alleged attack on a police station. As of Wednesday 6 October, 2010 at least four people are still incarcerated.

**Below is her story :**

« There are moments in everyone's life when, suddenly, after a tragic experience, the whole world looks different. On Friday 1 October 2010, the Belgian police provided me with such an experience. When they looked at me with the anger and hate of complete aggression in their eyes; when they raised their fists in violence towards me; and when I felt the hand of the state collide hard and painfully against the side of my face, that was when I realised – the world, my world, would never be the same again.

On Friday I travelled to Brussels to catch the last two days of the No Borders Camp, a bi-annual meeting of the No Borders Network that brings together people from all over the world “to end the system of borders that divide us all” and the systems of repression that “*multiply the borders everywhere in all countries.*” My research explores how these international networks are developing highly complex and effective models of democracy. So it is very ironic that when I began to take pictures on a public street, the police responded by unjustly arresting me and robbing me of my most fundamental democratic rights. »

### **The Violence**

« For fourteen unforgettable hours I was held in custody and subjected to their violence, their authority, their every whim. I was beaten, spat upon, repeatedly called a ‘dirty whore’ and chained to a radiator until 4am right outside the open door to the office of the chief of police, who observed it all and reacted only with silence. The police chief and I also witnessed the violent beating of another arrestee, also chained to a radiator, upon whom the police unleashed a fit of rage like none I’d ever seen – the young man fell to the ground screaming the only French word he knew, ‘non, non, non’. As I watched this, chained myself right next to the police chief, I wondered what country I was in, how such a thing could happen at all in this world, and where oh where had democracy and justice gone? »

### **The Crime – Being Socially Engaged**

« And what was my alleged crime? I was only taking pictures and the police knew it. The chief of police arrested me himself, dressed in plainclothes and without giving me any warning or dispersal order. He knew what I was doing and he knew it was only taking pictures. But it didn’t matter to these police officers. They were 100% convinced that I was a protestor and as they put it, a ‘leftist’, and that was all they needed to know in order to feel fully justified in beating me and others. They used the European Trade Union demonstration from Wednesday 29 September 2010, attended by over 56,000 people, as evidence against me even though I wasn’t even there, arguing that being a part of that demonstration justified their treatment of me. They were mad because someone had smashed the windows of their police station, and they were sure, despite all evidence to the contrary, that I had been a part of that and that being a part of that somehow justified their behaviour.

In this police station, any association with the No Borders Camp and any desire to help those who live their everyday lives in the insecurity of having no papers and nowhere safe to turn, was a justification for severe violence. The police laid their values on the table for me, clear as day. For them the safety, physical and mental well being and the democratic rights of the human beings whose care they were responsible for was irrelevant. All of those arrested should have been treated as innocent until proven guilty – and none of them, regardless of the crime, deserved to be beaten by representatives of the government. Once again I wondered what country I had ended up in and where democracy had gone. But I didn’t even dare to raise my eyes to meet theirs, much less contradict them, for fear of the raging fists flying at me. »

## **The Set Up – Police Intentionally Lie to Frame Me**

« Even one of the ‘friendlier’ police officers felt the need to frame me for the crime. There could have been no doubt that I was doing nothing more than taking pictures, not only because the chief himself saw me, but also because I had a perfect alibi for the whole evening – I was sitting on the terrace of a café with two friends and I told them that if they went there right now they would find many people who could confirm this fact. I described the café in extensive detail because unfortunately I didn’t know the name. Despite his claim that he believed me, and despite overwhelming evidence that I had done nothing, the police officer intentionally put a blatant lie in the statement he wanted me to sign. He assured me over and over that the name of the café where I was seated was the “Volle Bro!” even though this café bore no resemblance to the description I had given. I told him I couldn’t sign a statement of which I wasn’t 100% sure that all the information was correct. In the end this was a crucial decision. It was only the next day, however, when I came before the judge that I realised the consequences of what this officer had tried to do to me. To this day, I cannot imagine what the police stood to gain by falsifying my statement in this way. »

## **Theft**

« When I was finally released by a judge fourteen hours later, I received a plastic bag with my belongings in it. But many items were missing. Most importantly, my Identity Card, but also my USB stick, the camera I had with me and twenty-five euros cash. When I returned to the police station to reclaim my items – together with friends because I literally feared for my life – they laughed at me and said they were keeping my money as ‘financial compensation’ and taking the camera and the USB stick for investigation. I asked for a written record that these items were being confiscated and received none. I requested my ID card back and they just laughed. When I returned two days later for my ID card, they told me they had lost it somewhere in a ‘combi’. »

## **Lessons to be learned**

« As a university teacher specialised in democracy and social change, I spent the duration of the horrible night and every day since wondering if this experience can teach us anything about power, the state or democracy? I found very few answers.

