

THE CRISIS AND THE UNSUSTAINABLE CULTURES

MIRCEA MALIȚA

Member of the Romanian Academy

Abstract. The author imagines a moment in time, two or three decades from now, when the main fields of human activities and their global problems are invited to take part at a summit. He notes that the future point of significant changes for our century has a present name: *the great shift* or *the point of inflection*. The recent experience of the global crisis constitutes an imperative for change. Economy, energy, and resources are the main actors whose getting close to the target is brought into question. Sustainability is a concept that binds them. Are cultures going to skip this reunion? The study concludes that their presence is compulsory.

The world stage is in turmoil and the forecast for the near future is blurry as well. Like in every other similar situation, the uncertainty is amplified and societies are not feeling safe. An increased anxiety is brought about by the persistence of a crisis that perpetuates the damage, much like a long tailed comet. Owing to the fact that not only was the crisis an economic and financial one, but also a political one, the number of open questions left is considerable.

The attempt to even partially make out a possible horizon or preferable developments can set off from certain events or actions that are likely to have foreseeable consequences. The three areas which we appeal to with certain hopes to clear off confusion are the evolution of the crisis situation, the steps undertaken in the global warming area and those concerning natural environment and the jumpstart of a reinforced cooperation between the great powers.

The *crisis* chapter reveals some recent devastating side effects such as the failures of banks, the disappearance of industrial undertakings, the shrinking of the population's savings, the seizing of goods and, last but not least, the loss of jobs. Such a historical experience with worldwide outreach in a period of advanced globalization opened a window of opportunity in order to analyze the circumstances which led to or acted in its favor. Alongside the extensive debate over the remedies which, so far, have neither been completely worked out, nor a miraculous or universal cure-all identified, the question that persisted was: what went astray in the economic and financial system, which was the major flaw that had to be straightened out, rethought or redesigned?

The experts, as well as the general public, divided themselves into two opposing camps: on the one side, those who regarded it as just a simple error, which was inevitable within a system that resorted to risks and which was immediately followed by a comeback to normality, versus those on the other side, who looked at it as a deep-seated deficiency or as a source of malignance which

had to be removed. On a different level, the states, as opposed to the big corporations, are disputing over the old debate regarding the exclusion of state control or intervention. Another theoretical or doctrinal theme ponders whether the neoliberal current, a staunch supporter of the crisis notion as temporary accident as well as of a step-down in state's involvement, is still valid.

The cultures, seen as the source and voucher for the identity of a population, are intimately connected to the running of the state, it too constructed on the basis of this identity. And the fact that the ideologies and doctrines are part and parcel of culture in what regards their values, beliefs, mentality and even traditions, has implications on the theme of states and doctrines which, aggravated by the crisis, call on culture to testify as well on their behalf.

THE CRISIS AND THE STATES

The current state of these debates and the constant weighting of one solution in favor of another, allow us to discern, if not definite and resolute answers, at least bents or trends. These are:

The idea of a more profound change, as opposed to cosmetic solutions and patching. The system frame is fraught with weaknesses that need to be stamped out. Although capitalism itself is sometimes hinted at, it is not targeted directly. But the outcries are aimed at new and destructive currents, which have corrupted its rigorous principles and proven efficiency throughout history.

So far, the state/corporations dispute has yielded an increased advantage for the former. The controversy is backed by a lengthy process of systematic state confinement, in which the theory of the "minimalist state" prevailed and which is reflected in many cases by the situation of several states lacking intervention levers, economical attributions and resources. The resulting picture is one of states plunging into debt, living the agony of supporting the insurance, health and education systems, as well as finding themselves incapable to serve the public good and interest. The rebound came with the desperate pleas of banks and corporations, addressed to states, to save them from the effects of the crisis, especially the liquidity shortages. And the requests have been met to surprising proportions, whereas the states gained a new reputation as crisis rescuers by means of stimulus packages and capital cover on account of public funds and loans they were in possession of. If we also add up the Asian states, which were accused of endorsing "authoritarianism" and which truly played an important part in saving the emerging economies, the "state" regained all over the world the rights it had lost and which it was not willing to give up again easily neither in the course of the crisis, nor at the end of it.

In response to this tendency of reinstating the capacity of the state in what regards the control of the economic activities (the term intervention was avoided), the disputes moved their battle ground in the theoretical and doctrinary field.

