

# **THE PARIS ATTACKS, MAGICAL THINKING AND HIJACKING TRUST**

Francesco Ragazzi, University of Leiden and CERi / Sciences Po Paris.  
f.ragazzi@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

## **The problem is legitimate**

The recent attacks in Paris have highlighted three key issues Europe faces currently. The most obvious one, of course, is the issue of political violence. Although the official figures national governments provide each year to Europol do not place the category of “religiously inspired” on top of the list of attacks, convictions or acquittals (Irish, Corsican and Basque separatists are still ahead) and the total number of attacks is in decline (from 219 in 2012 to 199 in 2014), this matters very little (Europol 2015). Following the Charlie Hebdo and Hypercasher killings in January 2015, the mass shootings at the Stade de France and Bataclan in November last year, and the fact that 6,000 Europeans are estimated to be fighting in Syria, the general feeling is one of an overwhelming and growing threat. The public is scared, and they want answers from their politicians. The second major concern is that diasporic Muslim communities across Europe are increasingly feeling the target of hatred and discrimination. They feel excluded not only by right-wing extremist movements, but also by mainstream institutions of society such as the media, schools and the police, institutions that are supposed to guarantee their security, safety and well being. The third issue, is that government responses currently deployed in France – as well as in most European countries – are based on at least two forms of magical thinking that are at best unlikely to solve the first issue, but are quite certain to make the second worse.

## **Two forms of magical thinking**

Since the mid-2000s, governments across Europe have deployed several measures to counter radicalization and terrorism. While there is not much space to describe them here in detail, they all revolve around a combination of “hard measures” based on surveillance and coercion, and a set of supposedly “softer” measures aimed at detecting and treating “radicals” with the help of professionals, religious representatives and civil society organizations, engaging in dialogue and producing counter-narratives to the violent ideologies (Thomas 2012). While the “hard” measures can be efficient when targeted and respectful of the rule of law, the “softer measures”, as they are currently deployed by European governments, are by and large both flawed and dangerous.

They are based on two forms of magical thinking (Heath-Kelly 2012a). The first is the idea that we can track or recognize a process of radicalization; that there are “potential” radicals and that with the right tools and the right criteria we could anticipate the making of future terrorists (Kundnani 2012). Although most state agencies recognize that radicalization is not a simple or linear process, all of them state that certain elements allow us to anticipate it. This assumption suggests that not only the police, but also the entire civil society – teachers, university professors, prison guards, social workers, imams – should participate in the detection and identification of future radicals. However, John Horgan (2009), who tracked the trajectory of dozens of former terrorists, has shown that the combination and sequence of variables in a militant’s life, including personal trajectory, experience of exclusion and discrimination, meetings and social interactions, political opportunities and ultimately the decision to commit an act of political violence – are completely unpredictable. There is no

way to predict or anticipate the fact that an individual will become a terrorist or not. This may seem obvious, but we do not live in the world of *Minority Report* (Bigo 2006). Risk-assessment tools are not based on sound social science research. Focusing on signs and signals actually allows us to base a series of decisions on a subjective understanding of what “radicalism” is or can be, opening the door to stereotyping and discrimination (de Goede and Simon 2013).

The second form of magical thinking is to consider radicalization as a form of ideological “bewitchment” (Heath-Kelly 2012b). The Islamic State is supposedly very good at using “social media” to brainwash the youth. Attempting to understand the sociological or even political causes of the transition to political violence would be useless {Anonymous:2015tp}. It would be instead more useful to “unbewitch”. This translates into setting up “de-radicalization programmes”, carried out in France by entrepreneurs such as Dounia Bouzar, whose psychological method, for example, encourages individuals under treatment to think about “happy childhood moments”. This information was conveyed to me by a horrified experienced social worker who attended a training of the Prevention Center against Sectarian Abuses related to Islam (CPDSI). The intention behind these programmes is similarly to establish a “counter narrative”, a sort of “reverse propaganda” to convince young jihadi candidates to change their minds (Sabir and Miller 2012). Videos of such counter narrative programmes, stamped with the seal of the French Ministry of Interior, can be seen on the website [stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr](http://stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr), or on YouTube, where the protagonist is a character called Abdullah-X<sup>1</sup>. The audience of such initiatives is generally limited attendees of policy conferences on countering violent extremism.

The experience of young professionals and years of social science research on political violence show indeed that social and political explanations are crucial, and that it is plainly wrong to assume that the problem is only ideological. As exemplified by the now famous aspiring jihadists arrested at the border in possession of the book “Islam for Dummies”, religious texts are often poorly understood and serve more often than not as an ex-post justification. Many people leave the country in the hope of finding a simple solution to the complex problem of marginalization and exclusion; others depart out of religious conviction. In a theoretical register, the work of Charles Tilly (2003) and Donatella Della Porta (2013) shows that frustration, as ideology, are important factors, but they are just two among many others which explain the passage to violence. Among the missing pieces of the analysis is the role of “mobilizing structures”: networks, people and organizations, as well as the relation to the “political opportunity structures”, i.e. the “right moment” during which certain policy actions suddenly become legitimate and possible. Thus, theories of political violence require us to look beyond mere frustration and ideologies, and to consider the mobilization of personal networks and trajectories of the “radicalized”. More importantly, they force us to look at political violence for what it is: a particular unpleasant but political practice, to which no technical or psychological method will provide a satisfactory answer. These forms of magical thinking unfortunately have disastrous consequences, as many have pointed out (Choudhury and Fenwick 2011; Mythen and Walklate 2009; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). One that is not often discussed is that it introduces a destructive logic of suspicion in social spheres that need trusted relationships to work.

