

# The subjective impact of the jihadist offer\*

Fethi Benslama

The jihadist radicalism can represent an important factor in relationship with the process of subjectivation, identification, de-idealization and re-idealization of adolescents or young adults today. This contribution focuses on the phenomenon of radicalization in France and on its clinical aspects, on the basis of the data collected by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2015. It aims to understand the sources of radicalisation, showing that many of the candidates for jihad are getting younger and younger, belong to all social classes and constitute a heterogeneous whole, including the element of “prolonged adolescence” into a factorial multiplicity. In this perspective it is possible to measure the function of ideals in juvenile temporality, to interpret the clinically corroborated data according to it and to analyse the power of collecting negativity that characterizes jihadist radicalism around the world at present.

Fethi Benslama is Professor of clinical psychopathology and dean of the department of Psychoanalytical Studies at the Université Paris-Diderot.

The phenomenon of Islamist radicalisation has nowadays taken on epidemic dimensions, which are more or less substantial depending on the country, dimensions that need to become intelligible at the intersection of subjectivity, politics and history. The junction of these three coordinates is necessary, because no univocal point of view allows the summarisation of the facts. Here I would like to propose an approach in which the parameter of *subjectivity* does not elude the other two.

My remarks concern the issue of radicalisation in France, where I work on the clinical and research level. I will start by recalling some data that was made public by the Ministry of Internal Affairs; this data can be found in several reports commissioned by the government, of which the most complete and interesting is the one by deputy Sébastien Pietrasanta, published in June 2015.<sup>1</sup>

Until June 2015 there were 4462 individuals in France signalised as radicalised. Saying “signalised individuals” means that this is the known part of an otherwise larger reality. Here some notable characteristics of this population:

- 25 % are minors
- 35 % are women

---

\* Translation: Natalie Eder.

1 Pietrasanta 2015.

- 40 % have converted to Islam (the converts represent 50 % of those who travel to the combat zones)
- 2/3 are aged between 15 and 25.

If we move from the aspect of radicalisation to that of engagement in war zones, we notice the following:

- 700 young people have gone to these zones
- 475 are currently in Iraq and Syria
- 220 have come back to France
- 1800 individuals are said to be implicated in jihadist networks. These figures make France the Western European country in which the most citizens contribute to jihadism. Moreover it is estimated that the number of European combatants of the 20.000 strangers currently present in Iraq and above all Syria is about 5000.

Many of the candidates for jihad, who are getting younger and younger and belong to all social classes, are unknown to the police forces. According to a survey by the *Centre de prévention des dérives sectaires liées à l'islam* (CPDSI)<sup>2</sup> of 160 families received by the centre:

- 60 % of the young people (belonging to those families and involved in jihadism) belong to the middle class
- 30 % to the lower (and least affluent) class
- 10 % to the upper class.

Even if those numbers are not representative of the totality of the radicalised, they show that radicalisation is not specific to the working class or the banlieue. We have indeed been witnessing an extension of the phenomenon to the middle class ever since the expansion of the civil war to the whole of Syria and the appearance of Daesh, also called the “Islamic State”. Farhad Khosrokhavar distinguishes the radicalised of the lower class and those of the middle class by reference to their trajectory and the motives for their engagement.<sup>3</sup>

According to Pietrasanta’s report there are Atheists and youths without any connection to immigration among this population. In addition, there is an increasing proportion of departures that involve families and women, which is new for jihadism: one goes to Syria to build a life and to start a family. The project of the “Islamic State” attracts certain young people and not only those from Muslim families.

---

<sup>2</sup> This survey focuses on 160 families received in the *Centre de prévention des dérives sectaires liées à l'islam* (CPDSI, in English: Centre of prevention of sectarian misdemeanour linked to Islam): Bouzard / Caupenne / Valsan 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Khosrokhavar 2015.

This data shows us a diversity that produces great difficulties in establishing profiles in general and particularly with regard to the “average” radicalised or jihadist candidate. From a sociological point of view the examined group constitutes a heterogeneous whole, which does not allow going beyond noticing recurrences in the path and the process of radicalisation.