THE CRISIS AND THE DOCTRINES

In what concerns the doctrines and theories, the entailment of neoliberalism proved the hardest problem to work out. It is about a prevalent current among the officials, the universities and the theoreticians or professionals within the economic field.

Neoliberalism is associated with the name of Friedman, a skillful user of analytical methods, who was awarded the Nobel Prize. Neoliberalism was deemed a successful theory and many countries attributed their economic leap to its application. Indeed, the fact that the foundation of this doctrine implied utter abolishment of any form of control or exterior intervention set the economists free to take the initiative and seek by whatever means possible to ensure a fast and high profit even though this meant assuming greater risks.

The drawback of the method laid in its effects, seeing that part of the population, chiefly the upper middle class benefited from it, whereas the disparities with the lower classes grew wider. No outsider could moderate this process by urging increased caution when taking risks. The trust in the efficiency of the method was rooted in the solid theory about the capacity of the market to bring itself into balance in case of any fluctuation. The clear-up of some transitory crises strengthened out the degree of confidence of the relentless creators of new financial procedures, especially in credit granting practices.

What occurred in reality proved a careless and risky current which led to the appearance of the crisis through the fact that the deceitful character of certain methods was totally concealed by the non-participation of any responsible forum. We regard as fraud any attempt to mislead or abuse a person's trust and its presence is confirmed by the fact that the credit holders were completely oblivious to the risks they ran by ignoring the obscure maneuvers being forced on their funds. The outbreak of the crisis took place the moment the creditors became insolvent and the money flow was broken.

Two capital sins were identified among the causes of the crisis: greed and arrogance. They are traditionally condemned by the religious morality. Greed means to covet something which is not rightly yours (maximizing profits by use of covert and abusive methods), whereas arrogance is the false pretense of knowing for sure something you only assume. In this case, it was proved that the belief according to which the market could adjust itself was only a myth and not an economic truth.

In a volume published in 2009, a renowned researcher touches on the fault of neoliberalism of having created an incorrect theoretical basis with an aim to facilitate the undertaking of fraudulent practices, which led to the outbreak of the crisis in 2008.

John Cassidy* claims that the free market has been worshiped for the past two decades. He demonstrates this outlook is no more than a fiction, an invention. He

* *How Markets Fail: the Logic of Economic Calamities*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 2009.

dubs the doctrine he denounces (neoliberalism) an “utopian economy”, in contrast with the reality-based economy that he promotes. The neoliberal doctrinists: Friederich Hayek, Milton, Friedman and the Chicago School are taken down together with the unfounded attempt of the crisis makers to put forward mathematical models such as the ones of Arrow and Debreu, which netted them a Nobel Prize. The author regards the utopists’ invading presence in schoolbooks and study guides as a fever which is going to subside with the return to reality-based economy.

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY

The world held its breath while waiting for the Copenhagen treaty on global warming. However, the temporary solution reached was met with disappointment. Nonetheless, certain points *were* scored such as mobilizing the emerging countries, channeling the subject from the public opinion’s sphere to state-level decision makers and a more responsible handling of forest and agriculture issues. A resolute reduction of CO₂ emissions is still blocked by the sudden obstinacy of the third world that claims compensations for the restrictions allegedly imposed on it and its industrialization aspirations. This shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone considering that ever since environment has turned into a matter of concern in the developed countries, the third world is constantly shunned from the table of those who, for centuries on end, have fed their industrialization and modernization processes on the former’s natural resources. Sustainable development was placed on top of the world’s agenda on account of its emphasis on preserving natural resources. Once again, we need not be surprised at the industrial and economic predicament the great developed powers are facing when urged by the new philosophy to consent to drastic changes.

The sustainability solution calls for a huge about-turn: relinquishing non-renewable resources and switching to renewable ones, some of them not yet fully-fledged: wind, sun, waves and flowing water.

Ecology, a frail science, has radical demands. A new era is at its onset and has the historical significance of leaping from stone to bronze and later on to iron, from wood to petrol and gas, from animal traction to coal and steam. The history of civilization is stepping over a new threshold, which is no more significant than others.

What is worthy of notice, provided that we tied up the crisis with the environmental protection dossier, is the fact that at the origin of all vices that are now associated with the industrial and standard technological civilizations, one can perceive the same attitudes of greed and arrogance which are manifest in the economic field. The watchwords were “more” and “faster” combined with “we know everything” and “we rule the laws of matter”.

Progress was measured in global and per capita production and especially in their growth speed. Any other evaluation criterion was of secondary importance.

