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WHY DO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE GET RADICALISED AND OTHERS NOT?

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After the January 2015 attacks in Paris, the attention of the media and commentators turned to the life paths of brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly. Soon the profiles of these young radicalised people were placed on the path beaten in 1995 by Khaled Kelkal, perpetrator of the Paris metro attacks. Contrasted with them are Ahmed Merabet, the policeman gunned down during the attack on the editorial staff at Charlie Hebdo and Lassana Bathily, the employee who hid customers at the kosher supermarket in Porte de Vincennes, both of whom are held up as examples of courage, self-sacrifice and heroism and to whom French society has paid heartfelt tribute. Largely overlooked was the fact that victims and executioners shared, to a greater or lesser degree, the same archetypal profile of “jeunes issus de l’immigration” (young people from migrant backgrounds). A very similar situation occurred in March 2012 when a young man in Toulouse, Mohamed Merah, murdered, among others, Imad Ibn Ziatan, a military serviceman and French citizen of Moroccan origin born in 1981.

All of those mentioned above, except Lassan Bathily, were born in France between 1975 and 1982, just when French society was beginning to be aware of the emergence of the new generations produced by the Maghrebi and African migrations, a reality that was first revealed publicly in the so-called March of the Beurs throughout the country between

1983 and 1985. Around that time, the first sociological studies warned of the difficult conditions in which immigrant populations found themselves, owing in large part to the segregatory urban planning of the peripheral *banlieues* on the outskirts of the major French cities. The sociologist François Dubet referred to those young people, mostly born in France, as trapped “à la galère” (in the galley) and suffering greater social exclusion than their parents.

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Why have social and community institutions failed to create attractive affiliations for these people? The possible answer involves addressing the processes rather than the individuals and the social contexts rather than the doctrinal texts and imperatives.

The crises of the family and the mosque are, principally, about legitimacy. They are questioned by society about their function (from European societies’ points of view) and about their effectiveness in establishing solidly-founded frames of reference (from the perspective of Muslim groups).

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the most wide-ranging interpretations: the most optimistic analyses portrayed the identity crisis of these generations as inherent in the construction of multicultural society; the most pragmatic argued that the integration effort made by these generations would be much more intense than that made by their parents, who stoically accepted their functional marginalisation; the most ominous predicted permanent confrontation scenarios following the first disturbances in 1979 in Vaulx-en-Velin, in the Lyon *banlieues*, which were subsequently periodically reproduced. All these arguments ended up contributing to the consolidation of the idea that the experience of marginalisation and social rejection is what explains the drift towards radicalisation made by these generations, whether by joining urban subcultures characterised by violence or by allowing themselves to be seduced by another kind of subculture, in this case, one whose frames of reference are Islamic.

But the existence of jihadi generations (as certain authors claim) is a myth. Neither can radicalisation be explained by the combination of desperation and poverty. To understand the causes that provoke a complex phenomenon like this a little better, it is necessary to set aside the simplifications. And to do this we must ask ourselves why, in the main, young European Muslims have not been seduced by the rhetoric of radicalisation. What we will attempt to explain in this paper is why in similar social contexts, with very similar family profiles and life paths conditioned by contexts of structural

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exclusion not all young people have tried to emulate Kelkal, Merah, Kouachi and Coulibaly.

The theories that present radicalisation as a process understand that it is generated as the result of a situation of social breakdown or disconnection. They assume that young Muslims maintain continuity with certain models – whether cultural or religious – inherited from their family. This is the first presumption that needs revising.

The connection between generations is much less direct and much more fragile that is supposed, because, though the ethnic and religious baggage carried by parents and children may take similar forms, the identities and affiliations that result are very different. The generation gap is a factor that encourages different forms of disconnection in a social context that is mediated by interaction with European society. Parents and children do not maintain the same kind of relationship with this society. It said that parents have “frozen clock syndrome” and that their hearts and minds remain in their country of origin. Young people, by contrast, have accumulated social capital relating to the European environment that turns out to be much more potent than the family background capital, which finds itself displaced. The children of immigrants no longer act as the children of immigrants and subvert both the genealogical order proposed by their forebears and the order of social categorisation that European societies apply to them.

