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15- The dynamics of Islamic radicalization in Europe and their prevention: a humanistic approach

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A new counter-terrorism strategy emerged after 11/09, in the attempt to deconstruct the reasons that motivate people to engage in terrorism. This policy has been broadly defined with the term “de-radicalization”; however, at the moment, States’ de-radicalization programmes, such as the one implemented in Saudi Arabia,¹ or complex intervention plans, such as the one elaborated by the UK government in the aftermath of the 2005 London attacks, do not seem to have yielded effective results. One of the main questions emerging after more than fifteen years is whether the exclusively “securitarian” approach that permeates these programs will ever be able to bring about efficacious solutions to the problem of Islamic radicalization, or to prevent radicalization in the West and in the Middle East².

What would have happened if Sayyid Qutb, before leaving for the United States in 1949, had acquired moderate English language skills and had read a few essays on North American history and literature? Probably, not only could he have better understood the country in which he then lived for two years, but he could also perhaps have mitigated his radicalization path and anti-Western positions.³ Sometimes a humanistic approach could work better

¹ Andreas Casptack, “Deradicalization Program in Saudi Arabia: a case study”, in AA.VV: *Understanding deradicalization: pathways to enhance transatlantic common perceptions and practises*, Washington: Middle East Institute, 2015.

² Rohan Gunaratna, Jolene Jerard, Lawrence Rubin, *Terrorist Rehabilitation and counter-radicalisation*, London: Routledge, 2011, Intro.

³ John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 143-148; Patrizia Manduchi, *Questo*

than a securitarian one. This analysis does not wish to emphasize a conflict between different de-radicalization approaches, but highlight that, as long as the goal persists to be linked solely to security, and not to the prevention of radicalization through a humanistic approach, the results might not be satisfactory, as the post-modern creation of the Caliphate has amply demonstrated.

The present contribution seeks to reflect on the role of education and schooling in preventing violent forms of extremism, in light of the available evidence concerning the “geography” and the dynamics of contemporary radicalization processes linked to jihadism. Before showing how education could represent one of the most promising grounds for the prevention of violent radicalization, it is therefore necessary to explore the dynamics of radicalization more closely – a task that we will try to fulfill in the following paragraph. In the concluding sections, we will argue how education should represent the starting point of any attempt to fight the spread of violent radical ideologies in the long run.

I. A geography of Islamic radicalization from a historical perspective

Islamic radicalization – by which we mean the adhesion to violent extremism linked to Islamist and jihadist ideologies - was once directly connected to historical events: for instance, the repression of Islam within Central-Asian republics since the 1930s, the military coup of 1991 in Algeria, which annihilated the on-going democratization process, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Jihad in Afghanistan⁴ against the Soviet Union, with the return of the surviving Arab jihadists to their newly inhospitable countries of origin. On the contrary, nowadays, in Europe, the ideological –

mondo non è un luogo per ricompense. Vita e opera di Sayyid Qutb., Roma: Aracne, 2009, pp. 63-64, Demichelis Marco, Sayyid Qutb, il teorico dell'Islam politico. Il lungo cammino verso il radicalismo islamico, *al-Hiwar*, Torino: Centro Peirone, 2011, pp. 28-29.

⁴ The 1980s' Jihad war in Afghanistan, as reported by Ahmed Rashid, destroyed age-old Afghan tolerance and consensus. The civil war divided the Islamic sects and ethnic groups in a way that before was unimaginable to ordinary Afghans, Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001, p.83.

historical reasons motivating the adhesion to jihadism of an impressive number of young people are less clear and harder to identify. Indeed, contemporary jihadism raises the issue of its attractiveness and its plausibility in the eyes of European youths. In the past, Islamic radicalization affected Islamic countries and had an impact only on Muslim countries: between 20000 and 35000 Muslim/Arab fighters were recruited to fight the jihad during the '80s in Afghanistan and none of them came from Europe. Today on the contrary, the presence of European foreign fighters in Syria, as well as in the assaults in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin etc., show the existence of many radicalized persons who have grown in the old continent. While until the beginning of the new millennium the geography of radicalization in Europe could be established within an uncontrolled mosque or an unknown prayer room, or related to a fundamentalist Imam, usually trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or Sudan, with the deflagration of Syria and Iraq and the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, the young Europeans that became jihadists did not necessarily have personal contacts with radical mosques or imams. On the contrary, internet appears to be the privileged site for recruitment⁵. Actually, according to the accounts of many jihadists, the overwhelming majority of them did not attend mosques or prayer room and did not show any sign of religiosity prior to their radicalization; these people got in touch with the jihadist ideology via internet, through forums, chats and social networks – the most popular ones, such as youtube and facebook. The amazing development of these technological means allowed the jihadist propaganda to reach and persuade a number of youths that appears unprecedented – both in quantitative and in qualitative terms. Indeed, not only do “new jihadists” amount to high numbers; they are also extremely internally diversified, comprising both people with a migratory and

