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Is There a Political Pathology?

ANA-MARIA DRAGODAN

THE PRESENT economic crisis, as complicated and as full of surprises as it comes, is about to extinguish the last sparkle of optimism generated by the implosion of communism. That may lead to the assumption that the crisis itself was in fact delayed by this unique historical phenomenon—when a socio-political system self-destructs and collapses from within without an external intervention in force, thus providing for the opposing system a rather unexpected breath of fresh air.

It may equally be possible that the aforesaid phenomenon facilitated the crisis. Let us not forget that what we called communism maintained at the international level a psycho-political tension that, even though very difficult to endure at times, was nevertheless a powerful stimulus for the free world. And its fall entailed a sudden and complete loosening that ebbed prudence against risks and weakened self-control.

With respect to political pathology we could issue countless hypotheses. However, two aspects seem to be certain: on the one hand, the significance of political factors in the evolution of economies increased greatly, their influence being unfortunately often negative, and on the other, in the context of the sudden relaxation of political international relations the field of action of political leaders increased possibly beyond benefic limitations. As such, it is noteworthy the statement of the former president of the United States, George W. Bush, that he has a sickening feeling every time he thinks that Iraq in fact did not possess any weapon of mass-destruction at the moment the US decided to attack... There are yet many other indicators of the lax behavior of state leaders that surprises or confuses political observers, or even leads to misunderstanding.

In this respect, the recent disclosures by *Wikileaks* may be significant as well, with consequences impossible to presently assess. The language and liberties of thought taken by politicians often have vulgar effects and results, lacking coherence and perspective, revealing altogether minimal concerns as to the roles they assumed.

Also it should not be neglected that too many politicians seem to lack at least a minimal understanding of the specificity of the domain in which they seek to consolidate a career; many of their astonishing opinions, largely promoting confusions verging on the ludicrous, reveal a misunderstanding of their very own field of action.

And for most of them, politics means promoting party interests, and by that they mean one's own personal interests. The preconception residing in mentalities founded on the precarious knowledge that politics is mainly a partisan activity is reflected by them in public debates. The confrontations between politicians and the motivation of their acts suggests the idea that, for them, all means are worthwhile and any elementary moral refrains are but for the naïve ones or for those politicians lacking experience. Paraphrasing a well-known quotation, could we say that politics has become too important to be left to the politicians?

It may seem pretentious, but sometimes we have to go back to the original understanding of the notions we are using. Regarding the term *politics*, for instance, the definitions are many but there is a common, fundamental denominator. In its original understanding, this term means (to any person having a reasonable level of knowledge) the process through which a group of people with initially different opinions and interests (since groups are made of individuals/individualities) reaches collective, common choices and decisions, mandatory for the whole group and symbolic for the common, necessary outlines of social behavior.

Consequently, before anything else, politics is not a divider, a separator; it unites and represents that level of human existence facilitating a common and coherent behavior for a specific group of people, more important and comprehensive than the one based on blood kinship. Policy/politics thus lies at the basis of a cohesive human community. We might say that within human communities that resist through time there is a consensual infrastructure facilitated by politics. It is interesting to be noted here that the most influential hypothesis regarding the extinction of the Neanderthal man—a species contemporary with *Homo sapiens* for a long span of time—maintains that its disappearance was caused by the incapacity to unite in groups large enough to be able to survive.

That political connections are mandatory and not optional is beyond discussion. The essential community of the people generates these connections, which, in their turn, ensure and develop the capacity of survival of the units constituted on this basis, and of the species as a whole. The differences of opinion and interest, or partisan interests, can be expressed within this arena, and thus not only that they are not endangering the existence of the group/society but also contribute to its survival and development.

We may conclude that politics ensures on one hand the elementary cohesion of a group in which differences are not forbidden but declared, as otherwise the very core of political action would be nullified (it is pointless to unite what is not different, because it will unite on its own). On the other hand, and precisely on that basis, politics offers a free and peaceful arena for confronting ideas, opinions, valuable options or interests. Political means are, and have always been peaceful means; the latter entails and facilitates cooperation, negotiation and not conflict or social divide.

