The November 13 Paris Attacks: Rethinking the Concept of Identity

What we can learn from the different responses to the November terrorist attacks by ISIS in Paris and Beirut.

By Mathilde Simon

Abstract

The article analyzes the different demonstrations of solidarity worldwide for the November attacks conducted by ISIS in Paris and Beirut. Using conflict theories which analyze the notions of identity, ingroup and outgroup, the essay argues that distinctions in the way we show empathy for Paris and Beirut in turn can have damageable consequences, such as rigidified identities, that eventually lead to an escalation of the conflict. It finally advocates for using this moment as an opportunity to rethink our identities in a multifaceted and more inclusive way.

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Introduction

After the November 13 attacks in Paris, I was at first very apprehensive to write, comment, or share anything on social media regarding the events. As a French citizen, I was so shocked that I felt incapable of distancing myself from the events or to understand what the most appropriate response would be.

Yet, I eventually chose one article published in *Rue89*: "Paris-Beirut: variable geometry compassion",[1] which stated that Beirut and Paris, both having gone through major attacks by ISIS, received very different demonstrations of solidarity worldwide. Another person, who had not read the article, asked, irritated: "Is that really you who shared this article?" Not understanding quite well the tone of the question, I answered "Yes", and, a few seconds later, continued with "Why?" The answer I received was very natural for times of shock and mourning: "because I consider that in such moments, we should be able to mourn our deaths in peace".

Yet, my inner questions multiplied. I can only thank the person who said that for helping me to pick out what I was feeling so affected by: the distinction between "our" deaths and "their" deaths, and the line it draws between who is part of our empathy community and who is not. This is, by extension, a distinction between our humanity and their humanity.

Why is it more difficult, in times of crisis, to feel empathy for "them"? Why do we tend to draw more rigid boundaries between ourselves and others, stressing at the same time our ingroup unity and our distance with outgroups, who often share very similar stories? And, how do we decide who belongs to these outgroups? Lastly, what are the real consequences of such distinctions?

Is out empathy limited?

Emile Bruneau, a cognitive neuroscientist at MIT, explained the imbalance in demonstrations of empathy for Paris and Beirut by stating that moments of crisis, usually characterized by feelings of fear, insecurity, sadness and anger, exacerbate the understanding we have of our community, and tend to draw a more rigid line between who we consider to be part of it, and who we do not.

We look at victims of the attacks, and we unconsciously feel compassion for the ones who we consider similar to us, based, subject to the circumstances, on race, religion, culture, ideology, and so on. He writes: "you could argue that since the attack in Beirut was in the Middle East, and the Middle East is culturally and religiously distinct from the West—or the U.S. and Paris is more similar to the U.S. because it's more Christian and white, basically, or Caucasian—we sort of associate them with being in the same larger group with the majority of Americans."[2] The ingroup consists of a group of people a person psychologically identifies with. By contrast, the outgroup is made of the people this person does not identify with.

James Igoe Walsh, a professor who studies the relationship between terrorism and the media at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, seems to share a similar sentiment concerning the notions of ingroup and outgroup. He explains: "there is this concept in psychology, it's called 'in-group love' and it's about the idea that we might not dislike people who are different from us, we just like people who are like us a lot and so when bad things happen to them, we pay a lot more attention to them … When bad things happen to people that are not like us, it's not that we are indifferent to that—we just care less."[3] We only have a certain amount of compassion that we can possibly share with the world, so we prioritize our values by making decisions of where to devote our time and efforts.

Yet, although the concepts of ingroup and outgroup are very crucial to understanding the boundaries we unconsciously draw in times of crisis, neither Emile Bruneau nor James Igoe Walsh go far enough in their analysis. Indeed, on what basis do we feel some people are more similar to us than others? Individuals and cultures are a composite of thousands of characteristics that constantly evolve. What qualities do we value over others in order to determine who belongs to our community and is therefore worth our "ingroup love"?

In such times, the media and political discourses tend to overvalue the importance of the nation as determining the boundaries of our community. However, why should nationality take precedence over religion, culture, and the many other social identities that make us who we are? To many, religion might be more important to determine one's ingroup

than nationality, and this is only one aspect of social identification. Why do many experts therefore assume, as most of the media does, that American and European Muslims identify more with France, a country where Islamophobia has risen over the years, than with fellow Muslims who were killed in the Beirut attacks?

Additionally, the French flag—not the Lebanese one—became the profile picture of many non-Western people, as I witnessed on Facebook. Some friends from countries in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America put it as a demonstration of their solidarity with Paris. Did they identify culturally more with France than with Lebanon? The answer is not that clear. In response to people changing their Facebook profile picture to be overlaid with the French flag, some people changed their profile picture to have an overlay of the Lebanese flag.