⁵ Cfr. Gilles Kepel (avec Antoine Jardin), *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*, Gallimard, Paris, 2015; David Thomson, *Les jihadistes français*, Les Arènes, Paris, 2014; Dounia Bouzar, Christophe Caupenne, Sulayman Valsan, *La métamorphose opérée chez le jeune par le nouveau discours terroriste. Recherche-action sur la mutation du processus d'indoctrinement et d'embrigadement dans l'islam radical*, CPDSI-Centre de Prévention contre les Dérives Sectaires liées à l'islam, 2014, <http://www.cpdsi.fr/nos-ouvrages-publications/>.

Muslim background (descendants of first-generation immigrants coming from North African or Asian countries) and people with no Muslim background, descendants of Christian immigrants or of natives.

This is why designing a policy aimed at tackling the spread of Islamic violent extremism is particularly challenging, as it should be able to target such a heterogeneous group of people. As we will seek to demonstrate in the following section, an educational-humanistic approach could reveal one of the most promising grounds for the prevention of violent radicalization, both concerning second or third-generation migrants with a Muslim background, and for those who are descendants of natives. However, since the overwhelming majority of contemporary jihadists do have a migrant background⁶, we will especially concentrate on these persons within the following sections.

II. Socio-economic conditions, Muslims' symbolic integration and type of education as factors of radicalization

There was probably something in common between Mohammad S. Khan and Hasib Hussein, both responsible for the London 2005 bombs attacks, and Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam, responsible for the attacks in Paris (November 2015): the unbalanced correspondence between reality and the personal expectations that each human being creates for himself, paired with the impossibility to feel integrated in the society where they were born. It is relevant to highlight how some radicalization pathways move first of all from the failures of such expectations.

The search for social justice and greater global equality could be identified as a classical behaviour which, for political reasons in the '60s, as today, experienced a youthful enthusiasm often rooted in a marked idealism, in the willingness to be of service to the community, in a deep interest for global issues such as injustices,

⁶ Consider that in the case of France, besides children of Muslim families, many of the converts to jihadism are children of immigrant families having a religious affiliation different than the Muslim one (e.g. families originating from Guadeloupe or la Réunion).

oppression, wars: qualities and traits which are anything but fundamentalist or extremist or violent. However, as Moghaddam argues in explaining some of the conditions leading to the development of terrorism – in what this scholar calls the “staircase to terrorism”⁷ - some of these characteristics, on the contrary, can act as a detonator if intermingled with a deep perception of unfairness and a personal feeling of deprivation. Of course, considering the millions of people in the entire world who are conscious of the social injustice and deprivation they experience every day, only a limited minority tries to find a solution which usually clashes with the inability to change things: a factor which increases frustration as well as the inability to promote a change, according to Moghaddam⁸.

This reasoning needs to be put in perspective, considering the wider framework of contemporary Western societies’ quest for identity. Identity has become a very fluid concept, less rooted in the geographical location of birth and in the role assumed by the parents in portraying the historical- social family background; it actually is determined by more random effects, usually related to individual decisions or historical changes (emigration to a foreign country, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 etc). The role of the family, once able to permeate the offspring’s decisions for better or for worse, today has a more limited impact for a number of reasons which can be only briefly reported here: the surge in separations and divorces, the rising increase in youth unemployment (although youths often detain higher educational qualifications than their parents), the creation of a generalized anxiety towards various forms of sociological success – such as the imperatives to earn large amounts of money, to be handsome or beautiful, physically fit, etc. To further unbalance this anxiety of performance, Western society’s definitions of freedom and of abuse of freedom, for economic reasons in particular, are not clearly distinct. For instance, in the USA a young person aged sixteen cannot buy tobacco, cigarettes

⁷ Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism. A psychological exploration”, *American Psychologist*, vol. 60, n. 2, pp. 161-169.

