Building Social Scenarios. Self-Fulfilling Prophecies In The Terrorist Attacks In France

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Abstract: In nowadays Europe, a wind of terror, of an intensity comparable to that of the belligerent periods, walks freely and occasionally strikes the apparent tranquility of our lives. Islamic fundamentalist attacks, seemingly create hardly measurable effects. Media and, consequently, public opinion, economic, cultural, individual or group balance in many parts of this bewildered and concerned Europe. It is a tense context, in which fear and terror annihilate rationality and freedom of expression being able to maintain a toxic atmosphere of information, and independent media can serve conjuncturally, unintentionally even to the harmful interests of those terrorist groups.

Index Terms: terror, social scenarios, attacks, Self-fulfilling prophecies, France, public opinion, rationality.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current specialized literature, the integrative concept of social scenarios from the perspective of self-fulfilling prophecies was reported on an early stage by the works of Bishop Jacques Bénigne de Bossuet, in the 17th century, or by the philosopher Bernard de Mandeville, in the 18th century. In recent years, Romanian psycho-sociologists have also stopped on the theoretical (Ilut, 1993; Boncu, 2000), experimental (Chelcea Radu, Ciuperca, 1999) or historical frameworks of this topic (Radu-Geng, Ciuperca, 2001). Being by default one of the best known and most controversial scenarios in social psychology, sometimes associated with social telepathy, the concept (self-fulfilling prophecy) was imposed after the publishing of Robert King Merton’s benchmark: Social Theory and Social Structure (1949/1968). The book highlights the role of creating a social reality for a collective representation of a situation, which is based on the following action principle: social subjects build behavior not only on objective facts, but also based on the representations those facts bring along or on some imaginary elaborations, which respond to a masked form of social irrationality. This situation, even if sometimes it does not reflect the objective social reality, becomes real through those collective conducts specific to the assigned traits, by means of a semantic game of socialization. In this sense, self-fulfilling prophecies can be defined as social actors’ tendency to conform to the requirements of the built scenario at the level of collective imaginary as a consequence of a false definition, categorization, description. This way, another meaning is validated for actions, people, phenomena, influencing the further course of events. Suddenly, reality is no longer important, but the way the public imagines it. By the power of such a belief, reality is constrained to conform to its new definition, achieved thanks to the tacit complicity of social actors. The new modeled reality becomes a confirmation of the pre-established definitions when the symbolic game is initiated. Thus, false premises generate truths, in which the actors’ acknowledging of the objective reality is less important, as long as it keeps on creating social realities and significantly influencing everyone’s opinions, behaviors.

2 WHERE DO SELF-FULFILLING SOCIAL SCENARIOS OCCUR MORE OFTEN?

This phenomenon is mostly encountered in education. The most impressive results of self-fulfilling prophecies have been registered through the Pygmalion effect or the identity mirror effect (Rosenthal, Jacobson, 1968), that show how generous expectations can improve the other person’s performance. Robert King Merton is the one who identified the phenomenon of social scenarios in self-fulfilling prophecies as a living manifestation for interethnic and interracial relations. In the early 20th century, during the first union movements, representatives of the black population were not accepted in the United States since they were being criticized for their duplicitous attitude: “They are traitors of the working class, strike breakers”. This social stereotype, correlated with the marginal lifestyle and a modest educational capital, prompted them to accept the jobs of the whites who were on strike and then fired: “There are so many waiting for your jobs at the gates of the factory!” Employers would hire black people conjecturally, by instrumenting the whole scenario, and thus, prophecy would self-fulfill (the black eventually becoming strike breakers). Jussim and Fleming made a synthesis of researches on this controversial social phenomenon in Self-fulfilling Prophecies and the Maintenance of Social Stereotypes: The Role of Diadic Interactions and Social Forces (1996). The research of American psycho-sociologists stopped on several social realities, such as: the prejudice of the profiteering, immoral and dishonest Jew, who fueled the anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages. Another relevant topic refers to the slaves in America at the beginning of the 19th century, who were considered lazy, stupid, superstitious. By depriving them of employment and training, society determined them to confirm the stereotype. The portrait of the representatives of the black population in nowadays America retains traces of racial prejudice. For example, in the April-1992 confrontation on the streets of Los Angeles, a police patrol, consisting of five white people, molested a black citizen. A major collective violence followed this episode. Everything was due to racial stereotypes. Since blacks were regarded as potential criminals, violent by nature, whites felt, as defined by the situation, besieged, having to fight the evil and to calm the situation down. The escalation of violence did not do anything else but to reconfirm the validity of the prophecy. In the case of minority/ majority relation, activating this psychosocial phenomenon is based on the interaction between a quantitative majority (numerical) or a qualitative one (through

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its prestige) and a minority who, based on self-fulfilling prophecies, diminish each other’s identity and try to maintain the social and symbolic structure of society at any price. Minority groups with a marginal social status, low income, poor health, tend to buy poor-quality goods and services. The consequence is natural: they have much lower chances of finding a performant job, of retraining, so they consolidate their marginal social status and low incomes. This way, everything becomes a closed circle, and the individual/group subject remains trapped to this mechanism perpetuated from generation to generation.