Here enters the role of the media and their readers. After the attacks in Paris, a debate started as to who should be considered guilty for such an asymmetry in demonstrations of empathy. Yet, no one can be univocally pointed to as guilty: the media's emphasis on Paris was in part because this is what readers mostly want to hear about. Some demonstrations of empathy towards Paris might have happened because people only heard about Paris from the media with Beirut being relegated to the background. But this alone can't explain the great imbalance of empathy worldwide.

The line this variable draws between "us" and "them" generates different explanations to actions that can also be seen as similar. Although both were attacks by ISIS in areas that had not previously been targeted, Elie Farez, a Lebanese citizen, writes that: "when my people were blown to pieces on the streets of Beirut on November 12th, the headlines read: explosion in Hezbollah stronghold, as if delineating the political background of a heavily urban area somehow placed the terrorism in context."[4] While the shock of the attacks in Paris tended to prevent such political explanation by highlighting the horror and inhumanity of such acts, we provide political explanations for the same acts when they impact the outgroup. The above explanation for the attacks in Beirut makes their political aspect take precedence over their humanity, in turn hiding it from our eyes.

Rigidifying identities

In times of crisis, there is a need to understand what part of our society is under threat. Usually, we unfortunately turn a blind eye to political motivations. We search for deeper values, such as a national identity gravitating around the notion of freedom, in order to explain acts that, as a result of such explanations, appear even more horrendous. We look for threatened principles and values that seem to unify our conception of national identity. According to a survey conducted by Consumer Science & Analytics (CSA), 67% of French people considered their national identity to be under threat prior to the attacks. This rose to 70% after the events, highlighting a desire for protection.[5] Holding on to the idea that such non-negotiable values are under threat, this then justifies our military answer: we cannot negotiate with people like "them", with terrorists. And, indeed, 81% of French people afterward supported military intervention in Syria.[6]

Unifying our ingroup necessitates stressing commonalities. This way of analyzing the events takes us from a multifaceted conception of identity to a narrow-minded one. As explained by Lisa Schirch, author of the book *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, "conflict threatens both individuals and group identity. In conflict situations, people shift from viewing themselves as a complex mix of different identities, all roughly equal. Rather than using multiple groups to define identity, individuals begin to define themselves by a group identity that is threatened."[7] One form of identity is valued over the others, and as a result, "people's understanding of themselves and others may become increasingly rigid."[8]

While our conception of identity is unified, we conceive of the aggressor as part of another unified identity, whose values are intrinsically in conflict with ours: "all dimensions of the group's identity—such as ethnicity, religion, and language—tend to be viewed as highly correlated. The ideology calls for complete correspondence between ethnic boundaries, political boundaries, boundaries of emotional attachment, and boundaries of intensive interaction. Self and other are, in principle, completely separated along all the lines."[9]

But conflicts don't emerge all at once in society. They are latent, manifested in the forms of structural and cultural violence, before direct forms of violence emerge.

The fear of the other, which is the fear of an attack against our unity, is manifested in France by a desire for the assimilation of newcomers rather than for their integration. The concept of assimilation stresses the idea that newcomers should leave their culture at home in order to be able to completely accept ours. It is thus very different from integration, where the notion of exchange between different cultures, and the idea that such opportunities can open new doors and new understandings of one's own values, is at the core.

The phenomenon of radicalization, which in turn gives rise to events like November 13, as presented by Farhad Khosrokhavar in his book *Radicalisation*,[10] spreads from the impossibility for many youth to integrate themselves into French culture. To Farhad Khosrokhavar, radicalization is a reaction to anti-Muslim sentiments, widespread in France. Many radicalized young people come from other countries, and, in France, belong to a constantly humiliated minority. Simultaneously, youth is also a time for questioning and for exploring one's identity, often acted out by a desire to distance oneself from traditional environments.

Some Parisian suburbs constitute a symbolic space for relegation: their inhabitants don't have access to the same jobs or the same way of life as people who live in wealthier suburbs or in the city. The traditional political parties are viewed as unable to do anything to ameliorate the living conditions in these areas, while the Front National is gaining in popularity.[11] These issues develop into feelings of frustration and marginalization. Some people do not develop the feelings of belonging to a society. Instead they feel that the society in which they live rejects them. They develop other identities, be they cultural or religious ones for instance, that are more accessible to them. While identities may be built around a sense of belonging to a nation, they may also develop along other paths, such as around notions of exclusion and a sense of belonging to communities that are felt to be more welcoming.

