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"The Islamo- Occidental Ecological Niche," The Matrix of Islamist Radicalization

La « niche écologique islamo-occidentale », matrice de la radicalisation islamiste

[Online] May 8, 2017

Thierry Lamote
Fethi Benslama

Abstract:

The last decade has seen a profusion of works produced on radicalization. These include both scientific studies and recommendations from experts designed for policies of support and prevention. However, the current state of play shows that these studies, which are as much theoretical as practical, do not say anything about the processes that constitute the foundation of the radicalized subject's convictions, nor about the mechanisms that lead him or her to give up these convictions, or that culminate in their resistance. Here lies precisely the goal of our exploration. Founded on a clinical approach of analytical orientation, it aims to examine, through an analysis of the implied psychological processes, the link that each "radicalized" subject maintains with his or her belief, the singular context that incited him or her to adopt it in this way, along with the modalities through which he or she might be led to give it up, once it has become obsolete in regard to the discontent, even the psychical troubles, that it was supposed to resolve. To carry through this work, we will locate the psychological processes that interest us on the different scales of the human realities in which they are contained: the *macro* level (contemporary civilization), the *meso* level (local cultures with effects of "niche ecology"), and the *micro* level (the individual or the subject).

Résumé:

Durant la dernière décennie, une profusion de travaux a été produite sur la radicalisation, aussi bien des études scientifiques que des préconisations d'experts, destinées aux politiques d'accompagnement et de prévention. L'état de l'art montre cependant que ces études, tant théoriques que pratiques, ne disent rien des mécanismes psychologiques qui fondent les convictions du sujet radicalisé, ni des processus qui conduisent au renoncement à ces convictions, ou qui aboutissent à leur résistance. C'est là précisément le but de notre exploration. Fondée sur une approche clinique d'orientation analytique, elle vise à interroger, via une analyse des processus psychologiques impliqués, le lien que chaque sujet « radicalisé » entretient avec sa croyance, le contexte singulier qui l'a incité à l'adopter ainsi que les modalités par lesquelles il pourrait être amené à l'abandonner, une fois celle-ci devenue obsolète au regard du malaise, voire des troubles psychiques, qu'elle était supposée résoudre. Pour mener à bien ce travail, nous situons les processus psychologiques qui nous intéressent à différentes échelles des réalités humaines qui les englobent : les niveaux *macro* (civilisation contemporaine), *meso* (cultures locales avec effets de « niche écologique ») et *micro* (l'individu, le sujet).

Keywords: radicalization, ecological niche, psychological processes, symptom

Mots clés: radicalisation, niche écologique, processus psychologiques, symptôme

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Full text

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Thierry Lamote declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Fethi Benslama declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Introduction

The last decade has seen a profusion of works produced on radicalization. These include both scientific studies and recommendations from experts designed for policies of support and prevention. In this respect, the program for the “de-radicalization” and rehabilitation of jihadists, launched in 2014 in the Danish town of Aarhus, is instructive and, as we are going to see, exemplary for the practices that are currently in vogue. The government in Aarhus has put in place a procedure that rests on two pillars. On the one hand, it leans on a mentorship system, that is to say, a personal tutor is attributed to the radicalized persons in order to accompany them through all their steps towards integration and to converse with them about religious and moral questions. And on the other hand, there is a program of psychological follow-up that falls under the umbrella of the “life psychology” system, which aims to lead the person to vent the frustrations felt during his or her existential quest for a “beautiful life,” as the text has it.¹ On one side, the mentor “deconstructs the major narratives that have been put in place by extremists;” while on the other side, the psychologist leads him or her to “acquire a solid mastery of their life”² through motivational interviews. On the face of it, the program seems to be well thought-out, organized as it is around a precise function, with carefully put-together mission statements. But when one looks more closely, however, nothing is specified with regard to the psychological mechanisms at play: in

this method that is said to be “proactive,” as is the case in all the methods organized around other psycho-educative techniques of the same type, there is no clear explanation as to the processes that constitute the foundation of the radicalized subject’s convictions, nor as to the mechanisms that lead him or her to give up these convictions, or that culminate in their resistance. Everything comes to pass as though we were dealing with behavior that was nothing but a superficial veneer, entirely linked to the immediate environment, that a simple change, guaranteed by the day-to-day, well-meaning advice from benevolent persons (the mentor and the psychologist of beautiful life), would be sufficient to modify.