## **Hijacking trust**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx>

In this lectures at the Collège de France, Bourdieu (2012) explains metaphorically that the state is composed of a right hand, which punishes, and a left hand, which provides comfort and provides welfare. During their formation, modern states have developed the functions of the left hand, while ensuring that it possesses a certain autonomy from the right. To be carried out successfully the actions of the former and should not be confused with the ones of the latter. The work of the right hand – represented by intelligence officers, policemen, prosecutors and, border guards – is based on the distrust of the public: if police officers are not suspicious, they are not doing their job properly. The work of the left hand, in contrast, works through a necessary relationship of trust. Students must have enough trust in their teachers to be able to make mistakes and explore new ideas – including radical political ideas. Worshippers must have trust in their priests, imams or rabbis to be able to confide in them and ask for advice. Disadvantaged youths must trust their social workers or youth workers to share their problems and questions with them. As Simmel (1978) theorized, trust is in a sense, a form of social magic that makes societies possible. If suspicion prevails, societies collapse.

But if we look at what the project of counter radicalization entails, it is precisely that it allows the right hand to hijack trusted relationships that constitute the conditions of possibility for educational, social and health services to function. Families, and mothers in particular, are asked to use the relations of trust they have with their children to monitor and report them. Doctors, nurses, teachers and social workers are asked to exploit the relationships of trust they have with their patients, students or clients in order to monitor and report them. Finally, community and religious leaders are asked to use the confidence the community has in them to monitor and report them. In a word, it instills a logic of surveillance in the whole social body.

### **What is the alternative?**

There are however alternatives to the current policies, but they require to question some of the assumptions upon which current policies are based. First, our belief in the possibility of prediction should be questioned. One cannot predict the future, and one cannot predict who will become a terrorist – just as one cannot predict who will become a rapist or a murderer. Second, the terrorists are not “spellbound”; they ground their actions in personal and political motives. Understanding them does not mean justifying them. Third and perhaps more importantly in the current climate, we should protect the autonomy of the professions that require trust to function, dividing more clearly the tasks of each profession. Counter terrorism pertains to the police, intelligence officers and judges; the work of education and social assistance belongs to teachers, professors, educators and social workers. It is only through both a law enforcement policy that respects the principles of the rule of law and an autonomous policy of rehabilitation and reintegration that a durable solution can be found to the problems of political violence and discrimination.

### **REFERENCES**

- Bigo, Didier. 2006. “Security, Exception, Ban and Surveillance.” In *Theorizing Surveillance the Panopticon and Beyond*, 1–23. Cullompton, Devon.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2012. *Sur l'Etat. Cours Au Collège De France*. Raisons d'agir/Seuil.
- Choudhury, Tufyal, and Helen. Fenwick. 2011. *The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities*. Research report 72. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission. doi:10.1080/13600869.2011.617491.

- de Goede, Marieke, and Stephanie Simon. 2013. "Governing Future Radicals in Europe." *Antipode* 45 (2). Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 315–335. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01039.x.
- Europol. 2015. *Te-Sat 2015*. The Hague.
- Heath-Kelly, Charlotte. 2012a. "Reinventing Prevention or Exposing the Gap? False Positives in UK Terrorism Governance and the Quest for Pre-Emption." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5 (1): 69–87. doi:10.1080/17539153.2012.659910.
- Heath-Kelly, Charlotte. 2012b. "Can We Laugh Yet? Reading Post-9/11 Counterterrorism Policy as Magical Realism and Opening a Third-Space of Resistance." *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, July. doi:10.1007/s10610-012-9180-4.
- Horgan, John. 2009. *Walking Away From Terrorism*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Kundnani, Arun. 2012. "Radicalisation: the Journey of a Concept." *Race & Class* 54 (2). SAGE Publications: 3–25. doi:10.1177/0306396812454984.
- Mythen, G, and S Walklate. 2009. "'I'M a Muslim, but I'm Not a Terrorist': Victimization, Risky Identities and the Performance of Safety." *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (6): 736–754.
- Pantazis, Christina, and Simon Pemberton. 2009. "From the 'Old' to the 'New' Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation." *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (5). Oxford University Press: 646–666. doi:10.1093/bjc/azp031.
- Porta, Della, Donatella. 2013. *Clandestine Political Violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sabir, Rizwaan, and David Miller. 2012. "Propaganda and Terrorism." In *Media and Terrorism Global Perspectives*, edited by D Freedman and D K Thussu, 77–94. London.
- Simmel, Georg. 1978. *The Philosophy of Money*. London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Thomas, Paul. 2012. *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Tilly, Charles. 2003. *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.