O, Tempora...: A Methodological Model to Approach the Crisis

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**O, TEMPORA…: A METHODOLOGICAL MODEL TO APPROACH THE CRISIS**

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**Abstract**

My paper does not argue that the behaviour of the well-off and, more, of the visible ruling class would have been the cause of the breakdown of societies, but only to show that this behaviour was and is a sign of the social decay, more precisely, of the system crisis. Indeed, the crisis of social systems and institutions was and is the result of many causes, among which the fact that exceeding of the officially assumed legal and moral rules by the ruling elites has not only been the feature leading to the drastic reduction of political credibility of the rulers but also an example for the general social behaviour as in the model of avalanche.

I discuss the significances of Cicero’s phrase *o, tempora* (*o, mores*) in the concrete historical framework it was coined and I demonstrate that the conditions which have generated the saying are those of system crisis, and thus the formula – which expresses important feelings that ought to stay in our attention – synthesises a moment in the human reactions in front of these conditions. At the same time, I stop on the methodological meaning and value of this type of analysis.

**Keywords:** *o, tempora* (*o, mores*), crisis, system crisis, ruling class, social psychology, philosophy of language, social sentiments, corruption, to keep appearances, to abandon the keeping of appearances, patterns of behaviour.

**Introduction: Perplexity as First Feeling in Front of the Crisis**

In front of the present destructive phenomena worldwide, people enter a state of *perplexity*. What does this mean? They even do not believe the facts they see and bear, these are so distant from the ordinary commonsensical patterns of morals and behaviour and, more, of the ordinary presumptions that those from the leading stratum, although not being saints, would not behave as the most impudent scoundrels (“they are lords, educated persons, they know they are very visible, for God’s sake”), that the first reaction is a *void* of reactions. “It’s unbelievable”: it’s so unbelievable that people need time to articulate their judgements, in short, their feelings.

What kind of phenomena are we speaking about? We do mention all sides of the human life, namely on different levels of their objective structuring
and of our subjective ordering of things (the structural relations of the system, the use of the scientific discoveries, the political institutions and relations, the international warfare and insecurity, the social representations, the moral – especially the moral, don’t we? –, the traditional institutions of human aggregating, family, religion, solidarity, pity, shame): they are so unwoven, their functioning is so un-regulated, their results are so socially discouraging and individually harming, their whole aspect is so decomposed and devastating, that people are at least confused.

Am I, or are they too negativistic? Since bad relations and fake morals have existed since time immemorial. And here one uses the well-known cliché of “nothing new under the sun”\(^2\). But if this cliché itself has to be deciphered in its historical framework, more interesting for us is to analyse the present view people think within.

And first, who are we speaking about, who are the perplexed ones in front of the present aspect of society? First again, they are, obviously, those who can make the difference between the previous and the present situation. Those who had an improved life before (as compared to their anterior status) and now experience its worsening: and have a voice which cannot be neglected, since it’s the voice of the “mass support for governments in civilised, democratic countries”. This remark is certainly important: because it pays attention to the millions of people who had an under-low condition even during the post-war État-providence (providential social state) from the Western countries. We should not neglect that before the present economic crisis, and rather during the period of the Western welfare state, the number of those in extreme poverty has decreased, but the deep impression of de-structuring, of loss of every security the social settlements could supply, of an ill society that does not protect at all and damages even the most traditional institutions, belongs not so much to the under-middle class, but to those who have changed their life as pertaining to middle class and thus calling their new status as of middle class (in the meaning of Veblen: as level of consumption and middle quality of life, and not in the classical meaning of bourgeoisie).

It’s not the place to detail the structural reasons of the present crisis, nor the wave of profound transformations of institutions even much before, in the 60s of the past century. ‘The spring of students and youngsters’ in 1968, their revolt against both the pharisaic discourse of those in power concerning concomitantly the defence of democracy and the aggression of the weak (see Vietnam) and the lack of horizon the society provided them, have shaken the appearance of the stable post-war ‘Victorian’ institutions as family, marriage, respectability. But, since things were only at the beginning, the transformations have concerned rather the institutions from the margins (and generally, this is the process, from the margin to the centre of the social establishment): a post-war

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\(^2\) See Ecclesiastes, 1:9. “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun”.
“sceptic generation”\(^3\) became politically interested and involved and succeeded in shaking the institutions that framework the life (and later, step by step, they have continued).

Therefore (and in fact as during the whole 20\(^{th}\) century – let’s remember Scott Fitzgerald’s post World War I malaise, as well as the European avant-garde’s revolt), the idea of a “desperado age”\(^4\) as a desperate time has accompanied at least a part of the psychology of youngsters. (This is the reason why Marcuse spoke about the force of the young – inherently mostly young – belonging rather to minorities (as the American black movement) and to intellectuals whose radical thinking only may destroy the dominant political conformism; and, concretely, about the “student opposition (as) a decisive factor of transformation: surely not… as an immediate revolutionary force, but as one of the strongest factors, one that can perhaps become a revolutionary force” (Marcuse 1967): all of these being the only ones that may oppose to the one-dimensioning society which gives a rational character of its irrationality by emerging “a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe”) (Marcuse 1964, 12).