However, the most prominent element of this picture – that 2/3 are aged between 15 and 25 – seems to me to be a very important fact. It means that the majority of the so-called “radicalised” comprises either adolescents or young adults that find themselves in the moratory zone where the crossing of adolescence may lead to its extension and a prolonged state of crisis. Little use has been made of this fact in order to understand the sources of radicalisation. There is no question of reducing the latter to a causality considered to be mechanically linked to the troubles of adolescence – here as much as anywhere else it would be an error to isolate one single causal element. The idea is rather to include the element of “prolonged adolescence” into a factorial multiplicity which leads to a condensation in the form of radicalisation, or of which radicalisation is the condensation.

This is when we need to keep in mind the anthropological fact of the extension of adolescence, in particular since the second half of the twentieth century, which is characterised by an increasingly shorter childhood and an increasingly delayed maturity, both of which have become one of the marks of modern civilisation beyond the sole occidental area. So much so that the notions of “preadolescence” and “post-adolescence” have been suggested and that the services of the infantile and juvenile psychiatric sector around the world receive youths up to the age of 26 and sometimes even beyond. The extension of adolescence between “pre” and “post” starting from puberty signifies that there is a juvenile temporality that is adjustable to the individuals and the sociocultural environment.<sup>4</sup>

This observation leads me to interpret the afore-mentioned clinically corroborated data according to that juvenile temporality. The first angle of this interpretation results from what all clinicians of adolescence and its extension know, which is that this young population finds itself at the stage of life that centres on *ideality*. In the background the reorganisation of *identity* takes place, a reorganisation which can be tumultuous with *variations* that can go from *normalcy* up to the pathological.

In my opinion the appropriate angle of approach is thus the one concerned with the issue of the *ideals* through which the individual and the collective, the subjective and the political are intertwined in the development of the subject, at the very moment where a transformation of identity takes place in juvenile temporality. Yet the ideals raising the edifice of the subject, rooting it in a community, hinging it to the preceding generations and carrying it towards the desire to create

---

4 In the 1960s the psychiatrist Pierre Mâle proposed the notion of “juvenile crisis”, which corresponds to that extended adolescence. See Mâle 1982.

a better world, these ideals can also become the source of excess, terror and ravages beyond mention. The twentieth century was a century of political catastrophes induced by the exaltation of ideals on the area of entire civilisations. In this regard Europe has paid a very high human price.

Ideals hence contain *potential and explosive radicalness* of which the manifestations depend on the individual variations and the social and historic context. The epidemic dimension of “Islamist radicalisation” is a configuration of recent idealistic enthusiasm specific to the Muslim world and its crisis of civilisation, but it has become global and has acquired *the power to collect negativity* within and beyond this world. *The power to collect negativity* in the sense that this configuration shelters and nourishes frustration, hate, self-rejection and the rejection of the world at its current stage, which all find an “ecological niche” (in the sense in which Ian Hacking<sup>5</sup> uses this expression) in the ideal of radical Islamism. This notion makes it possible to take into account the conditions that allow a social and psychological epidemic to erupt (the “mad travellers” of the nineteenth century in the work of Ian Hacking), to develop, to proliferate in a particular cultural and historic space, and finally to get extinguished as would a species that does not find adequate living conditions anymore.

One cannot understand the jihadist offer and its impact, if we do not analyse the developmental conditions of the “ecological niche” of the Islamist ideal on a demographic, economic, political and geopolitical level. Important papers have been dedicated to this subject, like those by Olivier Roy.<sup>6</sup> But the parameter of individual and collective psychology is absent in the study of the conditions of the “ecological niche” of the radical Islamist ideal. This is what I dedicate my work to.

In order to measure the function of ideals in juvenile temporality the issue of identity characteristic for this period has to be kept in mind.

What constitutes the crisis of this life period is the *subjective transition* in which the ideals of childhood are smashed to pieces and the necessity to replace them with new ideals imposes itself with an avidity that bears witness to the urgency of the quest. The avidity of ideals: this critical moment is characterised by intense movements of “dis-idealisation” and “re-idealisation”. In dis-idealisation the subject collapses, falls into the “doldrums”,<sup>7</sup> as Winnicott called it, which means that it feels emptiness, boredom, depression, the absence of meaning in its life and belittles itself. In re-idealisation it experiences exaltation, the impetus of ideas and passions, the attempt of elevating its self-representation, the desire to set out for a new world or to participate in its creation, the aspiration of finding a plenary meaning through which truth and justice can triumph.