⁸ *ibid.* p.

or a can of beer, but can buy an automatic weapon, or drive a car with 200-horsepower⁹.

The above-described crucial traits of contemporary Western societies clash with the usual high expectations of a young man, maybe immigrant or Muslim, who seeks integration as a second-third generation representative in France or Germany, in Belgium or in Italy. In addition, it is fundamental to consider the dire socio-economic conditions and the high levels of deprivation and marginalization faced by Muslims across Europe¹⁰. They often live in highly segregated and poor areas, lacking access to quality education and housing, and, as it has been amply demonstrated, are confronted with discrimination both at school and at work, which helps to explain the high unemployment rate for instance in the French *banlieues*¹¹. Indeed, among Muslims, upward social mobility seems to be an exception. Deep socio-economic disadvantage, such as that faced by Muslim minorities in many European countries, contribute to explain the painful conflict between reality and expectations felt by many young Muslims, who, having been born and raised in European countries, do want to feel accepted as full-fledged European citizens. The reflection on the relationship between Islam and *banlieues* is old and has been thoroughly analyzed¹²; this problematic connection had already emerged when, after the victory by “les Bleus” in the Football Championships of 1998, the Champs Elysées were invaded by young French citizens from the suburbs, whose need for a better integrated future deserved more attention. Almost twenty years afterwards, some French citizens of “the banlieues”¹³ have taken

⁹ Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect society. Democracy or disposability?*, London: Springer, 2009, pp. 27ff, 69ff, 109ff.; B. Davies & Peter Bansen, “Neoliberalism and Education”, in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 20 n. 3 (2007), pp. 247-259.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard Alba, Nancy Foner, *Strangers No More. Immigration and the Challenger of Integration in North America and Western Europe*, 2015, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

¹¹ Cf. Cyprien Avenel, *Sociologie des quartiers sensibles*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2010; ONZUS - Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles, *Rapport 2014*, http://www.ville.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/onzus_rapport_2014.pdf.

¹² Cf. for instance Gilles Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil*, Gallimard, Paris, 2012.

action, blowing up the geography of Parisian entertainment, thus immediately drawing the public attention on the situation of many people like them.

However, deprivation can only partially explain the feeling of such a conflict. What plays a major role is how Muslims feel to be perceived and treated by receiving societies. Undeniably, within public debates across Europe, Muslims are perceived as “inner enemies”. Cultural and political elites often depict Islam solely in terms of social and cultural “Otherness” and assign an *a priori* negative identity to Muslims, who seem to be considered intrinsically “problematic” “and “unintegrable”. The crystallisation of the Western public debate on the compatibility of Islam with claimed Western values and laïcité has led to a representation of the integration of Muslim immigrants as “failed”¹³ and to attribute to individuals and to their religion the responsibility of their supposed refusal to integrate and of their presumed desire to live “parallel lives”¹⁴, separate from and in opposition to the rest of society. This has hampered the process of “symbolic integration”¹⁴ of Islam and Muslims. By symbolic integration, we mean the perception of Islam and Muslims in the public sphere as an *accepted part of society* – borrowing form and adjusting the definition of integration provided by Penninx¹⁵. Even if people with a migratory background can achieve integration from the socio-economic point of view, their integration in the cultural domain is often made impossible, due to the fact that they are perceived by the receiving society as irreducibly “Others”¹⁴ – this is

¹³ Cf. Jennifer Fredette, *Constructing Muslims in France. Discourse, Public Identity and the Politics of Citizenship*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2014.

¹⁴ Jocelyne Césari, *The lack of symbolic integration of Islam in Europe, as illustrated by the Charlie Hebdo attacks*, CritCom, A Forum for Research and Commentare on Europe, 10 August 2015, <http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/the-lack-of-symbolic-integration-of-islam-in-europe-as-illustrated-by-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks-2/>.

¹⁵ Rinus Penninx, *European Cities and their Migrant Integration Policies. A state-of-the-art study for the Knowledge for INtegration Governance (KING) Project*, KING Project, Overview Paper n.5/July 2014, http://king.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/Penninx_OverviewPaper5.pdf

true especially in the case of Muslims¹⁶. This leads many young Muslims to feel deep sentiments of humiliation and frustration in relation to their origins, religion and identity.