Summarising the aspects raised up until now, perplexity is not equivalent to the desperate feeling in front of the existence; or is it? And which is the scope of these attitudes?

In order to answer, we have to remember that, concretely, the appearance of capitalism as a settled and victorious system has generated a sentiment of despair in front of the contradistinction between its former promises and the reality of individualist fragmentation and cold pursuit of profit. At the bottom, the Western workers have opposed just in the name of their expectations meeting the utopian liberal promises: their presence in the British Chartist movement and their second upheaval in 1848\(^{th}\) France were the sign of their despair. At the top, philosophers like Kierkegaard have transposed into the questioning of the single individual’s psychology their deep anxiety\(^5\) which, at the last analysis, reflects not only the complexity of the human psyche but also the social atmosphere, antagonistic with the human expectations. For Kierkegaard, it seemed that all happened “as if God has withdrawn into himself” (Kierkegaard 1995, 301). God was for Kierkegaard not so much as, let’s say in the latter words of criticism of religion, an alter ego lain in the deep

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\(^4\) According to Lidia Vianu’s formula for the British literature from 1950 to 2004 (Vianu 2004). But if the author used it for expressing “the auctorial individualism, the denial of group psychology” by the British writers of the time, “the time of literary solitude and bravery” (11), I borrowed it in order to describe the tint of at least a part of the young generation psychology.

\(^5\) See the development of this concept from Kierkegaard to Sartre.
down of man and personalising his human possibility and aspiration\(^6\), but rather a close friend to whom one confesses and who is called as a witness of the despair one feels in front of “the absurd” (let’s use the latter word of Camus). In all these appearances, despair was the result of perplexity, it was its rapid transformation. People did no more lie in the first phase of their feelings in front of the existence, here – that of perplexity, but in the second one, that of conclusion – which was that of despair.

If we do not analyse in a concrete manner, or at the level of concreteness of the existence, we obviously may venture to assert that perplexity and despair could have been the original feelings of man in front of the distance between the real possibilities he could try to fulfil and, on the other hand, his profound desire and presupposition that ‘normal, just and good’ are things to happen according to this presupposition of ‘normalcy’/objective possibility, justice and good. In fact, it’s a risky reasoning: because we keep dark that we put in parentheses our theoretical conclusions concerning a certain historical period, and we generalise them in a forbidden manner, beyond the conditions that generated them. Indeed, our theoretical conclusions are valid only when we circumscribe the historical period that allowed them: and this is necessary and a valid methodological requirement for both the analyses concerning theories about man and society and concepts describing natural facts. Because all of these reflect the historical level of knowledge the inquiring man has arrived at, and we have to mention it and be conscientious about this condition of knowledge.

Lastly, perplexity is both a preceding feeling to that of anxiety and despair, and a component of these ones. The problem is: what is the scope of these attitudes and what are they related to.

**From the Void of Reactions to Definite Sentiments**

Therefore,

1. I do not speak here about the perplexity and despair people feel in front of their individual situations caused by individual occasions.

2. I started my paper from the sentiments concerning society as they transform the bindings within the social construction. Kierkegaard has spoken in the name of an ordinary single individual and – for him and for all of us – that one represented/represents the essential problem of (the modern) society.

3. Perplexity and despair are not common trans-historical feelings – *i.e.* transcending the conditions of any society. They reflect some *specific social conditions*, born in certain societies. As alienation is not an abstract disjunction between subject and object (just contrary to Hegel’s supposition), but a concrete estrangement of man from his products and environment when he does not

\(^6\) It’s about the aspiration towards perfection and, also, towards unity and coherence of society and the single individual.
control them, namely when group interests of domination impose the submission of the entire society, including through the domination of the exterior objects controlled by the dominant stratum over the entire society. In the same manner, perplexity and despair reflect and are the result of specific social relations which impose drastic limitations of individual freedom to control both the social settlements and the individual’s own behaviour.

4. The modern society – to which these feelings pertain – is the historical space that emphasises the conditions determining them. And as this society is the complex mirror which explains the simpler types of society – even though the historical description begins with the simplest and raises up to the complex one, capitalism –, as our understanding of the attitudes people have in front of these societies should be derived from the analysis of the more complex and latest one; an ordered analysis, i.e. using concepts developing in complex and multifaceted relationships according to the logic of this society, namely to the structural relations of this society; even if the imagined concrete world supplied by the concepts developed starting from/developed on the ground of the complex society supposes abstractions decomposable to simpler determinations, these simpler determinations concern just this complex social existence; thus an analysis which must not be extrapolated in its concreteness – but not in its method – at different and simpler societies: except if we compare them and conclude on their fundamental difference.

