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Exploring the root causes of the rise of fundamentalism in Europe

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France: the risk of spill over of radical Islam

The 7nth of January this year, France witnessed the most severe terrorist assault in her recent history. Ten people murdered and seven more heavily injured was the tragic account in human losses in the slaughter that took place in the offices of the satirical journal "Charlie Hebdo", in the very heart of Paris. At the symbolic level, the victim was the freedom of press, one of the most precious values of the Republic as well as of all western countries.[1]

Three young men have assassinated almost the whole redaction group of the journal and a Muslim policeman in duty, out of revenge for the drawing of caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed in an earlier publication of the journal.

Millions of people throughout the country, side by side with European and Muslim political leaders participated, the same evening in a surprisingly massive manifestation, demonstrating their mourning for the victims and their solidarity to the defenders of the freedom of expression.

The famous slogan which the crowds were shouting 'Je suis Charlie' made the round of the world through the media. 'Je suis Mahomet' came soon after the respond from Muslim populations of several countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, Mali, Senegal, Tunisia, Iraq, Iran and even Turkey.[2] Three churches and a French cultural center were burnt in Niamey and seventeen Copts were decapitated in Libya a few days after the shot dead of the perpetrators of the slaughter by the French police.

The fear of Europe becoming the battlefield of a war which was considered up to now as intra-Islamic, has been widely spread in many countries of the old continent.

Developments of the political Islam in the Middle East

A large number of migrants, refugees and citizens with a migrant background who have migrated to France and the EU originate from the above mentioned Muslim countries, Syria included. Millions of migrants have been established in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War and the decolonization of Arab, Asian and African countries in the 60s. It was the 'silent Islam' comprising of workers in search of making a living without disturbing the host societies with their religious practices since they intended to return home as soon as their migration projects were accomplished. The petrol crisis of 1978 and the zero option migration in combination with the right of family reunion have changed the migration landscape. Migrants have been settled in Europe with their children and with their aspirations to find their place in the receiving societies on an equal foot with nationals independently of their cultural particularities. They started to set up their places of worship, passing to the phase of the "Islam of the basement", in rented old buildings and houses.

In the 1990s came the period of 'visible Islam' with the adoption of religious dress-codes and alimentary taboos as well as claims for decent and official worship places, followed by more general requests for participation in the civic life and decision making.[3] This was the starting point for the radicalization of certain Muslim groups which used the political Islam as a weapon against western countries which were perceived as the cause of troubles in the Middle East and in certain regions of Africa.

The establishment of theocratic regimes in Iran and Afganistan, the Gulf War, the Arab Spring, the declaration of the Islamic State [IS] and the activities of terrorist movements such as Al-Qaeda, Daech, Boko Haram, the Shebabs[ex GIA of Algeria],Hamas and Hesbolah have pushed forward Islamic fundamentalism as the main threat of western world after the dismantling of the ex Soviet Union.[4]

The United States was the chief target of the Al-Queda terrorist attacks whilst certain EU states have been affected by minor terrorist assaults. The civil war in Syria and the reinforcement of the IS might transfer the battlefield of the intra- Islamic or to be more accurate intra Sunni war of the Middle East in Europe.

The conflict between the Sunni population which supports the IS and the wahhabit of the Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states run the risk to spread in the region, given the affiliation proclaimed by the first to the most prestigious caliphate in the Islamic history, established by the Abassids in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. The new caliphate has territorial claims, unlike the universal ones of its ex enemy Al-Qaeda, which cut across the old boundaries to the once vast territories of Muslim domination in Europe [Andalusia] and in North Africa, according to the extremist Iraqi movement Daech.

