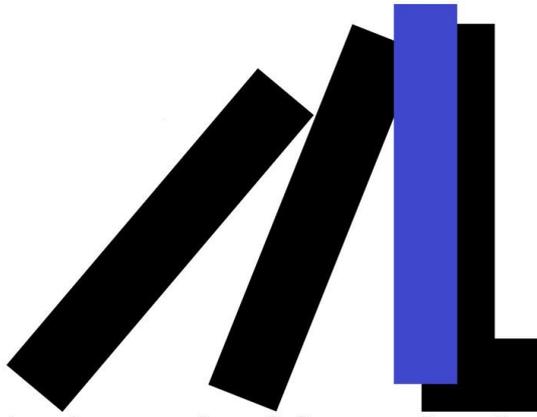




AFFECT



IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF BELGIAN DE-RADICALISATION POLICIES UPON
SOCIAL COHESION AND LIBERTIES

PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION IN MOLENBEEK

1

AN OVERVIEW

Fabienne BRION & Emmanuel-Pierre GUITTET

Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain)

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ABOUT AFFECT

AFFECT is a four-year research programme (2017-2021) funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) under the Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks scheme (Brain.be).

The objective of AFFECT is to assess the effectiveness of Belgian de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism policies and programmes and their impacts on social cohesion and liberties.

Coordinated by the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), AFFECT is a multidisciplinary and collaborative research project involving the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and the National Institute for Criminalistics and Criminology (NICC.)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In contrast to the social, political and media-fueled stigmatisation which the district of Molenbeek and its residents have endured over the last few years, the general aim of the present research paper is to contribute to a better understanding of a thorny and still sensitive issue, and to develop a less emotionally charged and knee-jerk approach to the question of prevention of radicalisation.
2. In the analysis of the phenomenon of radicalisation put forward by the intelligence and security services and the police, Islam occupies an important position. By contrast, in the analysis given by workers within the services concerned with prevention, whether or not they grew up in a Muslim environment or in families from a Maghrebi background, the significance attached to Islam is minimal.
3. The focus on the religious element in the analysis of the trajectories of terrorist attackers and jihadists makes it possible to avoid asking questions regarding macro-structural and meso-structural causes within Belgian society.
4. The attacks, their treatment in the media, and counter-radicalisation policies have all caused deep disruption to the collaborative relationships between social workers, the district administration, the police services and psycho-social services.
5. The dismissal of Molenbeek as an “inward-looking religious enclave” has helped to single out one district in particular, whereas in fact the problems of racism and common islamophobia are unfortunately – like other forms of political and social “mixophobia” – to be found more widely throughout Belgian society, as they are in European and western society more generally.



INTRODUCTION

It seems almost redundant to begin this report by stating that the Brussels district of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean was utterly unprepared for the turmoil into which it was plunged following the terror attacks and the procession of crass oversimplifications which came so predictably in their wake. The ghastly reality of the attacks and the number of men and women who have been drawn into “jihad”, have unfortunately lent credence to discourses that are not only simplistic but also overly deterministic. Following the terror attacks perpetrated in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016, the district of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean was presented in the national and international press as a “capital of jihad”, a “hot-bed of islamist terrorism”, a “hub of radicalisation” and an “ultra-segregated zone of lawlessness”¹, with some commentators feeling able to declare in public broadcasts that it would be better to bomb Molenbeek instead of

1 H. FRAIHI, *En immersion à Molenbeek*, Paris, La différence, 2016. While not an exhaustive list, the following press articles give a flavour of this coverage: T. BERTHEMET, Depuis 15 ans, Molenbeek nourrit le djihad en Europe et dans le monde, *Le Figaro*, 22 March 2016 ; D. CHARTER., Suburb where jihadists can be sure of sanctuary, *The Times*, 23 March 2016 ; A. DESTEXHE, Molenbeek : des zones de non droit au coeur de la capitale européenne, *Le Figaro*, 20 janvier 2016 ; A. GILLIGAN, G. WALTON et C. TURNER, Paris attackers linked to Belgian suburb where the authorities have 'lost control', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 November 2015.

Raqqa², and others denouncing the “blinkered policy of the Belgian authorities”³.

