

# THE NEW CHALLENGES OF THE PANDEMIC MEGA-CRISIS AND THE METAMORPHOSES OF THE IMMEDIATE PRESENT

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## Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic made humanity face the unknown and the unpredictable. It changed the world order, generating a period which confirms the theory of contemporaneity as a liquid and unsecure society (Bauman, Morin, Plesu). The virus-chameleon has generated a mega-crisis: a crisis of structure (institutional), a crisis of systems (medical-sanitary, financial-economic, psychological-communicational, and others), a crisis of cycles etc., which revealed specific issues in different spheres and the need to reconceptualise the guidelines and priorities. Covid-19, a coded assault, shows how fragile humanity is today. The significance of entering a new stage of the world's society also requires the creative adaptation of the academic communities to the imminent changes of the fields. Science represents a space to advance hypotheses/ to make proposals/to search and to find solutions in this complicated situation. During the spasmodic times of pandemic, science, culture and art became a *sui-generis* vaccine fighting against fear and death, as they replace immortality. Therefore, science and culture help us produce positivity, creativity and immunity.

**Keywords:** *Coronavirus, pandemic, systemic crisis, culture as vaccine, new humanism.*

We live in dynamic times of tension and intensity. Western philosophers, such as Zygmunt Bauman (BAUMAN, 2000), Edgar Morin (MORIN, 2020) or Andrei Pleșu (PLEȘU, 2016) defined contemporaneity as a liquid and unsecure society, statements which now become more and more credible. Today, pandemics prove how fragile humanity really is, depending on the total number of chaotic mutations of an invisible chameleonic, but almighty virus. It was thought that epidemics were already overcome in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that nowadays only the underdeveloped countries can be contaminated (ORSENA, 2017). The former footballer **Gabriel Șuleru, who moved to London after finishing his career**, formulated this state of bewildered humanity since the beginning of the pandemic

crisis: "Everything that is going on in the world right now is painful. Everything has turned upside down in such a short period of time, it seems unreal. We are in 2020, science and technology have reached such a high level and yet so many brilliant minds, who have unlimited resources at their disposal, do not seem capable of finding a solution, an antidote to this problem" (ȘULERU, 2020). We were just asking ourselves how extremely developed civilisations, such as the Atlantis, disappeared – nowadays we have some more options, for example that of the pandemics. Each era had its pandemics: antiquity – the cholera, the Middle Ages – the plague, modernity – the syphilis, romanticism – the tuberculosis, our era – the HIV and cancer.

The SARS COV Coronavirus pandemic represents a radical turning point which created specific epiphenomena, cancelling *championships, festivals, expositions, some with secular traditions*. The Coronavirus has put humanity in front of the unknown; the unpredictable changed the world order, generating a period of colossal uncertainty. Covid, a codified assault, moved too quickly to be studied in this planetary aggression. Similar to an era of war, it provoked some apocalyptic attitudes. Each generation has its own fight: deportations, war, hunger, Afghanistan, Chernobyl. We quote President Emmanuel Macron who, unlike other presidents, spoke right from the beginning about the seriousness of this pandemic, stating that the Covid pandemic represents the war that we have on our territory, with an invisible enemy. Also, the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres, notices that this fight represents "the fight of a generation and UN's reason for being." When humanity is at an impasse, we speak about "the

closure of times." Time also led to the questions related to the crisis situations: *Who is to blame? What are we going to do?* In the current situation, *the crisis* is no longer defined in a classical manner, but as an attitude which proposes new tasks and the corresponding solutions.

The Coronavirus represents a challenge; the weaknesses of humanity, of the systems and of the institutions became visible. Covid-19 generated a mega-crisis: a crisis of structure (institutional), a crisis of systems (medical-sanitary, financial-economic, psychological-communicational, and others), a crisis of cycles, a crisis of trust, together with "the corruption pandemic" and the politicization of crisis, supported by the pandemics of incompetency which revealed the specific problems of different spheres. The pandemic crisis influenced all fields. Affected and prepared in different measures, they reconceptualise their landmarks and priorities. The columnist Cristian Unteanu stated even from the beginning that "we find ourselves at a time that history will record as triggering one of those profound civilizational mutations, which will influence the subsequent development of our world" (UNTEANU, 2020). The coordinates of opposing paradigms enter into dialogue or competition: the warnings of the World Health Organization *versus* the lack of preparation of the medical system; the state of emergency *versus* the state of wakefulness; isolation - an efficient element from a medical point of view, but with risky consequences from an economic and social point of view etc. The political and medical self-organization was late and the insufficient anticipation of the danger led to irremediable losses. The medical and logistic organisation resisted, but the price in human lives, as well as the financial prices is extremely high. The effect of the crisis consists in the fact that it takes us out of the natural order of life and that it makes us question the way we live and the way we think.

