

Civic conscience and the social organism during the pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our capacity of understanding the gravity of situations, has showed how vulnerable the relationship between citizens and the elite is, has tested the veracity of the moral values we all claim during non crisis periods. We could have overcome this crisis more easily if we all had developed the civic level of our conscience. “Queen” of the conscience structure, the civic conscience makes us understand the citizen-society symbiosis, opens up our channels of communication and helps us heal in one another the alienation brought by the virus, fear, and isolation. A democratic society, by having active and conscious citizens, heals faster and more cleverly/sensibly/smarter. It learns progressively and it perfects itself.

Keywords: *civic conscience, society, system, organism, pandemic, crisis.*

What is civic conscience?

Civic conscience, a component part of the whole structure of conscience of a human being, is dependent on its inferior levels, is powered by their values, but the same time, it feels with even more amplitude the imbalances and movements in its structure. Dependent on self consciousness and moral conscience, civic conscience represents the final layer of the structure of conscience, whose birth comes with the perception and activation of the symbiosis between the individual and the society. Similar to a physical construction, the human personality starts being configured from the first years of life of an individual, its components being shaped and starting to gradually assemble. Self consciousness is crystallized first and implies managing both the relationship with the exterior and one's own self. The outline of a the future mature person that is being shaped now feeds from the perception and experimenting of the outer world, through discovering the universe that is less and less close, through the meaning things and phenomena acquire. In this construction of the self, fed thus by the exterior, values find their place as real magnetic centers that connect new experiences. Every decision taken by the

conscious self confirms or refutes the significance of the value that motivated the will and the decision of an individual. It is a living system, in perpetual movement, with values that continue to strengthen their priority status and others whose significance fades out after being invalidated too many times. The axiological structure is thus, purely subjective and offers an identity to the human self. Moral conscience mixes with self consciousness; setting a clear boundary between the two would be difficult, as the self does not distinguish that well between the decisions that are for the self and the ones for others. Practically, “decisions for the others” do not even exist; the moral value of a decision is never separated from the self. Doing something good for another person bounces back to the self as a satisfaction of goodness so morality is also full subjective. From this point onward, the human being starts to comprehend that it needs social relationships, and the Aristotelian “zoon politikon” is demonstrated with each child whose formation and development depends on the ones that guide their steps of cognition and understanding. Moral conscience is formed strictly in relation to the social environment; first, one that is close and then one that is wider and wider, thus making known the first traces of civic conscience.

Strictly from a moral point of view we speak about passing from anomie – without law, outside the rules – to heteronomy – law imposed by others – socionomy – law deriving from society – and autonomy – the law imposed by the self (Peters, 1965, p. 108). Yet, moral independence does not have to be seen as pure objectivity, but as pure subjectivity. The decision is dictated by the moral structure formed that offers the self the satisfaction of a good choice. Here comes into picture the role of the extended family, the city. The duties of others arrive with the social meanings and rules. It is an environment that the self must get to know gradually, in the same way it deals with the other aspects of the universe. This “must” is justified by the interdependency between people in a society. The “other” is a given, and is a necessary given, because through it comes forth information, the experiences of the past, the experiences of the “other”, meanings and values. The “other” can shake up the whole structure of conscience through its own values, which can be either a danger or an expansion for one’s horizons. The social will affect the self as a necessity, and the good and the evil will be felt by the self depending on how balanced is the self’s own structure. So the “other” can either be a friend or an enemy, but the self cannot escape from it no matter what.