Such lack of symbolic integration, combined with objective difficult socio-economic conditions, constitutes the premises for the perception of a conflict between reality and expectations for many young Muslims and disenfranchised youths. This, in turn, plays a role in the formation of “oppositional identities” among them, especially originating from the most impoverished areas or regions of European countries, which leads them to embrace the Muslim religion especially in identitarian terms. This allows them to reverse the stigma of being negatively perceived as Muslims, precisely showing off their religious practice and identity. This holds especially in relation to the spread of Salafism¹⁷, which represents a strong form of cultural and identity rupture in contemporary Europe, as the adherence to its tenets implies a refusal of modern Western society as “unholy”, “impure” and “depraved” – terms borrowed from the religious language to refer to the conflict with society. Salafism can be characterized as a counterculture, founded on uncompromising, ultra-Orthodox and ultra-conservative religious norms, which disavow Western society and its values¹⁸. As such, it constitutes an extreme and radical choice: even if it concerns only a very small proportion of European Muslims, it represents a powerful source of identitarian cleavages.

¹⁶ Richard Alba, Nancy Foner, *Strangers No More. Immigration and the Challenger of Integration in North America and Western Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015.

¹⁷ Juan José Escobar Stemann, “Middle East Salafism’s influence and the radicalization of Muslim communities in Europe”, in *Meria*, Vol. 10 n. 3, (2006); Jason Burke, “Radicalisation in Molenbeek: People call me the mother of a terrorist”, the *Guardian*, 16 March 2016; Z. Fareen Parvez, “Representing Islam of the Banlieues: class and political participation among Muslims in France”, in *Muslim Political participation in Europe*, ed. by Jorgen S. Nielsen, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 190-213.

¹⁸ Mohamed Ali Adraoui, *Du golfe aux banlieues. Le salafisme mondialisé*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.

Seeking to avoid any kind of contact with all non-Muslims, the type of oppositional identity as the one represented by the “Salafi way of life” is likely to pave the way for dangerous consequences: in particular, we refer to the formation of identity ruptures or the creation of fractures along identitarian lines within European societies, which create the fertile ground for the success of the jihadist ideology. Indeed, jihadist propaganda’s goal is to disseminate a Manichean vision of the world, as if it was divided between “the good”, who are on Muslims’ side, and “the bad”, who are against Muslims and oppress them¹⁹. Far from being an over-simplification, the contents of the videos and the documents circulating within the so-called “jihadisphere” are based on this binary vision of the world and aim at dividing Western societies, fostering conflict and fierce opposition within them. In the same vein, the surge in neo-nationalistic and xenophobic movements and parties across the Western world constitutes a symmetric and specular development, as such political actors often put forward a similar rhetoric, erecting barriers between “us” and “them”, and depicting Muslims in particular as intrinsically dangerous and unintegrable – as briefly described above. Such visions cannot but undermine social cohesion and lead fringes of society to radicalize and embrace forms of violent extremism in the long run²⁰.

¹⁹ Cf. Gilles Kepel (avec Antoine Jardin), *Terreur dans l’Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015.

²⁰ We do not intend to suggest that there is a direct continuity between Salafism and jihadism. Many scholars describe the different internal streams within Salafism and notably the harsh conflicts between “quietists” and “jihadists”. Indeed, jihadists despise quietists and Salafism cannot be considered as a direct “conveyor belt” of jihadism – indeed, many jihadists were not allegedly religious or pious Muslims. What we rather suggest is that the diffusion of Salafism, with its oppositional *habitus*, contributes to spread a divisive conception of society, i.e. “us (good Muslims)” vs “them (the depraved rest of the world)”. Such a Manichean vision of the world facilitates the spread of jihadism in that it makes it “plausible” and “attractive” in an “ecological” perspective (in sociological terms). In other words, the success of jihadism is rooted in the identity cleavage that Salafism purports. Cf. Fabio Introini, Giulia Mezzetti, “Storie di jihadismo. Il processo di radicalizzazione e la sua plausibilità”, in *XXII Rapporto ISMU sulle Migrazioni 2016*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2016, pp. 293-318.

