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Sectarian drift and radicalisation: an issue worthy of debate

FECRIS was established in 1994 as an umbrella organisation bringing together associations working on sectarianism.

Well before terrorist attacks led the democratic world to become aware of the fact that the first steps on the path towards young people joining radical movements had many points in common with sectarianism, our support associations for victims of sects knew that, on the ground, the violent radicalism in the name of Islam had a lot to do with sectarianism.

Throughout this day, specialists will be describing to us the drivers of radicalisation – historical, economic, social, sociological causes, sometimes suicidal, sometimes villainous.

Others will describe government responses attempting to prevent radicalisation based on well-understandable repression and attempts at "de-radicalisation".

Some will be looking at the psychological side, an aspect at the heart of what we have been discussing for decades with regard to sects. This psychological takeover, now well-studied, takes place gradually, insidiously, without apparent violence, following a defined clinically-identified process contested by the sects.

With reference to sects, the French government uses the legal term "*sujétion*", i.e. putting someone in a state of subjection or servitude, within the context of a statutory offense, that of "abusing the weakness of the subjected". Application of this statute has led to some 30 prosecutions since 2001.

For my part, and as today's opening speaker, I would like to discuss a point of view that to a certain extent brings these various approaches together, putting them in a particular perspective, that of the aim of any sectarian or radical group: to take power over individuals and subsequently, in a crazy project, over all of humanity.

I am teaching this approach in the context of the one existing university degree course at the Faculty of Medicine of the Paris Descartes University. Several dozens of trained professionals form a competence network for helping sectarian victims (and for the last two years also victims of radicalisation). Coming from a wide range of sectors, they include doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists, lawyers, investigators, experts, ecclesiastics, sociologists, educators, etc.

While control over an individual is first and foremost a psychological issue, control over a group (collective control), both within a sect and versus the rest of the world, is a political issue in the sense that it involves the organisation and management of power (submission / domination) both within the group and vis-à-vis "secular" society. This is something that I have learned through supporting victims for the last 40 years.

While this political perspective, although very much present, is certainly not very visible in the writings of the micro-groups accounting for the majority of contemporary sects, it is manifest in

those of multinational sects (at a doctrinal level) and even more visible in the path towards terrorist acts. One example of this is the Tokyo subway sarin attack perpetrated by the Aum Shinrikyo sect in 1995, the stated goal of which was to depose the Emperor via a terrorist attack.

But whatever the size of the group and its theoretical underpinning (health, personal development, well-being, religious aspirations), the motor driving the group, its leader and, at a certain level of control, the individual members, has always something to do with power.

I would like to see my presentation helping you to understand first that this psychological control over group members has a lot to do with the sectarian structure of the group and how this shapes control. Secondly, I would like to demonstrate that it is the hegemonic design of the sectarian (or radical) state to dominate the world which motivates, enthuses and galvanises members. This identification with an ideal is what motivates members and "radicalisable" young people, what defines their "mission" and what gives them a sense of belonging and the certainty of belonging to an elite. Turning their backs on the group, former members become aware of the process of gaining control associated with the particular and archaic form of internal power they have been subjected to, with the result that, at the end of the psychological de-radicalisation process, they can re-discover the lost citizen dimension.

It does not matter whether the group has religious roots or not. It is not the nature of the belief which leads to submission. It would be an error to oppose this belief, postulating that one belief is "truer", more correct. This is the trap set by sects (and by radicalised groups), all of which have prepared in advance ready-made answers for use by members and future members.

The only way to get people to turn their backs on a sect is to undermine this ideal of identification with a utopia via testimonials from former members. Such testimonials speak of the group's esoteric dimension, a dimension hidden to the eye. The presentation to be given by Ms Roy is one such testimonial, allowing us to relive the drama in her family, the total breakdown of communications between her son Quentin and his parents engineered by the radical group! Similarly, the testimonial of Sophie, victim of a university-trained psychotherapist and guru, will teach us the same lesson. We extend our thanks to both of them.

For the most part, the efforts of the secular analysts (sociologists, historians and others) only apply to a group's exoteric dimension, an ever-deceptive dimension as it merely constitutes the "appeal" to future recruits, camouflaging its real aims.

Two aspects: 1/ a group-based structure enabling control to be taken over individuals 2/ a motivating project

1/ a group-based structure enabling control to be taken over individuals

This is because contemporary sects represent a dangerous political model for democratic societies, beyond the individual danger for sect members and their families. This danger is not to be underestimated, and the study of how it functions (in its state-level dimension) is of major interest.

Certain unvarying aspects define the state-level dimension of these sectarian groups:

A sectarian or radical territory

The sect defines itself around a territory, most often virtual but more than just symbolic. This "virtuality" refers to a form of reality which often has a certain magic dimension to it, offering a replacement reality to people without any shares in our society, people overwhelmed by too much complexity or by an appropriation cutting them off from a course of action to which they legitimately aspire.