Whence does this necessity, urgency and avidity of ideals come? From the fact that the subject has to appropriate itself, this self that is not that of the child that

5 Hacking 2002.

6 Roy 1992.

7 Winnicott 1965.

developed with the help of the parents, but a self supposed to become the subject's own. Henceforth it wants to "belong" to itself by reinventing itself. However this appropriation forces it to undertake the reorganisation of the most crucial boundaries of human existence: between the me and the non-me, life and death, its sex and the other sex, reality and fiction, the world and the hereafter etc. This is not a game with limits, or if it is one, it is a dangerous game where the borders risk becoming blurred or partially vanishing. This is when the subject's survival is at stake. If it takes such risks that is because, through the peril it faces, it aspires to conquer itself and to master its own existence. This explains the frequency of transgressive experiences in which the borders of the self are stretched, and, to some extent, adolescent suicide attempts. Acting out often includes the desire of transformation, of leaving one's skin in order to get a new one, like this young woman who declared: "I wanted to kill myself, but I did not want to die." All in all, there is a perilous passage described by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in the verse "What was is not anymore and not yet what will be". He designates thus a caesura, an interval, the passage from one shore to the other that has to be overcome in the hope for a new self and a new world.

This crossing gives rise to the critique of the world of appearances on which childhood is largely based, to the doubting of the ideas of the adults, whose beliefs are perceived as illusions or conspiracies against truth and justice by the youth who consequently wishes to dismantle them. One might call this a juvenile revolution. However, in many cases this reorganisation of the boundaries and the will to master oneself lead to extreme and dangerous experiments. They border on ordeal-like behaviour where the youth exposes himself to experiences of which the outcome will serve as judgment on his dignity or indignity, his value or insignificance, his ability or impotence. It is about surviving these trials that can take on diverse forms. This is where "radicalisation", regardless of its ideological content, can present itself as some kind of probation and the solution for overcoming the hiatus indicated by Rilke's verse.

"What was is not anymore and not yet what will be", it is in this in-between, in this passage from one shore to the other and its deviations that the point of the impact of the jihadist offer is located. Its discourse and the recruitment procedures make use of many of the motives of the *subjective juvenile transition*, like a hunter who sets up the traps knowing his prey's path.

These young people at whom the offer is aimed are expecting a transition; they are on the look-out for a solution or in the middle of the ford. Particularly on the look-out are those for whom the adolescent passage is difficult because of personal flaws that result from mishaps in their life and/or failures in their family or social environment. They do not necessarily show obvious troubles. In some cases they experience secret or hidden turmoil that we will call asymptotic and those are the most unpredictable ones, sometimes the most dangerous. This will manifest itself after some violent acting out through other people's statements such as: "He was a very kind boy, he was helpful, he helped the old lady from the fifth floor

carry her shopping bags, etc.” In other cases, one notices chaotic journeys afterwards, that had already manifested themselves through delinquency or addiction; some of them reveal borderline or psychotic troubles.

The offer of radicalisation creates a demand in the subject’s state of identity-related fragility, which the offer transforms into powerful armour. When the conjunction of supply and demand takes place, the flaws are compensated, buried. For the subject this results in the sedation of its anguish, a feeling of liberation, rushes of omnipotence. It becomes someone else, chooses another name. It adopts the same behaviour as the members of its group. If the discourse of all radicalised people seems as if it was held by the same person, this is due to the abdication of a large part of their singularity: *the subject yields to the fanatical automaton*. The sacrifice of its singularity indeed frees it from its symptoms to the exact extent that psychological symptoms are correlative of the individual’s idiosyncrasy. The symptoms, which are accounts of intimate conflicts, are converted into collective formations. The elimination of all singularity and the absorption of the symptoms in radicalisation are at the origin of the errors of assessment of many (clinically un-trained) observers on supposedly “psychologically problem-free” radicalised people, even though their subjective trajectory has been tumultuous, sometimes even so risky that radicalisation is an attempt at surviving a state of interior urgency.