However, in addition to identity-related issues and socio-economic deprivation, it is crucial to consider the type of education that even highly skilled persons receive during their schooling years²¹. Paul Vallely, quoting a study of the British Council, argued that, contrary to a common understanding, almost half (48.5%) of the Jihadists recruited in MENA areas had a university education; among them, 44% had degrees in engineering. This percentage greatly increased if we consider Western – recruited jihadists: 59%²². Gambetta and Hertog²³, considering the distinction between violent jihadists and non-violent radicals, highlight the over-representation of engineers among the latter to be slighter, though still significant, among jihadists. They note that though engineers are over-represented in both categories, violent and more peaceful Islamic groups, holders of other elite degrees, such as medicine and natural sciences, are much more strongly represented among the latter. Islamism seems to be appealing to both, but engineers seem much more prone to taking the step towards violence.²⁴ Another recent study showed how terrorists were more likely to hold technical and applied degrees: medicine, applied science and especially engineering; non-violent radicals, by contrast, were much more likely to study arts, humanities and social sciences.²⁵ This, if confirmed, would suggest that the transition from one category to the other is not at all the smooth and slippery slope that anti-terrorism theorists imagine, and that forms the basis of much security rhetoric.²⁶ Although all these information either relate to Muslim countries – where conditions

²¹ According to the available evidence, the vast majority of jihadists holding university graduated in scientific subjects: Engineering, Medicine, Information Technology, etc. Paul Vallely, *Are Scientists easy prey for Jihadism?* The Guardian, 3 December 2015.

²² Martin Rose, *Immunising the Mind. How can education reform contribute to neutralising violent extremism?*, British Council, November 2015.

²³ Diego Gambetta, Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad*, Sociology Working Paper n.10, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, 2007.

²⁴ Diego Gambetta, Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad*, p. 35.

²⁵ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell and Michael King, *The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism*, London: Demos 2010, p.24.

²⁶ Martin Rose, *Immunising the Mind. How can education reform contribute to neutralising violent extremism?*, p. 7.

on the ground are entirely different in comparison to Europe²⁷ - or to the “first generation”²⁸ of jihadists – while the new forms of jihadism presents unprecedented characteristics than “old jihadism”²⁸, we believe it is nonetheless extremely meaningful. Indeed, scientific education, with its rigour and its indisputability, can lead the individual to not properly consider *nuances*. Therefore, receiving only scientific education can facilitate the adoption of binary vision of the world (black vs white).

Therefore, we propose to integrate into Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism” the consideration of the above-described relevant factors, i.e. 1) socio-economic conditions – which can lead to strong feelings of frustration in the face of thwarted personal expectations; 2) identity-related issues and the perception of a lack of symbolic integration – which may lead to the formation of identity cleavages and to conceive society as if it was divided between “us” and “them”; 3) the type of education received – which can lead to adopt binary visions of the world (black vs white). The ground – floor level of the staircase, in which the perceptions of injustice may arise for a variety of reasons, including economic and political conditions and threats to personal and collective identity, needs to be paired with individuals’ level of education: for example, if on the one hand, a Muslim radical who gained a university degree in a scientific subject cannot usually show “symptoms of poverty”, the real perception of injustices as threats to personal and collective identity passes through a scientific methodological approach, acquired through exclusive scientific education, in which “black and white” are predominant over grey. This is the first step which can incentivize a radicalization- process: to consider historical events as European colonialism or the birth of Israel (1948) with excessive clarity, as if right and wrong were clearly identifiable, where the complexity of the problem is unconsidered, while demagoguery and easy ideologisation take over.

²⁷ Khosrokhavar explains why, since the ‘90s, Jihadism attracted mostly persons belonging to the middle class in Muslim countries in North-Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Cf. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2014.

²⁸ Cf. Gilles Kepel (avec Antoine Jardin), *Terreur dans l’Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015.

“Plato warned on the inevitable collapse of a society that does not allow for the rise of talented individuals in the social hierarchy and, correspondingly, the downward mobility of those who lack talent but are the offspring of those in power”²⁹. If we add to the above *forma mentis* the impossibility of attaining the expected results against personal expectations: a post-graduate job, for example, due to the lack of meritocracy within a society that despite being democratic has maintained relevant integrative problems; the inner radicalization of the individual actor can only increase (second step).