But is it really the case that the phenomenon of radicalization is merely a matter of managing behavior and emotions? We do not think so, and this is why we are going to tackle it from another angle: as the synthesis brought about by the subject between the two anthropological registers at whose crossroads he or she evolves, namely the dimensions of civilization and culture. It is here, in the zone of friction between these two major tectonic plates, which are often contradictory, of (worldwide) civilization and (local) culture, that, in our opinion, has produced the adoption of radical discourses – the adoption that then holds the value of a compromise solution for the subject, that is to say, the value of a symptom. This in any case is the thesis, which has been inspired by our practice on the ground, which we are currently in the process of developing and which has recently been the object of a research protocol proposed by France’s National Agency of Research – the CliREST project.³ Rather than being a completed piece of work, this article thus presents the main axes of a program that is still in the course of being carried through, a work in progress. Before we spell out our thesis, let us try to begin by diagnosing the current state of knowledge on this subject.

1. Overview and the Current State of Play

As is easily shown by a review of the European programs for the prevention of radicalization,⁴ the expert analyses share the same base of presuppositions, namely that those individuals who are tempted by extremism (whether political or religious) would have certain stereotypical views in common (on Jewish persons, on the West, and so on), an intolerance to frustration, and difficulties when it comes to managing their violence.⁵ In this way, a simple schema of analysis has come to light: radicalization appears as the result of the prevalence of stereotypical views held by subjects who have been poorly integrated into society, and who do not manage to treat their anxiety otherwise than through violence.⁶ This is why the methods of “de-radicalization,” or of the prevention of radicalization, tend to follow two modalities. The first modality consists of modules of civic education, that is to say, of collective workshops that are supposed to allow individuals to question their stereotypical views, in order to dissolve them by religious counter-discourses⁷ or “critical” discourses,⁸ in such a way that once these stereotypical views have been weakened, the person will let go of his or her belief. The second path of de-radicalization consists of working on frustration, the sense of exclusion, violence, and self-control, though sports⁹ or social integration (all the countries include this component in their programs). The psychologist will only intervene here in conformity with one of four modes: social psychology produces methods to lead the subject to deconstruct the stereotypical representations; behavioral psychology invents techniques to decrypt signs of radicalization and dangerousness; industrial psychology aims to facilitate integration, by means of motivational interviews that allow needs to be ordered into a hierarchy; and as for the therapies, they seek, through techniques based on communication, to reinforce confidence and self-esteem. Psychopathology is rarely invoked; and when it is invoked, it is in order to trace out pathological profiles, notably in the cases of so-called “lone wolves.”¹⁰ It should be noted that none of the works that we studied describe the psychological processes in play: only the “profiles”¹¹ are sometimes described, but, on the other hand, the psychological mechanisms, both conscious and unconscious, or the dynamic mental function of adhesion, are never explained. Nonetheless, the very notion of “radicalization” does bear within it such dynamic and procedural dimensions, as has been shown by the works of Farhad Khosrokhavar.¹²

This sociologist and anthropologist considers that the contribution of this notion in sociology has constituted a shift in perception that complements the discipline's perception of terrorism. The latter was focused on the study of groups that use ideological violence and its political and social signification. Now, the notion of radicalization has allowed for an approach in terms of the processes of individual trajectories that lead subjects towards violence, to the extent that there is never a sudden tipping point, but an evolution over a time period that may be more or less lengthy. This is why this author defines radicalization as "the processes by which an individual or a group adopt a violent form of action that is directly linked to an extremist ideology with a political, social, or cultural content that contests the established order on the political, social, or cultural plane."¹³ This sociological conception establishes a direct association between an extremist and radical ideology and "a violent action that is considered by its actor to be a direct consequence of the said ideology,"¹⁴ to such an extent that the absence of one of the two dimensions – "for example, when there is violent action without ideology or extremist ideology without violent action"¹⁵ – classifies the phenomenon outside the field of radicalization.