One limitation to Farhad Khosrokhavar's argument, however, is that by highlighting social explanations to the phenomenon of radicalization, he downplays political motivations behind it. While we obviously don't

have to agree with ISIS's political motives behind the November 13 attacks, they do, however, exist. Western governments share a responsibility in the rise of ISIS in Syria and in Iraq, and, if we continue to turn a blind eye to it, we prevent ourselves from a holistic understanding of the present crisis.

The Clash of Civilizations: a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Society comes to be divided in our minds between the ingroup and outgroup based on cultural and religious characteristics conceived of as intrinsic to these groups. Such a gap between us and the others has real consequences: our minds read the situation as a clash of civilizations, and our answers, in turn, follow those lines, transforming an interpretation—one amongst many other possibilities—into a reality. These are what the asymmetry in the demonstrations of empathy illustrates. Indeed, as explained in *The Atlantic*, "following the attacks, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham said, 'This is not just an attack on the French people, it is an attack on human decency and all things that we hold dear.' The statement was eloquent and true, but as Ishaan Tharoor of *The Washington Post* noted, "American politicians issued few equivalent statements about Beirut. If no one points out that suicide bombings in Beirut are no less an attack on human decency than those in Paris, it is much easier to sort the world into a clash of civilizations—where innocent deaths on one side are more deserving of mourning than innocent deaths on the other."[12]

The line we draw between the ingroup and the outgroup echoes Samuel Huntington's interpretation of the world developed in his 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations". He argues that conflicts in the world will become conflicts between civilizations, where civilizations are defined as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguished humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people."[13] He draws eight civilizations, amongst which he considers "Islam", entirely defined by its religious factor, to be

in conflict with the "West", benefitting from a much more neutral wording. The West is associated with the respect of human rights, democracy, freedom, equality, liberty, the rule of law, free markets, and so on. These, indeed, are the values that French and other leaders worldwide have depicted as under attack with the November 13 events. Yet, this obviously is a short-sighted conception of our history, which forgets the numerous wars raged by Western governments to dislodge democratic regimes and install dictatorships elsewhere.

Samuel Huntington's argument runs as follow: because cultures and the way we conceive of our world has a direct impact on policies and economic decisions, Islam and the West's civilizational gap will manifest itself into an economic, social and political gap that, ultimately, will lead to conflicting interests and to violence. In such a civilizational conflict, both will look for allies in countries and civilizations that are the closest. He refers to H.D.S. Greenway quoting the 'kin-country' syndrome, which consists of "replacing political ideology and traditional balance of power considerations as the principal basis for cooperation and coalitions."[14] Yet, is the government of Saudi Arabia, and the emphasis it places on wahabism, a 'kin-country' to Western governments in the way Samuel Huntington meant it?

The main issue with Samuel Huntington's argument consists of its narrow-minded definition of civilization. Especially at present, when migration, economic, cultural and political exchanges have reached an unprecedented level, a civilization cannot be conceived of as a unified whole. Edward Said, in "The Clash of Ignorance", stresses this aspect when he writes: "Huntington is an ideologist, someone who wants to make 'civilizations' and 'identities' into what they are not: shut down, sealed-off identities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing."[15] Samuel Huntington's interpretation of the world seems therefore to already be one of conflicts, where conceptions of ingroup and outgroups have been rigidified following the process depicted earlier, therefore ignoring the many possibilities to read our history in a different light, one which would be much more inclusive and peaceful.

Explaining the monopoly Paris had over Beirut in demonstrations of empathy through the idea that France is a kin-country whereas Lebanon is not is a result and illustration of the division of the world along cultural lines, where culture takes precedence over humanity. This is where I agree with Samuel Huntington's threatening vision of the future: "a world of clashing civilizations, … is inevitably a world of double standards: people apply one standard to their kin-countries and a different standard to others."[16] This double-standard is only possible because of the way we read the world. Yet, this is a very old and untouched paradigm, where the West always conceived of itself as enlightening other cultures: "the basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated) remained untouched, and this is what has persisted, often insidiously and implicitly, in discussion since the terrible events of September 11."[17]

An additional reason why we might feel threatened comes from the fact that Islam, which was, according to Samuel Huntington, at the fringe of the West, is now at its center. To many, as argued vehemently by the Front National, the threat from Islam comes from inside, and the fight therefore entails discriminatory measures such as expelling Muslim refugees and shutting down our borders. The pursuit to reconstruct a homogeneous identity illustrates the desire to put Islam at the fringe of our civilizations, forgetting the numerous exchanges that have made it part, over centuries, of who we are at present. Discourses and policies advanced by the Front National (FN) in France and by Donald Trump in the U.S., and their impact on civilians, are responsible for the danger of making Huntington's interpretation eventually become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In times of conflicts the reality of the world ends up being modeled according to our fears.