The third step is reached when in addition to the above-described psychological melting pot of pre-radicalization, the help in rediscovering a fundamentalist renewed religious affiliation comes from outside: a recruiter, or a propaganda video, which in a specific moment of a state of depression, outlines a morality that justifies a struggle to achieve a perfect society, a better world. If this passage succeeds, the new recruit is persuaded to be completely disengaged from the previous morality, from the family, from preceding friends, to enter a secret, isolated, quite fearful organization; a parallel life is already started and if on the one hand their normal daily existence continues, a second one, made up of victimization and conspiracy, both characteristics well rooted in the psychological background of the young radicalized, will continue to entrench the previous one, is increasingly perceived as a masked existence that is increasingly rejected.

The consolidation of fundamentalist thinking, which leads to believe that being part of a terrorist organization is the best way to reach an ideal end, is the conclusive step before the final immolation. This fourth step is significant because, if not properly carried out, it could still bring the recruit to doubt in the end, being overwhelmed by fear.

The conclusive step, which collides with the terrorist attack, has finally sublimated the “us” vs. “them” and the perception, made even easier today in the exclusivist ideological Neo-Wahhabi perception, that anyone who is not actively resisting against the

²⁹ Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism. A psychological exploration”, p. 163.

new crusaders and Zionists, even if Muslim, is a legitimate target of violence.³⁰ Prevention of radicalization is a long term solution which could not only be related to a securitarian approach, but also to a psychological and didactic one.

III. For the prevention of radicalization in Europe: an educational – humanistic approach

That prevention is a long-term solution to terrorism is certainly self-evident; that prevention should be based on an educational-humanistic approach, which takes longer than the ongoing securitarian one adopted in Europe since the bomb attacks in Madrid and London, is less self-evident.

In an article published in the New York Times (20 Nov. 2014), Janet Breslin and Smith Caryle Murphy stressed that the presence of humanities within the Saudi Arabia academic system had been partially incentivised on a scene that was already not particularly idyllic. During the reign of ‘Abdullah bin’ Abdulaziz al-Saud (2005-2015) in fact, although the number of universities increased from 8 to 25, the curricula accentuated a specific inadequacy in relation to the humanities and within the universities of religious studies, where the majority of *A’immah* (pl. of imam) are trained, the inappropriateness to ensure an interdisciplinary study methodology that is able to create links between Islamic religion and history, geography, law, sociology, philosophy and mystics encouraging inter-disciplinary research.

On the contrary, the Saudi education board has touted an ideology whereby every citizen must exclusively be a “Muslim citizen” aware of religious values and ready to be integrated in a society that accepts change only if this transformation is rooted in Islam, or better in the Islamic ideology as shaped by Neo-Wahhabism: reflecting on the economic and financial sectors, Islamic precepts have been largely neglected since the 1970s in Saudi Arabia as in the majority of the Arab Gulf countries, having been re-shaped to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

encourage the creation of a capitalist economy with the concrete support of the religious jurists³¹.

Educating children in schools differently could be the preventive approach necessary to counter form of violent radicalization and growing religious extremism, at least in Europe in no less than fifteen years. The strategy to identify and eliminate individual religious extremism and terrorism could reveal expensive and counter-productive, because as long as conditions on the field remain the same, every violent extremists who is eliminated is quickly replaced by others. Eradicating the possibility that they could be replaced is probably the best solution that European societies could put into practice without transforming themselves into autocracies but only by strengthening their educational system. Obviously, long- term securitarian policies need to be kept alert, but psychologists, inter-cultural mediators as well as teachers and professors need to play a prominent role in order to favor the adoption of a different humanistic approach for the prevention of radicalization within national European education systems.

The best viable solution appears to be the implementation of an approach able to fight categorizations and the formation of oppositional identities, as described above: Us vs. Them, Orientalism vs. Occidentalism, Christians vs. Muslims, Burkinis vs. bikinis etc. Such labeling process can only but endorse the views of fundamentalists and radicals, and increases the probability that more individuals will engage in violent extremism.

It is easy to imagine that the young terrorists who hit Paris, Brussels or London, having or not an educational qualification (in the case of the 2005 London attack, terrorists had reached a university graduation), had passed through a national education system, having spent some years in schooling. What would have been of these people, had the schools system been designed so as to avoid their failures? What would have been of these people had they encountered in their school life teachers able to open their minds?

³¹ Janet Breslim, Smith Caryle Murphy, *The Struggle to Erase Saudi Extremism*, New York Times, 20 Nov. 2014.

