

Social capital, insecurity and fear of crime in Padova

Dario Padovan. Department of Sociology. University of Turin, Italy

1. Introduction

Every society must offer its members a degree of security and security is a social good. The sphere of security and, in a broader sense, of assistance is as old as the oldest human community. The original such communities evolved because of the need for security and assistance, a communal supply system that, as time went on, became more and more complex. Security includes a wide range of social goods and meets needs such as medical care, distribution of food, caring for the infirm, help for orphans, coping with disasters, guarantee of physical safety for the individual and so on. Security is a public good that must be managed at the political level, thus it is closely linked to political society and its functionings. Almost inevitably in situations where there is a high degree of insecurity there will also be a lack of participation. The absence of an *agora* renders individual actors isolated and afraid, at the mercy of the dangers and risks around them.

The aim of the norms and laws that are the basis of modern society, which some sociologists call “the risk society”, is no longer that of the social security briefly described above but rather a uniquely negative and defensive “secure utopia”. As Ulrich Beck suggested, we are no longer dealing with the question of obtaining something that is “good”, rather, we are merely trying to avoid “the worst” [U. Beck, 2000, 64 on.]. Risk society is reflected and expressed in the phrase “I am afraid” and the community that grows up is that of fear. A new political energy is emerging from this way of living together, whose motives and characteristics are, as yet, unclear. We still do not know what exactly communities emerging from this “solidarity of fear” will do, how they will act, however it would seem that they are often oriented towards irrationality, extremism, fanaticism, towards a way of acting that is clearly impolitic. The community of fear, which brings together exclusively individual and private interests and fears, is no longer bigger than the sum of its parts. In Bauman’s eyes is a “coat hanger community” or a “coat-peg community”, because the group is formed through a common search for a ‘peg’ to hang the fears of many individuals on contemporaneously [Z. Bauman, 2000, 54]. These communities get their strength from the force of fear and repressed anger about certain problems, but the “problems in question” can only generate fleeting and ephemeral aggregates, which in the end will prove disappointing and frustrating and which are very different from the “real community” Bauman was thinking of when he wrote.

The fear of crime is one of these pegs which unite individual fears and apprehensions into communities of intermittent, fleeting, but aggressive, actions. A great many worries and existential anxieties are ensconced within the fear of crime, a sign of a wider problem of social integration which social institutions seem unable to deal with effectively. The increase in social insecurity and its specific sub product the *fear of crime*, clearly shows the difficulty *policy makers* have in drawing up public policies that obey the principles of social protection [D. Padovan, F. Vianello, 1999, 248]. However, it is the self-same political élites that, taking advantage of this situation, play upon the sources of this insecurity, which springs from roots which are often hard to identify, by heightening the more generalised worry about the lack of personal safety and collective security. Governments and institutions, unable to offer any adequate answers to the feeling of insecurity experienced by citizens, thus focus on “aliens” and strangers people who are different and declare war on criminals of every type, block illegal immigrants, throw any person who risks being involved in crime into prison and make life generally difficult for those who are not part of the “community of fear” Law and order are the only answers politics and politicians seem able to offer in order to reduce personal and social unsafety.

2. Methodology and objectives of the research

The data presented here were collected during a research project, carried out using a questionnaire based on themes, which examined people’s perceptions of insecurity. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 604 individuals, selected on the basis of gender, and resident in three different areas of Padova. The study is an extension of another, conducted in 1996, which examined the relation between public opinion and crime [G. Mosconi, 2000a], and also of another study which is

carried out every year on the same theme as part of the project “Città sicure” (safe cities) in the Emilia-Romagna Region [G. Mosconi, 1999; G. Sacchini, 2001].

The sample is not representative of the population of the entire city, in that the three areas studied were chosen because of their different social qualities. The urban area called the *Fiera* (literally Trade Fair) is that near the central station. As is true of all towns and cities above a certain size, a higher than average number of immigrants can be found in this area even though it does not fall into the category of “residential ghetto”. The area around train stations is usually a meeting place for all immigrant groups, full of shops and bars that cater to their needs and which are often owned by other immigrants, above all people from China and Nigeria. The area forms a sort of “Inner City”, even though this is not really a very good way of describing the situation given the peculiar structure of Italian towns and cities. The urban area called the *Stanga* is noted for the large number of immigrants who live there, indeed, it could be called the “ghetto of Padova”. It is a semi-suburban area located right next to large complexes which offer commercial and other tertiary services and which have very little to do with the life of the area itself. The neighbourhood is assailed by heavy traffic partly because of the shopping centres, the social composition is differentiated and varied and there is a lack of essential services. The third area studied is *S. Osvaldo*, which is an urban residential area for high income residents, socially tranquil except for the limited presence of some “local youth” who may, or may not, be involved in hard drugs. A small number of immigrant families have settled in the area.

