Revoking citizenship: The malaise afflicting France

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Abstact: In France, the recent wave of terror requires the Holland government to restore social cohesion. Suffering from emotional distress, a majority of French citizen supports the constitutional reform aiming at revoking citizenship of terrorists. But social fractures should be addressed as well, argues IPA's International vice-president reporting from Europe.

In the grip of terror, people are inclined to outwardly project the feeling of being overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. As we know, projection is used in psychoanalysis as a tool to explore the unconscious. But such dynamics of projection and mental transference can sometimes be problematic, as they usually lead to blaming others for our bad feelings: "*you did me wrong and I righteously hate you for doing so.*" In dysfunctional families, projections onto close relatives fuel hatred, if not violence. Everyone feels justified in unloading the emotions he or she feels on the other. They serve as pretext to the abuse of women and children.

A backdrop of terror

Social dynamics are reflective of these individual dramas and can, in some circumstances, show similar dysfunction. As in family and couple therapy, collective interactions should be addressed in all truthfulness, dark pages of history should be revisited to disclose their impact on the present. Truthfulness implies a genuine interrogation about what is affected in our inner selves, with a conviction that therein lies the key to resolving our problem. This requires being honest about our own acts, while considering wrongful conduct as an expression of what has not yet been fully revealed and realized.

In the current debate in France about deprivation of nationality, there is a backdrop of terror rekindled by the recent mass shootings; we are at war, but against whom ? Dealing with the question in these terms is already misleading. If we're unwilling to be introspective about where our fears actually come from, we will most likely find an extraneous factor causing them and make a point of getting rid of it by any means. In medieval cities, for instance, criminals were routinely banished for petty larceny, after being shamed at the town's pillory. In the wake of the Reformation, banishment was among the most prevalent penalties in cities of the Holy Roman Empire such as Frankfurt, Augsburg or Cologne, and a means to do away with deviants and outsiders found guilty of disturbing peace or moral order (Jason P. Coy, *Strangers and Misfits Banishment, Social Control, and Authority in Early Modern Germany*, Brill, 2008, 1-10).

A popular measure

In his speech to parliament three days after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, President Holland declared that he would strip French nationality from an individual found guilty of a terrorist act, "even if he was born a French person, if he has another nationality" (Speech by President of the Republic before a joint session of Parliament, Versailles, 11.16.2015). The proposal, which was questioned even within his own party, includes a constitutional revision that will be discussed by the National Assembly in early February. According to a recent survey released by *Le Figaro,* this measure would be approved by 85%

of the French electorate, and even more among rightwing sympathizers. On the left of the Socialist Party, deprivation of nationality is endorsed by 64% of environmentalits and radical leftists (François-Xavier Bourmaud, "Sondage : 85% des Français favorables à la déchéance de nationalité", Le Figaro, 12.30.2015).

There is nothing new here. Taking away an offender's legal rights through the "royal ban", which sentenced a fleeing convict to public hatred, meant nobody was allowed to give him shelter and anyone could strip him of his belongings or kill him with impunity (J. Maillet, *Histoire des institutions publiques et des faits sociaux,* Dalloz, 1956, § 671). After the fall of Napoleon, banishment took the form of a first "law of exile", banishing the Bonaparte family from the French territory. Since 1915, deprivation of citizenship affected some 16,000 citizens, mostly under the Vichy Regime. It might be recalled that General de Gaulle was stripped of French nationality by a decree signed by Marshal Pétain (Journal officiel de la République française*,* 10.12.1940). Strictly circumscribed by existing laws on account of its highly symbolic character, this exceptional measure is currently limited to binational citizens (Mathilde Golla, "Cinq terroristes bientôt déchus de la nationalité française"*,* Le Figaro, 10.7.2015).

Reflecting rather than reacting

Without presuming the effectivness of such sanction in preventing terrorism, this debate speaks volumes about the climate of fear that prevails in France. A state of panic was prompted by the 2015 terror attacks. The national media have fostered this by their dramatic coverage on the first anniversary of the January mass shooting in Paris. With exclusive television reports, unpublished testimonies and new camera angles on the raids, we plunged back into the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher massacres. The constant reactivation of these traumas sustains a public demand for security that compels the French government to fight a roaring fire. Would a constitutional reform extending deprivation of nationality to all French citizens, as Holland now suggests, suffice to restore social cohesion ? It is doubtful.