The western policy in Syria coupled with the absence of a clear political plan for the region, plus the marginalization of the Sunni minority in Iraq contribute to the alliance of the former antagonist jihadists Al-Qaeda and the IS, thus maximizing the threat of a religious war transferred from the backyard to the center of Europe.[5]

So far, terrorist attacks in EU countries by radical Muslims have been officially attributed to criminals or mentally disordered individuals, as in the case of Mohamed Merah, Kouachi brothers or Nemmouche in an effort to downgrade public concerns for a terrorist spill over and to avoid political interpretations of the phenomenon. The same attitude has been adopted by politicians and journalists concerning the recent "Charlie Hebdo" in France, hosting 5 million Muslims, 1,5 million out of which are French citizens.[6]

The discussion on the impact of economic globalization and recession to societal and consequently to migrant integration, on the declining model of the nation-state as well as on the effectiveness and credibility of the political institutions and values has not yet been publically launched although sociologists and intellectuals call for a public debate on the root causes of Islamic radicalization.

The consequences of the labor deregulation to integration

Cynthia Pleury, philosopher and author points out that fundamentalism is a collective psychosis which supplies desperate people with a feeling of existence and a meaning of life.

It seems that radicalization is closely linked with a feeling of nothingness that a great number of disadvantaged young migrants with a Muslim culture experience in France and in many European countries.[7]

Kamel Daoud, journalist and author reveals in his article for the «Charlie Hebdo» affair a reality reflected in the slogan «Je suis nulle» (I am nothing) whispered among the most vulnerable, poor end excluded young Muslims and for that reason not captured by the media either in Europe or in the Muslim world. This motto can provide us with the key for unlocking the door of the shady universe of radicalization and even terrorism, which a great number of jobless, less skilled, confined to closed geographical spaces, known as "difficult suburbs", and stigmatized young of migrant background, who feel deprived of any opportunity for a better life and of the rights that the Republic guarantees in theory for all citizens and residents in its territory pass through.[8]

"I am nothing" is a two folded verdict for France and for Europe designating the failure of the integration policies as well as their inefficiency to retain the welfare state, to regulate their internal markets (labor market included) and to implement in everyday life the values and norms they declare to be based on.

In France the famous three pillars of the Republic, equity of rights, freedom and brotherhood, remain dead letter for an increasing number of citizens with a migrant background, coupled with a cultural (religious) particularity and for newcomers with similar cultural futures and social conditions.

The economic globalization, the restructuring of international markets, the deregulation of the labor system and the collapse of the welfare state have triggered unprecedented high rates of structural unemployment, social insecurity and poverty in large fragments of the French and European populations.

Governments have lost their authority to create consensus through public dialogue on different policies and on a common vision for the society and the future. Modern states experience in addition a decline of their authority, perceived as a strong ethical force superior to individual moral codes, to which people are bound and obey by respect.

Last but not least, the decline of institutions such as family, school and associative organizations has a heavy impact on the societal integration and the social cohesion. The crisis of migrants' integration is part of the overall crisis that host societies go through and cannot be dealt with as an isolated phenomenon.

In the old good days, when modern migration inflows arrived in France and in Europe, the main social bond promoting migrants integration was based on labor division. Labor division reinforced complementarities of workers, performing different functions and tasks within the labor system, while obliging them to cooperate in order to promote general prosperity and growth. Each place within the system of organic participation, following the terminology of Serge Paugam[9], corresponded to a social status, accompanied by an elementary protection and a feeling of usefulness.

Later on, as states Norbert Elias, in modern societies characterized by a high level of interdependence of functions, the state interfered in the economy by setting up an obligatory security system related to labor and employment as perceived within the welfare state.[10]

The social bond has been built upon the professional integration, bearing both material (wages) and symbolic recognition to the labor and social protection.

In our post modern world, all these references seem to faint out.

Robert Castel asserts that people nowadays experience social insecurity in view of the social risk of unemployment and poverty in the absence of a robust welfare state.

