Colloquium
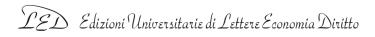
COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura, musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

I saggi contenuti nel presente volume sono stati sottoposti
a valutazioni accademiche esterne che ne hanno confermato la validità scientifica.
The chapters included in this volume are peer reviewed.

In copertina:
Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

Videoimpaginazione: Paola Mignanego
Stampa: Litogì

Desideriamo ringraziare tutti i partecipanti alla conferenza internazionale *Composite Identities* da noi organizzata nel 2020, ed esprimere la nostra gratitudine nei confronti di Vanessa Meyers e dell'Office of Global Services della Georgetown University per aver sostenuto quel progetto e la realizzazione di questa pubblicazione. Un ringraziamento speciale va inoltre alla pittrice Marsha Steinberg per averci concesso l'uso del suo dipinto *Open Space* per la copertina del presente volume.

Sommario

SEZIONE 3
Percorsi di scienze sociali e politiche

The Path towards Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Pursuit and Recognition of 'Identity' in the Process of Radicalisation

Maria Abruzzo

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

This chapter analyses the concept of identity and the role it plays both within a personal and collective dimension in the process of radicalisation. It does not aim at providing a static definition of radicalisation. It rather aspires to detect possible convergence between certain phenomena (e.g. violent extremism; terrorism) and related aspects of different nature, such as socio-cultural conditions for instance. This work puts efforts in building a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of radicalisation, by considering diverse arguments offered by different scholars, over the years. The subjects of interest in this place are radicalisation (as a 'process'), and its violent epilogue in the form of Islamist terrorism. This will just be mentioned as a specific example – amongst others – 'in the background', as a possible extreme outcome, not as the focus of this analysis.

1. Radicalisation as a path

Radicalisation is a multi-level process, which leads an individual to develop and corroborate radical and, at times, extreme ideas or behaviours. Considering a generic definition of such a process, one may refer to radicalisation as «[…] a multifaceted and dynamic process, often occurring in response to the events and people surrounding the radicalizing person […]» (Nilsson 2019, p. 2). According to Fathali M. Moghaddam, there are «[…] three components associated with radicalization, including the development of a cognitive tunnel vision, the making of a categorical moral judgment and, third, the

willingness to take action based on categorical perceptions» (Moghaddam, Sardoč 2020, p. 474).

Radicalisation has to be intended as 'a path' triggered by several reasons and conditions, not necessarily culminating in violence. As a result, not every radicalised subject can be considered a violent extremist, nor a terrorist.

In this place, the author argues that the causes fostering the development of a radicalisation process can be diverse and maintains a transversal overture when analysing the phenomenon. Such an approach highlights different triggering causes, which encompass not only a historical motivation, nor a sole socio-cultural or political origin of the phenomenon, nor a sole religion-based explanation, nor a theory solely based on a criminological analysis. The purpose of this work is not 'agreeing with' a certain scholar's argument, while 'disagreeing with' another scholar's stance. There will not be any reference to any 'A vs. B' position. On the contrary, some studies will be employed and discussed since they are considered remarkable and complementary. Past and current investigations are helpful to observe the evolution of social contexts, or the emergence of digital tools, with respect to online radicalisation for example. This work intends to give value to diverse theories by juxtaposing all useful observations that would be less effective if considered as isolated exclusive perspectives.

We identify possible reasons behind the choice to follow a radicalisation path. Such reasons may include difficulties or inability to integrate with society; exclusion feelings; reluctance towards a culture other than one's own; reluctance towards a system of government; pursuit of one's own identity; pursuit of ideals; desire to support a cause to find a purpose in life. Historical factors, as well as socio-cultural and political dynamics, may also play a role in this process. As an instance, we mention a particular movement that, in the past, influenced the interpretation of political and religious aims by the Muslim society. The example refers to pan-Islamism, a political-religious movement dating back to the 19th century. It 'did not have' any violent trend, it developed within the Ottoman Empire and its original purpose was tackling western colonialism (Guidère 2017, p. 32). According to Guidère, Pan-Islamists wanted to unify the Muslim People and restore the «Caliphate», abolished by Atatürk in 1924 (Guidère 2017, p. 31). Aiming at eliminating any and all obstacles to the unification of Muslims, it has been argued that this movement contributed to the propagation of radical ideas. We have to mention also 'individual factors' telling the «personal» history of an individual and marking his/her personal profile. As Nilsson maintains: «Thus, radicalization can be seen as a discursive journey, jihadiship, consisting of (e)merging ideas, meanings, problems and solutions that change with individuals' encounters with new circumstances – both material (e.g., people and place) and immaterial (e.g., ideas)» (Nilsson 2019, p. 40).