These frequently outrageous, stigmatizing and hurtful descriptions do little to help; not only do they contribute to the production of the very thing they denounce, but they also undermine the preventive work being carried by various agencies on the ground by underplaying the realities and difficulties that these professionals face. This tendency among journalists and politicians to try to outdo each other in their disparagement of the district has certainly made it more difficult to speak about the truly rich and unique characteristics possessed by Molenbeek in both sociological and historical terms⁴, and to look in a calm and serious manner at what the local political authorities have been doing for some time in order to address these sociodemographic and socio-economic challenges, along with the precarious status of a section of its population. The few press articles and academic papers which have sought to

2 E. ZEMMOUR, « La France devrait bombarder Molenbeek », le polémiste dérape sur RTL, *Le Soir*, 17 November 2015.

3 C. LAMFALUSSY, J.-P. MARTIN, *Molenbeek-sur-Djihad*, Paris, Grasset, 2017, p.295

4 *Les Cahiers de La Fonderie*, No. 33 : Molenbeek, une commune bruxelloise, décembre 2005. G. DE PAUW, *Een beeld van een buurt. Molenbeek-centrum door de ogen van zijn bewoners. Mille et une facettes d'un quartier. Molenbeek-centre vu par ses habitants*, Molenbeek: ed. by Jean-Marie De Smet, 2002. S. DE CORTE, *Mediterraan Molenbeek*, in: E. Corijn, W. De Lannoy, (eds.) *Crossing Brussels. La qualité de la différence/ De kwaliteit van het verschil*, Brussels : VUB Press, 2000.



present a different image of the district⁵, or tried to give a more nuanced account of its social and political realities⁶, have been drowned out in a veritable maelstrom of clichés which has allowed Molenbeek to be used as political shorthand even beyond Belgium's borders⁷.

The present research paper is based on two series of group interviews conducted between March 2017 and January 2018, with social workers involved in ongoing education and careers training, the implementation of alternative judicial measures, the enforcement of judicial decisions or the provision of legal aid on one hand, and police officers from the Brussels-west zone working in different departments, along with officers and other staff from the district administration on the other.

The group interview method is a challenging exercise insofar as it relies on each participant feeling free to communicate his/her point of view without feeling inhibited by the judgmental gaze of the other. The method, its significance and its difficulties are well

5 E. JARDONNET, A. MOREAU, A Molenbeek, la culture résiste après les attentats, *Le Monde*, 16 April 2016. AZIMI, Roxana. Molenbeek est (aussi) un repaire d'artistes, *Le Monde*, 08 April 2016.

6 J. DONZELOT, Les déçus de l'immigration et les frustrés de l'histoire. *Tous urbains*, 2015, 12: 50-52 ; LAUMONIER, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean n'est pas un ghetto, *Le Monde*, 23 November 2015. J. LEMAN, Is Molenbeek Europe's jihadi central? It's not that simple, *The Guardian*, 17 November 2015.

7 E. DE VULPILLIERES, T. de MONTBRIAL : « En France, on trouve des dizaines de Molenbeek », *Le Figaro*, 14 avril, 2016. FRESSOZ, Françoise. Bruno Le Maire : « Il y a l'équivalent de Molenbeek en France, dans certains quartiers », *Le Monde*, 23 March 2016.

known and have been detailed elsewhere. The present research paper does not focus on the methodological dimension, but rather more on the analytical one. Our concern here is to explore the following question: what are the expectations and concerns of the actors who are, sometimes unwillingly, associated with counter-radicalisation policies?

THE IMPACTS OF THE ATTACKS ON THE DAILY PRACTICES

Following the attacks, police officers – in conditions of great urgency and often putting their own lives at risk – carried out a series of intensive and particularly intrusive operations, in particular searches of properties, which involved the use of both criminal and administrative policing powers. Terrorism was assigned to the federal police, radicalisation to the local police force. All available legal measures were mobilised in what was presented as a race against time to prevent not only fresh attacks, but also any further growth of the phenomenon:

“To shut down mosques which were advocating violence, or other places, we sometimes used pretexts other than radicalization: we made use of offences that were easy to prove, like poor hygiene or planning offences.”

As one police officer remarks, some collateral damage was inevitable:

“We're working on the basis of suspicious behaviour, previous form, family network. When a person is



suspected of radicalism, their friends and relatives also pay the consequences."