Pierre Bourdieu, further elaborating this concept, introduces the term "conditions of misery" with a view to define the field within which social relations and the subsequent forces of

domination are established in the post modernity. He argues that social insecurity derives as well from precarious jobs that cause economic vulnerability and restriction of the social rights, largely depending on employment stability. On the top of this situation, expressions of distress, lack of confidence and feelings of inability are socially recognized as statuses of inferiority instead of side effects of unemployment and job instability.[11]

The deregulation of the labor system is a permanent future of modern economies, affecting "par excellence" the more vulnerable groups of the population such as migrants, citizens of migrant origin often less skilled than the born natives or social deficits and diverse cultural affiliations.

Research shows that migrant children and children with migrant background, specifically those residing in poor and "difficult" suburbs have lower school achievements and high rates of drop-outs, while youngsters with similar social and ethnic characteristics face higher unemployment rates than their native born peers holding an equal diploma. In France, for example, the rate of unemployed young people of Algerian origin is 37% while the one of young people of Portuguese origin is 16% and of young French 15%.[12]

The role of French school in migrants' integration

Avoiding to lump-up different categories and ages, we will start examining the French educational system, considered as the corner stone of second generation migrant integration. Evidence shows that the "sanctuary of the Republic», as Jacques Chirac characterized the public school, which assumes the responsibility to produce citizens in conformity to the national norms, has not succeeded in its role concerning the full socialization of pupils with Muslim culture.

Explanations of this failure include the lack of a supportive environment within the family (parents often illiterate or of poor knowledge of the French language), the negative position of teachers and directors of school and colleges towards the children behind schedule in the learning course, the school itself, that according to Jean-Paul Payet not only reproduces social inequalities but even enhances them by offering different working conditions to learners with difficulties.[13] This phenomenon is related to what Jean-Yves Rocher calls "the fabrication of the classes".

School directors in areas with high concentration of migrants, taking into consideration that the reputation of their establishment depends on social recruitment, in order to limit up the flee of middle class children and in the same time maintain a minimum of social mingling, they gather pupils with good achievement in "protected classes", while assembling the less productive in "troubled classes". This arrangement sometimes entails the disruption of pedagogic relations and the reaction of migrant children which feel segregated by the school community. Another bad practice of segregation is the orientation of pupils with migrant background to professional classes (known as preparatory classes for donkeys, in the school jargon). Children attending these classes feel relegated to the world of "blue collars", obliged to continue the fate of their parents.[14]

Jean-Pierre Zizotti, Eric Debarbieux and certain other researchers insist that pupils of Algerian origin are constantly discriminated against and stigmatized during the orientation process.

Internalizing of negative representations in the school by these pupils results to resentment and contribute to religious identifications. Islam offers to these "losers" alternatives to their cancelled expectations for social mobility through successful studies. Islam compensates the lost chances by integrating them in an unofficial educational system of religious studies in local associations and Islamic centers, like the one situated in Geneva.

Muslim intellectuals originating from the Gulf states, well educated in both French and Arab language recite by heart verses of the Koran and introduce Muslim youngsters in the Sunni texts passing from Voltaire to Averroes, through historical and philosophical references, thus compensating the disappointed second generation migrants of the professional classes who are excluded from school courses in philosophy and science. By subscribing in the religious field and attending religious seminars, they go through a dynamic process of learning and intellectual evolution, assisting them to create a space of self requalification and re evaluation.

In doing so they are also enabled to overcome the negative image and the stigmatization of their family cultural norms that teachers and social workers project to the public sphere. Hani and Tariq Ramadan, the favorite religious leaders of the Muslim youth, in their speeches point out that the Arab-Muslim societies have critically contributed to the progress of humanity and civilization. They refer to Averroes, Ibn Kaldun, Avicenne, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushdi and other celebrities of the scientific and cultural field. The websites and forums of discussion in the Internet confirm along the same lines that Ibn Kaldum has been one of the first theorists of the history of civilizations (reciting Fernard Braudel) and that Ibn Nafis has discovered the scheme of blood circulation four centuries earlier than the doctor Michel Servet.