That is where a collective form of intospection should come into play, encouraging reflection rather than reaction, however justifiable it may seem. Instead of excluding or exiling to avoid the fact that terrorism mirrors social fractures, let us consider these extremes as dramatic expressions of a collective dynamic. Let us not resurrect ancient scapegoat rituals to hide the deficiencies of our own communities. To act effectively, we must take into account the tragic path of these young jihadists and their families, deeply ingrained in the patriarchal culture their parents and grand-parents were born in. On January 4, a documentary by *France 3* gave a truthful and uncompromising glimpse on "the life course of these renegades of the French society" (Stéphane Bentura, "Attentats : les visages de la terreur"*,* France 3, 1.4.2016).

Undisputed analysis

However, we cannot ignore the successive failures of public programs for the most vulnerable social classes, often with an immigrant background. These are exiles within the French borders and they suffer from exclusion—sharply on the rise in the past few decades— in the forms of urban ghettos, ethnic discrimination and communautarism, to name a few (Didier Lepeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain : ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui,* Robert Laffont, 2008). This shift towards cultural isolationism is a response to the planned eviction of these youths, born as French people, in miserable neighborhoods where Republican values never took root. In a recent survey of French immigrant suburbs, sociologist Gilles Kepel describes the ins and outs of this "unprecedented polarization" of the nation, where the markers of Islam appropriate public space, predominantly the poorer districts, with the proliferation of halal shops, the general use of the veil by women and the conspicuous presence of Salafism (Gilles Kepel, *Passion française,* Gallimard*,* 2014, 18-20).

Without reducing the complexity of the jihadist phenomenon to its territorial dimension, the French daily *Libération* emphasises that nearly all murderers of 2015 come from Sensitive Urban Zones (ZUS) or other poor municipalities of the country (Pierre Beckouche, "Terroristes français : une géographie sociale accablante", *Libération*, 12.28.2015). Aiming at selecting an elite of students for the French Grandes Écoles, the policy in National Education does not meet the needs of these downtrodden children, often of Muslim extraction, and tends to confine them to failure in school. In terms of juvenile delinquency, incarceration has proven to be an aggravating factor of social exclusion, even a vector of islamist radicalization, as shown by the recent debate on French prisons (Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Prisons and radicalization in France", Open Democracy, 3.19.2015). Although undisputed, theses analyses do not translate into action; we still prefer punitive measures, a defense reaction to fear, often leading to further exclusion.

Prohibiting violence against children

So what is the malaise afflicting France ? The gut response of projecting one's own unresolved emotions onto others prevails in the French society and public deliberations. A parent/child relationship largely based on denial and violence is questioned; socio-economic difficulties should not serve as justification for this relationship. Indeed, such psychological conditioning starts at a very early age, when we get accustomed to blaming instead of paying attention to others, as a result of not having been listened to. Adults suspect children, from early childhood on, of all kinds of malice and reprimand their life impulse, at times quite harshly.

Recently, before speaking at the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, the French Secretary of State for the Family, Laurence Rossignol, admitted that promoting the rights of children should be a social and political priority: "Violences towards children are far too numerous, often taboo. They frequently cause a stunning shock that inhibits our action." (Laurence Rossignol, *Faire des droits de l'enfant une priorité politique et sociale,* Huffington Post, 1.13.2016) But unlike 27 State members of the European Council, France still refuses to ban corporal punishment within the family, in violation of the revised European Social Charter compelling all signatories "to protect children and young persons against negligence, violence or exploitation" (European Social Charter (revised), May 3, 1996, 17). By breaking the stalemate over the consideration of banning violence in education and promoting positive parenting in all social strata, the French authorities would not only comply to their international commitments, they would make a decisive step towards empathy and dialogue in families and society.

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