While this grouping of elements, which is to be found in a number of other authors of reference,¹⁶ undeniably clarifies the phenomenon, it has nonetheless contributed to its being located essentially within the domain of the expertise of sociology and social psychology. This approach has given rise to retrospective studies of actors from movements such as the Direct Action group in France or the Red Army faction in Germany,¹⁷ among many others. The goal is to be able to isolate the formal descriptive criteria of radicalization, as in the works of Isabelle Sommier¹⁸ who locates the formation at the crossroads between three parameters: the social and ideological context; the individual and subjective trajectory; and adherence to a radical group, the encounter with which is facilitated by the internet. The result of this is that there is an abandonment of the "why" of radicalization in favor of the "how," which from this point on is prioritized in its matching with the procedural analysis. For Xavier Crettiez,¹⁹ what is at stake are the determinisms of individual engagement in "high-risk activism," which is broached in accordance with three cumulative elements: the motivating factors; the cognitive mechanisms of the actor; and his or her evolving processes -- leaving behind entirely the notion of "profile" in favor of the notion of the "career" of the radicalized person. Other studies have brought the group dimension of radicalization to the fore, leaving behind the individual processes in favor of collective dynamics.²⁰

In this avalanche of international publications we have observed an epistemological loophole: all of these studies are inscribed in the fields of sociology or of social and behavioral psychology²¹ – in other words, so many approaches that base their descriptions in a position that looks down from above on the phenomena they are studying; on the other hand, none of them put to work the paradigm of clinical psychology with a psychoanalytical orientation.²² The psychoanalytical approach commits first and foremost to taking into account the singularity of phenomena in the way that they are manifested in the speech of radicalized subjects, and looking for the structural recurrences in order to then link them to considerations about the cultural context that has favored their emergence. Therefore, within this epistemological frame, it is not a matter of studying radicalization on the basis of its link to violent lines of behavior and/or potentially criminal conduct, the dangerousness of which would have to be measured; nor is it a matter of restricting it to coordinates of the social environment, nor of making it the consequence of bitterness or of social frustration. Rather, the clinical practice of psychoanalysis takes an interest in the function that a line of behavior has for the subject: here it is a matter of questioning, through an analysis of the psychological processes that are implied, the link that each radicalized person maintains with his or her belief, the singular context that has incited him or her to adopt in this way the modalities through which he or she could be led to give it up once it has become obsolete in regard to the discontent, even in regard to the mental disturbances, that it was supposed to resolve. We need to put this approach to the test of phenomena, on the basis of an opening question that will serve us as a guiding thread: how is it that some subjects come to adhere to radical Islamist ideology, to the point of embracing all of its consequences right up to its most

extreme ones? The psychological processes that interest us need to be situated on the different scales of the human realities in which they are contained: the *macro* level (contemporary civilization), the *meso* level (local cultures with effects of “niche ecology”), and the *micro* level (the individual or the subject).

2. Three Levels of Analysis: The Civilizational Context, the Register of the Ecological Niche, and the Subjective Dimension of the Symptom

At the *macro level*: the current state of globalization, following that of colonial globalization, has created new fields of tension between the Western world and the Muslim world. At the same time as human groups have been dragged into the flow of techno-scientific and economical exchanges and homogenizations, as their interpenetrations extend, reciprocal fears have come to light and ancient traumas have been reawakened. We are witnessing a weakening of the sense of identity on both sides, which bears witness to the fact that there is also an interconnectedness in the crises, even if they are not of the same nature on either side, and do not proceed from the same causal factors. There is an effect of the synaptic matching of edges.