It’s difficult enough to understand that we better conceive of the past simpler societies starting from the more complex ones, since every description begins with the beginning. In fact, it’s about the significances we put and discover in the concepts we use even in the description of former societies. Even when we draw a lesson from the analysis of the ancient times, we do so only with the help of the richness provided by a lot of research concerning the more complicated societies and the development towards them. Simply: the old type simpler societies teach us in a profound manner only when we reflect upon them with the toolbox of significances and theories we historically arrived at.

More clear: the simpler data, corresponding to simpler concepts/ simpler concepts corresponding to simpler data (as feelings and, more, concrete feelings as anger, despair, anxiety, fear) could hoax us determining us to think the analysis of any society from these concepts and data, and not from their complex environment, the social relations and their corresponding concepts. By doing so, we are tempted to separate the simpler data and concepts from their complex determinants and, at the same time, to consider them a-historically, as eternal and general, the social evolution only adding some new appearances and

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characteristics. But, as Marx has observed\(^8\), the concepts as such – and always in their newest forms, with their newest contents – are the result of the most elaborated thinking in the newest, most complex societies. Consequently, the

\(^8\) Marx 1857, 1. 1.: “This very simple category, then, makes a historic appearance in its full intensity only in the most developed conditions of society. By no means does it wade its way through all economic relations”… “Thus, although the simpler category may have existed historically before the more concrete, it can achieve its full (intensive and extensive) development precisely in a combined form of society, while the more concrete category was more fully developed in a less developed form of society”… “Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form – as labour as such – is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, ‘labour’ is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction”… The simplest abstraction, then, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.”… “This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations”… “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape”… “But not at all in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society”… “The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself – leaving aside, of course, the historical periods which appear to themselves as times of decadence – it always conceives them one-sidedly”… But “In so far as the bourgeois economy did not mythologically identify itself altogether with the past, its critique of the previous economies, notably of feudalism, with which it was still engaged in direct struggle, resembled the critique which Christianity leveled against paganism, or also that of Protestantism against Catholicism”… “It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development. The point is not the historic position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence ‘in the idea’ (Proudhon) (a muddy notion of historic movement). Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society”… “the purity (abstract specificity) in which the trading peoples – Phoenicians, Carthaginians – appear in the old world is determined precisely by the predominance of the agricultural peoples. Capital, as trading-capital or as money-capital, appears in this abstraction precisely where capital is not yet the predominant element of societies. Lombards, Jews take up the same position towards the agricultural societies of the Middle Ages”… “divergent positions which the same category can occupy in different social stages”. I made a so abundant quote in order to highlight the methodological valence of Marx’s theory.
specific content of a simple concept (and the concept, though abstract and resulting from the ability to think in an abstract manner, not only depends upon a concrete historical reality that constituted its ground, but has a concrete content in that it contains concrete historical aspects) has in its subtext a whole history of complex development. For example, concerning our topic: perplexity towards which reality? And why would some ones (but who?) be perplex, what does that perplexity mean and to which other feelings does it lead?

5. But it’s not enough to insert our analysis and determine our concepts by capitalism in general. Since concepts are determined, they are determined not only by a general structure of a system, but also by its stages of development.

This aspect is important because the social reactions reflect not only the system, but they also reflect it in its concreteness of stages. For example, leaving aside the prolonged social paralysis of the ruled in front of the domination, they had their specific expression of their status and indignation in the radical theorising of Marx, an individual. But why was this theory, though on the one hand, grasped as the idea of revolution, idea that was intimately consistent with their deep feeling that “the real is not rational at all and we do no more accept it”, seen on the other hand, as “it’s only a theory, it is not realisable”? It was just because the past stages of capitalism contained features counter-balancing this idea. The majority of intellectuals – and they strongly influenced the workers – have thought during these stages that the evolution as such – irrespective here, if it was conceived of in the liberal or socialist manner – would be the remedy of the social problems. Thus: not revolution, but step by step changing. In short, as long as capitalism was in its stages when the ideological forms and manipulation from above still met its reserves/ when capitalism as such had reserves consisting in and in order to:

a) develop some regions and thus to increase the living standard of the working people in the Centre, although on the expense of the capitalist discovering of Periphery,

b) develop new regions snatched from Periphery, namely to integrate them in the capitalist world economy and consequently to extract profit balancing the objective tendency of fall of the profit rate as a result of the generalisation of technological discoveries,

c) increase the power of dominant strata worldwide, it could last with all the theoretical expressions of anger, disappointment, despair. Especially Nietzsche must be noted here: capitalist evolution does not lead to anything good, he said, not only defying the above-mentioned optimistic conceptions, but also warning about both the automatic objective development and the subjective assumption of this automatism.