3 HOW DOES THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES WORK?

In 1960 Gordon Allport was drawing attention upon a phenomenon confirmed in the belligerent situations until then: if nations expect to enter war, they will indeed do that. When a nation sends its expectations to its enemy, it starts putting into action its whole war industry, generating a similar reaction to the adversary, in accordance to the physical law of actions and reaction (Allport, 1960, apud Brehm, Kassin, 1990, p. 135). Darley and Fazio (1980) described the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecies in four stages:

1. The subject formulates/shares their expectations to the “target”.
2. The target-partner’s new behaviors confirm the subject’s initial expectations. The sense of guilt appears. The cause: personality traits, not the context.
3. The subject persists in manifesting their initial expectations from the victim.
4. The victim lives a real change in their image of themselves. The conviction that new behaviors are due to their defining personality traits appears.

Other researchers, Brehm and Kassin (1990), indicated only three important stages in the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecies, in which the source perceiving the other’s presence (perceiver) firstly forms their impression about the target-person (target) based on the initial interaction or on the stereotypes engaged in the relationship; then it models their behavior according to their expectations and, eventually, the target responds by a behavior which is convergent with the actions of the source.

4 THE ILLUSTRATIVE CASE FOR CREATING MEDIA SCENARIOS WITH FULLFILLED PROPHECIES: THE TERRORIST ATTACKS IN FRANCE

In order to outline the real image of the terrorist attacks in France, in the 1995-2016 period, the chronology of terrorism is as follows:

- November 13, 2015 – Gunmen and suicide bombers committed a wave of bombings in Paris, which targeted restaurants, a concert hall and the adjacent Stade de France area. The attacks, resulting in 130 dead and hundreds of injured, was claimed by the jihadist Islamic State group.
- July 14, 2016 – in Nysa, a 31-year-old Tunisian kills 84 people on the National Day of France, the attack having been claimed by the Islamic State terrorist group.
- July 26, 2016 – two men take more hostages in a church in Normandy, northern France. The church priest is killed.

The reaction of the French press to the terrorist attacks starts to respect the first constitutive stage of the analyzed social/media phenomenon. On the one hand, the media presents the state of shock and horror which dominated France those days: “War in full Paris”, headlines Le Figaro; Aujourd’hui en France writes: “terrorist massacre in the center of Paris” or La Voix du Nord: “Horror in Paris”. On the other hand, social media issues apocalyptic, alarming, pessimistic social scenarios about the situation in which France is hit by terrorist attacks, thus formulating a number of expectations towards the “terrorist target”. For example, the regional newspaper l’Est Republican published: “the terrorist threat which has already arrived in France puts the country in a permanent state of war”. “Horror”, headlines on black background L’Equipe sports daily, describing the mood of all French citizens. Le Parisien newspaper headlines “This time, there is war!”, “In the name of yesterday’s martyrs, of the innocent victims and in the name of the Republic, France will know to stay united and to make common front”. Liberation newspaper announces “Carnage in Paris”, “Terrorist barbarism has reached a historical stage. One cannot stop from making a connection between these bloody events and the battles occurring in the Middle East. France is playing its role and it must continue its actions “… . “The Third World War began on September 30”. The French press writes that World War III could have already started, noting the two events that took place in Moscow and in the Gulf, which could trigger a general confrontation. “History will probably indicate September 30, 2015 as the smooth beginning of the Third World War”.

The second stage (reunited with the third stage) targets to confirm the behavior expected by the terrorists. And, as the French press announced after each attack, the terrorists periodically initiate other attacks. But not because they had read the French or the international press, wanting to respect the prophecies of the media. No! The French press (and not only!) watches with fear each event in which people die in order to rapidly illustrate the involvement of Muslim terrorists, possibly of the Islamic state, so that they come back to the anticipations knowingly made long or short time ago. Thus there have been publishing analyzes made in different periods, in which France is warned of the danger of terrorism. But just as France, many other countries/areas/people have also been warned. For example, Iraq’s warning: “Iraq says it

The third stage is then consolidated as a media relay: the first terrorist attack is made, the first scenario is proposed, the real event becomes the expected event, the second terrorist attack confirms the expected event, the second scenario is proposed, and so on. The media relays the scenario, which becomes a “reality” that is then utilized as a new starting point for the establishment of additional scenarios...
warned there would be attacks in France, in the US and in Iran”. Or: The Institute for the Study of War, an important institution in Washington DC, published this map in July 2, 2015.

ISIS’s threat is visible over France, Italy, Spain, England.