The violence I experienced and witnessed was not the random act of a single police officer that had gotten out of hand. It was apparent from the very first beating that for these police officers, in this police station, this unimaginable violence was completely normal behaviour. They did not feel the need to hide me in a cell in order to beat me; they did not shelter their violence from the eyes of their superiors or their colleagues; their colleagues did not even look up from their paper work. Why would they? They obviously saw this everyday.

I, on the other hand, held this type of violence as unimaginable. I had seen police be violent on the street and heard of beatings in cells, but to experience and witness such an extreme degree of violence under the controlled circumstances

of an everyday police office, in plain sight of police superiors, but fully sheltered from the eyes of the public, was an experience that engraved itself onto my heart and will forever be rooted in my mind.

Perhaps it is a function of my privilege that being faced with such violence on the part of those that are supposed to protect us shocked me so thoroughly. I am not the poor person, the migrant, the person without papers or money, who doesn't speak the language of the police and who lives in a poor neighbourhood. I have a PhD and get by in six languages. I am a university lecturer and a published author. People like me don't often become the ones that catch the unbridled rage of the police state. Until, of course, we dare to stand up for those whose life is defined by this kind of fear and insecurity.

This too, is part of the trauma I am left with. Not only was I subjected to bodily violence and witness to what can only be called torture, I am left with a question that I cannot let go, a question that keeps me up at night and makes me lose my appetite. How is it possible that we live in a society where these kinds of people are allowed to represent the law? And why is it impossible to do anything about it? Even the judge told me the only thing I could do was to register a complaint – as if the police had made an administrative mistake. How can I come up with an explanation for this experience? There is no explanation. There is actually no reason at all why this kind of violence should be possible. »

### **Why all this matters**

The violence I witnessed on the night of 1-2 October is worrying for at least three reasons. First, the way the police operated was based on an assumption of guilt by association – this is a much larger trend that we see across Europe as categories of people are being created as 'evil' regardless of whether or not individuals have committed a crime. The pre-emptive arrest of hundreds of people who were on their way to a legal demonstration on Wednesday 29 September 2010 is an example of this trend. It is an example of the increasingly powerful idea that it is okay to rob people in general of their freedom on the off chance that maybe, at some point in the future, someone (statistically not even likely to be the person robbed of their freedom) might do something slightly illegal.

Second, the idea that you can base someone's guilt on ideas and not actions – what we might refer to as thought-policing. For the police officers, the idea that I might have left-leaning politics at all was enough to prove my guilt in this very specific case. This too seems to be a growing trend. It was in this frightening combination of guilt by association to a vaguely defined category of people and guilt by association to a general set of ideas, that this police violence was made possible. Once the police had labelled me a certain way, it no longer mattered what happened to me. This is a type of prejudice that democratic societies cannot and should not support.

Finally, what worries me today is that everyone keeps telling me that there is nothing I or the many other people subjected to abuse by the police throughout the duration of the no borders camp can do about it. I worry about the four others arrested at the same time, held in the same station, subjected to the same

violence, but who are still being held in custody. The more I delve into the history of police violence in Belgium, the more I realise it is actually a chronic problem and that my experience is anything but the exception. Belgium as a country and we as its people have the responsibility to examine this chronic problem and to begin to take steps, serious steps, to rectify it.

What worried me most, however, is the idea that guilt in this matter would somehow justify the violent beating of citizens by the representatives of the state. Since when do we live in a society where the police are empowered first to pass judgement and then to deliver violent reprisal ?

### **Making sense of the unimaginable**

The only sense I can make of all this, a week after the facts, is that what I witnessed is the ultimate example of why it is necessary to struggle for a more just society. The one we have now, even as it is legitimated by rhetoric of democracy, is prepared to violate the most basic principles of a democratic society as soon as it feels even slightly threatened. That is not the world I want to live in, nor the world I want others to be subjected to and judged by.

And so, after all is said and done, and once the nightmares subside, I will remember this day as the day I understood, for real, how big the problems are that face our society today and how deeply undemocratic Europe still is. It will be the day that I understood with every inch of my scared, shaking and shivering body how important it is to keep working for a society in which we can all feel free and safe.

*[Sources : [Wetlands Preserve](https://wetlands-preserve.org/no_count.php?page=Belgium%20Action%20Alert)  [https://wetlands-preserve.org/no\\_count.php?page=Belgium%20Action%20Alert](https://wetlands-preserve.org/no_count.php?page=Belgium%20Action%20Alert) - [Mondiaal Nieuws](https://www.mo.be/node/149570)  <https://www.mo.be/node/149570> , 11 octobre 2010]*