The Cultic Experience in the Program of the RAN DERAD of the European Commission

By Caparesi Cristina

This presentation was given at the ICSA International Conference in Trieste (4-6th July 2013)


In 2011 the European Commission established the radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), a network on the prevention of the spreading of violence and extremism in Europe that brings practitioners, experts, teachers, associations, professionals, victims of terrorism, local authorities, police forces and academics together. The nine RAN working groups were set up by European Commissioner Cecilia Malmström in September 2011 in the wake of the Oslo and Utoya massacres carried out by the xenophobic and neo-Nazi fanatic Anders Behring Breivik that led to the death of 69 young people. The initiative came ten years after September 11, 2001 which brought terrorism to the heart of the West. These groups meet regularly to study strategies, share ideas, knowledge and experience on contrasting violence, extremism and terrorism through the development of techniques of preventive measures.

The principle that has been adopted by the European Commission is that to counter radicalization and violence, joint action between civil society and local authorities is necessary and these actions need to be developed at a national level in each member state. Europe's role is to provide support to the coordination of national policies, share information and disseminate good practices. There are three objectives that the prevention of radicalization and recruitment are trying to achieve:

- Disrupt the activities of individuals and networks that recruit for terrorism;
- Make sure that mainstream opinions prevail (or possibly moderate) over extremism

- promote security, justice, democracy and opportunity for all.

Referring to the group DERAD, of which I am part of, which consists of heterogeneous operators who are engaged at the forefront of de-radicalization and desensitization to violence. The Working Group is concerned with all forms of extremism, including religious extremism and gangs. These individuals often embrace an extremist view that distinguishes between inside / outside of the group, encourages ideologies of superiority, and separation / discrimination / exclusion with which they legitimize hostility, hate crimes and violence. Typically, field workers come from a cultural and / or ideological background similar to their "assistants" who can better understand the language, habits, and ways of thinking. It has been seen that these field workers gain greater success than governmental operators because, they can build easier relationships of trust, respect and confidence more than they can.

Similarities between the phenomenon of Cultic Phenomenon and Terrorism

The goal I pose in this report is to share some reflections from my own experience and knowledge of the cultic phenomenon and to establish a common ground with my DERAD colleagues; endeavoring to compare and define some principal basis of a few good and bad practices that each of us have accumulated throughout the years.

A first reflection I want to bring out is that there are numerous similarities between cults and terrorist, as a matter of fact, many adherents of such organizations, especially ex Jihadist terrorist, consider that terroristic groups are cults; in that they both consider that the end justifies the means. Considering the Italian experience on terrorism as an interesting perspective given (Orsini A, 2010) where the Red Brigades were orientated by a religious-political conception of a historical development leading towards the establishment of Heaven on Earth. Red Brigades, according to this perspective,
were considered “purifiers in the world” who shared a deep hatred against a bourgeois society, considered a putrid and nauseating place to be swept away by the use of revolutionary terror.

Psychological violence, influence programs and control in some terrorist groups share many common features with cultic groups. These features are well known and in fact there have been numerous academic studies carried out mainly in Spain, Japan and Anglo-Saxon countries. I do not want to dwell closely to the analysis of these similarities/differences, but to remind that this field of study shares several aspects in common and there have been also quite a few cases of terroristic cults, such as the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult or the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso (Alvaro Rodriguez-Carbaillera ed al., 2010).

The common features, albeit with some differences, mainly involve the use of manipulation techniques to deprive the person of his basic personality and make him or her a member of that particular group. Certainly the opening of the "High-Level RAN Conference in Brussels last January, in the presence of Anna Maria Cancellieri, the Internal Minister and the Italian delegation had a great impact. The workshop introduction commenced by videos of young people, subject to radicalization, had slowly transformed into Islamic terrorists or political extremists coming to commit hate crimes, a process that was blocked only by their incarceration (European Commission, 2013). It was recent news in Italy when a 23 year old Italian, who converted to Islam and fundamentalism, had recently been killed in Syria and of other Italians collaborating in fighting camps (quite different had they been part of a second generation of immigrants) What operators, working in the prevention of extremism and terrorism, usually tell me is that so far the only studies that have helped them to understand the dynamics within extremist groups are precisely taken from cultic studies.

Confronting methodologies in countering radicalization in the two fields.
With this consideration in my mind I would like to **develop a second reflection**. It is certain that the danger of terrorism has always been a big concern for most national governments due to the high impact over the lives and security of innocent and defenseless civilians. In order to counteract criminal and terrorist activities in Italy and elsewhere, through provided instruments to convict under criminal law, have now become more severe especially after September 11th. Whereas much different are the conditions and status in the cultic field and not only in Italy.