2. Individual and socio-cultural dimensions

By referring to al-Qaeda, Olivier Roy (2008) suggests paying attention to the individual dimension within the process of radicalisation: «We should study radicalisation essentially at the individual level, addressing the reasons why young people who are not linked with a given conflict would join al-Qaeda» (Roy 2008, p. 3). Radicalisation inevitably has to do with the pursuit and recognition of one's own identity that, in turn, is linked with the perception an individual has about himself/herself, his/her essence and existence, his/her relationship with another individual or with a group. In this sense, identity is not only 'individual'. It implies a reciprocal recognition between an individual and the society he/she lives in.

It is important to relate the «individual» dimension of a radicalised subject with an «exclusivist» approach, leveraging the conception of a category's superiority over a wider community. In *The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration* (Moghaddam 2005, p. 162), where the metaphor of the stair describes the rise to terrorism, Moghaddam points out a radical categorisation of the world, referring to the discernment of the society into «us and them». He elucidates the development of a «categorical us-versus-them view of the world» stemming from extreme approaches, with a specific reference to terrorist organisations. Moreover, he stresses the «anti-democratic» (Moghaddam, Sardoč 2020, p. 475) strength a radicalisation process brings with it and spreads out, and the asset it represents to «governance». Moghaddam emphasises the role of radicalisation in undermining democratic societies, regardless of its violent epilogue. This is a relevant issue to be observed, as radicalisation – broadly speaking – is a process conducive to the extinction of a democratic dialogue. As he himself asserts:

> From a broad perspective, radicalization is a problem in itself not only when it leads to violence. It's a problem in itself because it is a way of weakening democracy. When you have a society which has multiple radicalized groups in it, it becomes more difficult to have democratic discussions and democratic processes in general. (Moghaddam, Sardoč 2020, p. 474)

Identifying possible breeding grounds at the base of radicalisation would avoid triggering the dynamic of the 'dog chasing its own tail': radical ideas undermine democracy, just as the lack of democracy fuels the development of radical ideas and behaviours. It has to do with the capacity of governments to promote trust and opportunity for all, firstly as a matter of ethics (promotion of democracy and human rights). Secondly, as a matter of strategic prevention of any sort of social instability, potentially culminating in a lack of peace and security.

2.1. *Mental health issues*

This study also judges fundamental recognising the existence of factors linked to an individual's mental health. We consider crucial analysing the *excursus* of an individual, to detect possible experiences of deprivation, exclusion, or even violence. Such experiences may lead an individual to embrace extremist groups, or even to join a terrorist entity, in search of a 'new' personal life history.

Every individual, from his/her childhood, has perceived the influence of different groups around him/her. She/he has identified those to which she/he feels to belong to and, by contrast, those towards which she/he does not perceive any compatibility. Within a group, individuals find their place and feed on external influences and exchanges. Thus, identity cannot be considered static, but dynamic: it assimilates exogenous inputs, re-elaborates them (e.g. mitigating or exacerbating), or rejects them. One may assert that identity is not totally 'genetic', nor 'innate', though every individual perceives his/her belonging to a particular culture. While saving a cultural background to a certain extent, identity may be considered as malleable: it delineates itself by interacting with the external environment.

