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RADICALIZATION, PSYOP AND OPPOSITE EXTREMISMS: THE ERROR OF EUROPE

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“Psyop” is a weapon system that comes from psychological warfare. According to the NATO definition, the term refers to: “Psychological activities, conducted in peace and in war, directed to an audience, friend, enemy or neutral, in order to influence their attitudes and behaviors which, otherwise, could compromise the achievement of political and military objectives. They include strategic psychological activities, psychological consolidation operations and psychological activities typical of the battlefield”[1].

In recent years, these techniques used mainly in war and insurgency scenarios have penetrated into European internal politics. The identification of the apparent enemy, known in Civil Information Warfare circles as 'Tagging Politics', is one of the main tools introduced in 2004 by the Dutch and British intelligence agencies within the strategic policies of the European Union reinforced then with the Lisbon Treaty, as Rik Coolsaet[2] states. Since then, 'tagging politics', which is an inherently civilian variant of military Psychological Operations (PSYOP), has become a trademark of all the 'counter-informative active measures' used by European governments in the wake of previous American experiences and the most recent Russian proactive initiatives. Tagging politics serve to bring about internal political and social balances through policies to combat radicalization, disinformation and fake news. These are civilian PSYOP operations aimed at conveying selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and, ultimately, the behavior of governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. In particular, these forms of civil PSYOP are aimed at identifying more or less fictitious internal and external enemies, with the aim of creating socio-political alliances that prevent competitors from intervening on certain issues and forming blocks of opposition.

The key to the application of 'labeling politics' techniques in the field of radicalization is the intentional confusion between crime related to terrorism, which is prosecuted by law, and non-criminal behavior showing opposition to the government or the EU and which should instead be protected by law as free opinions, however extreme. By gradually lowering the criminal punishment threshold for minority behaviors and ideas, a socio-legal space is created for 'crime without fault', as Sgubbi has recently defined it[3]. It is the “author's crime”, that is, it is subject to sanctions, often administrative, in the absence of an individual's guilt and becomes a social stigma when it is not addressed through legal prevention. It is a fault-without-fault that is considered justified not so much for what the subject has done culpably, as for what the subject is, for their origins and history, for their role in society or social dangerousness.

[1] Fontana L., Le Operazioni Psicologiche Militari (PsyOp): La conquista delle menti, informazioni della difesa, https://www.difesa.it/InformazioniDellaDifesa/periodico/IIPeriodico_AnniPrecedenti/Documents/Le_Operazioni_Psicologiche_militar_620menti.pdf. IL manuale di riferimento resta <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3-13-2.pdf>

[2] Coolsaet R., All Radicalisation is Local. The Genesis and Drawbacks of an Elusive Concept', Egmont Paper 84, June 2016, pg. 12 sgg.

[3] Sgubbi F. (2020), Il Diritto Penale Totale. Punire senza legge, senza verità, senza colpa, Il Mulino.

These come to be understood as 'pre-criminal' ideas and behaviors. No one wants to be an ally of a 'radical', a state considered the antechamber of terrorism, even if, in reality, the behaviors and ideas in question are not criminal acts and are mostly protected by law and international conventions, protecting fundamental freedoms, such as of speech, of thought, or of expression. And so, new categories of suspects are created (Gefährdeten), who are threatened with preventive measures of administrative police (extra jurisdiction) and socially isolated in public discourses (labeling or tagging).

Counter-Radicalization Campaigns 16 years on

16 years after the launch of the first European strategies to combat radicalization, on the domestic level the experience of civil 'labeling politics' has unfortunately proved to be a disaster. The objective of the mass psyops campaigns that had become necessary after the attacks that took place between 2001 and 2015 on the World Trade Center and in Spain and England, produced unexpected drifts by the strategists of MI5 and AVID. In fact, the various editions of 'Prevent' in Dutch, English and, today, French forms, have not considered a criminological phenomenon parallel to the 'psyop' which is the 'mutual radicalization'[4], as constant outcome of the labeling policies[5]. In fact, the European 'Prevent' strategies have partially prevented European Muslim minorities from serving as a breeding ground for foreign jihadist movements and therefore restricted the extent to which European Muslim communities have connected organically with insurgencies in their countries of origin, with the exception of the marginal phenomena of foreign fighters who have always been present in the West. Conversely, they have created two new negative competing phenomena: the first is that minority communities have felt betrayed by the state and by the models of legalitarian culture based on 'author crime'.

Secondly, they have noticed the hostile use of a double standard. Seduced by oil and the sale of arms, the European principles of democracy, rule of the law and human rights have been sidelined as national and European institutions have often chosen the (more or less formal) alliance with dictators such as as-Sisi in Egypt, al-Asad in Syria, Hady in Yemen or Heftar in Libya. Faced with this double standard, various Muslim communities in Europe have therefore taken refuge in identity sub-cultures, refractory to the alliance with the institutions, and to integration models. The presence of an "other", different immigrant, often portrayed as a threat to European values, has activated the mechanism of opposite extremisms in different parts of majority cultures, first on the right and then on the left, generating a process known in criminological terms as 'mutual radicalization'.

