

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CRISIS OF THE ROMANIAN ETHOS FOLLOWING THE ROMANIAN REVOLUTION OF DECEMBER 1989

Vasile MORAR¹

¹Prof.PhD, University of Bucharest, Romania

Corresponding author: Vasile Morar; e-mail: vasilemoralis@gmail.com

Abstract

Faced with this honourable intellectual presence, I do not think it would be without interest to think together about the *theme-phenomenon*: the Romanian ethos at the turn of the times, almost two generations after the Romanian Revolution. Due to the force of things, the analysis we propose can only represent a brief, essentialized one. First of all, we believe that there are no solid counterarguments against the idea of crisis, for the time leading up to the unconquering socialism, which collapsed irreversibly in '89. Nor to accept that, after December 22, '89, we started dealing with a different kind of crisis. *The radical turn-split* of '89 ended a crisis and paved the way for other structures: as real as they were unexpected and unprepared. Hence the premises of different crises, but still crises. The moral one seems to us to be the top and quintessence of the others.

Keywords: *crisis, Romanian ethos, Romanian Revolution.*

But what is a crisis in general, and what does it mean to experience a crisis of ethos? We start from the definition formulated in the 30s of the last century, reactivated, not by chance, nowadays. It is certainly a *paradigmatic definition* of crisis and, importantly, it is a definition that encompasses *the moral dimension* intrinsic to major crises.

Here is her expression in a pointless phrase: "Precisely, the *crisis* consists in the fact that all that is old has *died*, and the new cannot be *born*, and in this inter-kingdom, great varieties of morbid symptoms appear," without being able to be stopped.

Why is this definition so important for the case of the post-Decembrist Romanian ethos? Because, in an extremely short time, an entire way of life and a whole system of beliefs about survival and duplicitous adoption collapsed. Thus, *negative unanimity* towards the old regime quickly turned into a *Manichaeian reaction*: *what is old deserves to die at any cost*. But the *new truth* has not yet been born. The *new moral* itself takes time, and impatience with "stage burning" doesn't help, quite the opposite.

The enthusiasm of liberation represents a collective state that will face the "hard rock" of realities coming from the structure of the past, which, after a while, "can take revenge" (Teodor Brateş, *The Revenge of the Past. The First Five Months of Capitalism in Post-December Romania*).

The new ethos has yet to be born only as a successful overthrow of the old tyrannical and repressive regime and as a beautiful moral aspiration. In fact, in his name it can happen – and we know this from the experience of all revolutions since – "a variety of morbid symptoms." Moreover, even these morbid symptoms can give the deceptive sensation that they *themselves are this new ethos*. The chain of Minerriads and the false hero of "University Square" will lead to a morbid symptom: the September '91 Mineriad and the long-standing hijacking of the possibility of establishing a new ethos. This extremely prolific period of exhaustion of chaotic symptoms carries with it – not only causes derived from the "political game" and "not settling things" – but also several other, equally important causes:

1. equating capitalism with democracy, with all the confusions and ambiguities left free for the proliferation of anomie and encouraging behaviours in which theft, dishonesty, deception appeared to be "normal," "democratic";

2. The disappearance from the scene of autochthonous history of the oldest social class – the peasantry, with the dissolution of its traditional ethos, a dissolution that began, in fact, with the modernization and the forced "years of collectivization" ('62-'89). After 1991, all pension legislation put former "cooperative peasants" at a disadvantage a through vile legal subterfuge: "they did not contribute to the

pension system." However, much of Romania's modernization effort was built on the sub-remuneration of the peasantry. Thus, the disregard of the peasantry has also been converted into the ethos of the last 32 years, into contempt or indifference to a way of life, to traditional values, including the paternal and maternal model;