In the ICCT Report *Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: A Case Study from the Netherlands* (Paulussen *et al.* 2017, p. 7), the authors, by referring to a factsheet of the World Health Organization (WHO), highlight some of the factors which contribute to generating a poor level of mental health. According to the WHO:

> Multiple social, psychological, and biological factors determine the level of mental health of a person at any point of time. For example, persistent socio-economic pressures are recognised risks to mental health for individuals and communities. The clearest evidence is associated with indicators of poverty, including low levels of education. Poor mental health is also associated with rapid social change, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, risks of violence, physical ill-health and human rights violations. There are also specific psychological and personality factors that make people vulnerable to mental disorders. Lastly, there are some biological causes of mental disorders including genetic factors which contribute to imbalances in chemicals in the brain. (World Health Organization 2022)

In tough times, 'identity' may be put in discussion or even missed, causing a distressing sense of bemusement in people. Such a disorientation may emphasise confusion, deprivation feelings, frustration, resentment, disappointment or anger. With respect to the contemporary violent behaviour of certain young Islamists, Roy observes the adhesion of «individuals in crisis» to big global narratives (Roy 2017, p. 14). If throughout a personal experiential path, an individual (thus, his/her identity) has benefited from 'healthy and constructive' educational and social incentives, his/her moral and emotional structure

will be resilient and will search for a fulfilment in likely healthy environments. Such an individual will be attracted by rewording and fair relationships and initiatives, and will develop skills useful to cope with difficult times. On the contrary, if he/she suffered lack and deprivation, harmful socio-political influences, or even violence, an individual may search for reassurance, acceptance, or 'redemption', and may not probably own enough resilience skills to cope with challenging situations. The *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan* (World Health Organization 2013), coming from the Sixty-Sixth World Health Assembly promoted by the World Health Organisation, defines an individual that «[…] can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community […]» as an individual who enjoys a «state of well-being», namely, a good mental health state.

2.2. *Role of a group*

A personal sense of distress and privation can foster the development of a sense of empathy towards a community that 'suffers' a similar hardship. In this respect, the observations of Nilsson appear corroborative: «[…] images of collective relative deprivation suffered by an identity group that is exposed to perceived injustices can motivate individuals to act more strongly than personal relative deprivation does» (Nilsson 2019, p. 2). Attention should also be brought to the role of the persuasive indoctrination carried out by a group. We refer to family members, trustee people and friends who share ideas and provide mutual support. In an interview released by Moghaddam in 2020, by commenting on his previous study, he states: «I think I should have emphasized more in the staircase model the fact that radicalization up the staircase is always in reaction to some other group or phenomenon. Radicalization does not happen in a vacuum. I should have therefore emphasized more the interactive nature of radicalization» (Moghaddam, Sardoč 2020, p. 475). Additionally, Roy explains: «[…] the process of radicalisation takes place in the framework of a small group of friends (they knew each other before, used to have a common place of meeting: campus, local neighbourhood, networks of petty delinquency, etc.)» (Roy 2008, p. 5).

Similarly, Nilsson argues:

> While most theories of motivation describe it as originating in the individual self, emphasizing individual autonomy in creating one's personal goals, from a social psychological perspective, human motivation can be described as social, in that our perceptions, attitudes, and identities are constructed in conjunction with those people with whom we share our social reality. (Nilsson 2019, p. 11)

Sometimes, affiliating to a group can provide individuals with the practical means to give a change in their life: playing a role in society; obtaining

a real 'job'; creating a family. It is noteworthy that a radicalisation process may involve both men and women, adults and young people and they can be independent of any social status: favourable social conditions, such as having the means to live a dignified or affluent life, are not always sufficient to prevent such a phenomenon. From a terrorist entity's standpoint, it is possible to notice how such an entity leverages the unsatisfying conditions and the great expectations of individuals who may become potential new affiliates. The strategies employed by a terrorist organisation can be different: face-to-face indoctrination; spreading of *ad hoc* magazines; sharing of User Generated Contents (UGCs); enhancement of online propaganda; use of a pervasive narration made of engaging speeches, images and videos; targeted gendered messaging; etc.