To use a salient example, one of the factors (ignored most of the time) that led to the implosion of communism was precisely the reduction to a minimum of the field

of political manifestation through the dictatorship of one party, whose singularity however denied its very political character. The fuelling of certain sources of conflict between the individual and society, even their expansion through coercive attitudes was the driving force behind the collapse of the artificial social edifice. The effect, in time, could not be other than the rendering of a society completely devoid of political life and the destruction of the solidarity at its basis.

We notice that the reflex of this extreme voluntarism is still manifest within post-communist societies, particularly in those where this tendency was stronger and the rarifying of the daily survival means was likewise extreme. To many people, “the other” represented an adversary, who may get on an overcrowded public bus before him, or cut the line in front of a store and thus depriving him of the indispensable aliments.

The destruction of the elementary solidarity at the basis of society, combined with the tacit, (at times even enthusiastic) implicit complicity at its peak, with a leader who, once proclaimed, gained ego-cratic powers, quickly emptied the political field, jeopardizing the very survival of said communities. Only the political/propagandistic blender functioned, running on empty nevertheless, and only within the frame of formal manifestations of a single political party, which gradually eroded the point of its existence, first and foremost through the precise destruction of its political character. We shall return to this subject within this paper, as its features are much more complex and instructive than we might think.

It is certain however that such a negative performance—namely reaching the highest degree of self-denial—was to be persistent, unfortunately, even after the disappearance of the system that produced the single party anomaly. A political party that has not partners of similar nature, i.e. other political parties, cannot survive, but can induce within the political body an illness difficult to cure.

To be more explicit, the most telling example is the tendency—weaker or stronger according to how the imposing intensity of such a party was: more expansive or contained—of parties in the post-communist countries to impose themselves as a single party when they reach power. This perverse effect is so strong that even politicians talk about politics in a pejorative manner, mistaking politicization for partisanship, making reciprocal accusations that, by taking a party position, one politicizes the matter in question to an intolerable degree.

This illness is aggravated by obsessive hypochondria. Is there a way out of such a situation verging on the edge of the tragicomic?

Certainly, we should not forget that ignorance is one of the contributing factors to this falsification of political opinions and attitudes. Many members of the new political classes entered politics without any elementary knowledge of the field, and without sharing any values connected to that. Moreover, while some of them are mere dilettantes, some others are driven by very strong interests, nevertheless of a different nature than political ones.

Hence, nowadays, people talk about pseudo-politics after the fall of the communist regime, especially in East European countries. Such an approach, however, has

only a didactic interest. What is considered pseudo-politics is indeed a very concrete political life, with all the consequences it entails and with an undoubtedly long-term effect. Its acts are not cohesive but destructive, gradually taking the contours of non-politics. It is rather an ignorant and obsolete political manifestation, fallen into primitivism—it is flawed politics.

This type of politics turns us back to the starting point of the elementary political act, that of identification/re-identification of the possibility of deliberative cohesion of human groups larger than those within which blood ties are the only coagulant factor, which is self-regulating. As such, we have reached a threshold from where the call to pathology of politics appears to be imperative. But is there such a pathology and, if not, can it be initiated?

It is known that the term *pathology* refers to the systematic study of diseases, their diagnosis and prescription of remedies, and—most importantly perhaps—the prevention of their incidence. However, if the illnesses that constitute the field of Medicine cause, first and foremost, an individual pain, and only by becoming endemic do they become a collective illness, the possible or real illnesses of the political field cause a collective pain from the start. Even the ancient Greeks considered collective unhappiness as an effect of a flawed political life and possible subject for pathology. Moreover, is not hard to notice, throughout all historical periods, the existence of those states that affect in difficult-to-predict manners the vitality and even the survival of a community—the modern era, in particular, provides examples to anyone interested in such a subject.