Under great pressure, the district administration carried out extensive searches in the databases and archives available to them. They were thus able to locate all the files relating to administrative sanctions within the district, in order both to protect themselves and to identify potential suspects, establish the connections existing between individuals and, more generally, attempt to detect warning signs of impending violence:

"We go back over all the stop and search reports, all the pending files, to cover our backs of course, but also because we think it's the right thing to do" [...] "We reread a lot of documents retrospectively, based on a name or a file".

According to the social workers, the attacks, the reaction they provoked and the excessive coverage of them in the media had various consequences. Firstly, they widened the gulf between citizens and the elected officials who represent and govern them, with many citizens no longer having confidence in official institutions:

"One phenomenon which the authorities haven't understood is the very large gap which exists between politics and citizens" [...] "You can see that there's a real breakdown of people's confidence in institutions and this isn't just happening in Molenbeek, it's everywhere!"

Young people are not immune to this phenomenon of a loss of confidence. According to one teacher who works in a technical and vocational college in

Molenbeek:

"As far as young people are concerned, confidence in institutions has become so eroded that they need 'guides' to accompany when they go to a work placement or a meeting. Otherwise, they prefer to drop out ... The mistrust and stigmatization is so great that you have to resort to playing a character in order to get them to speak ... At the same time, they're conflicted: if we do free expression in school, ah well that's because it's not a 'real' school; in a 'real' school, that's to say in a school like the one they've been thrown out of, you've got books to study."

Secondly, these events reinforced the stigmatization of what some, probably out of convenience, call the "Moroccan" or "Maghrebi community" – a heterogeneous group whose members, Belgian nationals for the most part, are constantly referred to in terms of their bi-nationality or the origins of their parents and grandparents:

"Sometimes the Moroccan communities are a bit more open, sometimes they're a bit more closed, it depends what's going on in the world ... As soon as an event occurs, the finger of blame is either pointed directly at them, or at least everyone looks at them. But when it's calm ..."

Thirdly, they have reinforced the polarization of the population, and of discourses, attitudes and behaviours, into a configuration based on a split between an "us" and a "them":

"The 'them against us' discourse is pervasive." [...] "Young people are adopting a radical discourse, not necessarily in the religious sense of the word, but in the sense of a divisive



discourse, a 'them and us' discourse. There is a positive aspect to this, namely the building of institutional awareness, the beginnings of political consciousness. But there's also a negative aspect: the young people say to social workers: 'you're working for them and against us'. But we're not 'sedaters', we're not legitimizing the replication of social inequalities ..."

During the meetings, these three sets of consequences are linked together – the relationships they establish between each other become the subject of debate if they seem to be a factor in the phenomenon of exclusion which these actors seek to counter. This is the case, for example, with the relationship between polarization, stigmatization and disconnection from institutions:

"'Them and us' is a discourse that a lot of people adopt. Young people don't have a monopoly over it; their parents hold the same view. It goes back to the perception that social mobility is completely blocked".

Similar observations are made regarding the relationship between polarization, stigmatization and the withdrawal of the State or the reformulation of social policies along security-based lines:

"The 'them against us' mentality is also a phenomenon born of anxiety when the people who are supposed to be protecting us no longer protect us. 'They' keep themselves apart since they aren't subject to the humiliations, the stigmatization, having the finger of blame pointed at them".

It is as if this polarization sanctioned or even decreed the loss of confidence in the institutions of representative democracy

seen here, by its simultaneous inscription and reversal of stigma. On the "ground", which has now become the "frontline", two groups of professionals in particular are paying the price: on the one hand there are the police officers of the tactical intervention units, incarnations of the State insofar as this is seen in terms of a community claiming a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical violence within a given territory⁸, a right which is contested; on the other there are the teachers working within the context of the obligatory provision of technical and vocational education, insofar as school holds out the promise of social integration, a promise which is not kept.

As far as these problems are concerned, counter-radicalization policies are, at best, ineffective. We say at best because they can also, on the contrary, become vectors for radicalization and serve as evidence to back up the ideas of the Islamic State organization, which is quick to interpret them as such. Logically, but also sociologically, the principle becomes that of the excluded middle.