Young migrants who have failed in school and have been stigmatized for their origins (dirty Arabs), find a way out of distress by rejecting their parents in search of glorious ancestors and of a prestigious history. They substitute the popular and normative religion and culture of their ascendants for a universal Islam, an ideal collective and abstract construction, transgressing any national or linguistic affiliation.

Even in case of successful university studies, second generation migrants cannot escape from ostracism and the institutionalized racism reflected to negative representations of people with North African background prevailing in the academic field. Racism takes different forms such as the non access to research grants or to the top posts of the academic career.

The religious identity of migrants with a degree is organized across the idea of a Muslim community, a group of individuals sharing common attitudes and a common vision of the world, as perceived by the muslin mentality. The community is strongly engaged in the public dialogue against discrimination, formulates claims for equity, emancipation and access to the decision making and protests against the dominant public discourse which depicts it as a minority exclusively defending its own survival.

The growing Islamization of migrant youth and citizens of migrant origin takes its roots in the following paradox: equal chances for success and an educational mechanism which promotes inequalities.[15]

The rise of radical Islam: a social pathology

Exploring the root causes of the accession to Islam of the vulnerable young people leads us straight forward to the famous principle of "laicite", meaning the secularization of the state and considered as the fourth pillar of the French universalism as well as the key for an harmonious "living together". The rise of combating Islam which has become visible through its dress- code, devotional practices and places of worship (2000 all over the country, according to the French Muslim Council) and which serves as the vehicle of protest and claims for acceptance, contests among others the principle of "laicite". Chaleb Bencheikh gives a different interpretation, pointing out that "laicite" has lost its very substance in a public space which is radically different to the one described by Habermas and which does not subscribe any more in the genealogy of

Kant. According to him the decline of "laicite"is reflected to the need of adding attributes and the uncertainty about its true meaning. Is it a positive, an open or a tolerant one? Is it combating or indifferent? In times that democratic values do not guarantee the dignity, the respect of rights and equal chances for all, everyone can bring its own religious message for a better everlasting life which will compensate the miserable everyday life of poor and excluded.[16]

The adherence to Islam with a view to fabricate a positive identity and to participate to the public debate through legal and democratic means, striving for the amendment of established and often out of date rules is the best and more widespread option of this phenomenon. There is also a worse scenario, opting for the radicalization and fanaticism, which under certain conditions can end up to terrorism, as in the case of Couashi brothers of the "Gharlie Hebdo" tragedy.

Radicalization can be activated when exclusion, humiliation, domination and racism are accumulated in a certain stage of an individual course of life. It should be underlined that radicalization does not lead automatically to terrorism. The latter is the fruit of exceptional circumstances and that is why it remains marginalized.

Terrorism can be the last resort of a young Muslim, in the absence of assistance by a religious association and in case that a terrorist group takes him in charge, exploiting the frustration, the disorientation and often the hate against a society which condemns him/her to nothingness.

Radical Islam remains more often than not a specific mentality characterized by the racism against French and Europeans, responding to the dominant racism of the receiving society that perceives young people of Arab or African origin through negative stereotypes (lazy, insincere, non intelligent, fanatics and suspect of terrorism). An obsession of persecution coupled with prejudice against the infidels, qualified as arrogant, selfish, immoral and racist, provokes an abstention of the real world and the hardship of everyday life, turning the mind of these frustrated youngsters to the quest of a subjective interior serenity and of a sacred and closed universe.

This state of fake serenity and impassivity can unfortunately converse under exceptional conditions to blind and pure violence. In this case the pathetic Muslim undergoes a full transformation to a ferocious worrier attacking innocents in the name of a noble cause, namely a crusade for its faith, legitimating thus his/her violence and crimes.[17]