In fact, while it is clear that terrorist action and violent extremism have always (denied) human rights to anyone, civil liberties, constitutional order and the law, you cannot say the same for cults. Starting with the difficulties involved in defining what is or is not a cult, the nuances that differentiate similar or even groups with a common matrix, the fact is that ideology may be an element to be monitored but not the only one. Moreover a group which is spread nationally or internationally could be handled differently depending on the local leadership and there may be chances for which the same group could be harmful someplace and not harmful in another. It should also be noted that freedom of belief and religion are guaranteed by our democracies and that not everything that is strange and different is necessarily dangerous. The complexity of the cultic field requires a careful attitude and one has to be cautious when generalizing information, though there are abuses in part of the group does not necessarily mean it is extended to the whole group.

The striking and shocking actions resulting from hate crimes, which usually call for a strong and open denunciation, opposes the *silent* psychological abuse, so often perpetrated in so called “cultic groups” or in families, being so subdued and barely visible from public society and often hardly recognizable by the same people who suffer from it, if not after an extended period of time. These abuses, which generally are not even public, unless those who suffer from them, don’t decide at some point to denounced them, are generally done to the
same members of the group, and this is the major difference between cults and terrorists: violence within the group and violence outside the group.

The status difference and instrument intervention which national government usually adopt and apply when fighting against terrorism, are now mostly indifferent to cultic problems, and have usually relegated the problem solving solution to the victims of abuse themselves. This reality has led over the years of cultic history (which has about 40 years of history) to seek the most diverse solutions, often with the combined action of family members with religious people, professionals of mental health and charity associations. From early intervention methods which comprised besides violent deprogramming, things have moved to more respectful and friendlier forms such as exit counseling, advice on thought reform until today, at least for some of us, we tend to deal less with the recruitment in itself and focus more on improving better ways of communication and relationships between family members in and out of cults using methods similar to alternative dispute resolution (L. Ryan, P., Langone M., 2011; Caparesi C., 2011; Millar P., Caparesi C., 2014).

Therefore the combined intervention of abused families together with civil society (associations, professionals, religious, etc.) has been quite active in de-radicalizing their children, thus reinforcing a view that today appears to be a winning approach also in the de-radicalization of extremism and religious violence and terrorism, calling upon civil society in particular. In fact, there is no doubt that the operators expert in counteracting violence tend to be more successful in the process of de-radicalization than government bodies, eg. law enforcement. Thus, this regulatory absence of intervention in many states including Italy, has in fact led to a greater engagement of civil society that could not delegate its problem to anyone else other than itself and did not have other instruments on which to rely, if not his own will and determination to seek answers. The transition from violent and anti-democratic instruments such as the deprogramming of the first period to more inclusive approaches such as mediation is in my opinion an example of what the operators expert in
The de-radicalization of psychological violence have learned in the field (Langone M., Martin P., 1993).

Today, with the knowledge we have and the experience gained, it is easy for us to point fingers against anti-democratic practices such as deprogramming, which often did not produce the desired results hoped for by the families. But I think one should put oneself in the shoes of those who had been left alone to solve a problem as important as that of seeing their son or daughter transformed by groups and strange ideologies which have completely changed their loved ones into someone different and unrecognizable, to understand the despair and loneliness to which they were left. And loneliness and despair never produce good fruits. The expertise gained in the field, thanks to the workings of the civil society, has brought in results once thought unthinkable, as well as obtaining the resolution of many cases.

In the light of what the European Commission is suggesting, we can say that our weakness has been our strength. What civil society can do, when it knows what to do, is definitely much more effective than other means because of its powerful preventive action, because it can intervene at a cultural level by developing awareness and knowledge, and lastly for its complementary role to the instruments of repression. For sure it takes a longer time to have change when education is involved but it is also true that results are usually longer-lasting.

*What is the role of civil society in countering terrorism?*

This brings me to the **third and final reflection**. What should the connection with civil society be? Speaking with RAN DERAD operators it has emerged several times that, although in different contexts such as street, prison, school, etc., the foundation of a derad intervention lies in a successful relationship of trust with their clients. This need often leads them having to break free and become more autonomous with respect to their stakeholders, eg. prison director, the police. It is evident that if I disclose the information I learn from
my radicalized client, to those who have power over them, that would incur a decrease of trust and ultimately the preventive action would lose its effectiveness. It is a difficult relationship but the autonomy of the operators must be guaranteed.