6. Therefore, which is the stage of the modern society supporting both perplexity and the channelling of anger and despair? It is the present,
trans-national stage of world capitalism that, with all its benefits from the scientific and technological development it controls, from the trans-nationalisation as such and from its apparent higher power than ever, is at the same time a stage of system crisis.

Just a time of crisis opens a profound transformation of attitudes and feelings of people concerning their whole existence in society. The last century, already mentioned, illustrates this fact. The post World War I period was that of stage crisis: the crisis of the stage of first industrial revolution which has performed capitalism’s productive forces during its epochs of free competition and monopoles (from the standpoint of the criterion of the evolution of capitalist productive relations). To this stage not perplexity, but either impotent despair leading to individualistic experiences of carpe diem, or confidence that ordinary people can change the social organisation in order to allow a human life to all have corresponded. The post World War II period has manifested through the pragmatic cynicism of cohorts of low origin fellows becoming and climbing up as middle class (Veblen) and only a small number of individuals were those who warned that at the core of this evolution there is a falsity that stops the real search for and the realisation of freedom and creative life. With all the passing these warnings over in silence and all the states of revolt manifested not only in the 1968 movement, till the last few (let’ say three) decades people did not experience first of all perplexity but rather plat anxiety, un-questioning resignation.

But nowadays a general sentiment is raising up above the same general feelings of evasion from an alienating society, of resignation in front of the implacable appearance of the relations of power: it’s perplexity that, first, coexists with the general and basic boredom which is only the manifestation of socially caused pain and which is still manipulated by the subduing entertainment. But soon enough perplexity generates indignation, a state of revolt. These attitudes seem to be powerless and helpless, since the social establishment continues with the same aggressiveness of its instruments. But, as technology served and serves to render to people a state of anaesthesia, it also serves as a means of communication of perplexity and revolt.

Once Again, What Does Perplexity Mean?

Why would this feeling be so important in the construction of present human attitudes? It is because it is situated in front of a relatively new phenomenon linked to the present system crisis: that of the ruling elite’s abandonment of appearances it observed before. Indeed, if the duplicity of the rulers is generic – at least, in their approach of the internal problems and respect

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9 The development of automation – as the last moment of the first industrial revolution from the standpoint of means of production – took place only towards the end of this period, during the World War II and after.

10 See Eisenstein.
of appearances divergent to their behaviour abroad; but at a more profound level, in the contradiction between the domination they impose and the slogans they wave about liberties —, inwards the frontiers they assumed, they always were tempted to show their respectability: obviously, within the inherent social establishment, for whom the domination-submission relations would be natural and eternal. Concretely, they tried to both save their appearances of respectability and alleviate in a certain manner the situation of the many, driving at a certain social consent through manipulation and the enlargement of the middle class.

But in the present capitalism’s entering the system crisis and the more so as it confronts a deep and persistent economic crisis, there are less and less means to observe these requirements: world competition shrinks the resources of profit and the strata of bureaucracy access a lesser part of it as payment for their support of the power society. This is the reason of the abandonment of appearances by the bureaucratic leaders issuing from these strata: even in the Western civilisation marked by ‘Max Weber’s model of bureaucracy’, there were in the last period and are now more and more scandals related to the corruption of the leading elite and, more — if this is possible at all —, related to the impunity the members of this elite enjoy. In front of this concrete impunity annulling the basic equality before the law, specific to the modern state/to its theoretical tenets — and despite all the discourses reclaiming ethical values, equal treatment of citizens etc. —, even people previously non-interested about politics become already involved within the public worry concerning public things.

This change takes place because the abandonment of the former way of keeping the appearances coexists with the worsening of the general welfare: and the impudent allocation of resources becomes unbearable. We have to remember that — and despite its manipulating use according to which it would be the main cause of the present economic economical crisis – both the greed of the bankers and the continuous state financing of the banks as absolute priority of the world decision-makers show that the asymmetrical allocation of resources is for the general social conscience worldwide, both unbelievable and revolting.

In front of the former general estrangement from politics, the first reaction of perplexity, followed by a continuous preoccupation for the general state of injustice – felt by the many in their economic living – and thus by indignation, a feeling that contains both the conscience of the antagonism between one’s own moral sentiments and the political establishment of society11 and the sentiment of fear in front of the power elite which apparently cannot be dislocated12, are bricks constructing a new social conscience. These bricks help

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11 This is emphasised, for example in Romania, by the majority that considers, now in already successive soundings, that the direction the country goes in is wrong, irrespective of what people understand through this last word.
12 This aspect shows that the sentiment as such — and not only a single sentiment like indignation – is not sufficient to direct to an active efficient position: for example, people could protest, but rather as a finite ritual that comfort them, and at the same time vote ‘for
people to publicly separate the good grain from weeds, thus to publicly – through rational debate and control – construct a new social conscience and a new practical attitude toward society. In this new conscience, the impunity of bureaucracy which itself decrees for itself begins to be related with the impunity of the leading economic stratum and, more, with the impunity of the informal and abstract structural relations of capitalism: till now most of the people has considered these relations as normal and natural, because the leading economic, political and cultural strata have successfully imposed this belief to the entire society.