The Muslim world has been undergoing a deep and paradoxical transformation in which an unprecedented movement of renaissance has gone hand-in-hand with the agony of the ancient world. On the side of the renaissance, the twentieth century saw the amplification of the impetus that was affecting all the domains of civilization: the emancipation of women from domestic seclusion; the development of institutions of knowledge culminating in hundreds of universities; the considerable inflow of riches – and not only of profits from oil, but also from commercial exchanges and industrial ingenuity –; the extension of medical care at the root of demographic explosions; the emergence of an important elite of scientists, writers, and artists who produce knowledge and perceptions of the present and of the past; the elaboration of new systems of rights by post-colonial states in which the theological laws are in the minority. The emergence of a modern subject in the middle and upper social classes. On the side of the ancient agony: the fundamentalism born of Islam can certainly be compared to the other fundamentalisms that have come to light in all regions, to the extent that their traditional structures are no longer in a position to be able to respond to the changes in societies and in individuals, under the impulse of modernity, which does not occur without a large-scale Westernization. Except that a part of Muslim fundamentalism has been armed in a context of major geopolitical conflicts. Afghanistan, which was the site of a crucial conflict between the East and the West, was the first school of jihadism, which, moreover, is a jihadism crowned with the success of having led to the collapse of the Soviet empire. This event had repercussions on a grand scale, which were not initially perceived, in the spread of jihadism as an ideology and as a combative mobilization. It nourished and fanned the flames of hotbeds of civil war, as in Algeria, for example. During the same period, the grand post-colonial narrative was becoming exhausted across nearly all of the countries that have a Muslim majority, to the extent that the nation-states that had received legitimacy from it did not respond to the aspirations from the disadvantaged strata of their peoples. The demographic explosion overwhelmed the new and old institutions alike, and led to the escheat of numerous masses in miserable urban agglomerations, where vast swathes of youth found themselves being abandoned. In the absence of any other hope, a part of these young people has found the means of surviving a sense of indignity in the offer of Islamist ideals. The fundamentalist Islamist ideology has spread an elaborated theory that leans on two emotionally powerful schemes: the ideal of a return to the origin of Islam in which the response to all the problems is thought to reside, along with the sovereignty of the empire, the Caliphate. But it is an ideal that has been wounded by the West and by the defection of modern Muslims, which links this scheme of the wounded ideal to the scheme of the prejudice that the Muslim community must endure, whose reparation passes through the restoration of sacred power and the vengeance for insults inflicted on the divinity by Western secularization. The civil war of which Islam is nowadays both the site and the major stake, sets in opposition the beneficiaries of recognition and the losers of the old world’s agony, with a whole intermediary gray

zone in which those who are ambivalent, hesitant, or divided are to be found. In a context of civil war at the heart of the Muslim world, radical Islamism has developed a theory of identity that knots together ideal and prejudice, and turns its reparation into an epic and heroic battle. This offer captivates individuals who identify with one another through the idea of a real or imaginary damage that has been done to their life.²³

In the Western world, Islamist “radicalization” has become an epidemic phenomenon of society since midway through the first decade of the century, at the moment when the use of this term imposed itself, then becoming prevalent in the human and social sciences, in the works of experts, and in the media.²⁴ How are we to think about the phenomenon of radicalization in Western societies? Here, we can consider that there is also a crisis of ideals, but in a way that is different from how it functions in the Muslim world. This crisis has to do with the loss of impetus of the grand narrative of progress, both scientific and social. It is at the same time a period of the loss of confidence in institutions and the weakening of the performative strength of political discourses, inherited from modernity, notably the communist discourse. In the space that had been left vacant, an economism was installed that replaced symbolic values, governing by numbers.²⁵ Among other consequences, the amplification of exclusions on the material plane and on the plane of the social bond has touched populations whose affiliations are fragile. Among them, two groups seem to be particularly exposed: children that come from immigration from Muslim countries that are still in want of references, and children of autochthons affected by normative incoherences specific to this period of mutation. Each of them, along different paths, find in radical Islamist ideology a certitude and a submission to an accomplished order, which seems to deliver them an anomic experience of the world.

