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SÉMINAIRE

The nature of individual and collective reactions to danger in humans: evidence from interviews with survivors of the Bataclan attacks

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Individual and collective reactions to threat are largely conceived as individualistic and anti-social: when exposed to threat, humans would revert to self-preservative motives, trying to flee as fast as possible, sometimes at the expense of others. This conception, which can be traced back to the non-empirical conclusions of sociologist and social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, has met immediate intellectual success and is widespread both in academic and lay audiences. However, more recent work based on interviews with survivors from a diversity of disasters has consistently shown a very different pattern: humans do not display self-preservative behaviour when exposed to threat. In fact, they show a high degree of pro-sociality in such contexts, even when their life is directly at risk. Those results remain questionable. In particular, it is not clear how the type of danger people are exposed to can modulate their individual and collective responses to it. Another important issue is the methodology being used in those studies, which does not allow comparing between different moments of the event. Indeed, it is possible that immediate reactions to threat are self-preservative, with prosocial responses overcoming individualistic ones later on. Finally, previous work does not distinguish between genuine altruistic acts (where the action is immediately costly to the agent - eg exposing oneself to danger to help another person) and apparent altruistic behaviour (clearing an access, which directly benefits the agent). We have conducted interviews with survivors from the attacks at the Bataclan (13-11-2015 in Paris) asking them to describe with precision their own actions and others' at different moments of the attacks. In this talk, I will try to clarify the interplay between individualistic and prosocial motives and their temporality during collective exposure to deadly threat, drawing from our work with survivors from the Bataclan attacks. I will also suggest future directions to better understand the evolution of prosocial traits in such circumstances, in humans and other social species.