Radical Islam borrows certain ideas from Shi'i while declaring its Sunni source. The appearance of the twelfth chi'i Imam "Mahdi", a messianic figure that will eliminate all the unjust regimes in the world and will inaugurate the end of times, is getting on, according to extremists. Good Muslims must prepare his advent on earth by radically changing the way of living. Orthodox Sunni Islam organizes its mobilization around Shi'I themes with a view to achieve radicalization. The approaching Apocalypse and the fight against infidels push forward death as the privileged relation with God. While the atheist West countries celebrate rationalism and hedonism, radical Islam promotes the obsession of death as the authentic form for self accomplishment .The great majority of young Muslims in France and in Europe opt for an individual or neo communitarian Islam which is tolerant towards non Muslims. In the contrary a radical minority breaks its bonds with the host society, breaches the law and become intolerant and aggressive.[18] The death obsession is primarily a social phenomenon related to a hopeless life, drug addiction and delinquency of those young people who downgrade to the status of untouchable, persecuted by the police, justice, mass media and far right parties such as the Front National in France. Rumors and impartial information amplify the fears and the lack of confidence towards those parias, who have learned in school that they belong to a Cartesian society and experience instead a suspicious and hostile collectivity within which tensions and rejection push them to defend themselves even through violence and delinquency.

Delinquency leading to detention enables the radicalization of young Muslim population which is overrepresented in the French prisons. The number of terrorists does not exceed the 200 persons but they have a tremendous influence to other prisoners. Two of the terrorists who attacked the "Charlie Hebdo" seem that have joined radical Islam in jail. Youngsters of migrant origin arrested for petty crimes serve their sentence in the same prisons with people charged for terrorism and end up by joining them. The absence of Muslim clergymen in many jails leaves room for the propagation of the politicized Islam.[19] Khomenei has declared in 1978: "Islam is either political or nothing". This message is much more attractive to prisoners than the words of the Prophet himself, addressed to his soldiers before the battle: "Do not kill women, children and elders. Do not uproot a palm tree. Do not ruin houses and if you meet monks in the monasteries, leave them in peace" (Al-Sira. vol 2, p. 510).[20]

It should be clear that this analysis of the factors that encourage the spillover of radical Islam does not intend to give excuses for terrorism that has chocked and traumatized European countries, the last years.

Our objective is to raise awareness for the conditions that might entail the enhancement of terrorism, given the recent developments in Syria and Iraq in combination with declining integration policies in the EU space.

It holds true that certain European countries consider that they have achieved the integration of long established migrants in their territory and they develop targeted policies in the field, exclusively for newcomers. They underestimate the negative conjuncture of the economic crisis and the religious conflicts in their backyard, as well as its impact to migrants' integration. This state of play brings to the fore deficits and mistakes of an effort to arrange groups with specificities in a monolithic and solid nation-state with "one size fits all" policies.

Enhancing Democracy: a powerful weapon for fighting terrorism

Preventing the rise of fundamentalism presupposes, apart from the reinforcement of intelligent services and the forces of public order, sound socio-economic measures engaging social partners and stakeholders aiming at a broad consensus on how to make the European principles and values work for the benefit of all, in a democratic and prosperous society. Democracy is a major pull factor of migration from developing countries with often authoritarian regimes which govern through repression and violation of human rights. We should not forget that in the name of internalized values of democracy, young people of migrant origin and Muslim culture claim their full participation in the European societies, even if the means for achieving it seem inappropriate to the tradition of the host countries. Bearing in mind that democracy is an everlasting process and not a fossilized reality, the most powerful weapon for facing terrorism is the deepening and openness of democratic institutions. Minimizing social injustice, inequalities, while eradicating poverty and maximizing the tolerance towards diversity of modern societies constitute the only way out of the vicious circle of terrorism and anti terrorism violence, without jeopardizing the fundamental functions and values of the state.

Striking the balance among diversified claims and interests is without doubt a game for strong players. The complexity and the challenges that politicians are faced with, require a sound political will and action in order to safeguard peace and social cohesion and to combat social pathology that might generate violence and terrorism

Let us learn from our mistakes and start to laugh together instead of laughing at the "other", if we want to build societies promoting conviviality and freedom not only of consciousness but also of fearless and secure life.

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