At the *meso level*: we are borrowing from Ian Hacking²⁶ the notion of “ecological niche” in order to think about the environment that is constituted between the macro dimension and the micro dimension of radicalization. The notion of “ecological niche” designates the full set of elements in a culture whose convergence, at any one time, favors the appearance and the spread of an expression of the madness that is specific to an era, and which disappears thereafter, when the conditions in the niche are no longer brought together. Once they have appeared, have been described by experts and spread in society, this expression of madness forms a “transitory illness,”²⁷ that is to say, an illness that is “ready-to-wear” and liable to be adopted by subjects who live in the culture that gave rise to it. Our borrowing of this “formalist schema” will be supported by means of a displacement of its initial aims, since the “radicalization” is not considered as an illness, but rather as a line of behavior that is founded on a relation of subjects to discourses that are considered as extremist discourses.²⁸ It is less the use of the term in the medical field that will hold our attention than its use in sociology, in psycho-sociology, and in criminology, which have modified its initial contours. In a similar way to Ian Hacking, we will approach Islamist radicalization as a subjective and social phenomenon kindled by “an ecological niche” that we label “Islam-Occidental,” to the extent that it is the coproduction of an interpretation between the two human and civilizational sets at several different levels and across a long historical expanse. For example, the split between Muslim modernists and Muslim fundamentalists throughout the Islamic zone, since the start of the nineteenth century, cannot be thought about outside of this Occident-Islam relation. The same is true of the formation of the first school of jihadism in Afghanistan, as we will indicate below. We will take up here, succinctly, the four vectors of Ian Hacking’s theory:

– The *cultural polarity* between vice and virtue, which we will localize in the representations of radicalization as revolt. In the virtuous register of dignity, these are themes relative to the uprising of “the Islamic nation,” borne by a Romantic wave, against the Western oppressor and against the injustices committed by its allies, the powers in the Muslim counties. In the somber and anxiety-provoking register, it is a matter of millenarian movements as much in the West as in Islam, which have regularly made the masses rise up in the search of the millennium, of heaven on earth, which they

hoped to realize by undermining all the symbolic institutions, by removing all the founding prohibitions, and by suspending the law. In Europe, these revolts proliferated between the eleventh and the fourteenth century.²⁹ Comparable phenomena have also shaken the Muslim world, such as the famous Messianic event of the grand resurrection of the castle of Alamut in the twelfth century.³⁰ The jihadist Islamist movements mix these two aspects of the revolt of the masses: the virtuous quest for justice on the one hand, and on the other, the threat of a suspension of law and of chaos that would be its worrying consequence. This is how it is in the strategy behind the organization of the “Islamic State” (ISIS/Daesh), which leans on “the Administration of Savagery,” the title of a treatise that was published in 2004,³¹ and which calls for the destruction of all institutions of society, starting with the nation-states, in order to establish chaos, in the wake of which an order based on strict sharia law could be imposed.

– A taxonomy, which is not medical but sociological, psychological, and criminological. It is within these epistemological fields that a phenomenon has been observed and named “radicalization,” before being written, quantified, and inscribed in observation charts. For this to happen, the phenomenon had to be removed from the three spaces in which it had been located up until that time – the religious sciences, the police, and the legal system – when it was envisaged solely in terms of fundamentalism and terrorism, in order to be thought through as a dynamic process that is able to give rise to lines of behavior that are deviant in the eyes of social norms and of the law.

– *Observability*: this has two sources in the case of radicalization. First of all, there is the institutional field (MIVILUDES) and the not-for-profit field (UNADFI, ADFI, and so on) dedicated to the surveillance of cults, a field that boasts a long experience and a doctrinal framework, that of mental manipulation and ascendancy. It is through their prisms and in the context of a surveillance of alarming lines of behavior sparked off by “slides into sectarianism” that radicalization started to enter the discourse of experts in France. But once the phenomenon has been made consistent by this discourse, it started to be taken up on a large scale and spread in the media: the term “radicalization,” which at the start encompassed a series of political and politico-religious phenomena, became reduced to Islamist phenomena, above all following the attacks by Mohammed Merah in Toulouse in 2012,³² making the latter all the more observable by a wider public.

– *The desire for evasion*, and in particular evasion towards the elsewhere that has been promised by the Islamic State (Daesh), that of the Islamic City-State and of the restored Caliphate, far from social stagnation, from boredom and from the absence of future prospects (whether real or fantasized) evoked by radicalized subjects in Europe and in the countries of the Muslim world.

At the *micro level*, that is to say, at the level of the processes implied, we do not consider radicalization to be a new pathology; instead, we locate it in the register of the symptom, in the psychoanalytical sense.