This being said one should not confound explaining and excusing. The analysis of the subject subjective reality of this phenomenon signifies neither insanity nor irresponsibility, with the exception of certain cases.

This approach also allows us to understand the success of radical Islamism among converts. Identity flaws are not the prerogative of the children of migrants of Muslim families, which explains that 40 % of the radicalised are converts. I would say that these subjects try to radicalise themselves before being introduced to the product of radicalisation. It does not matter whether they know of what this product is made, as long as it brings them “the solution”. The press has reported the case of jihadists who had ordered books like “Islam for Dummies” on the internet. One needs an important dose of ignorance in order for one’s fantasies to wrap themselves in innocence and to look for their realisation without fear nor doubt. The examining magistrate Marc Trévidic of the antiterrorist centre in Paris has declared on several occasions that certain returnees from the combat zones whom he interrogated did not know the five pillars of Islam!

Some of the volunteers in the combat zones do not primarily look for the spiritual dimension or a religious conversion. They want to rebel against the injustice suffered by the Syrians through the regime of Bashar al-Assad. For others the departure towards the mysterious war-torn East serves as a romantic and initiatory passage. It struck me to read texts on the history of the crusades and to notice numerous similarities to “the subjective venture” of these departures to Jihad. Could jihadism be an inverted crusade: a “crescentade”?

Today, radical Islamism is the most widespread product on the internet market, the most exciting, the most unabridged. It is the master key to idealisation readily available to those having lost hope with regards to themselves and the world.

The assimilation of Islamist radicalisation to a sectarian phenomenon is largely erroneous. There are some comparable aspects, like the phenomenon of “mental control”, but essential differences are apparent. In a sect the individual submits to his fantasies or the delirious theories of the guru, to his economic or even sexual exploitation. As to the jihadist, he adheres to a very large collective belief, the belief in the identity myth of Islamism, which is nourished by the reality of war and in which he is offered to take a heroic part by means of material and sexual advantages, real and imaginary powers. The mixture of myth and historic reality is more toxic than being in delirium would be.

The radical offer will thus seize the impasses of the juvenile passage and model itself on the possibilities of a crossing that is at the same time individual and collective, physical and metaphysical, mythical and historical, of which I wish to show the main motives.

**1. Identity-related justice** is the cornerstone of the radical and jihadist offer. It touches on the heart of the identity flaws of young people. It is based upon the theory of “the wounded Islamic ideal” and the wrong having been done to Muslims in the past and the present. This wounded ideal is linked to the loss of the principle of theological and political sovereignty of the Muslim community with the abolition of the Caliphate and the dismemberment of the last Muslim empire, the Ottoman Empire, in 1924 by the colonial powers. It should be noted that the organisation of the Muslim Brothers was founded in 1928. One could say that Islamist movements were born of the trauma of this period and have propagated this shock to the masses. As for the wrong done to the Muslims: the ancient and recent wars in the Middle East; Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. Pictures of destruction, massacre and dead and mutilated children serve as support, along with the appeal to become a righter of wrongs. One observes that there are young people who are not Muslims who respond to this call for justice. But for the majority the jihadist offer consists of *placing the wrong done to the Muslim community on top of an already previously experienced individual prejudice*. It aims at having the subject absorbed by the wounded ideal and the injury and to speak and act through it like a revenant. It is called to become the avenger of the ideal or, what amounts to the same thing, *the avenger of the offended deity*. The case of the Kouachi brothers in the attack against Charlie Hebdo is paradigmatic in this regard. There are young people whom the deficiency of the ego ideal (*idéal du moi*) leads to look for an incarnation of the collective ideal, which is at its fullest in the act of becoming a martyr.

**2. Dignification and access to omnipotence:** To young people who lack self-esteem, who have the feeling of being stifled, of having no value and “being trash”, as one of them told me, one offers the recognition not only of their having been harmed, but also of being one of God’s elect, underestimated by everyone. To take

on this chosen destiny, the youth has to inspire respect and fear, become a missionary of the cause, a hero to whom the gates of glory will open. He can take the law into his own hands, he is authorized to be outside of it in the name of God's superior law. "The trash" thus becomes fearsome. Fearsome and feared by his own family. A father told me: "My son has become my father, he dictates the morals of Islam to me... Even more, he takes himself for the father of God, after having been involved with drugs and delinquency."