The citizen-society symbiosis

Society needs to be understood as being an organism, or a larger family, where people need each other. Systems such as the economic, the cultural, the educational and healthcare systems are essential for the self's stability, and these systems cannot function in a stable manner unless the citizens behave as in a family. In a close family, a sick or unstable member also affects the others. Either in a good or bad manner. The natural development of the family life is halted by the therapeutic process, if it is resorted to one. If the condition is neglected, the consequences can be serious and can shake the foundation of the family's structure and balance. Similarly, in a society an ill, unbalanced "other" affects the ones around it. The sickness of our peers, their scarcity, their emotional troubles, incapacity, helplessness, the decisions and solutions they apply to overcome a situation, they all affect the social organism. Economics show that all social categories have to be taken into consideration and they have their own role in a strong economy. Political science also showed throughout its history that the excessive poverty of some has also, sooner or later, destabilized the rich. Mental illness, the same as the helplessness of the "other", is a danger to the people around as much as it is to the self. The incapacity of a leader has major effects on the lives of all those who he is in charge of. These are a few examples that show that the self can be affected negatively by the social "other" or that it can be helped by it if instead of disharmony it finds energy, solutions and initiative to stabilize the self. This is the big achievement of civic conscience: an individual understanding the fact that an ill society will affect him sooner or later; that its normal development and securing the topmost and democratic chances, depend on the social organism's health. The symbiosis between the two, society and the individual consists in the fact that one has an essential need for the other. A sick, alienated society endangers the rights of its generic citizen. It refuses or it misses the mission of securing for the citizen a collection of spiritual values that help its development, and the material ones are on hold. At the same time, an estranged citizen, that does not see his purpose in a society, that does not react to abuse, that does not monitor the political class, that does not take a stance when there are serious deviation from the norms that were agreed on, will affect through its behavior the social equilibrium and create an environment for society's alienation, and the effects will return with a boomerang effect.

The concept of "system" in a social context has dated from a few decades ago, the perception of the social organism in a systematic manner highlighting

exactly the interdependence of its components, the capacity and necessity of self-adjustment, the focus towards common objectives. Defined as

an ensemble of identifiable, interdependent components, that have such a relationship in which if one of them modifies, the others modify as well, and consequently the whole system's ensemble modifies, it transforms ...a limited ensemble whose limits are defined on the objectives (purpose, projects, finalities, teleonomy, properties) that are favored. (Carpinschi & Bocancea, 1998, pp. 155-156)

the social system is of interest in order to show the importance of the civic conscience of each member. Part of a subsystem, every human being can balance or imbalance the pieces it is linked with, and similarly to a domino, to generate reactions to a smaller or larger extent in the whole system. It is of equal importance that the rules of functioning of a system can be used in order to make it better. In other words, through the power of intervening, through initiative, searching for solutions and deciding to get involved, the human being can restore balance to the whole system. This can happen only if the citizens have a strongly formed civic conscience, if social moral values are properly crystallized, if critical thinking and a knowledge base are ensured.

Civic conscience and, by default, the health of the social organism are tested by periods of crisis. The immune system of the social organism is represented by the democratic mechanisms, by the promptitude and efficiency of the chosen solution, but also by the citizens' solidarity. Using rationality, analyzing the situation in order to choose the most suitable solutions depends, however, on the civic conscience being formed or not, if it is healthy and active, or on the contrary, if it is undeveloped or alienated. Such a trial for the human society was the crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. It tested both the way in which nations, its officials and institution know to collaborate in order to diminish the havoc as much as possible, and the manner in which citizens are able to perceive their role in the fight against the calamity. It showed how prepared everyone is to view the phenomena adjacent to the pandemic as they are, such as fake news and conspiracy theories, and what it may possibly be the most important, to see beyond their immediate personal interests that were insufficiently understood. Practically, people were asked to understand, and demonstrate that they do, that sacrificing some of their freedom, and more precisely a series of sacrifices, can save the life and health of the others around them, and even their own. An analysis of the decisions taken by the social figures involved show how just much human society is prepared to confront crisis or, better said, how strong is the social immune

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system. Is civic conscience really formed and strong enough? Are the state institutions modern, cooperative and mature?