But do not get enthusiastic too much: it’s only a trend; nevertheless, although drowned in the systematic and aggressive manipulation from the top, it is symptomatic for the present-day general transformation.

Therefore, we speak about a general state of spirit, or rather a generalising state of spirit, a spiritual atmosphere imbued with feelings which tend to dislocate the former public conscience. The vectors of this radical/radicalising spiritual atmosphere are mostly the young, originated in both middle class and intellectual strata and in the lower ones: but all of them are close to the new information and communication technology and use it in order to freely and democratically debate the common trans-national problems concerning the means to confront and defeat the social order of domination as well as the ways to construct alternatives. The world of networks of socialisation allows – but it is not sufficient – to keep staying alive, thus not forget the perplexity one should have in spite of the entire environment of alienation, commoditisation, and reciprocal separation of individuals. It is the root of efficiency in people’s control of the yet impersonal and mimical society.

To Approach the Crisis: an Old Model
with Psycho-Sociological Reverberations

I focused on /I discovered the concept of perplexity as a result of my reflection upon an old formula: o, tempora, o, mores! At first sight, the significance of this phrase would consist in the impotent incrimination of “the times” that cover in an indefinite manner the specific structural and political causes of a deviating moral. Here the incrimination takes place only in the framework of perplexity.

In fact, the exasperated statement – which became a well-known saying – belongs to Cicero who pronounced it when he heard about the praetor of Sicily, Gaius Verres, which has stolen gold vessels and art treasury and took possession of a big fortune in a corrupt manner (Cicero 70, B.C.). But Cicero has used the same formula when he has protested against the dirty complicity

the lesser evil’ that never dislocates the system; however, without this sentiment, people do not move at all: this is the reason of the huge manipulation from above, just to paralyse people’s ability to care about, to judge and protest, to react.
which led to Catilina’s conjuration against the Senate (Cicero 63, B.C.). Both orations were pronounced by Cicero as political acts, as active manifestations against the decay of behaviours in an epoch already of crisis of the Roman Empire: therefore, as indignation against the dangerous decline which already profiled.

But the saying was not occasioned by the facts and deeds of ordinary people. If it had been a reaction against such people, it would not have its valence as methodological pattern to conceive of the historical periods of crisis, and more, of system crisis. Both incriminated characters belonged to the ruling stratum and illustrated the inherent tendency of corruption of bureaucracy as intermediate stratum between the rulers possessing the means of production (namely, the economic or ‘true’ rulers) and the people. Both incriminated characters were members of high political bureaucracy (and from this standpoint their behaviour would not be strange at all to us). But – pay attention – they were also rich patricians, members of the true dominant stratum, the economic one. Thus why would they have descended to ignoble habits if they already had all the consideration of society, the social prestige that cannot be jolted?

I am not interested in the answer rounding about the ‘eternal human nature’ that would push man to never be satisfied with his actual status and thus to want more and more, far beyond his concrete real possibilities and his values, in short, far beyond his moral conscience. I am only concerned about the causes that have during long periods opposed to this ‘human nature’. Would these causes consist only in compulsion, in brakes pulled by those more powerful than the certain individual, be these ones either superhuman entities or men lain on a superior step of the social ladder? If this were the case, the distinction between man and beast would not be real, it would not constitute for us a motif of pride. In fact, and leaving aside the social relations which always suppose compulsion in a way or another, it is the human conscience that, in the last analysis, is the guide of the human behaviour: and it not only constructs but also considers the moral values as the only Archimedean points of the human action and a liveable society.

We should not be idealistic: the self-control, self-restraint of the powerful was and is depending not only – or even not firstly – on deeply internalised moral values, but rather on preventive thinking regarding the possible negative consequences of their imprudent behaviour. But for a long time during the evolution of societies, both this preventive thinking and the individual moral conscience were efficient in generating such behaviour of the rulers that it did not jolt the general social conscience of the ruled. Society meant domination and, thus, cruelty. And the legitimising moral values of this domination and

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13 Let’s remember that Socrates called the moral conscience a daimonion: “a sort of voice that comes to me, and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing, but never urges me forward”. (Plato 1966, 31d).
cruelty (for example, the moral value of submission, of implacable destiny, of serene acceptance, of future reward, of social order and everyone’s duty) made them ‘natural’: in the framework/limits given by the fulfilment of the functioning of the rulers. But when this functioning involved excessive cruelty – in fact, non-necessary to keep up the social order – and excessive privileges and appropriation (in fact, robbery – as the present massive and aggressive privatisation of social assets worldwide and financial support to banks on the expense of ordinary people) of the individual or common wealth, the ruled opposed, even in the form of upheavals, and if they did not succeed, the system as such was overthrown. But, obviously – this happened not quickly, not soon enough from the standpoint of raising human suffering. The period when the rulers surpassed/surpass the moral of their functioning as rulers is that of crisis: and not of a particular political or economic one, but a system crisis.

