

Radicalism, identity and the public domain

1.

Speaking about the possible meanings of radical identity in our public domain, I want to make a confession first. Forty years ago I was a radical myself and it took at least twelve years before I could switch to a different role. Soon after the start of my study in Nijmegen I got deeply involved in Marxist philosophy, breaking away from a catholic education and looking for my own position in a world that – at least in my opinion – was moving in the wrong direction. I even became a member of the Dutch Communist Party and participated intensely in the political actions and intellectual debates of the time. And I was not alone by the way. In fact the city of Nijmegen counted more than two thousand students who were engaged in left-wing politics and who rejected the Dutch Communist Party as being... too moderate. So you may understand that radicalism is not just an subject that I reflect upon from outside, it also has been an inner experience that comes back to my memory in debates or analyses that occupy us today.

Let me give an example to explain what I mean. I can clearly remember an evening in which we discussed the reasons that could justify our participation in the communist movement. For me at least three motives played a role: fear, hatred and guilt. The last motive – guilt – had to do with my belief that millions of people had to suffer from capitalism in general and from the foreign policy of the United

States more specifically. The images seen on TV of the war in Viet Nam proved for us that this policy was totally wrong. In any case we felt the moral obligation to protest against these terrible events. The second motive – hatred – started from the conviction that we had to attack the existing social order and to create a new one. Being young and rather smart students we believed that we could play an important role in this revolution. It gave us a sense of identity that – at least on the verbal level and in the context of an academic institution – could not be denied easily. We really enjoyed the game of frightening professors and other members of the ruling class. The third motive – fear – had to do with our understanding that no individual was strong enough to fight such a struggle alone and that a powerful organization was badly needed. Given the role of Dutch communists in the resistance during World War II we believed that the Communist Party could help us in that respect. It didn't take long before we discovered the totally dogmatic and stalinist character of the organization we had joined. Nevertheless many of us stayed in it for quite some time because we also needed the brotherhood of our group.

2.

Returning to the present it is easy to recognize the psychological characteristics of adolescence in this type of radicalism. Many young people are animated by an idealistic zeal which makes them protest against the world as it is. However, the sense of moral obligation is

not the monopoly of leftwing radicals, it also motivates young people who are fighting for their goals in the religious, ethnic, national or even sexual sphere. Moreover, many of their arguments make sense indeed and the problem is mainly a lack of experience due to the fact that the intellectual and emotional development of their brains are not yet fully integrated. Apart from the moral idealism, we also can recognize the search for a personal identity, strongly related to the rejection of an existing social order and a revolt against the powers that be. Developing your own identity is seldom a smooth process and asks – at least for young men – a period of looking for conflict, transgression of borders and testing your strength. Lastly, we also can recognize the importance of the peers and the need to belong to a certain community. Craving for recognition and appreciation young people react primarily to each other, which even may lead to situations where the emotional contact between youngsters and their parents is lost. In a sense these phenomena – intellectual idealism, struggle for identity and the power of peers – are well known for a long time already. In fact all parents with growing up kids have seen its effects and cannot be surprised by the insights that researchers in the field of developmental psychology and brain science have gathered. That's why certain similarities between my own experience and what is happening now might be relevant.

However it would be unwise to think that we can draw direct lessons from an earlier type of radicalism or to assume that the psychology of adolescence can explain everything happening in our

public domain. Let me indicate two differences that separate the situation of Western societies a few decades ago from the situation that we are facing today. First of all, we cannot abstain from the content of radical stories. Many scholars have stressed that there is no causal relation between certain words in the Koran, the Communist Manifesto or another holy text on the one hand and certain acts of its radical readers on the other. But who is prepared to defend the idea that there is no relation at all? At least we have to recognize that this relation exists at the subjective level if radical activists explain to be inspired by it or if they try to legitimize their deeds by referring to it. You always can claim that they are misreading the text or are suffering from false consciousness but if you want to start a debate you will have to take their words seriously. This doesn't only apply to radical stories in the religious or political field, but also to activists fighting for homosexual rights, to leaders of a populist movement, to groups defending animal rights and even to intellectuals who are defending the moral majority against all these kinds of radicalism. Abstaining from a debate on the analyses, the values or the beliefs contained in the engagement of radical youngsters in order to care for their psychological vulnerability would be to abstain from any debate. Doing so the adult society would refuse to give its radical youth the conflict that they deeply need, with a further hardening of the conflict as a result. So the first difference with the situation of four decades ago is that any strategy of repressive tolerance turns out to be contra productive nowadays.

3.