The importance of entering a new stage of human society was undermined exactly at a moment in which globalization was necessary. However, the international institutions did not manage to deal with the disadvantages of globalization, such as *the butterfly effect*: as the world becomes more and more connected, it also becomes more interdependent, which inevitably

led to systemic supply chain disruptions and many other dangerous effects. The sceneries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which catastrophes, bio-terrorism and wars continue generate new challenges which represent a gate towards a new laboratory of the spirit. In the field of research, the effort of scientists in order to develop a vaccine was immediate. Critical thinking in a critical state becomes an operative creative thinking programmed for success, which proves the alternative solutions proposed by various groups of researchers from different regions at the same time. We remember Confucius' postulate about the age of change, which today sounds like an opportunity and an invitation to do something else. For the Hamlet of the 21st century, being is synonymous with *surviving*.

Besides the fact that it aggravated the already existent problems, the pandemic crisis triggered many new problems, such as the beginning of an economic war for supplying countries with specific equipment, the competition between countries to develop the vaccine, the citizens' quicker or slower repatriation, the transformation of the cities that never sleep (New York, Las Vegas, Los Angeles) into ghost cities, without actors and the other way around, of depopulated places into points of attraction etc. The paradoxes which appear sometimes come from informed individuals: "How long are they going to keep us indoors?" asked himself rhetorically the columnist Ion Cristoiu, in the spring of 2019.

The war on the medical front revealed many realities: the sending of doctors to war without weapons; the unprecedented recruitment of medical staff of all levels; tired doctors who do no longer manage to cope. There are hospitals completely turned into intensive care. On the other side, the medical diplomacy is impressive and especially the doctors' courage and sacrifice.

There are multiple challenges for education since the direct organic connection between university/professor/student, library/book was interrupted. The activities switched to a virtual or hybrid reality, which become an augmented and perspective one. The computerization of the educational sphere did not only lead to the boost of the development of new forms (online teaching, distance training platforms), but also to the reconfiguring of the already existent ones. The

screen monitor evolved towards a more and more dense informational surface, with specialised platforms and multimedia university networks. However, knowledge is supported not only by the veracity of the sources, but also by the guidance and creativity of what we call *the new identity of the teacher*. From the imperative perspective of the digitalization of all spheres, one can state that we now prepare the intelligent future. The quality educational act made a revolutionary jump and is becoming more and more open to deep changes: the recombining and recycling of traditional methodologies/conventions/materials with the new communication technologies, dynamically shifting from standardization to originality. From the knowledge gaining stage, education shifts towards the development of the innovation capacity and to the university's accentuated role in public life.

It was clear right from the beginning that the severity of impact of the pandemic crisis depends on the way in which national and international governments react. Therefore, one has noticed that in the case of a mega-crisis, states initially barricaded themselves, each facing the crisis on their own. In Europe more or less serious measures have been taken, the closing of the European borders being criticised. Beyond the different reactions, at present Europe tends towards a solidarity response, towards a protection mechanism including the integrationist processes of homogenizing solutions. The Anglo-Saxon world offered right from the beginning less recommendable lessons regarding Covid and their governors shocked the global public opinion with their statements and behaviours. Mexico and China manifested attitudes of ostentatious detachment. China's mistakes (a postponed recognition, the late emergency state) transformed it into an irresponsible actor which led to the present global health crisis.

At the international level we notice that the unprecedented economic and medical response of the developed countries cannot be implemented in many developing regions from Latin America, Africa, South Asia or Eastern Europe, where consequences are longer and more severe. We notice that this sanitary crisis, the most serious one in contemporary history,

attacks those who are weak and that the entire medical system of the Republic of Moldova is quite frail. The analyst Veaceslav Ionișă stated concise and objective: "the crisis caught us in a crisis." And yet, in comparison to the consumption society which accepts transition very hard because of opulence – in the era of crisis, one might also deduce some advantages of subdevelopment: rural distancing takes precedence over urban distance; *homo sovieticus* was used to all kinds of shortages; our old population are better trained when it comes to survival. Time put in brackets also became a time of reflexion about overconsumption.