This study uses the method of comparing different areas as it seeks to analyse and compare the feelings of insecurity experienced by the inhabitants of three neighbourhoods. These three areas are very different as regards their social composition, the quality of the environment and the relationship structures, networks, which have developed in each. Because of these differences the problem of ‘crime’ presents itself in a different guise in each. Our approach concentrates on the socially shared meaning of fear, insecurity and risks in general. The meaning attributed to fear and insecurity vary from place to place thus we wish to investigate how different actors and groups construct their concept of insecurity as part of their interactions with others. Furthermore, different types of urban social networks, different levels of trust in the institutional infrastructure and different degrees of participation, influence the genesis of very different fears and non-securities. Study of the structure of relationships and of social trust come together with the previously mentioned structure of meaning and practices that appear within a given social space, offering, as we will see, interesting possible explanations of the mechanisms that lie behind the genesis of fear and insecurity.

Thus this study is seeking, primarily, to identify the social mechanisms that generate insecurity. The concept of social mechanism refers to the context of an action – individual or collective – that is made up of the bonds, material means, and moral cognitive and motivational resources that are systematically built up at the local level. Thus the fact that there are these social mechanisms indicates the choices and actions of social actors do not depend solely on each actor’s individual character, rather it depends on the interaction between these latter and socially structured variables. Basically, the concept of “social mechanism” makes it possible to explain causes in their context in such a way as they take into account the “how” and the “why” of why a particular event has taken place and thus to go beyond the classic sociological confrontation between the subjective behaviour of an actor and the special structures that either restrict or encourage action [M. L. Bianco, 2001, 13; J. Elster, 1993, 11-17].

Outcomes

I offer a summary, a list, of the more important elements and data that have emerged from this investigation.

- The deterioration of the environment, political insecurity and imbalances, tenuous social bonds and relationships and the heterogeneous nature of the social composition of two areas, the *Stanga* and the *Fiera*, are reflected in the models of participation usually adopted there, in the higher level of prejudice expressed by residents – especially towards immigrants – and on strong feelings of insecurity and fear among the residents in these neighbourhoods. Between the difficulties of the environment, lack of systemic trust, everyday fears, prejudice and stronger feelings of insecurity there is a clearly defined network with strong links which continually reinforce each other.

- Greater prejudice and higher levels of fear appear to be associated mainly with different relationship mechanisms and with different types of social capital. In the *Stanga*, the prevailing circumscribed relationship networks had been built up between friends and relations and, rather than providing reassurance, serve instead to create a fragile but rigid structure that is easily destabilised by the presence of a ‘stranger’, or rather by the imagined insecurity that is associated with such a presence

as in the case of the short, dense relationship networks typical of the Stanga, which encourage the classic friend/enemy behaviour, e.g. effectively draw up clear borders between the individual and the 'other'. The longer, more tenuous relationship bonds more common in the Fiera, a type of network found in more individualistic social models shows, however, that even these other looser links are not able to reduce residents' feelings of insecurity, rather they too serve to exacerbate such fears. This is probably because in this situation, where there is little systemic trust, actors feel socially isolated not part of a community. There is, however a very different situation, as well as a different type of relationships, in S. Osvaldo, where higher incomes, the better quality of life enjoyed by residents in what is considered a well served and maintained area, the models of participation - usually humanitarian and based on trust - and the generally wider ranging and more open and diverse social life which enables residents to overcome prejudice and experience less feelings of insecurity.

- There are clear mismatches between the diverse levels of perception and expression of insecurity and fear. Although 'crime' tended to be perceived, especially in the more deprived areas, as a widespread amorphous 'risk' for everyone, the extent of people's feeling of insecurity did not reflect the level, lower, of their anxiety and fear of crime. There was no correspondence either between the level of people's perception of crime as a personal danger and/or, as a generalised danger, within the neighbourhood. Yet lower levels of anxiety were revealed when interviewees were asked about any moments of fear they had experienced when going about their daily lives, or about the crimes they feared could upset their lives, but people consistently considered these anxieties to be almost negligible when compared with worries about health, loss of loved ones and danger to the environment. Thus the higher level of insecurity should be seen the expression of an existential feeling of not being safe which is linked to the prevailing life-style model in the neighbourhood, to the problems of living in the neighbourhood itself and, to the perceived, real or imagined, presence of crime and deviance in the area.