3. If the peasantry and its ethos tend to disappear from social care, the working class, claimed to be the "ruling class" until '89, has returned to the status, somewhat forgotten from the memory of families, that of the proletariat. The way in which the capitalist nucleus ("the pillars of the new power in Romania") privileged not the entrepreneurial spirit of the most industrious, competent and honest, engineers and workers, but the plunder and theft of national wealth (promoted by Cepex members, by the party nomenclature and by those from the old Securitate or those working in Foreign Trade), the feeling of injustice, frustration and hopelessness. It encompassed those who did not steal, profit, cheat, lie, and ultimately "get rich overnight." In such a state of affairs lies open, in the long run, a *moral wound*, difficult or impossible to heal or heal from the content of the Romanian ethos. The wound deepens with information regarding the onerous origin of wealth and the ostentatious opulence displayed by the newly rich after the Revolution. However, the forced ideology of "egalitarianism" during the "real socialism" has been replaced - all the time, without reverts or corrections operated by "institutions with teeth" - by inequalities and inequities, many "outrageous." *Legitimizing* them through the political discourse and *legalizing* them through the judicial power has produced confusion, feelings of powerlessness, hatred, envy, the desire for revenge, but also the feeling of humiliation experienced by the simply honest man. *Honesty* and *merit* became, mere slogans, used to quiet and put to sleep the moral conscience of those who truly believed in such *values-virtues*.

In this context, the quasi-general feeling "that things will not improve in a foreseeable time" cannot be neglected either. The reflex in ethos meant the exponential growth of feelings of despair, faintness and deaf rebellion. From where ethos, on a slippery slope, accumulated all the

ingredients that make up constant *distrust*: distrust in people, institutions, the State. In fact, - in Ion Vianu's expression - "the victorious kleptocracy and the dissolution of the State, behold, our problems," could only lead to mistrust, to the dissolution of elementary solidarity between people.

4. This brings us to another cause of the crisis of the Romanian ethos: the system of privileges of the *corrupt caste* of judges - prosecutors - lawyers - members of the administration - notaries - police - secret services. The "*rule of law*" has, at its core, a fundamental flaw: the irremovability of judges has become synonymous with their impunity first, and then through the power of the thing judged and of all those defended from the toxic chain of the corrupt mentioned.

One example consists in revealing how the *loophole* brought about by leaving this chain of endemic corruption unchecked has become highly visible and prominent in the phenomenon called "litigation rights buying." The "buying of rights" opened wide the way for the purchase of the entire chain, the judges being the most important ones, because they "gave rights" in an oppressive way to the corrupters, under the guise of committing the act of justice. The effect on ethos proved catastrophic. The commodification of justice was even more evident when the idea was launched: "The Ministry of Justice does not do justice." Therefore, not only was there an ambiguity introduced regarding the justice-justice relationship, but, moreover, an abrupt censorship was established between *right-justice*, on the one hand, and *moral-morality*, on the other.

5. The question that should be asked in this context is the following: could there be a different kind of public morality in a social, political, religious, legal, but especially *existential* framework? A first answer would be that if all these *flaws or mistakes* occurred, then today's ethos "deserves" it if we have not been able to compose it *differently and in another manner*: with a core of moral values capable of withstanding the "assault" of *unethical interests* and irrational passions.

The second answer, derived from the first, would be the following: if we remain prisoners

only of *the morals and evils* that have taken hold during this period of almost two generations, then we only *notice* the crisis of ethos and we do not signal the possible coming to light of the public morals of the Romanian people. As such, we cannot judge, we must not judge feelings, habits, opinions, beliefs, attitudes and, especially, behaviours in action, only by appealing to explanations (provoked justifications) coming from the area of *utilitarian-mercantile-pragmatic* adoption, or from the sphere of *political-legal-religious interests*. The vicious circle of self-reproduction of a way of life based on values external to morality can become a *virtuous circle*, if and only if the moral benchmark prevails in public education and practice, and in judging facts relevant to the moral quality of life, *the ethical criterion*. The quality of a top can be specifically judged *only if this* fundamental brotherhood *between the primacy of morality in the institutional and educational public interest, and the application of the ethical criterion of judgment to all components of life in democratic society*, is constantly and repeatedly achieved.

More precisely: the Romanian ethos in crisis must be judged and interpreted through a "*reading*" from the perspective of the ethical theories of philosophical origin and scientific origin.