However, the more the product grew, the faster resources were depleted. The area of “sparse economy” appeared on the horizon.

The whole debate on environmental issues weighs heavily in the state/corporations dilemma, advocating for a decisive and efficient role of the states. Having the trial period of sparse resources and economy in the back of his mind, the economist Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen found the demands made by neoliberalism regarding state non-intervention rather amusing. He thought of them as simple children’s games in comparison to what laid ahead in an era in which the economy would be subjected to strict “supervisions” and severe rules enforced on producers and consumers alike.

The relation between the problems of the crisis, on the one hand, and those of the environment, on the other, cannot be reduced to mere common origins and the identification of certain flaws that need to be eradicated, but rather implicates the perspectives it opens as well. Either way, both the unavoidable change as well as its historic magnitude, are recognized.

The fact that a certain international solidarity was formed to fight against the crisis, inspired courage and hope into a proximate solving of the environmental problems and acceptance of a new type of energy. Ever since efforts have been undertaken by the international politics in order to wipe out the effects of the political crisis that characterized the past decade, the possibility of a reconciliation between the great powers alongside a new impulse to work out chronic or untreatable litigations that keep going the burning hot spots of local or regional war zones revealed their presence. A new configuration of world power finds itself on the working table of political decision-makers and analysts.

No economic theme, political subject or environmental dispute can be separated from the state of the dominant mentality and prejudices that deter solutions. Cultures and their values have a say in the former being embraced.

What is more valuable in this open calendar of changes is how to discern the convergence point of broken off processes, that is the point where the curves change their direction, and which is called by some *the big shift* and by others the *point of inflection*. It can be spotted when touching on issues like the future of energy, the answers to saving the environment and taming the climate, the objectives and methods employed by the economic activity, the eradication of the crisis effects or the evolution of the globalization process. At the meeting on point I, culture cannot play truant. The multi-dimensional change will probably come into shape in the 2030s, at the same time with the change of the generations.

Is it reasonable to believe that the great shift will actually happen? The start of a new chapter in the present civilization has but two or three precedents: the agrarian, scientific and industrial revolutions. The next has no name yet. Is there any groundwork to substantiate it and forces to trigger it off?

ECONOMIC DECLINE, SCIENTIFIC UPSURGE

The source of confidence and the strength required by a large scale global change *do* exist. They are embodied by the technical and scientific revolution of the last century. The “knowledge era”, as it was called at the end of the century, was dubbed as homage to the never before attained increase rate in what regards the number and the significance of new scientific findings. During the same period, two new symbols became increasingly popular: S/T (science and technology) and R/D (research and development) as a means to achieving S/T. New concepts were born and many grew up into cardinal points of the economy, such as innovation. The workforce was enclosed within the classic formula of the production factors, by pushing farther down the list capital and natural resources. The computer became the omnipresent tool which provided information, knowledge, communication and human-like judgment. Its language spilled over into other sciences: even international politics aspires at becoming “soft”, thus replacing the traditional “hardware” of raw forces. Tens of human activities are executed by robots, while countless others are being assisted from within smaller than a seed computer “chips” by artificial intelligence. The household environment turns “digital” for those people surrounded by communication gadgets, video sets, computers and kitchen appliances, all working in digital bits.

There is no clearer illustration of the contemporary scientific and technological advance than the explorations of the extreme distances that separate us either from the great cosmos, or the tiny cell. Permanent space stations and observatories that are currently being lived in, visited and repaired by people or provided with supplies by extra-atmospheric flights, have become launching bases for outside solar system expeditions. In the opposite direction, the atom and the cell are revealing their structures and laws to people’s advantage, whereas a new science, nanology, is in its full development with significant consequences spanning from medicine and up to technology.

There is an amazing contrast between the scientific and technological advance, on the one hand, and the sluggish and sometimes retrograde state of human management and of derelict institutions and policies, torn by corruption and bureaucracy, on the other. Nonetheless, it is easily overlooked by the large public and even by common sense which could raise the legitimate question whether the same human mind can conceive or develop both.

It is not by chance that the idea of a global, multidimensional change has caught the attention of the scientific and technological field, as a welcome challenge for its capacities and resources. One would sooner hear the call of change within a reunion of entrepreneurs or researchers rather than during the committees of global politics great organizations or forums or as part of the language of political parties.

THE STAGE OF DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLOSION

If we refer to science and technology as conducive to the legitimization of “the great shift” expectations, we can’t miss out another factor, this time a pressing one, that urges its soonest materialization. That is the demographic factor. The spread of civilization has brought about the occupation of the whole planet by human species.