**3. Repentance and purification:** Islamist radicalism is a religious ideology of which one of the fundamentals is repentance and purification. It deals with the culpability of living and desiring that one finds among young people who sometimes have not committed a single crime. The torment indeed intensifies where there is misfortune and shame of existing. Particularly with identity troubles: The subject tells itself that it has no value, that it is a "defect", according to the words of a patient. But the offer also reaches delinquents looking for forgiveness (there are delinquents who are such due to a feeling of culpability, as Freud pointed out) or delinquents who find a means of ennobling their criminal urges through their enrolment in jihadism. The offer of radicalisation reflects unto us this message: You are unworthy because you are godless and lawless, you have the possibility to expiate and to ask for forgiveness: become a "Supermuslim"!

I call *Supermuslim* the position in which a Muslim is brought to outbid the Muslim that he is through the representation of a Muslim that has to be even more Muslim. This is the behaviour of a subject that is prey to its own reproaches of defection and the harassment by the army of media preachers who accuse it all day long of the worst moral crimes and doom it to be "a combustible in hell". It is called to "over-identify" with the exemplary Muslim, the prophet and the perfect ancestor by establishing a border against the impure by joining the group of the pure, even at the cost of challenging its own parents and family, whom it will save during the Last Judgment.

**4. The restoration of the subject of community versus the subject of society:** The restoration of the subject of community is associated with the promise of the return to the world of tradition, where being a subject is given, ensured, guaranteed. By contrast the subject of modern civilisation, of social contract, the individual as such is the blockbuster of itself and in order for it to be that, it is forced to accomplish exhausting work. One needs the means for that. One example of the guarantee given to the subject of community: When one offers a youth of 16 years old to choose another name for himself that starts with "Abou X" (Abou Ali, Abou Salah), which means "Father of...", then, even though he is not a father in reality, by renaming himself he jumps from the condition of being a son to the condition of "being a father", becoming thus the origin of an imaginary posterity. He hence becomes his own origin. Today there are young people who prefer the reassuring order of a community with restrictive norms, allocating them to an authoritarian structure that relieves them of the disarray of freedom and of a

personal responsibility for which they do not have the resources, meaning the psychological and material resources.

**5. The elimination of the boundary between life and death:** The preachers' discourse penetrates the unconscious fantasies of the adolescents at the moment where they go through the process of reorganising the infantile theories of the boundaries between life and death. They saturate them with litanies on imminent or already present death, on the throes of the grave (a terrifying type of sermon), throes that they have to spare themselves from now on as if they were already dead. Imaginary death is so invasive that real death becomes insignificant, which explains that some young recruits declare: "Death is nothing, it's like a pinch." A pinch that transports them to the paradisiac other world. In the case of the man killed in battle, the martyr, he is only apparently dead; he stays alive, enjoying all his possessions, being thus an immortal. The subject hence has to die in order to get access to this immortal life. The recurrence of the desire to die and even the desire of already being dead is a constant fact in the discourse of the jihadist offer. Because when somebody already feels dead nothing can happen to him anymore, apart from living in the current world, which is considered as being vile. In his excellent book of testimony *Les Français jihadistes*,<sup>8</sup> David Thomson reports the words of a youth that told him: "Allah decrees our death even before our birth." This affirmation does not exist in the traditional corpus of Islam. This would mean that what we call "the primitive scene" in psychoanalysis, the scene of the fantasies on the origins of life, is a scene of annihilation and thus the source of a melancholy feeling of self-loss and of matrix fusion with the forces of life and death alike.

The jihadist offer corresponds therefore to a policy oriented towards the triumph over death: what one could call a *thanatopolicy*.<sup>9</sup> But the type of death in question contains some superior form of life. In our eyes death is opposed to narcissism, but here death is at the service of narcissism. Death is a mother that gives birth to the candidate for a perfect life. The candidate gives up his life, which is the life of a good-for-nothing and therefore has no value, to the totally Other and expects that the latter will make it perfect for him. A perfect life is a life where the ideal prevails over the ego which is liberated from everything in the world. It is very well possible that here some subjects find the possibility of converting suicide into self-sacrifice, but self-sacrifice in jihadism involves what Lacan called the "supreme narcissism of the lost Cause".<sup>10</sup> This is the experience we make of the incomparable dignity that every man who has lost his life acquires in our eyes. Somebody's death constitutes the most powerful and ultimate assertion of the value of his existence.