The last stage – in which transformation occurs at the level of personal convictions and, implicitly, at the level of the incriminated person’s behavior – gets materialized in the case of media-created scenarios by assiduously presenting the terrorist threats as a certainty, a consequence of the created situation, a behavioral change anticipated once by the press and confirmed now and in the future by the Islamic state/terrorists/Muslims, etc. Due to this attitude of insistent presentation of terrorist events, even where they were not tested, France faced a different kind of consequences as well: fear among authorities, manifested by strengthening security measures. (The government in Paris has ordered all Frenchmen returning from Syria to be under house arrest); fear among population, dysfunctional tourism, burning a refugee camp; armed counterattack in Syria to avenge the death of the French in the terrorist attacks, in addition to the constant issuance of new imminent catastrophic scenarios in the near future. Suddenly, the media became a voice carrier for the leaders of the terrorist movements that were threatening France or other parts in the Western world. Consequently, even if terrorists attacked more or less in other periods, the press made them much more present through reports, analyzes, debates.

5 HOW COULD THEN THE CHAIN OF FULFILLING PROPHECIES BE INTERRUPTED?

Many times, we don’t necessarily need social earthquakes, riots, explosive energy to break the chain of tradition and social reflex. The fulfillment of prophecies can be canceled if each of the three/ four constitutive stages of the analyzed social/media phenomenon counteracts. For the first stage, an authentic knowledge of the accusatory character/phenomenon is sufficient. Very accurate information refutes the original expectations, causing the tearing of the first link. For the second (and third) stage, making the target aware of the accuser’s distorted opinion is essential. So, good information is still essential. In the situation of terrorism in France, some media institutions, universities or research institutes have tried to verify the degree of real menace of the potential terrorist. Thus, studies have emerged about the death causes in Western Europe in different periods. For example, a survey made by BBC with the help of Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland shows that the terrorist attacks in the 70s, of the ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom) and of IRA (Irish Republican Army) groupings were more bloody: terrorism – 175, murders – 4,000, vehicle accidents – 19000, accidents of all kinds – 126.000. Some publications have tried to look at the phenomenon of Muslim migration beyond the terrorism, which is usually assigned to them or linked to migration. The boundary between migration and terrorism, between the effects of terrorism among the Muslims in France and the effects of terrorism upon the French, was a necessary and very useful informative step in the context of generalizing tension and fear: Terrorisme islamiste: quelles sont les vraies causes? (In translation: Islamist Terrorism: what are the real causes?)

For the second step, in which media would present terrorist attacks as a behavioral change derived from the previous events, becoming aware of the conjunctural nature of those past events would cancel this false faith. Part of the press noticed this and tried to stop promoting terrorist movements in their editorial spaces. They proposed the solution of filtering information about terrorism in order not to popularize documents. They tried to avoid media gratification of terrorism. But those voices were solitary. An example is the article Terrorisme: comment la peur s’insinue-t-elle en nous? (Terrorism: How is fear creeping in us?) from Slate of 01/06/2016, which explains the mechanism of producing and maintaining a state of fear among the population by terrorism and its popularization. Although the press did not realize from the beginning that they initiated, maintained and completed the media phenomena of social scenarios with self-fulfilling prophecies, some publications have guessed the damaging approach on public opinion, which was being conveyed, under the influence of fear, a false image, certain stereotypes against the Muslims of France and around the world, a state of panic when confronting real imminent, implacable danger: TERRORISM! In cancelling the social/media scenario with fulfilled prophecies, the psycho-sociological theory of deindividualization proved once again its timeliness and usefulness. As it has already been noticed, the individual immersed in the great mass of public opinion, which consumes media, lives during those tense days the dilution of the feeling of social responsibility, being very sensitive to the suggestions of the press. By imitation, the individual participates in the formation of the group spirit and gregarity, gets contaminated by a sharp emotion, lives a state of social irrationality, reaching even those instinctual, aggressive and antisocial behaviors, which led to the burning of a camp. If for Carl Gustav Jung the individuation process was essential in developing personality, here, in the crowd, deindividuation gradually diminishes the subject’s individuality. And the main
factors responsible for this phenomenon are anonymity and reduction of self-consciousness (Diener, 1980).

4 CONCLUSION

Pierre Bourdieu spoke at one point about the inherited symbolic capital, which tends to be preserved in any society. Applying the postulated principle, in this context, individual or collective subjects will follow the already drawn routes. The role of the media in fixing the existential and cultural trajectories of some individuals belonging to ethnic, cultural, social groups is major, as demonstrated during the events of the terrorist attacks in France. In society, whether we like it or not, we carry with us an implicit logic of conservation, although we would sometimes like a saving change. This type of reasoning underpins perpetuating the prevailing social stereotypes, just as stereotypes about terrorism and Muslims terrorists are in this situation. Most of the times, the majority created through the media defines the social situation and imposes on minority a certain order of things. The minority reports itself to it as natural and integrates more slowly or depending on the persistence with which things are generally depicted in public space, and particularly in the media. Thus, the social equilibrium of a reality, although it may be a social erroneous or unfair construct, it is perpetuated from one individual to another, from one society to another, from one generation to another. In this context, the role media occupies in today’s society, beyond the acclamation/official use of freedom of expression and of economic or ideological independence, has a much more solid and imperative prerequisite: the consciousness of social responsibility that should govern freedom of expression and its independence.

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