Is there a clue that a political pathology may already exist, and, by a misapprehension of sorts, we fail to make appeal to it when needed? Unfortunately, there is not! There is instead a well-developed political psychopathology, which is not taken too seriously by either the political or the electorate body, serving rather the obsession for the sensational present in the mass media. There are many references to political pathology in the scientific, mainly sociological literature, and it is often referred to in mass-media debates. Nevertheless, what is indeed important is the fact that the great historical and philosophical works of humanity are abundant in references and suggestions regarding political illnesses as well as their possible cure.

Nevertheless, there are no systematic studies with proposals of strategies, or, perhaps, therapeutic or preventive methodologies. The accumulation of unhealthy conditions generated directly or indirectly by politics, the symptoms of collective unhappiness which seems to broaden its scope with each passing day, the psychosocial tensions encountered everywhere demand explanations or solutions, even palliative ones, which may lead to the strengthening of the trust people put in their own social life.

Such an endeavor will inevitably start from the most ancient and consistent historical data. It was Thucydides who wrote about the Peloponnesian wars as a subject for political pathology. And, indeed, nothing contributed more than the latter to the fall of the Greek polis. . .

Starting from the biblical text, Pierre Watté challenges us to delve back to the origins of man. According to his opinion, the original sin marks also the primordial political relations. Hence, he maintains that we can talk about a triad of the original sin: the drama of Adam and Eve as a couple, Cain's fratricide and the fall of the Babel Tower. Beyond the reservations we may have regarding such a perspective, it is worth meditating on the fact that, in a positive translation, this triad reveals the relativization of morals through knowledge, the fratricide as a historical event from which wars originate, the difficulties or even quasi-impossibility of the unification of peoples into comprehensive political units.

Thus, the link with politics is no longer necessary to be demonstrated. Moreover, if we talk about an original sin of man, it is worthwhile translating it into the terms of our present-day knowledge and to complete the full comprehension on the origins of man and the genesis of his distinctive relational forms of existence.

It is very difficult and pernicious to deny the role of religion in constituting and maintaining the cohesion of social relationships. Durkheim—considered by many as the first important sociologist—asserted that religiosity is the web that holds society together. It should also be pointed out that even nowadays religiosity has a more important role in the American society (the most dynamic among of the known ones) than in the European societies. At the same time, in post-communist societies, the role of religion, even more that of the Church, increased significantly.

On the other hand, it is precisely that that can help us understand that, in crisis situations, of ideological confusion or pronounced insecurity, man returns to what seems eternal and where he looks for grounds to keep hope alive. Without hope, no political pathology seems to be of any use: to what end to try to cure an illness if you cannot hope for recovery?

Historical study, like the etymological or mythological one, reveals to us an even more dramatic situation: a terrible illness seems to be ingrained in the very genesis of the political units. At the origin of human societies, power is linked to death; furthermore, this link is sacred by consecration.

Coming down from Mount Sinai with the Tables of the Law, Moses ordered the sons of Levi—who will then become the defenders of the Law and exclusive sacerdotal caste—to kill the people who worshiped the Golden Calf. As such, one of the Ten Commandments—"Thou shall not kill"—is welcomed with a death sentence, on grounds of the sacred right taken by the person who assumes power.

The transition to the first Roman emperor takes place in a similar manner. Octavian, great pontiff at the time of the killing of Julius Caesar, assumes the title of *Augustus*. In Indo-European language, *august*, similar to the Latin *augur*—the one who has to consult the gods before a decision affecting the community is taken—, signified mystical being. We may assert that the divinity itself institutes power. Especially as all emperors would bear the title of *Augustus*, and at their death they would be immortalized in the Roman Pantheon.

Mircea Eliade tells us: “for twenty thousand years, all known vestiges of humanity send to a cult of the genitor animal in forms that are globally identical and stable”.¹ Moreover, this animal is the investor of power, representing the sacred element in whose name power imparts life or death.