Typology of the detachment

How do we explain this process of referential alienation between parents and young people? The study made by the economist Albert O. Hirschman (1970) attempted to explain the different attitudes that could be adopted by actors in response to crises suffered by the institutions of which they formed part: abandoning them, protesting or settling for the situation were the three ideal options that faced individuals. Applying this perspective to the links between young European Muslims and their families and community frameworks it is possible to establish a typology of situations showing various ways of defining their position that range from participatory to distancing that, as will be seen, need not always be interpreted in a negative way. These four ideal types of attitudes are established relative to the distance from the frames of reference of the family and Muslim community environments, but also end up defining specific ways of relating to European societies.

It is possible to speak of *overcoming* when describing a way of life that is built, by preference, on a Western framework and which leads the individual to live outside the frames of reference of the Muslim community. The resulting identities prioritise the European components over those relating to the origin of the family. Distancing themselves from those models does not mean rejecting them but it does mean setting them aside in the day-to-day, avoiding their use as mechanisms to regulate daily life. This attitude is related to a pattern of growing social mobility.

Secondly, it is possible to speak of *recreation*, an attitude by which an identity is reconstructed in which inherited tradition is reclaimed (though this reclaiming is carried out via implicit adaptation to the European social average) and active links are maintained with the nuclear family and the community. In this case, social mobility tends to be located within this community environment. From this individualised identity a specific relationship with European society is defined, maintaining an interaction that is much more substantial and less dependent on that established by previous generations.

A third attitude based on *rejection* means disowning the elements of family legacy and all frames of reference connected to it (as may be the case with community membership). This rejection is not expressed in opposition to the models themselves but to what they represent: on the one hand, because European society has given them a minority, subordinate identity; on the other, because these frames of reference have not helped the young people to deal successfully with social exclusion. That these family and community references have been replaced by other urban subcultures, favouring a kind of “apartism” (Gest, 2010), is proof of the failure of those individuals’ social mobility.

The fourth attitude is strongly linked to the last and means a deeper degree of disconnection, given that it tends towards *rupture*. This means a double distancing, both physical and cognitive, from those spaces and models that belong to the

family and community environments, as well as the social context. This detachment needs to be argued and legitimated as it means breaking with what one was previously but, at the same time, requires the construction of a new identity related to what one wants to be from now on. In the case that concerns us, this line of argument is doctrinal in nature, invoking an Islam that presents itself as the corrector of the deviations passed down via family inheritance and impervious to the disrupting influences of the external social context. Rupture is the result of the polarisation of a group of people seeking to separate themselves from the erroneous ideas that, in their judgement, others express. Rupture, then, becomes the only possible option if you are convinced of living surrounded by ignorant people and false ideas.

These four attitudes should not be interpreted as if they were phases in a process moving from normality to exceptionality. But by distinguishing between them we can identify some of the nuances that the extensive use of the term radicalisation has ended up nullifying. Detaching themselves from frames of reference that remain their own despite being kept at a distance, reconstructing an identity based on the mainstream principles of this group and thereby being able to establish a distinctive character, seeking refuge in an identity that is shared with those who feel separate and out of place or who have the sensation of finding themselves in a hostile environment from which they must protect themselves are various paths of identity expression that grow out of the same situation of friction between family, community and social models.

The life paths of the perpetrators of the Paris attacks would be positioned somewhere between rejection and rupture, while those of Merabet and Bathily could be placed close to the first two attitudes. But it is evident that throughout their lives all may have experienced feelings as disparate as pride, frustration, humiliation and detachment. Lassan Bathily arrived in France from Mali aged 16, three years later his permanent residence permit was refused and he was on the point of being expelled. He was finally given residence in 2011 and from then onwards he worked in the supermarket in Vincennes. The judicial policeman Ahmed Merabet still lived with his siblings in the *banlieue* where he was born – Seine-Saint-Denis in the north of Paris (popularly known by its postcode as “le 93”) – which is the paradigmatic conflictive neighbourhood in the French imagination. In 1994, following the deaths of their parents, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi were sent to a reception centre in Corrèze in the centre of France. When they were sixteen they returned to the north of Paris, the 19th arrondissement, between Belleville and la Villette, and spent their time in precarious, poorly paid jobs. Amedy Coulibaly was also born in Paris, in this case in the south and grew up in La Grande Borne, a huge commuter town of 11,000 people characterised by violence and marginalisation. At sixteen, he was arrested for theft and drug dealing and began a long path in and out of prison. After entering a youth employment programme in 2009, he was coincidentally invited by President Sarkozy to the Élysée Palace along with five hundred other young people.