3. Cyber dimension in radicalisation processes

In the last years, radicalisation has had a deep social impact due to technological development and the widespread accessibility to digital devices and social media. This has enhanced the «cyber-radicalisation», with a much greater capacity of spreading. Such digital evolution has brought about an impressive change that Antinori defines «mediamorphosis of terrorism», or rather a

> […] process of transformation in which the medium is not only a container of messages aimed to generate terror, such as in traditional propaganda strategies, but it also becomes 'media-terror' itself, an asymmetric weapon of the globalized contemporary reality throughout the violent action/representation nexus. (Antinori 2015, p. 4)

Through this cyber dimension, violent extremists avail themselves of an accessible potent tool (the web). The cyber-dimension designed a new concept of «space and time» where everyone may remain anonymous and act in a «never-ending (cyber-)hub of hate and violence where i-nculturation and self-training are open and available for everyone whether they are active participants or not» (Antinori 2017, p. 52). The Internet, social media platforms and the dark web have provided extremist individuals with all useful tools to easily self-indoctrinate, contextually allowing them to establish relationships. Nowadays, extremist propaganda is branching out through accessible social media platforms and social networks, such as the popular Telegram, Signal or Parler, for instance. When referring to youths, violent-inciting microblogging and social media platforms – as Antinori explains – hinder «[…] the natural development of young people's critical thinking and provide attracting terrorist tutorial» (Antinori 2020, p. 3).

4. Extremism, violent extremism, terrorism: common grounds
   and differences

The term «extremism» has increasingly become familiar to analysts, scholars, institutions and civil society that follow socio-political developments at both national and international level. The term refers to an ideology or attitude that is based on a radical and uncompromising point of view. *The Cambridge Dictionary* scores: «the fact of someone having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable and unacceptable»[1]. As known, in politics, both the right and the left fringes may show extremist attitudes. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that extremism is not necessarily violent. By referring to «violent extremism», instead, we consider forms of violent behaviours/actions. At times, for instance, violent extremist actions can be recognized in violent street demonstrations following on from political actions. Also, genocide, war crimes, as well as crimes against humanity can also be considered as results of «violent extremist ideologies» (Neumann 2017, p. 19).

To face radicalisation processes, which may lead individuals to embrace violent extremism, the international community underpinned several «Preventing Violent Extremism» (PVE) measures. Aside from PVE, there is an additional way to refer to actions/measures tackling the rising of extremism: this is «Countering Violent Extremism» (CVE) (Frazer, Nünlist 2015, p. 1). It is also very popular within international institutional environments. The definition of CVE dates back to 2004, when Europe experienced the terrorist attacks that occurred in Madrid, and in London one year later. The UK government's program called «Prevent» is considered the first concrete example of CVE initiative (Frazer, Nünlist 2015, p. 2).

As for the phenomenon of terrorism, the recognition of a definition universally accepted is still subject of debate at international level. According to the *General Assembly's Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism*, it encompasses «criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes» (United Nations 1994, pp. 1-6). The Resolution also states that these acts «are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them». Over the years, the United Nations elaborated several 'sectoral' conventions aiming at countering terrorism (some of them are related to the protection of persons; taking of hostages; financing of terrorism; nuclear terrorism, etc.)[2]. To foster the adoption of a «comprehensive convention against terrorism», the General Assembly has produced a draft of such a potential convention (United Nations High

---

[1] See https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/extremism.
[2] See United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, *International Legal Instruments*, available at https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/international-legal-instruments.

Commissioner for Human Rights 2008, p. 40). Article 2 of this draft refers to terrorist acts as:

> […] 'unlawfully and intentionally' causing, attempting or threatening to cause: (a) death or serious bodily injury to any person; or (b) serious damage to public or private property, including a place of public use, a State or government facility, a public transportation system, an infrastructure facility or the environment; or (c) damage to property, places, facilities, or systems…, resulting or likely to result in major economic loss, when the purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act. (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2008, p. 6)

The lack of a universally recognised definition of terrorism fosters the misleading use of the term and strongly affects the legal dimension.

5. Preventing and countering radicalisation: final remarks

Since its self-proclamation (2014), Islamic State (*Daesh*), has developed its 'communication strategy' by creating the best image of itself, as fascinating and mythical. It has also created an image of its followers, portrayed as true 'mythical heroes'. The rhetoric used by the terrorist entity leverages on the dichotomy 'abuse', as a victim of Western Governments, and 'justice', creating an avenger hero fighting injustice. *Daesh* bases its propaganda on the manipulation of the religious concept of *jihād*, often wrongly interpreted and translated as «fight», and arbitrarily promoted as «personal duty» that every Muslim must fulfil (differently from what the traditional doctrine states). Indeed, the term *jihād* means «effort» conducted «for Allah's sake» (*al' jihād fī sabīlillāh*) (ElSayed 2014, p. 81). As Seyyed Hossein Nasr clarifies, *jihād* means:

