RESEARCH REPORT:

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

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Intrusion-safe security doors, CCTVs placed in parking lots, hallways and even in lifts. People resort to all sorts of security devices, they want to feel safe. But how can safety and security be defined? Why do people link some phenomena more than others to the perception of this asset? Trying to answer these questions, at least partially, can contribute to understand a very complex phenomenon – the fears that affect our society and that sometimes lead to unjustified alarmism or, even worse, to the constant search for an enemy.

Starting from the idea that knowledge makes things less ‘awesome’, I have conducted a study at Rome’s University La Sapienza (“Safety, security and the police forces - The opinions of a sample of police officers belonging to the Polizia di Stato”). The main innovation of this study is that it is centred on the analysis of the viewpoints of a group of police officers from the police headquarters in Bologna, the railway police in Milan and the traffic police in Rome, in their capacity both as police professionals and citizens.

Researchers, local and national policymakers, police forces and the public have been widely debating the issue of security for some time both in Italy and abroad. Our times are characterized by what some sociologists describe as ‘the paradox of contemporary societies’: although these are the safest times ever, the demand for safety and security keeps growing. In line with this increasing demand, the types of services requested and provided have changed on the basis of different needs at community level. Cities and neighbourhoods have become places where security - as distinct from traditional policing - has been reconsidered and tailored to the local needs.
**Bauman’s three dimensions**

In this time of change, one of the most prolific contemporary sociologists, Zygmunt Bauman, identifies three different aspects: *safety*, which has to do with personal safety and the risk of victimisation; *security*, which is linked to economic and social security, and *certainty*, which has to do with one’s own beliefs as well as moral and ethical background. Based on this classification, Bauman suggests that it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach without focusing on either *safety* or *security*.

Based on the idea that the need for safety and security is typical of contemporary societies, this complex and multifaceted concept can be studied by analysing the many insecurities which characterize modern life. This means probing into the fears of contemporary society, the alarmism that spreads in larger cities and small towns, in a continuing process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the ‘society of (in) security’. Feeling unsafe means facing a variety of social phenomena: crimes that jeopardize personal safety and property; phenomena undermining the people’s existential certainties; the instability of the global market and rising unemployment, the anxieties linked to social change affecting the traditional family, education and social protection systems.

Most research concerning insecurity as perceived by the public, its causes and its possible connections to other phenomena is not matched by studies involving security professionals such as judges, fire fighters or police officers. For this reason, we asked police officers to fill in a questionnaire and to take part in interviews in order to identify the phenomena (from petty crime to social unease) that are linked to the perception of insecurity in the cities (see table).

The study reveals that police officers have a balanced picture of insecurity, halfway between *safety* and *security*. In particular, their answers show that they are able to go beyond the mere policing approach, recognizing that not only crime but also urban decay, vandalism or antisocial behaviour are among the major causes of perceived insecurity.

**Petty urban crime, immigration and narcotic drugs**

The preliminary analysis of the data reveals that the police officers point of view is in line with national surveys on perceived insecurity targeting citizens, according to whom petty urban crime (96.7%), illegal immigration (96.7%) and drug dealing and abuse (93.1%) are the main causes of social alarm.

Police officers in the study indicate illegal immigration as a major issue but distinguish between proper crimes and cases of social exclusion which often lead to migrants being recruited by criminal organizations. Petty crime and drug dealing and abuse are widespread products of modern
life and are the main concerns of the public. These offenses are more widespread in larger cities as compared to other crimes (such as murders) and are mostly committed by young people, thus causing increased social alarm.

**Roma people, vandalism and urban decay**

Among the phenomena associated by police officers to perceived insecurity (over 90% in the table), three show very high percentages (over 80%), confirming that insecurity is not exclusively linked to crime but also to social behaviours that are typical of urban and local settings: Roma people (89.8%), vandalism and antisocial behaviour (83.8%) or urban decay (80.2%). In connection with the issues of Roma people and urban decay, police officers complain about the lack of social integration policies rather than expressing the need for further repressive and judicial measures. In their opinion, social exclusion can lead to offending. Moreover, vandalism and antisocial behaviour are not crimes, strictly speaking, but they are considered to be relevant for measuring perceived insecurity.

This trend is confirmed by other data in the study: mafia organizations (75.3%), international terrorism (61%) and prostitution (57.5%) show percentages that are similar to job insecurity (71.7%), economic crisis (67.2%) and loss of shared values (69.5%). In relation
to the latter, the analysis shows that for police officers social insecurity is more alarming than international terrorism or prostitution.

**Terrorism, prostitution and violence in the media**

Almost ten years after 9/11 and the Madrid and London attacks, it should be highlighted that police officers no longer consider international terrorism as an impending threat but rather as part of routine prevention. This does not mean that the terror threat is being underestimated but rather that a terror attack is not considered as very likely and as something to be tackled on a daily basis. Noteworthy is the low percentage attributed by police officers to prostitution which usually is the subject of local government policies and campaigns. With respect to this, while the results of our study do not conflict with citizens’ surveys according to which prostitution is never considered as a major cause of fear, they collide with the opinions of local policymakers.

For police officers, violence in the media (71.7%) is also closely linked to insecurity, a result which contradicts the surveys on public opinion. The breakdown of the family (46.8%), the crisis of politics (46.8%) and above all environment-related threats (36.5%) are not felt as alarming.

What these results reveal is that police officers, rather than focussing only on policing, tend to have an integrated approach to security. An approach that takes into account the various aspects of safety and security as well as the different needs of the citizens and the marginalised people and that engages different institutional actors. In fact, police officers are convinced that while petty crime is a police matter, urban decay requires good policies, although both phenomena fall within the scope of urban security.

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