3. One Ecological Niche For An Infinite Diversity of Singular Symptomatic Makeshift Solutions

In psychoanalysis, the symptom is the attempt at a solution that the subject brings to a psychical conflict. Therefore, it is not, strictly speaking, an illness: the illness is the disorder that stems from the conflict; as for the symptom, it is already an auto-therapeutic response to the illness, a compromise solution that aims at recovery. Understood in this way, the symptom implies that the subject should be confronted with the conflict that made it necessary: it is the index of an active choice (albeit unconscious, at least in part) by the subject, who will construct it by kitting it out with harmless elements borrowed from the subject’s environment (ordinary experiences, scraps of culture, religion, and so on). It can happen nevertheless that the subject may manage to dispense with having to produce

and to support a symptom: by adopting the religious solution, as a “universal obsessional neurosis”³³ in order to treat his or her psychic conflicts; or else by hiding his or her conflicts behind a veil³⁴ so as to avoid confronting them, which can give rise to attempts at resolution through the *passage à l’acte*. We will not tackle the question of psychosis here, due to the shortage of space, in order to concentrate on what it produces on the side of neurosis.

It is in this double sense that we envisage radicalization in its dimension as a transitory envelope stemming from an ecological niche that is specific to the contemporary global culture: either in the framework of the (neurotic) symptom properly speaking, as a singular makeshift solution mobilizing symbolic resources that can, on occasion, borrow some of their materials from religion; or, by sticking to some fundamentalist discourse as a “universal neurosis.” We will focus on two clinical vignettes, which will allow us to reflect upon the current approach to radicalization in terms of profiles and of signals (strong/weak).

Ali, our first case, is a young man in his twenties who presents himself as a Salafist. He hails from a very moderate Muslim family, whom he reproaches for their religious laxity. He aspires to recover the grandeur of the Turkish Empire before Atatürk, which puts him on the trail, without him necessarily being aware of the fact, of the ideological lineage traced out by Sayyid Qutb.³⁵ It is in this way that he explains to us that he would like to live in a city-state (“an Ummah”) integrally represented by God, through a Caliph: a man, he specifies, who would have adhered unreservedly to divine Law and whose word would convey this Law to his people. In the face of a man such as this, whose every decision would bear divine inspiration, no violence would be required, because the people, composed of Muslims who would aspire to live in accordance with the Law of Allah, would submit freely to his directives. At the heart of Ali’s utopian city-state would thus be a consistent incarnation of the Law, whose directives would not be up for discussion – they would be applied, to the letter, as the sole means of establishing peace. Ali, who himself seems to have found peace, thus illustrates to the letter, once again, the significations of the terms “Islam” (submission to a one and only god, and peace) and “Muslim” (he who is submitted to God): he has fully submitted to the will of Allah and to the literal application of His Law (favoring the latter to the detriment of his mind). However, his relation to the law has not always been so strict. In effect, Ali found religion just after having been through a period of major addiction to online gambling: only religion, practiced with rigor, has managed to regulate his irrepressible compulsion. Thus there is a clean break between a before and an after: first of all, a phase of unbridled *jouissance*, and then a life of meditative asceticism; between the two is the adoption of an ultra-rigorous Salafist path. His relation to the sacred text and to religious litany is so literal that it paralyzes their metabolization. Moreover, Ali did not seek to borrow any symbolic elements from religion that could allow him to fabricate a singular symptom that would be apt to treat his psychic conflicts: he has adopted the religious discourse as a “universal obsessional neurosis.”³⁶ Thus he has remained on the surface of the text, reading the text and reciting in Arabic all day long. For him, it is a matter of domesticating his drives, of disciplining them by imposing upon them the rigor of the sacred text. He has accepted this text as it is, without making so much as a crease in it, without reinterpreting it on the basis of his desire. This is why Ali seems destined to stick to this identification with the “Salafs:” his quest for a foundation on the basis of which he could sustain an identity without it becoming fragile has been resolved for this young man who lacks a symbolic heritage by sticking to the fantasmatic representations of the first companions of the Prophet whose idealized image haunts the hard-line branches of Islam.

It is not this kind of quest for foundations that has guided our second case, but rather the unresolved question of what constitutes a social bond when no symbolic institution acts as a guarantee for the collective pact.