> […] 'exertion' in the path of God, and its outward aspect it is meant to be defensive and not aggressive. Whatever misuse is made of this term by extremists in the Islamic world or Western commentators of the Islamic scene does not change the meaning of outward *jihād* in the traditional Islamic context […]. (Seyyed Hossein 2003, p. 34)

Olivier Roy (Roy 2017, pp. 10-14) refers to jihadism as a phenomenon «inseparable from the youth culture of our societies» and theorizes his vision of «islamisation of radicalism» that contrasts with the most widespread «radicalization of Islam» (a concept Roy borrowed from Alain Bertho, who spoke of the «islamization of radical revolt»). Roy affirms: «[…] the process of violent radicalisation has little to do with religious practice, while radical theology, as salafism, does not necessarily lead to violence» (Roy 2008, p. 1). Very often,

radicalised subjects who decide to join Islamic State (or who had affiliated with al-Qaeda, from the 2000s onwards) have a very little religious awareness. They are mostly «secular young generations». As Moghaddam affirms:

> Perceived threat to identity is of central importance in the case of religious fundamentalists because of the unique ability of religion to serve identity needs (Seul, 1999) and the feeling that increasing globalization, secularization, and Westernization are undermining traditional non-Western ways of life. (Moghaddam 2005, p. 163)

According to Roy (2017), referring to a «religious» radicalisation is not correct. It is about a more complex phenomenon, from a socio-cultural perspective, although the basic ideology reworks and exploits religious elements and principles, manipulating them. As he himself maintains:

> […] I prefer a transversal approach, which attempts to understand contemporary Islamic violence by paralleling it with forms of violence and radicalism that have similar traits (generational revolt, self-destruction, radical break with society, aesthetics of violence, adherence of individuals in crisis to great global narratives, apocalyptic sects). (Roy 2017, p. 14)

Governments need to improve counter-narratives to combat the myth of the Islamic State and the 'jihadist hero'. The author considers the terrorist narration as the *medium*, using the ideology as a catalyst which exploits a *vacuum*, in which different actors and conditions significantly come into play: diverse factors (socio-cultural; etc.); networks; family; friends; peers. It becomes crucial avoiding the bounce effect pointed out by Roy and named mirror effect: «[…] we are what you say we are, that is your worst enemy, and the proof is not what we do, but what you say» (Roy 2008, p. 7). An example of effective counter-narrative concerns the terrorist attack occurred in Trèbes, southern France, on 23rd March 2018. The Lieutenant Colonel of the French Gendarmerie, Arnould Beltrame, was the hero who offered himself as a hostage to a terrorist (Radouane Lakdim, affiliated to Islamic State) in place of a woman. The French Interior Minister Gerard Collomb and President Emmanuel Macron (at that time) portrayed Arnould Beltrame as a real hero sacrificed for his homeland. In the days following the attack, the media mostly focused on the hero, relegating the terrorist to the margins of the tragic event, denying him celebrity, avoiding the acclaim of supporters and inhibiting the risk of a possible further emulation.

Radicalisation is a non-linear and complex issue fostered by a variety of factors: historical, socio-cultural, political, and concerning the personal history of an individual. It is steadily important addressing radicalisation and violent extremism in all its forms, by going beyond a phenomenon 'as it may appear' *ictu oculi*. States need to adapt their resources and instruments to the changing nature of the threats. It is fundamental to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach engaging key actors with the aim to favour a 'science diplomacy-overture' to

151

global challenges: institutions, civil society, key point of contact (POC) such as religious leaders, enterprises and academia. Promoting educational projects in schools, to counter the spreading of radicalisation, should occupy a wider room within the Ministries' agenda. There is an additional issue which is becoming a priority for governments, namely, the engagement of women in decision-making processes, as well as in projects aimed to disengage both women and youths who experienced a radicalisation process, or an affiliation to a terrorist entity. Significant examples are the foreign terrorist fighters' family nuclei, but also women and youths still living in Western countries.