As we have attempted to argue, schooling plays in any case a crucial role. However, for the school system to be transformed in an effective resource to counter violent radicalization and extremism, two steps are necessary: 1. make the educational system more equitable at the European level – in order to tackle social disadvantage, which plays a significant role (cf. Previous) ; 2. train teachers to the adoption of a humanistic approach on the basis of interdisciplinary textbooks and curricula.

This first step concerns ensuring effective equal opportunities in education, combating inequalities, segregation in schools and equipping students with all the means in order to climb the social ladder. This is necessary in order to obtain a more egalitarian level of education in the EU³², which has been achieved in countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, but has not yet been realized in other countries such as France and UK. Actually, the educational systems of the latter pose a double problem in relation to the public- private system debate (in Scandinavia there is no private system), and to the main differences between élites schools and the other schools, especially in suburbs and peripheries³³.

The second step is more related with the educational contents; within European educational systems, curricula's contents hardly contain modules devoted to the history, religions, literature, art of parts of the world other than Europe. Indeed, schools curricula seem to not take into account that the composition of schools cohorts is increasingly diversified in terms of cultural, ethnic and religious origins and migratory backgrounds of students. Thus, a second-generation student, with an Algerian, Nigerian or Ethiopian migratory background, has hardly ever the chance to study the history, literature or art of parts of the world different

³² All European data are collected by Europe 2020 indicators- education. Some important data can be found directly on this website:
http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_education#Main_statistical_findings

³³ All European data are collected by Europe 2020 indicators - education. Some important data can be found directly on this website:
(http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_education#Main_statistical_findings)

than Europe, during his or her schooling years. Frequently, second-generation boys and girls live in the outskirts of major European cities, where it takes more than an hour to reach the city center and find a well-stocked bookshop, and must face acts of discrimination and racism on a daily basis. Therefore, these youths' growing expectations as adolescents are thwarted by the consciousness that "the Europe of democracy and human rights" will always consider them as foreigners, and they must cope with very scarce possibilities to improve their social position³⁴.

Prevention of radicalization needs to start from integration at school, where the history, art, literature, music and religion of those who are perceived as "Others" are considered as relevant as that of the "old continent"; all the more so when significant proportions of classes' compositions are made up of students without a European cultural background. Such an approach does not intend to abolish traditions such as Christmas parties at school: integration takes place in a precise context, and the cultural traits of that context must be known and understood by children of immigrants. However, it aims at the interdisciplinary integration of "Others" humanities in a continent where out of 500 million inhabitants, 34,3 are composed by people that were born in a non-EU state³⁵. The claim, here, is about the necessity of designing an integrative education policy with the goal of preventing violent radicalization, focusing on humanities – specifically, on the interconnections between history, literature, religion, history of art, music, etc.

For instance, each subject, regardless of the number of hours, has to be redesigned in relation to a less Eurocentric and more comparative approach. What happened in Europe or France in the 18th century, and in parallel in the rest of the world? Does Dante's *Divine Comedy* really have Islamic eschatological origins? Is it possible to study Music without exploring the history of black slavery? The Ottoman architect, Mimar Sinan and Brunelleschi-

³⁴ Cf. Cyprien Avenel, *Sociologie des quartiers sensibles*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010.

³⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migrant_population

Michelangelo, a comparative approach in art-history, etc. The reconstruction of the history of religious coexistence, of cultural hybridizations and reciprocal influences, as well as of religious conflicts in Europe are crucial in this respect. Topics are unlimited. The university level is facilitated by a number of courses that are usually chosen by students out of personal interest, but what can be done in scientific faculties? Until 2015, to quote an example, the Polytechnic of Turin (Italy) organized free courses of Arabic and Middle Eastern history and culture, but also Chinese for students interested in studying foreign languages and humanities.

Such intercultural curricula could also contribute to solve the legacy of troubled colonial pasts, which often represent a cause of resentment among migrants and especially among their descendants, posing issues concerning their self-identification and sense of belonging. An unresolved colonial past (for instance, the one binding France and Algeria) is likely to emerge within educational institutions taking subtly oppressive forms, such as inadequate study of colonialism and of its consequences³⁶ or a complete disregard for former colonies' history and culture. This adds to more explicit acts of discrimination at school, which constitute a source of suffering and an obstacle for social mobility³⁷.