This territory of shared fantasised purity, this "vibrant" territory, constitutes the first building block towards the sect becoming a state-level structure. We just need to think of the role played by territory for the IS in the construction of the Uma, the community idea behind the political model of the Caliphate. In association with the IS, this territory has not just a virtual, but also a geographic dimension.

A frontier

This territory is surrounded by a frontier enabling the sect to separate the pure from the impure, to make sect members believe that they are coming from an external world full of impurity, with bad vibrations, with mistaken beliefs which they need to "clean". Though unverifiable, such claims plunge members into a feeling of permanent guilt, the first step towards the sect gaining control over them.

A hostile, dangerous and toxic outside world

Portraying the outside world in such a way has many advantages for the sect: prompting its sympathisers and the radicalised to subscribe to a Manichaean vision and getting them to take up arms. They hence imagine themselves as heroes, as saviours invested with a mission. This outside world is bad and needs to be destroyed. While awaiting this final outcome, it has to be exploited.

Conspiracy theories are rooted in this inside/outside dichotomy.

A group

This besieged territory is destined to welcome the community. And the group will build up the leading role of its leader by mutual influences.

A guru

As with any social group, habitual "powers" are placed in the person of the leader, with the latter rising to become legislator, head of the executive and judge.

The legislating guru

He sets the group's norm and norms: a rule of law transcending that found in outside society and which legitimises transgressions and breaches of the law as these are rooted in the guru's superior law. Each sect has its own sharia and all members take refuge in this law, giving them a feeling of

superiority. This constitutes the first step towards abandoning ordinary citizenship as there is no question of normal members taking part in defining the norm.

A guru as head of the executive

This internal norm is part of what may call the "sectarian executive", just like in any state governed by the rule of law and in which various ministries cover specific fields. Each sect has its own rules governing the different fields of everyday life: health, the economy and finance, education, policing, etc.

But a sect will go one step further, giving each of its members a new name and thus creating a new affiliation beyond the civil status. It may even create an Orwellian "newspeak" to back up the elitist sentiment enclosing sect members and helping to quash any critical minds by a form of translation equivalent to brainwashing (the work soon to be presented by Frédéric Tomas shows how linguistic analysis can open up new scientific paths).

A guru as judge

Any infringement of the law set down by the guru becomes the subject of internal sanctions ranging from the assignment of guilt to (physical) punishment via "magical" interpretations of ordinary facts such as the meaning given to physical affections (interpreted in a logic of "false induced memories").

The guru alone wields these three powers

Putting these three traditional powers in the hands of a single person, the guru, while fully accepted by sect members, is full of significance: in any democratic society, the separation of powers is a *sine qua non*, a gauge of the liberty given to citizens who participate in a system of checks and balances.

By contrast, because the guru (or the radical leader) is the only person to exercise all three powers, he is almighty in the eyes of his followers. It is this absolute power upon which the leader's legitimacy is founded. At the same time, all his subjects are deprived of all freedom, making them "happy slaves"!

Viewed from this angle, the hegemonic pretensions clearly voiced by the "Islamic State" and other Jihadist groups should shed particular light on the political model of substitution upheld by sects, even if it is more concealed in these organisations.

We thus again see an archaic form of power in which citizens become "subjects" and in which the person claiming to be invested with "spiritual" power (even without any religious dimension) claims the right to exercise political power.

This specific structure allows control to be gained over sect members without them being aware of it.

2/ a motivating project

The political project common to radicalised groups and sects is the will to recreate a fantasised humanity. This involves nothing less than the leaders of such groups (and this applies to every sect whatever its size, even if it shocks our logic) wanting to build a true utopia of a political nature, taking over the world by destabilising states and subjecting all humanity to the archaic sectarian model of exercising power.

In doing so, the citizen dimension is trodden on, with members viewing it as an attack on their dignity when victims try to say that they need help, though without really understanding the processes behind such. Ways of seizing power can vary: in certain cases, the group will "profit" from natural disasters which it interprets in an apocalyptic vision as nature helping prepare for the hoped-for political revolution (a sort of Noah's syndrome in which the sect represents the mythical Ark), while in others terrorist attacks accelerate and concretise the process of seizing power.

The goal is the same for sects and for radicalised groups. It is only the means to achieve it that differ.

Understanding a person's entry into a sect or his radicalisation is not limited to describing the psychological processes involved. Any analysis must also take account of the utopian ideal, as this is what motivates members, giving them the certainty that they are doing the right thing.

The archaic political model common to sects and radicalised groups, a model which gained added momentum from 20th-century totalitarian movements, is today enjoying the revival that we know because of the less legible character of our states of law. and their fading contours.

Both sects and radicalised groups thus appear, to those attracted by them, as solutions for living in a society, alas in a society cut off from the real world.

Such phenomena of gaining control over people are thus symptoms of sick power.

It is our job to understand this so that we can explain it: to understand contagion as the "rhizome-driven" extension of this new form of totalitarianism; and to provide explanations with a view to promoting prevention and helping people rebuild their lives.

I hope that this short presentation has helped you distinguish between the different layers making up a sectarian and radical state, associating each layer with the different steps of gaining control over an individual.