We must once again underline that relationships and communications with radicalized people and our proposed interventions are done voluntarily and depend on the responsibility and willingness of the subject to change: in fact he/she has an active role in the process of changing. We can call ourselves as someone who accompanies this change and our action will be much more effective so long as we can build relationships of trust, understanding and peace-building.

Applying this principle to cultic phenomenon, what we often see is how civil society loses its role and its effectiveness when it becomes a "branch" of government authority. If associations, instead of trying to reconcile and pacify the conflicting issues of a dualistic and often irreconcilable world, restrict themselves to taking the role of simple informants, in some way they lose their potentiality to be effective in recuperating people. The potential of civil society and associations lies in being able to use different tools other than repression. One of our secret weapons lies in having no obligations as those of a public official and generally, at least for most professions, but not all, we have an obligation of reporting only in case of serious criminal offenses, eg. suspected child abuse or if we know that a serious crime will be committed. This allow us to be perceived as less threatening and become aware of many more things and able to intervene with such tools as dialogue and other strategies such as empathy. Some experts, in the cultic field, have been able to bring changes in groups because they have not been afraid of challenging by intellectual honesty and have challenged antidemocratic practices that some groups were using against their members, earning the trust and respect with satisfactory results. Our strength lies precisely in the way in which we can help radicalized people become more aware of their rights and those of others, listen to their
grievances and needs but also monitor their behavior so that the offender would not abuse their power. It is only in this setting and with this perspective that we are really on to something and can we call ourselves front-liners. Those that work in this field have to remember that members and ex-members of groups are two sides of the same coin and they must be cautious through their work not to emphasize the existing conflicting fracture of this dichotomy.

Sometimes the joint work between civil society and local authorities can produce invaluable tools as we have seen in FVG with the Regional Law of FVG n. 11/2012 "Rules for the support of human rights and full intellectual freedom, psychological and moral of the individual" which the first signatory Roberto Asquini will illustrate (or has illustrated). I believe that the potentiality of this law, which has taken a long period to finish its process of application with the recent approval of an applying regulation, is exactly that of giving more power to civil society providing work tools and resources to associations who are engaged in helping victims.

This law can be a great resource at so many levels for those who have been affected, distressed and helpless by their experience. The attention of government policy in a nonjudgmental form can make victims feel less isolated. Not only would they count on an economical help (if the conditions are met) in obtaining legal and psychological assistance, but demonstrate that their needs are recognized, make them feel less isolated and guilty but encourage them to seek out professional help.

At a community level this law could give more power to civil society providing those working tools and resources that are usually lacking. It should not be forgotten that often those associations who deal with this phenomenon, do so on a voluntary basis through their own personal strength and effort. It is essential that such associations be benefited by adequate economical resources to pay professionals and expert operators. It is also important, both in the cultic field and the political violence de-radicalization, that these work groups may be autonomous even though connected in a local social network
and moreover not tied to any ideological, religious or other kinds of enforcement. They should be uniquely interested in pursuing their objective of promoting the rights and dignity of the people involved.

Finally at a national level I perceive, with a note of satisfaction, that even Italian political orientation have recently called upon the regional law n.11/2012 seemingly giving more credit to preventive solutions, that are likely to be easily applied because they can be voted for by different political views.

It is hoped that both national politics and institutions will continue on in this direction in an effort to seek a more fruitful dialogue with civil society involving all of those operators and professionals who have for many years worked to help victims. Indeed only if institutions will recognize the value and work developed by all those working in the field, with their different perspectives, and involve them in the problem resolution of radicalization (both cultic and political extremism), we can then effectively promote that needed and necessary network in order to develop that sense of trust which people of need can seek help from a civil society.

**Bibliography**

Caparesi C., Dennetta T. (2012). Manipolazione psicologica: leggi speciali o proposte alternative?


Commissione Europea “*Radicalisation Awareness Network*”

Commissione Europea (2013). *High Level Conference: Empowering Local Actors to Prevent Violent Extremism*


International Cultic Studies Association (2013) “*Cerimonia di premiazione*”
http://www.caparesicristina.it/premio-alla-leadership/


Álvaro Rodríguez-Carballeira, Javier Martín-Peña, Carmen Almendros, Jordi Escartín, Clara Porrúa e Massimo Bertacco (2010 ). *A Psychosocial Analysis of the Terrorist group as Cult*. International Journal of Cultic Studies vol. 1 (1), 49-60

http://www.icsahome.com/articles/a-psychosocial-analysis-of-the-terrorist-group-rodriguez-ijcs-1-1

