

Neither liberty, nor safety

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by Ninel Ganea

We do not know exactly how all this will end, but we do know for sure that the myth of liberal democracy has been broken to shards in only a few weeks. By this myth I am referring to the idea that liberal democracy, with its astounding billboard of unalienable rights and liberties, which citizens benefit from every day, is the regime for which people are willing to sacrifice all they have dearest (“give me liberty or give me death”), being, in their view, the supreme political option.

Of course I’m not so naive as to believe that all people, or at least a majority of them, or even just a relevant proportion, would be capable of risking much for liberty, about which Nicu Steinhnard was saying that it is the “courage in the face of death”. But it is somewhat stupefying how, in just a few days, not a deafening silence, but a vehement roar settled in, a collective hysteric scream which is begging on its knees and imploring with desperate tears in its eyes for dictatorship to be established and for the suppression of those liberties which the political theories of the last 200 years saw as fundamental to the biology of the modern human.

A very respectable libertarian thinker was talking, not long ago, about the passion for justice as uninterrupted stream of commitment to liberty. But people demonstrated they rather have a passion for toilet paper, which is undoubtedly more valuable than the fundamental constitutions and charters of human rights.

Liberty was always publicly supported by a small handful of people, and from the historic and philosophic standpoint it was inextricably tied, in the classic period, to a more ample “package” of virtues. Even the Founding Fathers

of the United States were stressing this connection, which can never be stressed enough, but which was nevertheless forgotten – only to be later reinterpreted as its exact opposite, in the sense that only a people of vicious can be free. “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks – no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea,”¹ wrote James Maddison.

If we regard liberty through this dynamic of passions²/virtues we shouldn’t be at all surprised by people’s dictatorial neuroses any more. Per Dostoievski’s intuition it the story of the Grand Inquisitor, people don’t want liberty, but bread and safety (and toilet paper).

At first glance, modern society looks like a perfect mechanism, which functions with astounding precision to give its members all they desire. This society doesn’t live off of virtues, but needs only a set of well established rules and practices, thought out by experts, which even the devils are coerced to respect, as Kant once dreamed. In reality, it looks like this form of community has lived off of the capital of virtue accumulated over the course of epochs rather than off of the wit and good performance of procedures; and in these last days it came to an end.

Theoretically, the institutions and organisations that watch out for people’s rights and liberties to be, not just not stomped on, but not even touched, are plenty. In theory... because in practice we are witnessing a carnival of cardboard dictators.

Let us consider, for instance, the press, “the fourth power of the state”, “the watchdog of democracy” etc. The media should criticise the government for its authoritarian excesses,

1 <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1932748/posts> (t.n.)

2 “Passions” in a negative sense, closer to “addictions” (t.n.)

should warn about the existence of an imminent risk of abuse and denial of rights (which were simply suspended, by decree, anyway), should verify to their utmost all alarmist and incendiary statements, should raise the question whether there exist perhaps more palatable measures that could have been taken. Something, anything in this sense. The media does indeed criticise the state, but only because it is insufficiently dictatorial, insufficiently paternalist and “brave” as to pick up people by their collars and forcibly shove them into houses or hospitals, to blackmail the “unconscientious” and “criminal”, who went for a walk on a warm spring day, with electronic bracelets.

Moreover, hysteria crisis has revealed another very important thing, namely that so called rifts in Romanian society, opposing social and cultural camps, subscribe in fact to absolutely identical fundamental opinions and political suppositions. The monotony is dreadful and specific to any totalitarian country. Only there can you listen to the same buzzwords and slogans, recited in monotonous language with the excitement of a detachment lead. You will have to search with a magnifying glass to find any journalist who raises the smallest questions about the measures taken, and exceptions such as Adrian Pătrușcă (I apologise if there are others) only confirm the rule. Per a British essayist’s statement, the current crisis killed, first and foremost, public debate.

On a different note, when rights are suspended and we enter totalitarian logic, NGOs prefer to aim their attention at more neutral landscapes, not to clap too noisily at the government, but neither – God forbid! – to criticise the monumental efforts to combat the crisis. Civic consciousness takes precedence, so there remains some waiting time until new commandments and instructions arrive from the Headquarters (“global problems require global solutions”).

Finally, don't forget the simple people from the gallery of liberty protectors, regardless of age. Yesterday, in a queue outside a shop, two citizens of the generation who lived most of their lives during communism were displeased that the measures weren't harsher because "all the gypsies are walking about unhindered". Inside the shop, the cashier, a young woman, was displeased that customers spend time looking at all the shelves instead of having a time limit of 10 minutes to do the shopping and leave. On social networks, where the beautiful free youth is active, the generation vaccinated against communism, the "#StayHome" nonconformists, and others, however many, as soon as they dare say the smallest word of doubt, are chased, stigmatised, and denounced to the police of thought which bears the name of the social network and can suspend somebody's account in the blink of an eye.

A generation bathed and weakened by consumerist and libertine comfort cannot give any answer but the dictatorial one in the face of a crisis, be it real or manufactured. For people nowadays, the thought that there are things much more important than life simply does not exist. C.S. Lewis pointed out this idea admirably in a snippet more current now than ever: "The survival of Man on this Earth, more than that of his own nation, culture, or class, is in vain unless obtained through honourable and indulgent means. [...] Nothing will destroy a species or a people, except the determination to survive at all cost. Those who care about something more than about civilisation are the only people through whom civilisation will most likely survive. Those who aspire for Heaven the most are those who served the Earth the best."³

<http://contramundum.ro/2020/04/06/nici-libertate-nici-siguranta/>

3 Sorry if I butchered this – couldn't find the original (t.n.)