The huge wave that had not been perceived directly, allowed for measurements over the years. I was born in the year 1927, when the world population had reached 2 billion, by doubling its size in just 123 years, from 1 billion as it had been during the time of Napoleon. After having completed my studies and coming back from New York where I had worked as a UN diplomat for five years, until I reached full adulthood in 1960, at 33 years, I had to wait for only 14 years to find myself living in a world with a population of 3 billion people, a point in time which took place oddly enough while I was working at the organization of the World Population Conference in Bucharest (1974). The 5 billion people world found me as a professor of mathematical models used in prognoses at the Bucharest University. It was no later than 1999, a time when Romania was stepping into the transition period, that the world population reached 6 billion. And look at me in 2010, when I am writing prospective essays about a world that is going to reach 7 billion in two years and exceed 8 billion in 2025.

It is hard to find a greater and more profound shift of society on which it has just dawned that its cities, streets and airlines are overcrowded. It is up to the power of evidence that the political and administrative evolution as well as the management of public affairs have been left far behind to fend against hardships, obstacles and crises when solving their problems.

Those who have witnessed the tripling of the world’s population during their lives, are finding hard to understand they are living in a changed world from that in which they first saw the light of day. From all its fibers, this world demands, expects and imposes drastic changes.

We are currently living in a world with a population of 7 billion people which by 2050 will have reached 9 billion and going on 10. It seems that food will not be a problem as its production growth rate is bigger than that of the population. The novelty will reside in the areas, perimeters and the distribution of power and wealth. A classically affluent group, the Western World (USA, Canada and Europe) will amount to no more than 12% of the world population and less than 30% of the global product. By 2050, the Western world will have doubled its production, whereas the rest of the world will have it multiplied by 5. The developed states will continue to stay at the top but they will no longer form an Atlantic group, but rather one of the Pacific with North America and East Asia going hand in hand. The emerging states will follow close by. Coming last are the poor and heavily populated countries, though urban and young. What kind of

solutions will the global reconciliation forum put forward for this area whose misery could erode the entire world? Issues such as education, in the first place, as well as cultures and mentalities will be once more taken into consideration.

We are surprised at the fact that cultures are watching from the sideline the clashes entailed by globalization and its specific changes, while murmuring in discontent. They are anti-globalist by their construction and calling. Globalism tends towards universality which is the same direction as that of civilization and its governing sign.

Cultures deal with the particular and therefore are staunch supporters of heterogeneity. The local, the individual and the original are their main focus. As a result, globalism is seen as nothing more than a menacing enemy bent to homogenize them.

This is why, no sooner is an international reunion on global standards rather than common problems convoked, than the partisans of cultures are beginning to manifest loudly. Is there anything wrong with that?

THE SUSTAINABLE CULTURES

At first glance, one might say no. The cultures' particularizing calling, places them in a position of steadfast defenders of individual or group identity.** Civilization guarantees no specific status but rather a universal-like role. Culture personifies the caring mother of that mysterious and precious quality of "being yourself" and of not "getting mixed up" with others. Through its individually-oriented character, it boosts faith, stirs up new ambitions and encourages creativity.

He who speaks about cultures needs to think about those collections of traditions, histories, beliefs, values, customs and styles that enable a collectivity to run through history with the same name and profile which are known and acknowledged by the rest of the world.

This unrestrained praise brought to cultures (always in plural) cannot put aside two embarrassing questions:

- 1) Why is it that the majority of present conflicts between neighboring countries or within the same states are identity clashes, more precisely 28 out of 30 wars are of cultural nature?
- 2) Why certain cultures let go of the survival imperative and embrace the manifest form of decadence by becoming frivolous, hedonistic and obsessed with the present moment, while amusing themselves with an unending cheap and senseless-type of entertainment?

** Researchers such as Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, NY, 1973) encompass religions and ideologies within culture. Other studies (*Culture matters*, L. Harrison, S. Huntington, Basic Books, NY, 2000) are deepening the relations between cultures, economy and social life. Very few researchers draw a clear distinction between cultures/civilization, whose predecessors are presented in M. Malița, *Ten thousand cultures, a single civilization*, Nemira, Bucharest, 1998).