Paul is a young convert with a tortuous path: his quest for a livable elsewhere led him to the Maghreb a few years ago, where he had run-ins with the legal system. During a collective workshop, he tells us the story of an imaginary character by the name of “the Commander.” When heard for this first time, this

Commander is evocative of Ali's Caliph: both of them appear as the temporal manifestation of Divine Law. Paul tells us that the Commander derives his legitimacy from his refusal of violence. As with Ali's Caliph, the community that he governs accepts his directives, without finding anything to dispute, because the directives bear within them the direct expression of the will of God. But is this Commander really a reformulation of the Caliph? In other words, are Ali and Paul really speaking about the same thing? In order to understand what this invention corresponds to, we need to re-situate its elements within the framework of the young man's anamnesis.

Paul grew up in a hotel that was run by his mother; he evokes with nostalgia the time when he had the run of a kind of suspended and porous space where the unknown clients' private lives were accessible to him on a daily basis. He liked to go into the rooms once they had been vacated of their passing occupants, in order to glean snatches of enigmatic stories – crumpled scraps of paper and leftovers of lives whose bits and pieces he would try to stick back together. At the heart of this, otherness left its mark – the heterogeneous infiltrated into the homogenous. Besides these first manifestations of his desire for an elsewhere, what transpires very quickly from these evocations is the promiscuity in which he lived. Because his hotel, like every hotel, accommodated furtive intimacies: the clients took shelter, for a lapse of time that was often very brief, behind their closed doors. But what becomes of this privacy when one lives full time in such a place, when one is a permanent fixture and when one settles down in a place of passage? For those who live in a hotel, the limits between the private space and the public space very quickly appear to be fragile: at any moment, the outside world can melt into the family's inner world. For Paul, the family was itself “dis-institutionalized.”³⁷ It no longer fulfilled its role of sharing out places in a stable structure. Was it not the case that the very thing that was lacking in this life organized around a relentless promiscuity was the instance that would be able to act as a guarantor for a zone of privacy? The bulk of Paul's narratives turn around the absence of what Lacan named the “at least one,” namely the register of the Third Party that Freud³⁸ turned into the condition of the social link, in the form of the ego ideal in its multiple manifestations (the father, the leader, the grand narrative). The question that drives Paul, though unconscious and unformulated, this blind point of his desire that led him towards other cultures (the Maghreb) before committing himself, through the mythology of the Ummah and of the Caliphate, to the ways of Salafism, touches on the fact of living together: how can human beings hold together when no symbolic institution acts as the guarantor of the social link? How can people form a community if the place of the Third Party is empty? Paul thinks he has found a solution in the Ummah, in the way that it could be organized in the context of the Caliphate. But once again, what exactly is it that he calls “Ummah?” In his discourse, this term designates a community of equals, like in Ali's narrative, except that the community that Paul dreams of presents itself as a collectivity that would have found the means to hold together without any leader occupying the place of the Third Party. But then, what becomes of the Commander in this strictly egalitarian system? When Paul speaks about this figure, it very quickly becomes apparent that it is an abstract, immaterial instance: it is not an empty place, a body of ideas, or a purely symbolic reference. That ideal that Paul is aiming at, as moreover he will say clearly, would only be, at the end of the day, nothing more than a system founded on participative democracy, “as in the Nordic countries,” he tells us: a democratic system composed of equals with a shared ethical ideal, an “autonomous” system in the proper sense of the term, namely a system that organizes a community on the basis of laws that it would have given to itself and which, thereafter, it can only freely choose. On the basis of a shared symbolic ground, we can see here how each subject seizes hold of religious narratives to draw from them the materials that are liable to treat the singular problems that are specific to the history of each subject: where Paul, who lived in a dis-institutionalized universe, found, in the religious text, the paths of a solution that would allow him to bypass the Third Party, Ali, on the contrary, seeks out those elements by which he can sustain his desire for a solid foundation that is embodied by a consistent figure of authority.