James George Fraser reveals the wide distribution of the myth of the “Golden Bough”, that bestowed to the one who discovered it the right to challenge the one in power to a fight to the death, within one political unit or the other, and if he were to prevail, to become the new sovereign. The popular mythologies maintain within their collective memory such images: in Romanian mythology for instance, the one who takes on the mission of conquering power is seen as “being clothed with the garment of death”².

The reiteration of the sacred power/death duality, of pagan origin, is present throughout the entire history of the Western world. Christianity would not change that: he who is “God’s anointed one” would have the right over the life and death of his subjects; he will not share power with any ordinary mortal, but after many centuries of fratricide battles.

The Amerindians from the Oneida tribe have an ancient story about the discovery of a new place that seemed much better than the territory they occupied at the time. Once they moved on, they discovered that the place was being run by wolves. At first, they thought of killing them, but then asked themselves what kind of people they would become after the extermination of the wolves. Finally, they decided to stay on, and they elected someone who, every time the issue of the killing of the wolves was to be brought into play, would defend the animals. In the course of history though, not everyone thought of that, after unleashing waves of murders against their own kind, until they reached what Edgar Morin calls *mega-murder*. During one single century, the twentieth, the violence reached the threshold of madness. “The two World Wars killed millions. The Stalinist and Nazi death camps killed millions...”³ and so, as Michel Foucault noticed, “we are living from now on in societies in which the right to live is measured by the right to kill”⁴.

It is also worth noticing that the emergence of constitutional states led to the “secularization” of power; but the echoes of the original founding did not fade away. The divine commandment was diluted in more or less infatuated or demagogic phrases, such as the phrase “national interest”, a bauble in the electoral speeches of all politicians, very few of whom make the necessary effort to define it.

Nowadays, many are tempted to refer only to the blamable character of those evolutions; however, a minimal scientific scrupulosity determines us to analyze them within the appropriate contexts, in order to decipher our origins and the ways in which we have imposed ourselves as social beings. Such a perspective would allow us to understand that the very process that allowed the constitution of political units contained within it the source of certain political illnesses: the collective will did not appear as an act of rational thought or consciousness, but as a relation of power and,

fatally, a minority succeeded in imposing its will to other minorities, or majorities, by increasingly radical means.

Therefore, the long line of attacks against the integrity of humanity unraveled in its entirety; from the political insignificance of the individual to almost unimaginable kinds of despotism, from state absolutism to the most destructive forms of totalitarianism, from seraphic spiritualism to the most aggressive forms of materialism, until we reached the limit where murder has taken an all-encompassing scope.

Fortunately still, nowadays we can consider that in the history of humanity global catastrophes with irreparable consequences have yet to occur. James Lovelock wrote, "It is not the Earth that is frail, it is us who are frail..."⁵

If throughout history such an evolution was inevitable, with all the flawed consequences we still inherit from it, presently we can look from another perspective. Humankind has gained awareness over the entire process of the evolution of social life, the consequences accumulated from the manner in which the political units were constituted and survived until the moment our planet became a "global village", according to the famous words of McLuhan. Moreover, there are systematic and comprehensive studies available to people who have the decisional power, and who could use them for the preemptive control of dangerous evolutions. The general level of knowledge has increased considerably. The mass media, regardless of the perverse effects it continuously produces, is a cognitive vector with a seemingly inexhaustible influence.

Nevertheless, the most serious problems that humankind is confronted with reside at the level of expectations. In the same time, we should not forget that, promoting a model that worries everybody, we could generate despair and, ultimately, induce a feeling of guilt and fear. Social life is very sensitive, and actions, especially political ones, can induce different states of the same nature among populations while trying to unveil flawed states at the social or political level. However, it does not mean that we should not be realistic and notice that in the field of finding real solutions to persistent pathological problems the steps forward are very few.