The red code did not impress the unruly citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The pandemic confirmed that we are a country and a society based on the cultural and spiritual values of Christianity. Our Orthodox Church, stuck in time, remains one of the few institutions which is not afraid of the virus. The Metropolitan Church of Moldova even encouraged the Holy Mass, considering churches as spiritual hospitals. Could they also really treat the sick parishioners? Pope Francis celebrates the Holy Mass without physical presence, considering that people are more important than the economy, and doctors are the only ones who give verdicts and prescriptions. The pontiff of Vatican stated that that pandemic offered an opportunity to slower the rate of production and of consumption and to teach people to understand and contemplate the natural world. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church contributes even to the spread of the coronavirus by giving the Eucharist with the same spoon to the people who do not bother to kiss the icons. It is paradoxical the fact that in countries such as Poland, where orthodoxy represented a factor which actively fought against communism, in the current European configuration orthodoxy turns into a brake for liberal-democratic options. We are to deal with the confusing position of the Balti bishop in relationship to the people who got vaccinated, which prefigures, according to the conspiracy theory invoked, the introduction of a chip into the human being. This is not far from the position of a 70 years old Indian priest who beheaded a man in the idea of "the human sacrifice" that might lead to the end of the coronavirus



pandemic. This frightening medieval attitude raises many questions, among which one is major: Is man's relationship with divinity affected if the secular rituals are not respected? This is a rhetorical question for the majority of the 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity. Coming back to Pope Francis, we quote one of the peaceful messages offered by him in the Holy Easter day: "This pandemic stopped us from our hectic rhythm and made us reflect (...) There is no time for division, for wars: it is time to reconcile. There is no time for forgetting, the weak/migrants/refugees have to be helped. Indifference, egoism, forgetting are words that we should forget. Let us find solutions. Unity! Perseverance in doing good deeds!"

However, the observance of a tolerant and just morality was limited by the diversification of the scale of virtues: while some people perform acts of generosity, others launch themselves in speculations and cynical swindles. Enriched by the war, enriched by revolutions and now we have people enriched by Covid 19. Equality in front of disease risks to aggravate social inequality. Some people continue to benefit from comfort, while others permanently risk their lives.

Covid generated a change in social behaviour and different attitudes came into play: the siren of peace versus the siren of calm, solidarity versus hatred. At the beginning of the pandemic, in Ukraine, the contaminated citizens were attacked, a similar situation to the medieval plague. One entered into an axiogenic area, when we initially started to fear of the old and subsequently of children. However, solidarity means to be aware of the fact that *being old represents the future for every one of us*.

On a difficult background, when quarantine and isolation make the difference, doctors have to choose who to help and the paradoxes of the daily existence multiply: distancing measures closeness, there are more cars than people on the streets, funeral do not cost much etc.

The domestic universe is rediscovered and reinvented, new classes, studios, stadiums and laboratories appear at home. In order to overcome the feeling of void and of desert, cinemas appear as well as collective scenes outdoors or in cars, whereas online shopping and consultations become overcrowded.

What have we learned about the coronavirus during this period? First of all, that the virus does not have any age, race or boundaries – nobody is safe. That the heterogenous circulation of the virus is not uniform, it changes according to both external circumstances and the organisms that it attacks.

The officials clearly stated that we have to learn *to live with the virus; to protect ourselves and to adapt*; we have to be *alone, but solidary, positivity creates immunity!* – these statements became the slogans of the day. During quarantine the flux of conscience is trained to find outstanding solutions beforehand. The crisis motivated us to be competitive, to develop ourselves personally and professionally. Working from home and selling services turned it valid universal formats. The coronavirus represents a challenge that did not bring humanity to its knees, but propelled it a few steps forward.

How did we change during this period? What have we learned about ourselves? We learned that isolation is not a punishment, but a shelter; we rediscovered the importance of civic conscience and responsibility. Basically, the present epidemic proved to be a recovery in isolation; other values appeared in the foreground: self, culture, reading, nature. A deeper understanding of the human fragility proved to use that we are never safe and out of danger.