Conclusion

It will have been understood that our clinical approach does not commit itself to the paths of the so-called “de-radicalization:” it is simply a matter of stripping the symptom of its superficial envelope, even if this envelope expresses itself in the form of what has been named “radicalization.” Like any envelope, this one has a protective function – so we have to be careful. Indeed, the psychologist owes it to himself to be particularly attentive not only to the envelope, but to the symptom itself: it is not a matter, as it is in medicine, of wearing down the symptom (where symptom = illness), because, in this case, the risk would be to leave the subject in his or her state of initial turmoil, which gave rise to the adoption of his or her symptom. The therapy consists either in reducing the symptom (in such a way as to avoid it becoming invalidating, if it is a source of suffering), or to allow the subject to give it up in favor of another solution (of a symptom that would occasion less suffering, or of an activity of sublimation).

One can also see, on the basis of our two clinical examples, how much the problematic of radicalization eludes any objectifying observation: in order to understand the intimate machinery behind the adoption of radical discourses, it is necessary to listen to what the subjects say about them. There is no profile, nor is there any chart for observing attitudes and lines of behavior, that can suffice to grasp the deep motives behind these phenomena. It is to the junction between the subject and the wider social context into which he or she is inscribed that we must turn our attention, if we are to be able to keep this epidemic of Islamism in check efficaciously. Like Ian Hacking, when he asks himself in his book on multiple personality disorder, “about the way in which certain categories of people appear,” we ought also to begin by asking ourselves “how the way in which certain people are systematically studied and characterized brings about a feedback loop in their regard?”³⁹

The multiplication of studies that aim to describe the signs of radicalization – that is to say, the formal envelope of this symptom – have essentially had the effect of spreading these signs and proliferating the number of subjects who adopt them; perhaps the time has come to leave this approach behind in favor of studying the underlying subjective processes?

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Notes:

¹El Difraoui, A. (2015). *Les politiques de dé-radicalisation, Allemagne, Grande-Bretagne et Danemark. Note pour le CIPD*. Paris: Sciences-Po. http://www.aeciut.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/aeldifraoui_Note-CIPD-Sciences-Po-Dé-radicalisation-en-Europe.pdf.

²*Ibid.*

³The project called ClIREST (Clinic of Radicalisation and Its Treatment) is a project in the course of being evaluated by the National Agency for Research. It is run by the authors of this article (Pr. Fethi Benslama and Thierry Lamote), in partnership with the University of Rennes 2 and the University of Paris Descartes-Paris 5. Its aim is to develop a clinical approach to radicalization.

⁴Institute for Strategic dialogue (2010). *The role of civil society in counter-radicalization and de-radicalisation. A workshop paper of the european policy planners' network on counter radicalization and polarisation*. London: <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/publications>.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶This refers to the "Violence Prevention Network" programs in Germany and the "Slotervaart Action Plan to Prevent Radicalization", in the Netherlands.

⁷The "Street" program and the "Prevent's" program in the United Kingdom.

⁸The "Slotervaart Action Plan to Prevent Radicalization", in the Netherlands.

⁹The "Street" program in the United Kingdom.

¹⁰Roy van Zuijdewijn, J. & Bakker, E. (2016). Analysing Personal Characteristics of Lone-Actor Terrorists: Research Findings and Recommendations. *Perspectives on terrorism*, 10, 2; McCauley, C. & Moskalkenko, S. (2014). Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26, 69-85.

¹¹McCauley, C. & Moskalkenko, S. (2014). Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action. In *Terrorism and Political Violence, Op. cit.*

¹²Khosrokhavar, F. (2014). *Radicalisation*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Khosrokhavar, F. (2013). Radicalization in prison: The French case. *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, p. 284-306.

¹⁵McCauley, C. & Moskalkenko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, Issue 3, p. 415-433.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

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http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/03__mars/22/9/Rapport_Radicalisation_545229.pdf?ts=1457090184.
- ²²We may mention at this juncture the French exception: besides the works of F. Benslama, the University of Rennes 2 has in fact since 2016 set about filling this loophole.
- ²³Benslama, F. (2014). *La guerre des subjectivités en islam*. Paris: Lignes & Benslama, F. (2015). *L'idéal et la cruauté, subjectivité et politique de la radicalisation*. Paris: Lignes.
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- ³⁴This is the case for example with toxicomania: the production of an addiction turns away attention and circumvents the conflict, and this is why it does not constitute a symptom in the Freudian sense.
- ³⁵Kepel, G. (2012). *Le prophète et le pharaon* (1984). Paris: Gallimard.
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