I cannot but conclude, said U Thant in 1969, that according to the information I have in my capacity of General Secretary, members of the UN have less than 10 years to master old disputes and launch a global cooperation deemed to halt the arms race and better the human being's life environment and to minimize the consequences of the demographic boom, giving the necessary impulse to humanity's development efforts. If we cannot reach such a global cooperation, then I fear that the issues I referred myself to will attain such huge proportions that we will be unable to dominate them (apud. Watté)⁶.

Even today, after forty years, thirty five million people die of hunger annually; nuclear weapons continue to be a menace and the cost of their maintenance is astronomical; the gap between the poor and the rich tends to widen; hundreds of mil-

lions of people have no education; the economic disparity still is, for some, a source of easy money, and of chronic poverty for others etc. The series of striking inequities could continue. Moreover, the political factors are evidently directly involved in their perpetuation, and in great numbers.

Do we find ourselves in the middle of a political illness? And if so, from whom do we expect salvation? The illusions of redemption, deeply rooted in the mythical memories of humanity, did not do much more, up until now, than enabling man to indulge himself in a state of expectancy, without searching for the general good every step of the way, no matter how little it may be.

Some of the tensions reported forty years ago improved due to the implosion of European communism, but the signal drawn by U Thant is still valid. How pathetic can we be in our sufferings and expectations? What do we need to understand that, instead of nourishing illusions that do nothing else than aggravate negative evolutions, we should assume daily gestures, no matter how modest, in order to solve problems, to reduce the entropy of the daily life, to assume behaviors closer to the values we are claiming, or norms we are proclaiming? Is it not the time for a change of azimuth in our actions, evolved by now into automatisms of destruction?

These are some of the questions we will address in this book. Special attention will be directed to the problematic of political pathology specific to the realities of our country, which, in the author's opinion, is crossing one of the most complex periods in its entire history. In our analysis we will start from several premises.

The communist regime was enforced in Romania through the power of the occupation army. Its birth certificate is an utterly illegitimate one: the soviet delegate imposed to the king the nomination of a communist government under the threat that Romania would not receive Northern Transylvania and would be forced to pay the war compensations immediately.

The elections that followed were obviously staged. "In a country whose culture was dominated ancestrally by the anti-Russian sentiment—proven by two centuries of folk culture—and whose peasants were forced to give up their cattle for simple papers, how could the budding Communist Party, brought by the tanks of the Red Army, have won 90% of the national vote in free elections?"⁷

Furthermore, under the pressure of the psychological complex generated by its glaring illegitimacy, the communist regime had an aberrant evolution: in order to induce the idea that at its origin it is a revolutionary act, it proclaimed simulacrums, finally imposing a leader with a quasi inexistent formal education and a precarious political culture, with the declared ambition to become the Stalin of Romania.

This leader, in his turn, would mobilize the entire party and state resources in order to cultivate his own image. Obsessed with the vision of his own destiny, he seized and made use of absolute power, ignoring all ideological canons of communism, which, in fact, he never understood, until the final nonsense: the clan communism.

The consequences were so corrosive within the society that the elementary solidarity of the citizens dissolved. The individualism of the Romanians, exercised

throughout centuries of miraculous survival, debouched, and thus, the manners of resistance gained, partially, a pathologic character. A flawed mechanism would lead then to paradoxical effects: the “visionary” leader became the most efficient adversary of his “masterwork”. . .

Over the entire course of this evolution of the political superstructure of society, the economic power weakened, the commodities becoming so scarce that a parallel system of re-distribution appeared, generated by what came to be known by an argotic term, similar to that of “business”: *bisnita* (the core of the new Romanian capitalism!), with complicities extended to the law enforcing authority (*Militia*), security forces (*Securitate*), and even in party structures.

A black economy sprang out and developed from this phenomenon—the germ of generalized corruption and organized crime, with serious deforming influences over the legitimate economy. The ensuing degradation of social life in communist Romania was utter and complete, with consequences in economy, in morals, and the justice system that can be felt even today.