The second difference is that society itself has changed enormously. I only can indicate here three tendencies that characterize modern life and that may have a huge impact on the way identities are formed or articulated. First of all, the classical idea of an open society has been realized to a degree that nobody could imagine before. Not only national borders haven been abolished, but also the borders that have been cultivated by social, moral or religious traditions. Compared to the past it seems to many people that ‘everything’ can be said or can be seen, which also means that a domain of the sacred or the taboo in Western societies has disappeared. Even the reflection on the concept of borders has become exceptional, as is demonstrated by the fact that Paul Scheffers philosophical essay on this subject turned out to be highly controversial. The second tendency is that our daily life is speeded up permanently. We not only want to do more things in less time, but we also want to do it at expense of institutions and stable relations. This applies both to our private lives (leading to a decline of marriages and lifelong jobs) and to our collective live (leading to unrest in public opinion and the political sphere). Restricting ourselves to The Netherlands we see that the liquid society as predicted by Zygmunt Bauman is taking shape nowadays, a process that will have consequences for the way identities can be articulated. The third tendency is of course the growth of diversity in the ethnic and cultural sense. Big cities like Amsterdam of Rotterdam proudly announce that

they harbor more than 180 different nationalities in their populations and one only has to take a short walk in the streets to witness the effects of this fact. However, this change is not welcomed by everyone. As the Cultural and Social Planningbureau has shown many times already, growing diversity is also creating moral confusion, especially among low educated citizens. In many fields we have to ask ourselves which kind of behavior can be considered as being normal and which as being deviant. As we all know these trends of open borders, higher mobility and growing diversity occur in all western societies, be it at a difference pace. Our main question is what it implies for the way radical identities must be conceived.

Well the answer to this question is quite obvious. In fact we can read it in our newspapers and it is shown every day on tv. Experiencing an steadily growing degree of uncertainty, liquidity or diversity many people try to find or even to create their own identity. At least they protest if they believe their identity being threatened by political decisions, economic processes or events in the cultural sphere. Nobody can say that this reaction to globalization comes as a surprise. In fact it has been predicted twenty years ago by Manuel Castells himself, dedicating the second volume of his famous trilogy on The Information Age to this phenomenon. Today we see how the Power of Identity is asserted in many forms and occasions, on the individual level and on the collective level as well. However, the most important thing is not the existence of an identity in itself but the fact that it is recognized by others in the public domain. Given the fact that

we live in a world where images and visual communication have more weight than ever is it only natural that we have to understand this process of recognition quite literally. That is one of the reasons why the headscarf of Muslima's has become the main sign of their emancipation in our societies. Another example of this development is the discovery of so called daily racism in The Netherlands. Apart from kinds of discrimination that really exist (especially in the labor market) all references to the color of skin and the use of words as black and white are criticized as a sign of white privileges. Certain activists of ethnic minorities even count the number of colored people in films or tv-series in order to demonstrate that they are the victims of racism and prejudice. In other words: looking for stability in a world that is dominated by openness, speed and diversity many people are hoping for the public recognition and appreciation of their identity by others. That is the junction where the subjective needs of radical youngsters and the objective trends of our public life may reinforce each other.

4.

In many cases the effects of this process seem to be restricted to the individual level. An interesting example is the struggle for public recognition by homosexuals, lesbians, transgenders and other people who refuse to accept the way society wants to categorize them. They ask for the right to be 'as they are' without any reference to the fact

that the majority can observe certain differences. They don't see their behavior as deviating from normal behavior and seem to believe that you may have a public identity apart from the way the public is looking at you. In fact they don't accept the dialectical lesson that minor identities are created by the majority, just as the majority itself is created by the minorities it rejects. In order to understand what is happening in this field we have focus on the tensions, if not the struggle between certain cultural majorities on the one hand and all kinds of minorities on the other. This struggle seems to be highly relevant for the case of Muslims in general and radical believers more specifically. Of course it is wrong to accuse all Muslims of being a terrorist as soon as a new attack has occurred. Nevertheless, every single attack can easily be seen by the public as a proof that you cannot trust Muslims in general. The result is a massive rejection of Islam as such which – unfortunately – will encourage radical Muslims to assert themselves even more. As both parties in the conflict are claiming a unique identity and the struggle for this claim is fought in the public domain, the cycle of provocations gets easily out of hand.

To be more accurate we have to admit that the struggle for public recognition of private identities not always takes a conflictual form. Sexual minorities for example may fight for their rights and even reject majority rules but they do not commit bombings. And although some heterosexuals in modern society may get irritated by the gay parade, they are not prepared to act against it. In other words: we have to distinguish between two forms of interaction. In the first

case the struggle for identity is full of tension of even conflict. This is for instance the case when young radical Muslims are defending their identity by rejecting the values of modern society, which easily leads to the populist answer of rejecting any form of Islam. In the second case however, the struggle for recognition is characterized by a certain degree of mutual understanding and the acceptance of higher values that can be shared. Combining these two distinctions we come to the following diagram. This diagram not only shows that identities may take different forms but also that collective phenomena such as political populism or the attitudes of a silent majority cannot escape the conflicts in our public domain.

Types of identity looking for recognition in the public domain

| | Confrontation | Cooperation |
|------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Majority | Populism Nationalism | Silent majority Normal society |
| Minorities | Radical Muslims Animal liberation | Rights of gays etc. Human rights etc. |

5.