- There was also clear dissonance between what people imagined the level of danger was that they were surrounded by day to day in their normal lives and the fact that few of them could perceive, or pinpoint, any of the dangers of their immediate environment. One could perhaps say that through the certainties of their daily lives, the routines which are guaranteed by society itself, people seem to develop some sort of immunity from day-to-day anxieties and fear. Indeed, although, fears about the dangers engendered by today's "risk society" are growing, as is the fear of crime, they have not yet reached the level where they were causing any major changes in people's daily habits. One interesting datum is that the more people were anxious about or feared global problems, the less were their fears about possible events in their personal, day-to-day lives and the less they feared meeting people and relating with 'strangers'.

- There is a relationship between prejudice towards migrant workers and the feelings of insecurity perceived by actors. This study revealed fairly widespread racism towards immigrants, especially in the Fiera and the Stanga, while in S. Osvaldo interviewees revealed themselves to be not only more tolerant but also open to multiculturalism. The main expressions of prejudice against immigrants were linked either to the "crime risk they pose" or to the "fact" they "bring in disease": these are the themes upon which prejudice is founded, promoted by the mass media and politicians. The reason, the justification, offered by interviewees to explain their prejudice was not based on having been the direct or indirect victim of a crime perpetrated by an immigrant. but rather it stemmed from a more nebulous feeling of having been insulted or offended by an immigrant, usually the 'event' was some transgression of socially accepted behaviour: a heated exchange of words in the street; one glance too many; something said in a too loud a voice, too harsh a tone.

- There is even less correlation, even more dissonance, between the verbal answers given by interviewees and individuals' descriptions of their real behaviour when faced with the object of their fear. The radical re-elaboration found in interviewees spontaneous descriptions of what they thought was the right thing to do in order to protect themselves from the object of their fears means that these fears do not weigh heavily, or arouse strong emotions in the individual indeed, generally, they do not affect people's day-to-day routines. In all areas avoidance behaviour was a common strategy used to overcome certain fears.

- There does not appear however, to be any relationship between the levels of victimisation identified in the three areas and the fears manifested by residents, either in general terms as a widespread fear of crime or, in relation to a crime the individual had either been, or feared being, a victim of. So if it not the reaction to being the victim of a crime that conditions people's fear of certain crimes and not others, then there must be other variables which are causing them to imagine, and fear, falling victim to one crime rather than another. Perhaps here it is a question of indirect victimisation, being the 'second-hand' victim of a crime which may be experienced as a direct projection of a

collective sense of belonging (especially in the Stanga), which heightens the individual's perception of potential dangers through an emotional involvement that is reinforced by the horizontal communication of the strong, relationship network. In the Stanga the levels of victimisation can be more easily linked to those of insecurity.

- The percentage of residents in all three areas who wanted stiffer sentences, more repressive measures brought in to fight crime reflected neither the percentage of interviewees who had been the direct victims of a criminal act, nor the level of their feeling of insecurity, nor their fear of crime. In S. Osvaldo, where 'victimisation' was highest, both the fear of crime and the desire for heavier punishments were lowest. The hypothesis that the more crime the more and heavier the punishments people would demand was not borne out. For example, there was no correlation between the propensity to report crimes to the authorities and the demand for stiffer sentencing; nor was there a correlation between this latter and propensity to try non custodial rehabilitation rather than punishment for offenders.

- Attitudes to prison and evaluations of its efficacy in the fight against crime were particularly contradictory and mixed. Most people were against custodial punishment even though they did not question the fact that prisons should exist. The many throwaway truisms heard in society today, full of disinformation and lack of real concern about the problem, together with a marked lack of trust in the ability of the institutions to really do anything effective, all explain people's ambivalence towards and perhaps mistrust of repressive measures. Thus victimisation, in the sense of being the victim of a crime, the objective conditions that create the feeling of insecurity, the perception of this insecurity, feelings of different levels of fear in different contexts and the demand for retribution, for punishment, seem not to influence each other, are independent variables. Thus the oft repeated adage, hammered home both by politicians and the mass media, that "the greater the feeling of insecurity is, the more insistent will be people's demand for increasingly repressive measures, for 'law and order'", is clearly a sham, used to manipulate public opinion. Thus it should not be reinforced rather it should be exposed for what it is, a misrepresentation of what is a far richer and more tolerant reality.