TRAJECTORIES

In the analysis of the phenomenon of radicalization put forward by the intelligence and security services and the police, Islam occupies an important position. By contrast, in the analysis given by workers within the services concerned

⁸ M. WEBER, *Le savant et le politique*, trans. C. COLLIOT-THELENE, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, p. 118.



with prevention, whether or not they grew up in a Muslim environment or in families from a Maghrebi background, the role assigned to it is minimal. It is not that they dispute the retreat of Malachite Islam and the growth of Salafism, nor the widespread adoption of visible markers of membership of the Muslim community, nor indeed the pressure placed on people from a Maghrebi background who do not fast during Ramadan:

“Personally, I think attitudes have hardened. You have to put up with more and more comments if you don’t follow Ramadan. And the neighborhood’s changed, too. Before, the rue du Prado was a mixed street with different shops; that’s no longer the case. There’s a great deal of social pressure”.

Nor are they unaware of the fact that, within some families, a break has occurred between the religious practices of the parents and those of the children, the latter considering themselves to be, to a greater extent than the former, “true Muslims”:

“There’s a break with the parents on two fronts: social media, and religion. The young people who are coming back to Islam are convinced that they know better than their parents when it comes to what “real” Islam is. They believe that their parents don’t understand anything about it and have even betrayed it. The ABC of the terrorist recruiter begins with getting the parents out of the picture. But, with a helping hand from adolescence, they don’t even need to know their ABC.”

Some of them, who worry about these things, are setting up projects aimed at fathers, in order to reduce this “digital

divide” and also at adolescents, in order to give them the tools necessary to analyze the formal procedures employed in media constructions of the followers of ideological discourses from a critical perspective. Generally speaking, however, the members of the first focus group maintain that the problem is one of polarization, not religion: while the Islam which some “born-again”⁹ individuals claim as their own gives this problem a form, it does not explain it. Does this amount to saying the people working in the prevention services have adopted the theory of “root causes”¹⁰? Whether or not this is the case, they relate radicalization and polarization alike to macro-structural causes:

“In Molenbeek, 55% of young people aged 18-25 are unemployed (in the [Brussels-Capital] Region the rate is 13%). Inequalities are just being reproduced. They’ve passed through the vocational school system; they’ve come out without any qualifications, or just an electrical or general clerical qualification.”

The focus on the religious element in the analysis of the trajectories of terrorist attackers and jihadists makes it possible to avoid asking questions regarding macro-structural and meso-structural causes within Belgian society; it also justifies a strategy of “proactive repression,

⁹ S. MARTIN BEHLOUL, Le débat sur l’Islam en Suisse, in M. SCHNEUWLY PURDIE, M. GIANNI, M. JENNY (eds), *Musulmans d’aujourd’hui : identités plurielles en Suisse*, Geneva, Labor & Fides, 2009, p. 72.

¹⁰ On this theory and its relations with the history of the notion of radicalization, see R. COOLSAET, ‘All Radicalisation is Local’. The Genesis and Drawbacks of an Elusive Concept, 2016, *Egmont Paper 84*, 48 p.



principally targeting so-called 'islamist' terrorists' (...)”¹¹, a strategy based chiefly on surveillance and neutralization.

The consequence of this: the demoralization of professionals who follow the model of crime prevention based on the medical model and public health policies. On the one hand, they cannot relate to the Islam-focused definition of the problem which is imposed upon them (“*The problem isn't Islam, it's the macro-structural causes*”) and, on the other, they feel that they are neither acknowledged nor supported in this definition around which their work revolves, a complaint which is to be understood in very concrete terms:

Reaction of the federal government to the attacks: 150,000 euros for prevention, 4 million for security measures. That says it all”.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

The attacks, their treatment in the media, and counter-radicalization policies have all caused deep disruption to the collaborative relationships between social workers, the district administration, the police services and psycho-social services. Yet are these collaborations actually desirable? What conditions should apply to them? The points of view expressed in the two focus groups regarding these questions differed radically. The social

¹¹ V. CODACCIONI, *Justice d'exception. L'Etat face aux crimes politiques et terroristes*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2012, p. 280.

workers in the first focus group made these observations:

“After 13 November, all collaboration with other partners – with the police, with the district administration – was suspended. Everything stopped.”

The subject of progress having been thrown away and confidence lost as a consequence is a sensitive one. Thus, in the first instance, collaborations – and confidence, upon which they depend – are presented as purely being questions of personnel:

“Collaborations are something that depends entirely on the individuals who are there, their personal affinities”.