Vulnerabilities and solutions in the fight against the pandemic

Firstly, the values related to international and interstate collaboration were the chapters in which the states totally failed the test, immediately after the start of the pandemic. One by one, the states announced the closing of their borders, isolation being the primary method of facing the COVID-19 wave, giving up, for example, on the values of the European community that were well praised in theory. Free movement was suspended, as if the society paralyzed while waiting for the first wave of the new virus. Italy was hit first, and the Italians felt on their own skin the isolation on the battlefield. Fortunately, once the pandemic had installed in Europe, officials remembered the community values, devising and putting into practice mechanisms for solidarity. Donating equipment, dispatching medical teams and medicine, housing and treating patients from neighboring countries, and the repatriation of citizens stuck in other states, were all manifests of political solidarity. (European Commission, n.d) Another extremely difficult trial for the states was the acquisition and distribution of anti-COVID-19 vaccines. Administrations that had the financial prowess acquired much over the necessary amount of vaccines, with huge quantities ending up being discarded, while the overwhelming majority of the world's poor population had no access to the vaccine. Both the United States of America¹ and the European states were accused of excessively accumulating the vaccines on the basis of a narrow-minded nationalism, the unequal distribution of the vaccine at a global level making possible "the emergence of the Omicron variant, and the longer inequity continues, the higher the risks of the virus evolving in ways we can't prevent or predict".² But officially, the European Commission boasts that it

coordinated and co-financed deliveries of over 190 million medical and personal protective equipment, reinforced hospitals with additional medical staff, and provided over 10.5 million vaccine doses to over 55 countries in Europe and

¹ The Guardian shows in US throws out millions of doses of Covid vaccine as world goes wanting that "At least 15m doses were scrapped in the US between March and September, according to one analysis of CDC data. A separate investigation found 1m doses were discarded in 10 states between December and July (...) But the news comes as millions of people around the world wait for their first doses. Only 1% of the populations of low-income countries had received first shots as of July, compared with more than half of those living in a handful of high-income countries." (*The Guardian*, 2021).

² Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesu, quoted by BBC - Covid-19: WHO chief optimistic disease will be beaten in 2022 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-59840513>.

worldwide via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. In addition to its coordinating role, the EU finances 75% of the transport costs of the dispatched assistance.
(European Commission, n.d)

If officials may be able to understand when they are mistaken and correct their manners of response, the situation becomes even more problematic when it comes to decisions at a citizen level. The ethics of the pandemic have been deeply tested by the citizens' behavior in various parts of the world. Solidarity at the micro-social level, a proper way of getting informed, critical thinking and combating the fake-news phenomena and conspiracy theories have posed, and continue to pose, major issue to the population. A lack of human solidarity has often been the tragic manifestation that showed an alienation of civic conscience. Citizens from various corners of the civilized world have shown a sinister lack of concern towards the possibility of the virus spreading. Protests against the restrictions set by officials to limit and control the pandemic phenomenon have brought into light an accentuated lack of trust. State institutions, researchers, politicians, the people around, friends, have all been targeted one by one for the strong manifesting of this lack of trust.

The large-scale protests in major European and American cities, chanting for the right to freedom and seemingly campaigning for democracy, could be interpreted as a manifestation of civic conscience, but such an interpretation is flawed. According to the right to The Greatest Happiness, as the theorist of liberalism himself states (Mill, 1863, p. 5), human actions are useful and right if they tend to produce happiness, and they are wrong if they tend to produce the opposite of happiness, that is, suffering. Rejecting restrictions as a freedom manifest does not lead to the greatest happiness, as it was chanted, because the pleasure produced could easily transform into suffering for the self or for others. Disease and death are intense and heavy forms of suffering, which means reason can easily show the right decision between: being free but a risk to your own health and that of others, on one hand, and being constrained in your activity by a series of limits designed to reduce the effects of the pandemic, on the other. Refusing the restrictions can only be attributed to two possible explanations. One is the lack of trust in officials and in the existence of the virus/disease, and the other points to the extremely deranged moral structure of those who, even though they know the virus exists, value their own freedom more than the life and health of those around them. Viewing the human being with the optimism and respect it deserves, we will consider correct the option in which the protesters against protective masks, distancing measures or circulation restrictions wanted their freedom left untouched because they did not believe in the virus and its

devastating effects. This lack of trust is actually directed at the authorities, either scientific or political ones.