The moment of the implosion of the communist system also was, paradoxically, under the patronage of the same obsession: “we should also have our own revolution” (to paraphrase Caragiale, the most important Romanian playwright). And everything seemed to have happened in order to finally accommodate that aspiration (there are indications that everything was staged). Only thus can the lack of clear ideas regarding the transition, the aggressions, and the neo communist and anticommunist inconsequence, the entire atypical evolution of Romanian economy and society be explained.

All these assumptions lead to the idea that within the Romanian society, a serious pathological state of corruption has taken over and it has become quite persistent, one that irrevocably prevents us from overcoming this transition that seems to have become eternal, and this chronic state of socio-moral crisis.

For the modern societies in which the sociologists discover menacing flawed states—frustration and alienation, chronic lack of trust in institutions, reciprocal distrust among individuals, decline of the faith in political parties, ubiquity of corruption and its corrosive effects etc.—the case of Romania, which provides examples where these states reach their peak, may be a good starting point for structuring a political pathology under the “patronage” of an interdisciplinary political science.

As political doctrines have become rather obsolete, and their social mobilizing force is completely exhausted—at least at this historical moment —, such an enterprise seems even more necessary. In a complementary way, an alliance between science and mass-media could be useful, in order to put an end to a process of delegitimatization with incalculable consequences to social and political stability in the contemporary world.



Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. 1., Bucharest, Editura științifică și enciclopedică, 1986.
2. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Bucharest, Editura științifică și enciclopedică, 1984, p. 98-101.
3. Edgar Morin, *Pour sortir du XX-ème siècle*, Paris, Fernand Nathan, 1981, p. 367.
4. Michel Foucault, *De la guerre de race au racisme d'Etat*, Gallimard - Seuil, (Haute Etude), 1997, p. 111
5. James Lovelock, *Sinteza* magazine, February, 1991, p. 34.
6. Pierre Watté, *Esquisse de pathologie politique. Peché collectif et responsabilité*, Bruxelles, 1986, p. 17.
7. *Mattei Dogan, Sociologie politică. Opere alese*, Bucharest, Alternative, 1999, p. 161.

Abstract

Is there a political pathology?

Political pathology, as a recently born branch of political science, seems to be devoted to those negative aspects that alienate politics from its fundamental meaning, namely that of serving the collective interests, either of whole nations or of restrained human communities or, in other words, to serving the *common good*, as Aristotle himself defined it. Moreover, the extreme pathological manifestations taking place in the main fields of politics may determine the annihilation of their basic meaning, triggering real catastrophes for human communities. Yet, to the contrary, if considered in its benefic sense, politics does not divide or set apart, but represents that specific level of human conscience that facilitates a common and coherent behavior for the widest of human groups.

Politics lies at the basis of human *cohesive* communities. There is a consensual infrastructure achieved precisely through politics that made possible the survival of human communities and their development through centuries and millennia. Ensuring through politics the elementary cohesion of human groups does not exclude differences, but on the contrary, presupposes them, otherwise the area of politics would become empty and void of meaning. Under communism, the destruction of the elementary solidarity at the basis of society coupled with the presence at the top of a leader with Ego-cratic powers, has emptied quite rapidly the political field, threatening the survival of the community itself. This trait is common to all totalitarian regimes, constituting the *climax* of political pathology. Even after the dismantling of political systems based on the single party, in certain post-communist societies there existed tendencies of certain parties to assert themselves as “the one and only” party. The perverse effect is so strong that politicians themselves finally speak of politics in the most pejorative meaning and tend to confuse politization with partisanship. Pathology means, as it is well known, the systematic study of diseases, their diagnosis, the prescription of remedies, and, which is more important, their *prevention*. A systematic study of political pathology, entailing proposals of strategies and of therapeutic and prevention methodologies still fails to exist. The present study wishes to constitute only part of a more comprehensive book comprising the study of the main different forms of political pathology and it is worth emphasizing that the working hypotheses of said book may very well form starting points for a much wider area of interest covering the therapy of contemporary politics.

Keywords

Pathology, politics, prevention, systems, totalitarianism