On the one hand, the policeman Ahmed Merabet and the soldier Imad Ibn Ziatan were examples of how some institutional cultures (in this case the gendarmerie and the army) are able to admit people from minority groups to their ranks. The testimonies of their relatives spoke of their devotion to the services they gave to society despite the fact that being Muslims they may have noted a degree of suspicion of their loyalties from superiors and colleagues (see the testimony of Latifa Ibn Ziaten, 2013). On the other hand, the feelings of exclusion and detachment experienced by the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly may have predisposed them to a radical drift in which, as was revealed after the attacks, certain specific facilitating actors were involved (see the story of Abdelghani Merah (2012) in relation to the radicalisation process of his brother Mohamed). But this process of social rupture or disconnection cannot be explained as the result of the more or less defective management of individual emotions. Nor as the result of sharing the same level of humiliation as other Muslim populations around the world. They were protagonists of a double process: first, the internalisation of a feeling of finding themselves on the margins of everything or out of place as a result of their life experience of social marginalisation (which would have put them in a situation of loss of meaning in terms of their social fit); and second, the development of a conviction that would form the basis of their process of disconnection from the social environment from which they emerged and which gave renewed sense to their actions.

Jihadi generations are a myth and radicalisation cannot be explained by the combination of desperation and poverty.

The crisis of institutional frameworks

The question we have to answer is located more in the socialisation deficit between these generations than in the seductive shapes taken by discourses of breakdown and difference. Why have social and community institutions failed to create attractive affiliations for these people? The possible answer involves addressing the processes rather than the individuals and the social contexts rather than the doctrinal texts and imperatives and therefore differs from the standard approach to the study of radicalisation. To understand radicalisation, it is more important to study sociology than theology.

Of course, when a person becomes aware of their own individual experience, emotions are produced. These may be influenced by a particular fact, life situation or actor that helps to convince them. The intention to look for people who think in the same way, with whom convictions may be shared and to reinforce group-thinking, is what Cass Sunstein (2009) calls “group polarisation”. This seeks to produce a cognitive framework that guides these people and legitimates their actions. Feeling the rejection of their positions by their social environment is proof that they are on the right path. The group polarisation that accompanies extremist thinking shows that radicalisation grows, fundamentally, out of the application of socially-selective capital.

As far as commitment, breakdown and social exposure go, radicalisation can only be understood within limited and restricted group environments. But what is more, it structures itself as a mechanism to give renewed sense to social practices and to reconstruct those deteriorated identities. Sunstein cites Marc Sagemen (2008), one of the first authors to refer to the ties of affection and solidarity generated between “groups of friends” to the extent of forming a brotherhood that replaces family bonds. It is the same classic pattern followed by youth gangs whose capacity to generate strong affiliations between young people with weakened family and social identities is at the root of its capacity to mobilise.

Modernity has exposed the crisis of the institutions that order us socially. The institutions within which we live no longer have the legitimacy to be the mechanisms of socialisation that they were before. The fact that living in society means travelling between many social circles, attempting to maintain a certain coherence with regard to the affiliations, adhesions and commitments that affect us all contributes to diluting the centrality of those social institutions when defining our personal identities. However, perhaps due to fear of the vacuum this institutional dissolution may leave, we continue to appeal to our institutions, trusting that their “institutional programme” (Dubet, 2006) will allow those individuals who are socialised in them to become free, autonomous beings. But in reality, the institutions have lost their capacity to act as mediators between individuals or between them and other institutions, as that

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promise of freedom and autonomy has eroded the principle of equality on which they rested. If the last OECD report (*Skills Outlook 2015*) is right, 20 million young people who neither study nor work – half of the population aged 16 to 29 years old in developed countries – will be shut out of the labour market. The market will no longer be able to integrate those that the education system has been unable to guide towards training or professions and it is clear that in these conditions those most vulnerable to inequality will be the first to lose their confidence in the institutions. And without confidence, socialisation is not possible.