[4] Carter, J.A. Cumulative Extremism. A Comparative Historical Analysis, 1st Edition, Routledge 2019; Knott K., Lee B., Copeland S., Briefings: Reciprocal Radicalisation Full Report, Crest, 2018

[5] Lemert, E. M. (1951). Social Pathology. New York: Mcgraw-Hill; Becker, H. (1973) [1963]. Outsiders. New York: Free Press; Memmi, A. (1965). The Colonizer and the Colonized. New York: Orion Press; Memmi, A. (1968). Dominated Man. New York: Orion Press; Goffman, E. (1974). Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Goffman, E. (1982). Interaction Ritual. New York: Pantheon Books; Matza, D. (1969). On Becoming Deviant. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mutual Radicalization

As a result of continuous campaigns to criminalize the ideas and political elaborations of European Muslim minorities, which, if integrated, could have brought a wave of innovation in the asphyxiated political landscape of Europe, but which instead, through the use of excessive instruments of surveillance and criminalization, has generated a new radical-terrorist threat of the right, of a xenophobic and populist type, which communicated in a more crude and violent form what organizations like the Dutch RAN had promoted politely. Trying to impose a majority identity culture with the use of criminal law, legal prevention, decidedly disproportionate forms of surveillance and massive labeling campaigns towards different subjects has created the typical dynamics of in-and-out groups[6], known to classical criminology.

Legitimate right-wing and extreme right-wing political movements in the European parliamentary landscape have exploited this, but so too have small groups and individuals vulnerable, who ended up in the spiral of violence as a response to the perception of 'Islamic danger', which they thought threatened the Christian roots of Europe.

Anti-Muslims Right-Wing Radicals

They operated, according to these theories, with the aim of ethnic substitution or conspiracy (The Sages of Zion). The phenomenon has exploded to the point that there are now dozens of victims of criminal acts by right-wing extremists, be they Muslims, Jews or foreigners. They are acts that draw nourishment from individual aspects (micro level), but also from recruitment mechanisms (macro level). Paradoxically, also precisely from the security campaigns, conducted largely by national governments and the EU, which have identified Muslims as the enemy. They have even used Arabic terms and religious concepts inappropriately in communications on public security (macro level) or in legislation.

The policies to combat radicalization, arbitrarily understood as anti-jihadism, have become a catalyst for all those individuals and groups who claimed to restore the supposed natural order of things. It is no coincidence that the investigations record a very strong involvement of members of the police and the army in the ranks of right-wing extremists, given that these are by far the social areas most vulnerable to these extremist messages. These individuals and groups, such as violent youths inspired by religious ideologies, often simulate the use of images and techniques typical of war theaters (explosive belts, photos with assault weapons, uniforms of pseudo armies, cars and other dual weapons, GoCameras) to spread their messages on the internet, etc. As the case of the 'Black Lives Matters' movement taught us, this can be utilized to commit crimes of serious social alarm.

[6] Northrup, T.A. (1989), The dynamic of identity in personal and social conflicts, in L. Kriesberg, T.A., Northrup & S.J. Thorson (eds), Intractable Conflicts and their Transformations, Syracuse University Press, pg. 55-82

Antifascist left-wing Radicals

The new anti-fascist and anti-globalist brand of anarchism counterbalanced the widespread identity phenomenon of the far right. The symbol of this is the hundreds of anarchist volunteers who went to fight in Syria and Iraq against Da'ish or against Turkey. This is a trend of the macro Foreign Fighters phenomenon that the EU security agencies tend to reduce to ideological reasoning. These left-wing foreign fighters, with Western passports and citizenship, have acquired military techniques and methods which they then re-employ in various European anti-government protests, against NATO, the police, the army, public works, construction sites, factories and banks connected to the defense industry, vaccines, as well as against those they also perceive as their enemies. 'Think locally and act globally' is their motto. Each conflicting group feeds on what happens in the other field, be it a segment of society or the state itself.

The Counter-Radicalization Chaos

The result is a wave of multi-conflicts that is emerging as a result of this 'mutual radicalization' process. Europe must now prepare to face this anomalous wave, in a climate of growing economic tensions and with institutions that do not appear very solid. The lesson to be learned in complex European societies based on mass communication and social networks is that conflict cultures, especially if artificially produced through 'psyop' operations, tend to get out of hand. The EU was born as an instrument of freedom and supranational mediation of conflicts through the Rule of the Law. Schengen, the single market, civil rights, the Stockholm Program and data protection all spoke the language of freedoms. But the gradual securitization of a post-Lisbon Europe, first with massive investments in surveillance and then in the military component, the confusion of roles between politics, intelligence agencies, police forces and civil society, is changing this profile and generating ever deeper conflicts.

It is necessary that the two legs of the EU, of freedom and law and of security, walk together in a constitutional 'rule of the law' mechanism. Otherwise, by sowing discord in deregulated fields without checks and balances, it becomes difficult to distinguish the weeds from the wheat. With this, you risk a bad harvest, as ancient wisdom reminds us.





ANY QUESTIONS?

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