In any case, an important part of preventive work has to be planned in the field of the pre-university school system. In order to prevent the formation of oppositional identities, potentially

³⁶ For instance, in 2005 the French government passed a law by which school programs should have acknowledged “the positive role of the French presence overseas and in particular in North Africa”. A period of vibrant protests ensued, with scholars and politicians expressing their harsh criticism against the State’s decision to promote positive depictions of French colonialism. The law was eventually repealed in 2006. See: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loi_portant_reconnaissance_de_la_Nation_et_c_ontribution_nationale_en_faveur_des_Fran%3%A7ais_rapatri%3%A9s

³⁷ With reference to the French case, see for instance Gilles Kepel, *Banlieues de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, or Laurent Mucchielli, *Autumn 2005: a Review of the Most Important Riot in the History of French Contemporary Society*, in “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies”, vol. 35, n. 5, 2009, pp. 731-751.

conducive to violent radicalization, it is necessary to start since the elementary level of education. Each education system has a multifunctional purpose, which is not only linked with acquiring “knowledge”, writing skills and a basic culture; but to promote a first plural approach in a society *in itinere*. Every educational method that appeared in the 20th century, from Montessori to Steiner, from Feuerstein to Gordon, highlighted the balanced growth of the child between the acquisitions of competences respecting the individual maturation of the pupil³⁸.

Conclusive Reflections

The education system can certainly not make up for the absence of family ties, the presence of a healthy parenthood, and the recognition of the love of the parents by the child. However, school is the first “geography of integration” that every child will encounter during his life. While the family should be able to give the ability to face the outer world from an emotional point of view, education should be able to give children a place in it as well as a clear and realistic expectation for their future.

It is usually proven that the good charisma of a teacher or professor during the formative age, at intermediate, high school or university levels, has the capacity not only to create interest in his or her subject, but to plan a training program for the student. An educational system that can integrate pupils and students from different social and cultural backgrounds is a school in which teachers and professors are trained and textbooks are prepared considering the ongoing problems of integration in society. The capacity to prevent different forms of radicalization, not only referring to the Islamic one, passes through the educational system’s capabilities to rearrange programs and curricula, so as to be able to deliver notions and talents through a plural and diversified methodology. The solution is not to eliminate the history of the Roman Empire, or of Athenian democracy, Shakespeare or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but to put every subject into relation with other geographies, writers, philosophers, and

³⁸ Jael Kopciowsky Camerini, *Il Metodo Feuerstein. L'apprendimento mediato*, Brescia: la Scuola editore, 2015.

historical events. Fighting and preventing the ignorance of religious radicalization should start from here. Such an approach would help counter the hypostatization of a binary vision of the world (“us” versus “them”) that is central in every form of violent radicalization.

The role of schooling for countering the spread of violent extremist ideologies and attitudes and for containing forms of radicalization can thus prove crucial, as the years spent in education are pivotal for developing critical thinking and for acquiring the capability to go more in-depth and look beneath appearances, i.e. the only resources against bigotry, categorizations, simplistic accounts of global and complex phenomena, such as those heralded both by jihadists and xenophobes and supremacists. Broadly speaking, education should lay the foundations in order to build a wide cultural background; for the overwhelming majority of students, schooling is the only way for gaining notions and knowledge, which would not be otherwise accessible for them. If the curricula of European and North-American educational systems were in line with the times, they would include modules devoted to cultures and the history of other parts of the world, in order to better respond to the needs of an increasingly diversified student population – which includes more and more pupils with a migratory background.

However, we maintain that a humanistic approach to tackle radicalization – based on the teaching of intercultural knowledge and on the study of the history, literature and art of different cultures – works also for preventing the radicalization of young people with no migratory background (who now form a significant portion of the “new jihadists”). Indeed, due to ignorance or insufficient cultural knowledge, they could fall too into the trap of adopting Manichean vision of the world and to experience identity ruptures – and such an approach is aimed precisely at fighting labeling, categorizations and oversimplifications of reality.

These aspects – the exigency to develop more equitable education systems, the need to include in school curricula the teaching of notions concerning other cultures and religions, as well as a honest recognition of the colonial legacy – could all play a role in the symbolic integration of migrants and especially of those of Muslim

religion within European societies, and could contribute to open the minds of those with no migratory background.