And more precisely: to test the quality of ethos we only have to see how *elementary morality* (Niculae Bellu) works throughout this historical period. Not *minimal morality*, but *elementary morality*. Not minimal morality for a few reasons: first of all, both in the education system and through the media, the idea was induced that the rule of law ensures the moral minimum and this is sufficient for a democratic ethos. And the state must be *minimal*, and the more minimal the better. Here is the practical reasoning that functioned as a political and ideological justification for "market freedom that solves everything, including moral problems." This kind of deep reasoning, as in and through public communication, led, somewhat naturally, to the easily accepted idea in public psychology: moral values are also negotiable in most situations of everyday life. Not only are they negotiable, but they are relative. If nothing is absolute, it means that, in practical, everyday reasoning, one can

"*descend*" little by little, in the moral appreciation, to the acceptance of intrinsically bad facts, that is, bad in themselves: as, for example, swearing, lying, cheating, if they also have "good consequences," they can and must be considered as "moral."

The drift of ethos lies in the fact that, in people's current judgments, the deontological criterion is suspended. According to this criterion, fully moral acts are those in which there are good deeds in themselves and bad deeds in themselves, independently of their consequences. However, if one judges oneself in terms of minimal morality, imperceptibly, one ends up evicting the last *moral element* from assessments with ethical relevance, sometimes with destiny relevance for one person or another.

The real and permanent danger to an ethos in crisis is insidious; It disguises itself in various forms so that, on the surface of consciousness, it appears for what it is, "a morbid symptom" that blocks the new moral, making "birth" impossible.

But how do we apply the criteria of elementary morality to judge the quality of the ethos in general, of the Romanian ethos in particular?

First of all, by highlighting among the value bearers within the ethos the *rational* dimension of Romanians' behaviour and argumentation appear. However, a simple analysis of the public discourse often shows that *appearances of rationality* and "delusions of rationality" are preferred, in a climate of "liquid society (Umberto Eco) and the domination of truth" over "truth of facts."

Not infrequently, for example, an error, a logical mistake ("we are all equal, free and responsible, but they are poor, or foreign workers from Africa or Asia, or handicapped", etc.) remains unpunished, for example, which turns into a moral guilt: the attack on the dignity of the person.

Secondly, we recognize the presence or absence of elemental morality in an ethos by applying ethological truths of ethical relevance. For example, a healthy and balanced ethos is one in which mercy and love, as transcultural moral values, transpire statistically significantly in public behaviour. However, insensitivity to human suffering and the manifestations of hatred have become not a marginal phenomenon,

certainly worrying, especially when it is accompanied by *indifference* or cynicism, or just as serious, violence and cruelty. The statistics, in this case, testify to the crisis of ethos and its degradation, and not to balanced, apprehensible, benevolent life situations that naturally privilege in helping the peaceful spirit and understanding. In this sense, they are symptomatic by their increased incidence, acts of rudeness in public and indifference to the other (the example of those who occupy a seat on the sidewalk and do not want to give it for a second to the passer-by, is not a rare phenomenon, on the contrary).

Another test of ethological and adaptive moral psychology says quite a bit about the content and quality of the Romanian ethos. It's about the tension between three naturally rooted moral values: *mercy – love – hierarchical respect*. The submissions, the obedience manifested in the old regime, were not instantly pulverized: they were only reconverted before other powers: political, wealth, prestige derived from possession and privileged status.

Also, the entire psychomoral chain of coping mechanisms (Haidt), comprising antinomian couples – care versus injury; fairness versus deceit; loyalty versus betrayal; authority versus subversion; holiness versus degradation; freedom versus repression – shows us how upset the Romanian ethos has been in the last 35 years, while *moral adaptations* (care, fairness; loyalty, authority, holiness and freedom) are confronted with *Paradoxical injunctions*: these are asserted as desirable but at the same time are postponed, obviously making room for non-moral adaptations more advantageous in the open competition for money, power, and wealth. A competition, not infrequently, held in an anomic climate, devoid of elementary moral attitudes.

But, perhaps, the image of moral crisis, revealed by applying *the test* of elementary morality, is just as striking if we consider the relationship between the structural determinants of personality and its cultural-moral determinants.