The phenomenon of negation is not a novelty in social philosophy. The denial of aspects of reality that are evident and justified by specialists does not even need to be caused by insufficient knowledge of the topic in question, but by self-interest, group, cultural or identity interest. It has been shown (Bardon, 2019) that people contradict and interpret evidence in the light of a predetermined conclusion, and this is especially true with people that had intellectual training. The simplest example is the rejection of climate change and the necessity for measures to rebalance the environment. Conservatives in denial reject this aspect of reality, regardless of their cultural level. Economic, religious and also political decisions are thus affected in a negative way, with effects which can further accentuate the imbalances that are rejected purely because they are not part of their own ideology. However, when their personal interest or the group interest is endangered, the perspective of negation changes substantially. This means that, after reflecting on the case history of infections and deaths, ones that were skeptic of the virus had other explanations for rejecting restrictions. Some of them were precisely linked to their personal interest or political group interests in order to capitalize electorally people's dissatisfaction.

This was the context in which fake news and theories revealing hidden conspiracies appeared. These forms of misinformation and manipulation took on substantial proportions with the shift of the communication space from "face-to-face" to a virtual space. Information bubbles created for those who believe in certain theories, for those united by certain ways of reacting to reality, functioned perfectly in rejecting ideas contrary to the theories already crystallized in their conscience. Therefore the explosion of information in the virtual space often did not help, despite the tumult of scientific information that anyone interested could, and even now, can find if they truly seek it. Around the globe, circulated theories such as the micro-chipping the population through the vaccine, the crypto-monetization of the global economy in the interest of the elite, the only one that will survive the economic crisis induced by state institutions, and many more scenarios designed to explain the "real" meaning of the pandemic, beyond the official "manipulations".

In order to escape from the bubbles that were blocking contrary information and protecting them from the official reality considered far too sinister, citizens needed help. They could have found support in those near them, or a hand could have been extended from specialists and researchers. The reaction of the public opinion regarding news invented to misinform was, however, weaker than anti-

covid or anti-vaccine propaganda. In European countries, at least. A civil movement of protest against disinformation started in the United States with the so-called “Birds aren’t real” movement, sparked by the conspiracy theories that arose during the electoral polls, and therefore prior to the pandemic, but which perfectly aligned with the conspiracy boom around COVID-19. It is a movement through which ordinary citizens aim to demonstrate that the awareness level regarding reality, be it factual or informational, is higher than it may seem. The campaign is, at the same time, a form of protest against the mass of people allowing themselves to be drawn into such ridiculous, illogical and dangerous conspiracies.

A different type of help was expected from specialists and researchers, due to the ethical responsibility of researchers (Huidu, 2020) which, in such times of crisis, must turn to the general public and disseminate information that can heal alienated consciences. They were expected to explain to the public the principle of the relevance of a source of information, the method of identifying the identity of a source, and how to detect the conflicts of interest behind fake news. To show the connections with no scientific basis between events that in reality are not determined by one another, but merely linked by a context, and at the same time to warn them of the basic principles of bioethics: beneficence and non-maleficence. The ability to protect yourself, and not fall under the influence of hidden interests that distort reality, can be formed thanks to education and training. Hence, the essential role of teachers, specialists and researchers is visible.