The point is made that the refusal to collaborate with the police is not an outright refusal based on principle; it comes rather from a desire to maintain a critical distance with respect to the logics of action followed by other professionals intervening in the public space, and also from an acute consciousness of the need to take into consideration the effects of the reconfiguration of the field of prevention which are linked to counter-radicalisation policies:

“It's important not to denigrate 'social-workers/police' relations, but we don't function in the same way. The difference is we put the interests of the young person first.”

In this context, in order to make it possible to maintain relations with the section of the population targeted by counter-radicalisation measures most of the members of this group feel the need to avoid at all costs getting “*categories confused*” and to mark themselves out as being different from the police and the



district administration:

“We’re not against the idea of working with others, but you’ve got to be careful not to get categories confused.”

This is because they are regularly accused of being either “snitches” or “lackeys of the system”.

The transmission of information relating to young people who are suspected of becoming radicalized is thus non-negotiable: on this point, social workers are particularly at pains to make things clear, given that they are suspected of not being in a position to resist the demands placed on them by the police and the district administration:

“From 2014 onwards, we broke off all ties with the police. The police would send us list of names, repeat offenders who were constantly in and out of prison ... They gave us information, but nothing was given in exchange, we didn’t give them any other information ...”

However, the need to preserve the conditions necessary to maintain relations with young people is not the only reason behind their refusal. What they see as being at stake here is also a certain conception of prevention and, more generally, of what makes for a “safe society”:

“What they want to put in place is the Germanic model of prevention, where you’ve got the police station, the football pitch and the youth centre all next to each other, with information circulating between them, and adults from a minority ethnic background being taken on to keep an eye on young people from a minority ethnic background ... In Molenbeek, we’re not

ready for that. Developing synergies between actors, that’s not a problem. But to be able to do our jobs, we need confidence; and to feel confident doing our jobs, we can’t have confusion between roles and functions. We work with a long-term perspective. And we don’t need lists of names from the State Security Service to know young people ...”

In these circumstances, collaboration is cut off or reduced to a minimum.

In the second focus group, the opinions expressed are very different. Here the emphasis is on solidarity in the face of the challenge and danger that radicalization represents to society; a solidarity which, it is claimed by some participants, is as yet insufficiently developed owing to misconceptions regarding police work.

Collaboration with prevention-related services is sought for various reasons. The knowledge possessed by police officers is limited (“*We can establish risk factors, but not typical profiles*”). Given their on-the-ground knowledge – their “*knowledge by acquaintance*”¹², to quote Blumer’s concept – the professionals working in social prevention-related services could not only pass on high-quality information to the police but also help to reduce the quantity of information being sent to them by carrying out a certain number of checks; similarly, they could be involved in the pre-investigations carried out prior to taking a decision on how to categorise an individual and whether or not to include them in the dynamic Foreign Terrorist Fighters, and Homegrown Terrorist Fighters databases; likewise,

¹² H. BLUMER, *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 40.



they could provide the police with a sound indication, based on their judgement, of which files can be safely closed.

By doing so, they would also help reduce the total number of files, and at the same time limit the consequences which result from an overly hasty categorisation or inclusion of individuals in these databases. This request has left those working in prevention divided. On the face of it, there seem to be some workers and departments who refuse point-blank to collaborate, some who agree to do so, and some who are undecided.

There is still at least two points of agreement between the members of the two focus groups we would like to highlight here. Counter-radicalisation policies concentrate on the “upstream” side – “*preventive neutralization*” and “*proactive repression*” by administrative or judicial means – and neglect the “downstream” – “*deradicalisation*”, “*disengagement*”. And, secondly, the dismissal of Molenbeek as an “inward-looking religious enclave” has helped to single out one district in particular, whereas in fact the problems of racism and common islamophobia¹³ are unfortunately – like other forms of political and social “mixophobia” – to be found more widely throughout Belgian society, as they are in European and western society more generally¹⁴.

13 O. ESTEVES, *De l'invisibilité à l'islamophobie*. Presses de Sciences Po, 2011. L. FEKETE, S. AMBALAVANER, *A suitable enemy: Racism, migration and Islamophobia in Europe*. Pluto Press, 2009.

14 Z. BAUMAN, *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge, Polity, 2000.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fabienne Brion is professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) and coordinator of the AFFECT Research network.

Fabienne.Brion@UCLouvain.be

Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet is researcher at the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) and member of the AFFECT Research network.

Emmanuel-Pierre.Guittet@UCLouvain.be



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