The excessive and, au fond, counter-productive behaviour of some rulers was and is not only the result of their own psychical weakness but also of the dominant ideas related to the dominant world views from a certain epoch – and I am especially interested about this cause –. Indeed, in some periods, at least some rulers (but not few at all) were and are tempted to transcend the limits of what is acceptable and what is forbidden: not only, or both for every human person from that society, and first and foremost for their condition of rulers. Their decisions were and are supported by the dominant ideological ideas which erase the traditional moral brakes of those blessed by their destiny.

These dominant ideas insist on the force of power as defeating any viewpoint of the despised ‘common/common thing’, of ordinary moral and scruples. The arbitrariness became and is no more considered a feature of dictatorship – au fond, a kind of management and leadership the rulers do not agree in their own societies just because of its non-lasting and turbulence generating character –, thus a negative and undesirable form of political direction, but a banal consequence of the power – which is not as such if it is not discretionary, isn’t it? They insist on the unflinching superiority conferred by the power and on the limitless freedom – this is the real freedom, isn’t it? – that follows from this superiority. The entire insistence of these dominant ideas is based on an individualistic approach which considers the Other, the Others and society as both enemies and neutral and secondary range environment: a ‘necessary evil’. The old proverb quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi was a cynical aphorism expressing just this standpoint: that of the rulers in authoritarian regimes and that of the ruling strata in times of system crisis.

Before these times, they certainly were corrupt tax collectors and ministers (this last word in its Latin meaning14), and also bad kings and nobles, but rather as exceptions: or, more correctly, their behaviours were severely

14 In order: servant, slave, priest, agent, office worker, assistant, intermediary.
sanctioned not only by the people but also by the ruling stratum. And this – not basically because of the struggle for power, but for both as a consequence of the precautionary attitude of this one and, or rather, because of the dominance of the ideological ideas of limits (of the rulers) that should not be surpassed. I speak here about a socially relevant behaviour or, precisely, about a behaviour with social consequences. Thus I am not interested here about a private moral of the rulers: although this one could be seen as an example and a measure indicating (especially when the number of faults is significant) the way of the general de-structuring of moral values. Not the private moral but the public one is that which is relevant for the social coherence and framing of the concrete destiny of the ordinary people: the ‘neglecting’ of these ones, their domination and treatment as terrorists was and is promoted by the most moral husbands and wives from the leading stratum. But when rulers are proved to unjustly benefit from public funds and prestige since they are guilt of plagiarism: this is not a question of private moral. Neither when rulers think that they have not to be imprisoned when they are indubitably and irrevocably guilty, is not a question of private moral. Nor when the other members of the ruling stratum cover them: it’s not a question of private moral, but of class complicity and attack on the public morality without which there is no society. The public moral is that which is constituted from and refers to the functioning of ordinary moral values in the realm of social and public relations.

In a time of system crisis – generated by complex and convergent economic, political, social, cultural and psychological phenomena – the ruling stratum is so aware that it has no more unlimited time and, as I already mentioned, its former sources of profit, money and power are so shrinking, that it supports the radical values and public opinion-makers which legitimise their extreme individualistic and immoral behaviour. These values and their aggressive publicity emphasise, in their turn, this behaviour. Obviously, the ruling stratum wants to cover its violation of public moral. But – and this is the scandal, not so much the violation as such, since for some decades people do no longer credit the rulers as to their observance of the public morality – neither when this violation is discovered, the leading class does not give full swing to the sanction of the guilty. Sometimes they are removed so as to no longer be in the public eyes, and are replaced by other personages who do not play in fact another game. There are, obviously, differences between countries: but if, for example in Germany high personages resigned when they were proven guilty of plagiarism – while in Romania they seem to be unmoveable –, everywhere the corrupt relationships, acting inwards and outwards, are vectors of power and influence.

Anyway, why is the example of Romania so important in the discussion of corruption? Because even these low level facts as those of high personages’ plagiarism – covering in fact the general decay of the intellectual stratum and
the breakdown of the credibility of intellectual valuation – suggest the way of the ruling class in the system crisis. Perhaps this is not the only way: it would be possible that the secondary aspects such as plagiarism be severely sanctioned, in order to give room to the usual and much more important forms of power and struggle for an indefinite time for the power relations.