The question “how moral is capitalism?” can also be answered in this way: what place do the values of the civilizational progress (the scientific-technical-utilitarian and pragmatic sphere) occupy, which function according to the *possible-impossible categories*, to the political-legal sphere

(which is related to the legitimate-legal categories), but also to the moral sphere (which is guided by the category of *duty*) and, finally, towards the ethical sphere (which is coordinated by the category of *love*? What do we find? The first sphere in itself is *amoral*; ethos begins only because it is judged from the outside by the political-judicial sphere, limiting its harmful effects and dangers. Also, the sphere of morality comes from outside and judges political and legal values as they function in and through institutions, but also through public psychology. Finally, the value and quality of ethos is truly revealed only through the ethical sphere of judgment; Only it necessarily implies debts, obligations, responsibilities universally valid for every human being.

What are the pathologies generated in ethos when the “lower” spheres come to “dictate” to their “higher” ones? There are attitudes and deeds that can rightly be qualified as “*barbaric*.” For example, the scientific – technical – barbarism and way of life based only on “it is possible,” “it is impossible”. The same happens in political “barbarism”, legal “barbarism,” when morality is disregarded or annihilated; Or in the case of moralizing “barbarism,” when the ethical sphere is ruled only by illusions, desires, lamentations about “how we should be moral.”

Conversely, when the “higher” spheres impose inappropriate demands on the “lower” ones, we will have to deal ethically with an elitist “tyranny,” moralizing “tyranny,” political and/or legal “tyranny.”

In the highly dynamic and chaotic content of public psychology, these “tyrannies” and “barbarians” will be seen in intolerances, exclusivism, and, above all, in Manichaean beliefs and attitudes.

The ethos turns into an appendix of public psychology. Where does this fact seem to transpire very obviously? In several states of mind, such as: a) moral discussions between Romanians are full of disagreements (in beliefs and attitudes) and these are “endless”; b) in their understandings and misunderstandings, in their thanks and dissatisfactions, Romanians, of all conditions, use the same vocabulary. But to use the same vocabulary does not mean to have the same *moral values*; c) the criteria of moral

judgment are heterogeneous, they come from diverse, conflicting sources. For example, they can be Stoic or Epicurean, they can be hedonistic or Christian, they can be deontological or utilitarian, they can be original in the popular, Stoic-Christian ethos, or in that of virtue ethics and the ethics of care; d) In all democratic societies, most people are in the 3rd and 4th levels of moral judgment, i.e. at the level where people regulate their behavior according to "what others expect of them" or compliance with legal laws.

A balanced and healthy ethos is one in which, those who obey only the "fear of punishment" or those who are guided only by the principle of utilitarian hedonism "as much as you give me, as much as I give you" tend to decrease in number, in favor of moral and legal conformity and, above all, in favor of those who share a civism of welfare and those who believe in a universal morality.

The question from the beginning, "can we have another ethos?" now receives this answer: there are enough signs (the reactivation of moral trust for many Romanians, even if it appears only as a revolt; the introduction of the ethical criterion in institutions begins to have effects) to be slightly more optimistic about the rise of an ethos in Romanian society 35 years after the Romanian Revolution of '89.

The mini-max condition for establishing this ethos, less undermined by crises, lies in this

fundamental fact: that the original moral dimension of the Romanian Revolution should not be subjected to a process of disfigurement, degradation, trivialization.

An ethos in action cannot exist without a foundation on a moral pedestal.

How right Mihai Ralea was, 97 years ago when, in Iasi, he thought in this way: "The real fight for identity must be fought on an ethical ground".

Finally, the "ethical ground" of the Romanian Revolution must be strengthened, through education, concretely and constantly, so that *elementary moral situations* (transparent, exemplary and authentic life) are not an exception, but a *rule* in the Romanian society of the near future.

Does this represent a utopian requirement? Yes, but only in the sense that true morality is, and must be *stricto sensu* beyond a place and out of time.

Otherwise, the ethos would represent only morals and not public moral conscience in action. In fact, only in this way can two necessary entities unite in the Romanian ethos: "the homeland of life" (Eminescu) and "the world of life" (Habermos). These two "ethical grounds" ensure a lasting identity of the Romanian ethos.

For the biographical references please address to the author.