Assuming that patterns of public recognition do have an impact on the way subjective identities can be articulated, it is inevitable to reflect on a few of changes that are occurring in our public domain. First of all the role of oppositions has grown. Theoretically we always have several ways to manage social tensions or differences. We can try to deny, to diminish or to mediate these differences but we also can choose to accept, to underline or to enlarge them. In practice however, modern society seems to prefer the last choice, thereby creating a public sphere which is more and more characterized by polarization and rage. A second change seems to be that public imagination has become more important than a shared reality. The dynamics of public opinion is more often determined by stories than by facts, more often by emotions than by knowledge, more often by image than by figures. The third change is of course that due to social media the range of public opinion has expanded enormously. Today not only the editor of an important journal or learned scholars can express their view but everyone who is triggered by the words of someone else or certain items in the news. Together these changes have produced a new social personage known in Dutch as ‘reaguurders’. I don’t have the English equivalent to this expression but I’m sure you will be familiar with the phenomenon in itself: angry men using the internet to send their furious messages to the world, not interested at all in any form of reciprocity or dialogue, mainly obsessed by the need to reject other

opinions, staying in the dark of their nightly warfare and avoiding the risk of an encounter with their enemies in reality. To be sure, this is only an extreme example of the way public opinion has evolved during the last decades but its dynamics can be recognized in a much broader field.

What could be the impact of these changes on the development of young radicals? How will they affect the ambivalences that always have characterized the psychology of adolescence? I personally fear that the dark sides of this psychology are reinforced while the sunny sides are weakened. Let us have a look at young Muslims who are using the internet in order to find their identity or to escape the moral confusion of our modern world. There are at least three circumstances that may enlarge risk of radicalization, compared to the situation that existed a few decades ago. First, due to the global character of internet religious ideas, texts, rules, standards, stories or examples are not tied any longer to a local and social context. As Olivier Roy has asserted ten years ago this disconnection of ideals and traditional authority is not without risk. Second, due to the digital character of internet the social, practical or even physical consequences of certain ideas or beliefs are not directly felt. Youngsters can develop all kinds of dreams without being able to test them in reality or to experience the resistance of other people reacting to their ideas. Third, due to the massive character of the internet youngsters can share their radical opinions in large numbers, getting the appreciation of their peers they are craving for and strongly convinced that their rejection of the

modern world is the just case. The true nature of these risks was demonstrated a few weeks ago when we could watch a documentary on Dutch television, stressing the terrible fate of parents that could not reach their child anymore. One of the stories was about a young girl, educated by liberal Muslims, doing well in school and living in a little place on the Dutch countryside called Lichtenvoorde where any form of discrimination didn't occur. On a certain age however, she retired more and more in her room to be inspired by stories about radical Islam. And suddenly she left for Syria joining the Califat, leaving her parents in despair because they had not been able to prevent this fatal decision. Looking for her identity, she was hijacked by the imagination the internet was giving to her.

6.

Finally the question arises what we could do to diminish the risks of these processes. Supposing that the psychology of adolescence is will not change in the near future, we have to acknowledge that the dynamics of our public domain is not very helpful in this respect. I only can indicate the direction of a possible solution and I'm well aware of the fact that a full elaboration is needed. To summarize this direction I would say that we have to restore social realism in order to get an better mix of the quest for identity on the one hand and de need to test this identity on the other. More specifically I would advocate to

pay more attention to three ways of testing: rationality, relation and ritual.

As I've said before, it is wrong to believe that radical acts of young Muslims flow directly from the Koran. It could be true that some of these youngsters are using the Koran just to legitimize their behaviors. In that case we have to do with the islamization of radicalism – as some commentators have suggested – and not with a radical version of the Islam. But even then we will have to take the texts, arguments of rules they invoke more seriously. Denying their ideas any rationality is not only the best way speed up the process of radicalization. It also contradicts our own commitment to moral and intellectual debate. Moreover, we cannot exclude beforehand the possibility that their ideas are partly right. For instance if they blame the West for making innocent victims in the struggle against terrorism. We understand that these victims provoke resentment and rage but leaving the debate on the emotional level is not enough. Struggling for a more rational approach could be a test. A second way of testing is to build or expand all kinds of social relations whenever the risk of radicalism is popping up. In fact we are developing this approach in The Netherlands for many years already. To us it is quite evident that isolation, segregation, repression and similar techniques are mainly contra productive in their effect. However it may be useful to stress the reasons behind this evidence. The relevance of building social relations is not only that we care for our youth. It might be more important that young radicals, having a solid relation to relevant

others, can test their ideals and develop a certain social realism, instead of rejecting modern society as a whole. A third line is the development or reinvention of rituals as a meaningful way to find your own position in life. In the past societies have always organized rites de passage, giving young people the occasion to be tested but also helping them to accept the responsibilities of the next stage of their lives. In modern society most of these rites de passages disappeared and even military service has been abolished. Nevertheless the need for such a ritual form might be greater than ever, given the high level of openness, mobility and uncertainty that characterizes our modern world.

During the last century the famous Doctor Spock has helped millions of parents by teaching them a certain degree of educational realism. His message could be summarized in Dutch as a view pleading for Rust, Reinheid and Regelmaat. Today we could use a new view pleading for Ritual, Relation and Rationality in order to give our radical kids a certain realism. It will be needed, not only by them but also by ourselves in the days before us.

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