However, the reception of information and efforts made by specialists also requires the trust of citizens, and the pandemic has revealed a severe lack in this sense. The level of vaccination in countries with the financial prowess to provide the antiviral vaccine also showed such a lack of trust, the most affected being those that were removed from democratic exercise, for several decades, by communism. According to “Our World in Data”, with a latest update from 21 February 2022, the European countries with the highest vaccination rates are the western ones; meanwhile, in the former Communist Bloc anti-vaccine propaganda and the distrust in officials have led to much lower percentages of a fully vaccinated population:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Rate</i>
Moldova	26	Andorra	69
Bosnia and Herzegovina	26	Liechtenstein	69
Bulgaria	30	Latvia	69
Armenia	30	Lithuania	69

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Georgia	31	Luxembourg	71
Ukraine	35	UK	72
North Macedonia	40	Cyprus	72
Albania	41	Greece	72
Romania	42	Netherlands	72
Montenegro	45	Austria	72
Kosovo	46	Norway	73
Belarus	46	Germany	74
Azerbaijan	47	Sweden	74
Serbia	47	Finland	76
Russia	49	France	77
Slovakia	50	Belgium	78
Croatia	54	Isle of Man	78
Poland	58	Iceland	78
Slovenia	59	Italy	78
Turkey	62	Ireland	79
Estonia	63	Guernsey	81
Czech Republic	64	Denmark	82
Hungary	64	Spain	83
San Marino	64	Faroe Islands	83
Monaco	65	Malta	89
Switzerland	68	Portugal	91

The data shows that democracy is the social context in which times of crisis can be faced more easily, and in which citizens can become aware of their own role in society and understand that an ill society will, sooner or later, also infect them. It is the framework in which civic consciences are formed and activated whenever necessary.

A suggestive metaphor to explain the clash between society and the COVID-19 pandemic is the one used by an analysis from Ukraine (Hanaba, Mysechko & Bloschynskyi, 2020), which sees this century's malady as a cancer that takes over more and more cells. Facing such an invasion, the social organism can defend itself only if it coordinates all its efforts and follows an integrative strategy. Cooperation, or the solidarity of efforts, is manifested through the communication of information between countries, the sharing of experiences and a more efficient selection of solutions, by offering specialists and medical infrastructure, and organizing the economies, which, if not done collaboratively, can lead to chaos and the crisis deepening. Cooperation must also be viewed in the relationship between citizens and the state, so that the former can make informed decisions and

the latter can better fight the waves of infection. The solidarity of joint efforts is therefore the key to emerge from the crisis.

But this crisis, like any other crisis, brings us hope that this pandemic will help humanity realize the danger of global separation. Global cooperation will become a victory not only against the coronavirus, but also against future epidemics and crises of the century. (Hanaba, Mysechko & Bloshchynskyi, 2020, p. 37)

wrote our colleagues in May 2020. Unfortunately, shortly after, another crisis fell upon Ukraine and, consequently, the entire world, and it is proving to be devastating. Whether countries will know how to unite their efforts in order to fight the new scourge brought by Russia's invasion of Ukraine will be visible. From the statements of Ukrainian officials, they are beginning to fight on their own the monster represented by the Putin administration. However, the protests of solidarity in the world's major cities, including the ones among Russians that are sacrificing their own safety, prove that the pandemic has indeed strengthened the civic conscience of citizens. We shall see whether the world's political leaders will also demonstrate that they understand the treatment through cooperation needed for the social organism.

Conclusions

In the context in which the lack of coordination of joint efforts between states, or in the direction of citizen-elites, has resulted in unnatural reactions from some of us, putting the lives and health of ourselves and of those around us at risk, often with tragic effects, an analysis of what could have helped is required. The context of the pandemic proves once again that human society has not managed to shape to its true value the psycho-social concept of "civic conscience".

If we would benefit during our upbringing from a real crystallization and education of the civic conscience, each and every one of us would succeed in making a contribution to the functioning and evolution of society. The continuous modernization of society is more than necessary in order to guarantee a framework in which individuals can develop to their full potential. And this stage is none other than the one where the human being moves their own cogs in the social machinery, ensuring, even by a small step, its evolution.

The citizen-society symbiosis, however, is absent from the conscious universe for many of us. Civic education, as well as moral education, has major shortcomings in upbringing the generations, alienating citizens and triggering behaviors that are hesitant, apathetic and that lack reason.

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