The columnist Cristian Tudor Popescu stated in a TV show that "the individual is a virus" who parasites nature. The individual has become harmful, he is in constant war with nature, poisons the entire ecosystem around him, and its destruction is a factor that favours the emergence of epidemics. And if he loses control over things, we will self-destruct and end up in *The red book of species*. Nowadays Terra needs a rest, ecology during the pandemic improved, the earth breaths easier due to the individual's low activity. We come back to the question asked by Țiolkovski a century ago: Will Terra, the cradle of civilisation, manage to preserve itself as it is? We fell that we are powerful on our planet, but nature puts us back in our proper place. The power of the virus consists in the fact that it is autoimmune. However, in terms of thinking, we can be stronger than the virus, here is where we can defeat it.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century scenarios in which catastrophes, bio-terrorism and wars continue generate new challenges which represent a gateway towards a new laboratory of the spirit. Dangers such as the insecurity of data, the manipulation of information or fake news have to be fought against through specialized research, supported by the credibility of the institutions and the reputation of the researchers. We now, more than ever, need a global plan, according to Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *Sapiens, Homo Deus* and *Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*: "Mankind has to make a choice. Shall we take the path of division or shall we adopt the path to global solidarity?" If we choose division, this will not only prolong the crisis, but it will probably lead to even worse catastrophes in the future. If we choose global solidarity, this will represent a victory not only against the coronavirus, but also against all the future epidemics and crisis which might assault humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (HARARI, 2020). Therefore, tomorrow's horizon imposes as an optimal intellectual solution the configuring of a new humanism as a projection of a world which can repair and regenerate the individual and the reality, which respects man and the humane. Edgar Morin, looking for a meaning that pandemics might offer, states in his latest book, *Let us change the path: The lessons of the coronavirus* (2020) that mankind has to be aware of the community of its destiny and of the fact that we have to change the path by regenerating politics, protecting the planet and humanizing the society (MORIN, 2020).

The post-crisis worries and hopes include the analysis of the concept of "the new normal", which refers to the fact that life will never be the same as it was before and that the metamorphoses include all fields. Our life will succeed progressively, but it will be based on other principles: a different reality, but with a certain freedom.

A metamorphosed Covid-19 will be an extremely disturbing force in the next years. The governments of numerous countries became aware of the fact that the spread of Covid-19 can be managed through both a coordinated national and international effort. The global answer includes an intensification of the medical research on vaccination, as well as massive health,

sanitation and basic income investments. This pandemic will consolidate the tendency to get production closer to the markets, emphasizing on the valuing of local and regional circuits than on the dependency of the international ones; the trade and financial flows will outpace the physical ones. Economics will be less one of mobility and more one of security – sanitary, food, energetic. The development of robotics, of artificial intelligence and of 3D printing will answer to these requirements and to many other, more diverse and personalized, ones.

We hope that one day Covid-19 becomes history. But, until then, a respectable institution – The House of Austrian History – began documenting events about this historical pandemic. Bill Gates forecasts that there is a probability that a coronavirus triggered pandemic might occur every 20 years and that scientists claim, on the basis of the segmentation of the genome, that they may be able to predict where the coronavirus will attack in the future.

In fact, the catastrophic scenarios related to pandemics were long ago anticipated by literature, especially by the fantastic one, by cinematography and by other arts. As the individual is "a narrative animal" and fiction is the most efficient tool for "getting to know one's life", as Julian Barnes (BARNES, 2014) and many others say, mankind turned to reading consecrated books, during the pandemic. From plague to Shakespeare and Boccaccio, from the pictures of Bosch, Breughel or Goia – to Camus's "Plague", Ionesco's "Rhinoceros", Eliade's "Letter for the sick" or Cioran's "On the heights of despair", whose profound and immediate values have been rediscovered by replacing the humane in the centre of the equation (TRONARU, 2020). Waiting for the vaccine is not a state "waiting for Godot", an emblematic character who does not appear.

The battle of narrations and "the narration's control" over the pandemic were also observed in the specific strategies of all governments, starting with the Chinese, American and European ones, who immediately wrote unique pages in this *postmodern story*.

The critics also signalled some anti-utopias in which Wuhan was precisely the city in which the pandemic catastrophe began. Cinematography

outplayed the scenarios with suggestive film titles inspired from reality: *Contagion – Epidemics: The unseen danger* (2011), *Pandemic: Fear of the dead* (2016) and others.

Isolation represents an ideal time for reading, which gives meaning to humanity by finding a common pulse and a diverse but supportive metabolism. During the spasmodic times of the pandemic, science, culture and arts became a sui-generis vaccine, which fought against fear and death, because they are at the place of immortality. Therefore, science and culture help us produce positivity, creativity and immunity, all extremely necessary during times of survival.

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