In another sense, a crisis has also arisen in the model of socialisation proposed by the two leading institutions for Muslim groups in Europe – the family and the mosque. Both present themselves as the guarantors of continuity for certain frames of reference relating to origin – cultural and/or religious – but they are still far from having fulfilled this function. In contrast to what is normally assumed, neither the families nor the mosques act in the sense expressed by Lewis A. Coser (1974), as greedy institutions able to exercise total and absolute control over the actions of the individuals to whom they serve as frames of reference. As social institutions they have failed to defend a model of socialisation that is capable of fitting into a European environment with moral values that do not always coincide with their own and which are sometimes in conflict. They have struggled to compete with other social institutions.

Accused of having enacted a resistance that is more passive than active with regard to the integration of their group, families and mosques represent an institutional model that still needs to be consolidated. Their crisis is, principally, one of legitimacy, in seeing themselves as questioned by society about their function (from European societies’ points of view) and about their effectiveness in establishing solidly-founded frames of reference (from the perspective of Muslim groups).

So is the problem of young European Muslims having to manage a double identity or is it seeing themselves trapped by the deep contradictions affecting the models of socialisation in which they have grown up? Because no one has been able to formulate an intelligible proposal for making being both European and Muslim compatible. Richard Sennett (2012) reflects on the relationship between the individuals and the institutions where they have socialised, starting with the use made by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) of the term *anomia*. Those people who the institutions place on the margins interiorise a feeling of rootlessness and low self-esteem, according to Durkheim. But Sennett suggests that the disaffection generated by the *anomia*, rather than provoking resignation, leads the individuals to question their personal adhesion to the institution and to explore other alternatives that provide them with renewed feelings of belonging. In this context of models of contradictory socialisation, the classic sense of the idea of deviation changes substantially: if the frames of reference are dispersed how can we not expect disoriented individuals to emerge? Sooner or

later this referential vacuum ends up filled by new arguments and ideas that help to reassemble the displaced identities.

Urban subcultures can fill this absence with their different, alternative component. But a timeless, universal and complete model like that expressed in the most literalist readings of Islam (those representing a culturally purified and decontextualised model of Islam, in the words of Olivier Roy, of which doctrinal Salafism is the main exponent in Europe), offers a much more potent alternative because it projects itself as if it were an institution that demands the reintegration of those who want to participate in it. For this reason it is more difficult to trivialise than the expressions of a juvenile counterculture because it formulates a proposal for a moral and social order that is much more consistent and legitimate. Islam made into an institution looks for space, paradoxically, in the vacuum left by the contradictions of other institutions that form part of mainstream Islam – such as the mosque or the family – that have become ineffective in the context of European societies.

This Islam that denies its own history projects itself without competition as the only source of good sense for European Muslim populations, offering an alternative for those who may experience a feeling of institutional orphaning. By proposing to separate themselves from the spaces and practices particular to European societies and being unconcerned about the solidity of the citizens’ links or fit with these populations, this Islam suggests an idealised model of social autarchy. In this project the self-regulatory capacity an Islamic model can offer is given the blind confidence that a sailor gives to his compass.

This new institutional setting, however, includes two serious problems: on the one hand, it has no qualms about proposing the progressive isolation of Europe's Muslim populations from the social contexts in which they live, seeking to turn their singularity into exceptionality (hence their emphasis on the reconstruction of a new moral order). On the other, it is unable to prevent the generation of openly ideological, nihilist discourses and attitudes that are not satisfied with puritanical ritualism but promote an aggressive militancy and which in Facebook have their principal mechanism of dissemination and socialisation.

Both problems produce a destabilising effect as much on European societies as on Muslim groups and require different answers on the subjects of both social cohabitation and security. We should deactivate radicalisation as a possible option in the lives of future Kouachis and Coulibaly. Certainly it would be extremely useful to fight the disaffection of these young people towards institutions, whether those of the European societies or those of Muslim groups. But another significant contribution would be to put an end to the proposals of alternative, idealised chimeras that so resonate with people who feel excluded. It seems equally necessary for the models of socialisation proposed by all these institutions to be much more compatible with each other and capable of generating sufficient participation and trust that all of us are able to construct identities that are coherent with our social contexts.

As far as commitment, breakdown and social exposure go, radicalisation can only be understood within limited and restricted group environments.

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