In a context of fear and isolation, extreme right parties such as the Front National tend to gain more influence. The most popular idea French people agree on is that this party could bring more security to the country. This echoes the desire for protection discussed earlier. Yet, there is also consensus over the idea that the FN would discriminate against certain populations (76%).[18] While it did not win any region on December 13, 2015, it still gained space in the political landscape in a way that would have seemed impossible some years ago.

Amounting conflicts to a clash of civilization is a choice, often manipulated by political leaders and especially by the extreme right. It is the easiest way to explain conflicts because it is most efficient and cost-effective: it enables us to further isolate ourselves, justifying this isolation through beliefs that non-negotiable values are under attack and that we are unfairly made to be victims for defending such humanist values. Finally, isolated in our conception of victimhood, we can turn a blind eye to what we impose on others, and on the numerous violations of human rights we are responsible for outside and inside of our boundaries, against those others who come to be seen as "deserving" it.

What this crisis demonstrates: the need to rethink our identity in a multifaceted and inclusive way

Although very difficult and shocking, times where taking a step back is usually an enormous effort which needs time, conflicts and crisis constitute great opportunities to question ourselves and to deeply reflect on what we accept as a given.

While identities can be defined in conflict-settings as isolated and characterized by a search for purity, they can also be thought of in a different light. According to Herbert C. Kelman, Director of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs from 1993 to 2003, "to view national identity as a social construction does not imply that it is manufactured out of nothing.… The social construction of the identity implies a degree of arbitrariness and flexibility in the way the identity is composed (which elements are admitted into it and which omitted from it), and in what its boundaries are (who is included and who is excluded). The choices depend on the opportunities and necessities perceived by the elites that engaged in mobilizing ethnonational consciousness for their political, economic, or religious purposes."[19]

Defining identities relies on many choices made, to a great extent, by political leaders, who can either decide to focus on similarities or on differences. The way we conceive of our identities depends on the historical events and experiences we decide to stress, which in turn define boundaries and priorities. Hence, Herbert C. Kelman continues writing: "there

are many elements that can be added to or subtracted from an identity without jeopardizing its core. In fact, changes in less central elements of the identity are often advocated precisely in order to protect the core of the identity."[20]

One of ISIS's main goals consists of dividing our societies and leading to a further isolation of Muslim youth, who, resultantly would turn more to radicalization. Therefore, creating a positive environment, one of solidarity and compassion, becomes a priority. Daniel Bar-Tal, professor at Tel Aviv University, Eran Halperin, from Haifa University, and Joseph de Rivera, from Clark University, define such an environment as "one in which people's emotional relationships are characterized by a concern for others, sensitivity to others' needs, freedom, trust, and security."[21] To this extent, it is a priority to acknowledge the fact that people in other regions are also victims of the same attacks, and that their suffering is closely bound to ours. We should be welcoming refugees coming from regions affected by ISIS and think of ways to integrate them in our society, rethinking our understanding of Islam and starting nation-wide discussion about the important role it plays in who we are. All these are part of defining this positive environment.

This amounts to building inclusive and peaceful identities. As explained by Lisa Schirch, "in peaceful societies, identities do not depend on defining an evil 'other'."[22] The transformation of our identities depends on post-crisis rituals and events that gather people and include all social groups, and where we "can respond to this process of dehumanization through increasing the flexibility of identity, rehumanizing, and confirming the complexities of understanding humanity."[23] Our reaction to the attacks should reinvent our identities based on the interdependence with other social groups, and especially with those groups who also suffer from ISIS, creating a unifying front made of many identities, which would help us better understand and counter the problem, rather than would isolate us further from each other based on perceived differences.

Conclusion

There is a need not only to work with refugees and with people who suffer from attacks from ISIS, but also to focus on the geography of our territory and especially on the relegated areas which are often felt as excluded from French culture and policies. Farhad Khosrokhavar highlights the necessity to integrate radicalized youths, by developing programs of deradicalization which would associate inhabitants from these relegated areas with municipal authorities, religious figures, police and psychiatrists. This shows the necessity to integrate diverse religions within our society, and to work closely with religious figures.

Endnotes

1. Translated from the French "Paris-Beyrouth: la compassion à géométrie variable"
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22. Lisa Schirch, p. 135.
23. Ibid.