---

8 Thomson 2014.

9 In the original: *thanatopolitique* [translator's note].

10 In the original "narcissisme suprême de la Cause perdue", in Lacan 1966, p. 826.

**6. A theory of evil and regeneration:** One of the fears of adolescence is related to the access to the adult world and its logic, particularly to the game of social pretending that the youth loathes for its dishonesty. Yet the jihadist offer tries to persuade the youth that the world in which he lives is corrupted, unjust, wrapped into falsehood: *a vile world*.<sup>11</sup> Thus the centrality of conspiracy theories, which are supposed to unveil hidden duplicity and malfeasance. From this the appeal to become the chastener of hypocrites (especially false Muslims or what one might call “Islamoids”) and an operator of the regeneration of the Muslim world is deduced. I will be succinct about this, because one finds the motive of the eradication and regeneration of the world in many totalitarian ideologies, for example in the Nazi or the Khmer rouge ideology.

**7. The completion of meaning and the Last Judgment:** The juvenile transition is a period of meaning-related deadlock, existential absurdity and shaped by invasive waves of emotions that are difficult to link and organise. The senselessness destabilises identity bearings and provokes fears of estrangement and endless decomposition. The transition places the subject in a state of expectation, where it waits for the moment when it will finally take on solid shape and the incessant flow of ideas will end. Yet the extremist Islamist discourse is a supplier of signs from all quarters which announces the end of time and the total closure of meaning through millenarian and apocalyptic themes. Currently, this discourse situates the end of the world in Syria, by using a prophecy as an excuse, a prophecy which is often repeated by young people who claim to want to go to Syria in order to participate in the end of the world, after the reestablishment of the Caliphate of which the “Islamic State” is the realisation. The apocalypse is the disclosure of meaning and its achievement, the final triumph, melancholy, certainly, but not void of the premature pleasure of the definitive victory of Islam. The apocalypse is a total purification that proceeds in the form of the disappearance of the world and the coming of the reign of the other world.

The enumeration that I have undertaken is not exhaustive, one could elaborate on the motives, but the power of the Islamist offer resides in its system that promises young people in crisis an exhilarating crossing at the very moment their existence has got entangled in negativity, distress and absurdity.

---

11 “*Un monde immonde*” in the French original. The author makes use of the paronomasia of the terms “world” and “vile”, which already existed in Latin (“mundus” and “immundus”) and is particularly striking since “immonde/immundus” has the appearance of being the negation of “monde/mundus” [translator’s note].

## References

- Bouzar, Dounia / Caupenne, Christophe / Valsan, Sulayman: La métamorphose opérée chez le jeune par les nouveaux discours terroristes, in: CP CPDSI / Bouzar Expertises, November 2014; available at: <http://www.bouzar-expertises.fr/metamorphose> [02.05.2016].
- Hacking, Ian: *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses*. Harvard 2002.
- Khosrokhavar, Farhad: “Le jihadisme en Europe: des classes populaires aux classes moyennes”, in: *Le Huffington Post*, 1. Avril 2015, available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/farhad-khosrokhavar/jihadisme-en-europe-recrutement\\_b\\_6977308.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/farhad-khosrokhavar/jihadisme-en-europe-recrutement_b_6977308.html) [02.05.2016].
- Lacan, Jacques: “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir” (1960), in: *Écrits*. Paris 1966.
- Mâle, Pierre: *La crise juvénile*. Paris 1982.
- Pietrasanta, Sébastien: La déradicalisation, outil de lutte contre le terrorisme, 2015, available at: <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/154000455.pdf> [02.05.2015].
- Roy, Olivier: Ethnic identity and political expression in Northern Afghanistan, in: Gross, Jo Ann (ed.), *Muslims in Central Asia*. Durham, NC 1992, pp. 73–86.
- Thomson, David: *Les Français jihadistes*. Paris 2014.
- Winnicott, Donald W.: “Adolescence: struggling through the doldrums”, In: *The Family and Individual Development*. London/New York 1965.