In addition, this phase that sets down the importance of values on a highly revered place is joining forces with the fierce criticism of science and technology that “alters and alienates” man from the school of effort and work, by forming a thick and hilarious layer of this century’s anarchists. Here we are in our right to leaf through the history of those empires, countries or societies that, just before perishing, were performing a dance of decadence.

A series of conferences organized by Armand Clesse in Luxembourg brought under analysis “the vitality of nations” from within different parts of the world. Certain European countries that have proved their vigor in the past by becoming great powers of their period, are wondering what is left of this vim at a time when the population grows old and the great projects are disregarded.

We are reading numerous studies about Europe that claim the latter starts to show signs of a weakness characteristic to senility. Although the charges are mutual between the USA and Europe, one may draw the conclusion that the whole West demonstrates a reduced vitality in comparison to the Asian countries, starting with China and ending with the ASEAN. The ageing of the population and demographic decrease, the securing of labor force by massive legal or illegal immigration, the meager economic growth, frequent crises and heavy indebtedting, the negativity and pessimism of the image obsessed and living in the present time cultures could constitute disturbing signs of a decline. And the prospects for the first and second halves of our century are quite alarming. The center of the civilized world is shifting under our very eyes from the Euro-Atlantic area to the Euro-Asian region and settles in the Asian continent. The bird of civilization set off on a journey from the Asian Pacific coast, travelled across the continent, made a few stopovers alongside the silk road, resting for long in South-East Asia and Middle East, pressing on to the Mediterranean Italy, Greece and Spain, and thereafter to the English and Nordic corner. Having crossed the ocean, it reached America, hovering over the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific and reentering Asia at the present moment.

What do the cultures have in common with this flight? If cultural identity, carried inside the minds of the people, reflects the self-preservation instinct, then culture measures the forces which are at the service of survival, that of the mind being at the same time the strongest and the quietest of all.

Decadent cultures, in their worn out, exhausted and resigned phase have signaled the serious injuries inflicted on this instinct, approaching doom and/or suicide. The other attribute of decadent cultures was their unsustainable character. When looking at the last days of the Roman Empire, it turns out that the concern for future generations had dwindled, whereas the long-term thinking and extensive projects had disappeared under a flood of final “son et lumière” shows and relentless jubilees.

Look at the world all gathered up today for a debate on environment and climate. They all charge economy with being unsustainable; so are industry and

technologies. Bitter voices can be heard as well. They demand of us to examine our own minds and the cultures we bear inside. Aren't we heading in some cases towards an unsustainable culture? Perhaps "de te fabula narratur!" Can we honestly expect to be able to change everything and enjoy a sustainable civilization, whereas culture is signaling unsustainability? We could examine the philosophical schools of our educational systems. Post- and neo- are the predominant currents whose essence extols the denouncement of science and irrationalism, the setting in of a reality with no existence outside our own subjectivity; namely the platonic, virtual and distant world, so dear to "humanists" that some of them settle there for good and never return to the real world and its hideous physical frame that is limited and confinable. There are a series of unsustainable cultures albeit seemingly weak and poor, that can't possibly be considered postmodern for the mere fact that they have never got to know modernity while being saddled under the secular yoke of myths and phantasms.

Of course, here comes a violent retort! All you nostalgic people, do you want us to turn back to the antiques? Would you prefer the lights of three centuries ago or the smoke industries that poisoned our "modernization"? Neither fistfights, nor broken display windows are unbecoming of these themes. Many debates wind up this way in irked societies, marked by discontent and concerns about their own fate.

Even though cultures verging on unsustainability are regarded as sad heralds of decline, they cannot avoid showing up at the great shift assembly, where economy, finances, science, technology, ecology and other key fields of knowledge and human action announced their presence.

Nothing "antique" or obsolete will be asked of them. Reason is since long on its way to endorse empirical, affectional and emotional knowledge. Science ceased long ago to be deemed absolute. Its determinism was replaced by probabilistic calculation. Man himself is connected to the information system, even though its structure is being overlooked. The extra time earned by welfare improved people's prospects of indulging themselves in reflection or pursuing permanent education.

The working and recycling years are intertwined, while the former practice of a single profession is replaced by a succession of activities which are chosen rather than imposed.

The old? Suffice it to quote Horace, who while taking notice at the young apprentices of a decadent Greek culture, dedicated his sorrowful ode to the downfall of a great empire. And where are, he says, the stout young boys who after a day's labor, release the oxen from the yoke at dusk, watched over by the stark gaze of their mothers? This wise man felt Rome was heading to its doom while embracing an unsustainable culture.