Cicero’s judgement concerning the public immorality of Verres and Catilina could be seen in the light of this present interpretation: in the Roman world where the observing of “puritan” morals in the public space was essential for the pragmatic spring of the power of the republic and of the empire, the most clarifying expression of the horror in front of the distancing from this moral was: o, tempora… The immoral behaviour of Verres and Catilina could but ruin the epoch Cicero lived within and, at the same time, the epoch as such seemed to poison mentalities and behaviours: o, tempora…

Cicero’s phrase also illustrates the precautionary spirit of preventing the aggravation of the crisis of credibility of the system as such, and of the leadership of the system: if one wants people to accept the system, then it must sacrifice something: the ad libitum morals. This one should remain within the limits required by the superior place on the social ladder.

But Cicero was not singular in reclaiming ‘the times’ that would be guilty: as we know, the decline of the Roman Empire was witnessed by many literary works and the perplexity and repudiation of the social spectacle were shared by the authors and their public as well: o, tempora… This sentiment became dominant in people’s psychology and, as it is dominant in the present world media and public feelings, it is witnessing the system crisis.

Passing by, here the concept of system does not involve only the whole social system, but also its subsystems. This means that it’s not only about the crisis of the system as a whole, but also about the crises of different subsystems: and of all the subsystems. Hegel has explained this problem when, for example, he wrote about Reformation as “resulted from the corruption of the Church” (Hegel 1900, 412).

But what does corruption mean? The Latin word, corruptio, -ōnis, means damage, alteration: from the verb corrumpo, -umpère, -ıpi, -uptum, to destroy, to ruin, to waste, to lose, to damage, to alter, to deceive, to infringe, to falsify, to bribe. A corrupt state of things is an alteration of its normal, usual situation. This is the most important element here. The general meaning of corruption – as theft, fraud, burglary, robbery, bribery, conflict of interests – derives from this idea of de-formation of the initial normal state of things. It’s significant that the more general concept – corruption – (that is concretised and described as theft etc.) starts from this idea of alteration, and not from theft (furtum, -i), fraud (fraudālentia, -ae), burglary (burgaria, -ae, vispellio, -ōnis), robbery (raptum, -i).

The basic motivation of this fact is that a theft etc. is an individual, accidental action. Certainly, the quantity of individual facts leads to a quality described as the general state of things concerning those facts. But if things are
altered, this already means that the concrete appearances of things we speak about are no more accidental, but belong to a new situation which is the new normal state of things. Hegel has helped us to understand that corruption is no more “an accidental phenomenon; it was not the mere abuse of power and dominion. A corrupt state of things is very frequently represented as an ‘abuse’; it is taken for granted that the foundation is good – the system, the institution faultless – but that the passion, the subjective interest, in short the arbitrary volition of men has made use of that which in itself was good to further its own selfish ends, and what is required to be done is to remove these adventitious elements. On this showing the institute in question escapes obloquy, and the evil that disfigures it appears something foreign to it. But when accidental abuse of a good thing really occurs, it is limited to particularity. A great and general corruption affecting a body of such large and comprehensive scope (as a Church), is quite another thing” (1900, 412).

This kind of permanent state of corruption does not happen any time. Only when the system faces a deep tension resulting from antagonistic forces in search of resources, i.e. only when the dominant stratum needs a large bureaucracy which seeks for more and more benefits, thus only when the restrictive allocation of resources forces the exceeding of legal means to obtain them and the interdependence of the dominant stratum and (high) bureaucracy is so strong that both depend upon the same process of extortion\(^{15}\) of profits and benefits by all means, one see with perplexity that there are no more cases of corruption, but entangled knots, chains and nets. And one can no more attack seriously one knot without seeing with the same perplexity that the problem is far more large and the knot is connected with other knots and chains and nets: so as either one continues to unwind the chain, assuming the revenge of the bearers of corruption, or one stops and surrenders, and the process of corruption seems to be equivalent with the whole society, as a huge monstrous castle\(^ {16}\) with a monstrous labyrinth of corridors where the individual is lost and deeply feels his insignificant size. The system crisis once more aggravates the modern alienation and the first reaction of perplexity is that which contains the conscience of the enormous asymmetry between the individual and the Moloch of corruption: o, tempora… and vae victis.

When both the corruption is so almighty and people seem to be paralysed in front of it, the bearers of corruption do no more care for keeping the appearances. Nowadays corruption is so huge – so as every one knows about it and feels it – not because mass media are more vigilant than before, but because the corrupts, i.e. the entire dominant stratum no longer care about the consideration of people, no longer care about the ordinary moral values which are nevertheless required by common people. This new attitude of the powerful leads to the increase – if it’s possible at all – of the corruption phenomenon.

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\(^{15}\) See the Latin verb: extorquĕō, -quĕre, -st, -stum, to sprain, to tear out, to snatch, to wring, to take out, to torment, to anguish, to torture.

\(^ {16}\) Let’s remember Kafka’s novel.
And so on and so forth. This un-destructible continuity has, however, a single solution: that of the decisive indignation of the many.

Therefore, Cicero’s phrase illuminates a model of approaching a historical period of system crisis, when the social decay is manifesting through corruption as a general and ‘normal’ state. There are, obviously, many example of corruption, so as they seem to be the new rule (while honesty and correctness – as something strange and out-of-date phenomenon). Because these examples of corruption are not punished, nor morally sanctioned at the official level (or not decisively sanctioned at the official level, since this would mean the substitution of the entire political class and the replacing of the entire economic and political system), they no longer seem discrete accidents that society may control and dissolve, but, on the contrary, the society seems to have become a corrupt space containing different corresponding individual appearances.

At the level of psyche, Cicero’s model of reacting involves mainly the sentiment of powerlessness and sadness in front of the size of the social taint and adulterated phenomena. These ones generate “sad passions” (Bensayang 2006): people cannot assume/ wonder about the possibility to assume the solving of the social decay. But, at the same time, a spark of optimism lights in the middle of these passions: if these tempora are real and mean the entire social establishment, they could be transformed so as to become also rational. Just the huge task and the superposing of time with the whole social reality allow – and, in fact, require – the human intervention in order to construct a rational environment, an environment proper to man.

**Instead of Conclusions**

Many decades until the economic crisis begun in 2007, the economic, including trans-nationally realised, corruption was not considered as something fundamentally harming: it was tolerated in the common conscience as the inherent abuse of the powerful, and even – in the opinion of the most educated from a social standpoint – of power relations as such. The inertia of ideological clichés must not be forgotten. There were, obviously, many causes, but the majority of people were integrated in the functioning of the capitalist system and in its electoral game: even if they abstained from the polls and although their confidence in the political supplies was very low, they did not react according to this fact (Dogan 1999, 513-548). They thought – and especially in the last three or four decades in the West, as well as in the last twenty years in Romania – that they lived *Hard Times*\(^{17}\), but they still hoped for a better life, like in the after-war period.

\(^{17}\) It’s Charles Dickens’ novel written in 1854.
The economic crisis – that officially was minimized and pictured as a short interval and after 2009 was periodically prolonged, so that at present one no longer ventures to decree its end in the next ten years—has weakened up the former common political conscience. People might still consider the political and academic corruption as being separated from the economic one and from the economic structural relations of society, but they are both exasperated and waiting for the breakdown which would bring something as a better social organisation: they think more and more that the system is wrong. But, obviously, they lack their power. And, what is more important, their social conscience is still marked by different backward ideas promoted in the huge ideological manipulation.

My paper is not focusing on this problem. What I am saying is that nowadays the old phrase of Cicero means more that the powerlessness that manifests through the abstract covering of things. *O, tempora*… signifies rather a little arrow conscientiously guided to the structural causes of a society in system crisis. The idea of this saying represents the sign of a time of system crisis – a general corruption and alteration – and not its cause: indeed, people’s resignation in front of this manifestation of the system crisis is a cause of the lasting of this crisis only through its combining with the other ones. From this standpoint, *o, tempora…* accentuates the message of the power as unassailable asymmetry, its victory. But, as we saw, the saying has not a single meaning.

A deep significance of this phrase which accuses the times – as in a periphrastic concise euphemism, if I may say so – is that of the concrete state of the human freedom: just because people have no liberty, and because their lack of liberty seems to be the result of the entire reality, *they take their servitude for freedom* and consequently accuse everything / “the times”. If they would really have some liberties, they would accuse precisely the instances/ social relations opposing to the rest of freedom they need. But, since they do not have but formal and in a formal manner liberties manifesting in the public space, they express their feelings from the inwardness of their homes – where they feel free – as a refutation of the entire exterior which comprises them: *tempora* are the receptacle of the entire non-understood and inimical milieu.

Finally, the function of a phrase pronounced two thousand years ago as a pattern of understanding of the historical epoch one lives in (and, more concretely, the epoch of system crisis – *i.e.*, not only the epoch of the Roman writer) is valid only because the phrase was interpreted from the viewpoint of significances and contents accumulated in the whole history and analysed and derived by researchers. Namely, if every theory and significant formula reflects

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18 But let’s remember Arendt, where she has demonstrated that one’s private movement in the private realm in order to labour “for the tangible things needed for the life process itself” (Arendt 1958, 96) – in modern words, to earn one’s living – is just subordinated to the natural anankē and is the least provider of freedom.
the concrete historical conditions they were created in, their correct extrapolation could take place only after the analysis of those historical conditions, the drawing of possible common features in different historical epochs and the exploration of the world of feelings those theories and formulae involve. Only from this standpoint, an old saying could be significant both in its common use, which fulfils as a result of spontaneous intuitions, and in its scientific interpretation, beyond the time when it was coined. The reproduction of a spiritual state of many individuals through a formula is thus a sign of the reproduction of the conditions it was thought.

REFERENCES


