

## THE INTERMEDIATE REALITY

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### **Abstract**

History, as a human perspective over time, can be described as an intermediate reality between two important events or between existence and lack of existence. In time of pandemic, the reality is suspended between the old times (as a Golden Era) and the Future – that can both be described only using the concepts of “what it was” and “what it is”. From this point of view, the perspectives for the future could only be described in terms of “hope or despair”. The article tries to show how, throughout the history of humanity, the reality was fragmented into little frames of human conscience of the present. Our frame now is both related to a normal past and a desirable future because the present looks very unpleasant and incomprehensible. However, the glimpse into the future is not comforting because of the destruction of the world as we know it, not due to the pandemic, but to the fatigue of the history. But the pandemic could also be a chance for the history to go on through new possibilities.

**Key words:** *intermediate reality, history, democracy, dictatorship*

Time, as physical reality, is an extremely controversial subject in the contemporary sciences: some deny it completely; others consider that nothing exists without time. But for the society time is an indubitable reality, because absolutely nothing could be given without it. The past is constantly pouring into the present, while the present that has already become the past is also meanwhile pouring into the present: the future is opaque. Therefore, we discuss about possible futures and not about a single future. Not even theological time has escaped this possibility of possible futures. Jacques le Goff [1995] explains in “The Birth of Purgatory”, a fundamental book for the European culture, why the Catholics, before Einstein, discovered a space-time continuum where souls after death exist between salvation and hell. In this spectrum of eternity, the purgatory, as well as the mundane life, were temporary. The purgatory could be manipulated from the outside – by those still alive, who prayed or spent money on indulgences for the ones on the other side. This represented the easiest way to explain a transcendental reality, but a reality that could be brought to the consciousness of immanence.

One of the most controversial and original pre-Renaissance mystical theologians, Meister Eckhart [2019], considered the mundane time as an intermediate reality, expressing it through that extremely interesting formula of *negatio negationis*, better known from Marx’s late reflections on the *negation of negation* [Marx, Engels 1968]. For Eckhart, the mundane time was only a transition from non-existence to the eternity of divinity by subjecting the soul to the test of materialization and entering the world of material desires (hence finite) as an expression of the eternity’s reality. Eternity, as infinite time, can only be defined in relation to finite time, which is transient. Thus, time is born from eternity to return to eternity by embracing physical time. However, only within physical (mundane) time the soul can understand eternal time – through a denial – and to consecrate it

through a mystical exercise. Therefore, Meister Eckhart accepts the Purgatory as a space (let`s call it here a “space-time continuum”), where the finite flows into infinity, without the finitude altering the eternity’s infinite substance. The soul remains in time as long as it is necessary to overcome its own temporality generated by desires, to return afterwards to its original eternity: the non-existence. It is not surprising that Meister Eckhart was considered a heretic, because the exercise he required supposes the exit from time so therefore the exit from the immediate reality in order to conquer a superior time that we call nowadays “future”. Because, as we said before, the future is as opaque as eternity (the latter being repetitive *par excellence*, indefinitely equal to itself).

Meister Eckhart’s approach, like Marx’s one, as Erich Fromm [2013] explained in “*To Have or To Be*”, is a positive one, even optimistic. Fromm tells us that the future is controllable and even rationally accessible if we overcome the fear of nothingness: death is only a stage, not the end, non-existentiality is a fertile ground for the future reality – the history has its end, but this end is one we should want, not reject. Our personal future leads us, as human beings, towards death, but this death has a meaning: the redemption of the material. As paradoxical as it may seem, Marx, an absolute materialist, gave a chance to exiting from the materialistic totalitarianism of nature through the human society that left history, seen as a history of class struggle. The vision of a positive society, where death is nothing but compost for birth and rebirth (perhaps too repetitive) of a society equal to itself, actually shows how the medieval mysticism was poured into the mysticism of the communist vision. For Meister Eckhart, death was only an intermediate moment between infinity and infinity, for Marx an individual death was only a moment for an immutable social eternity. Both of them, as strange as it may seem, were followers of a space-time continuum where history is more a mishap than a possible future.

On the contrary, one who lives in the space of history lives in intermediate reality, in fact – the one between the beginning and the end, between existence and non-existence – where death accompanies our steps every second of our lives. Therefore, paradoxically or not, the only entity that needs a future is history that is undergoing changes every moment in the present. Moreover, this moment we live in, that of the pandemic, when death is more present than ever in our intermediate reality, asks from us to reconfigure our future again, as human species and as civilization, because we are the only species that manifests itself as civilized and not only by some genetic accidents which lead to various genetic mutations.

Epidemics are proved so far to be some intermediate stages in our intermediate reality: there are many voices claiming that the era of Renaissance is a direct consequence of the great plague of 14<sup>th</sup> century (the Black Death), which imposed an equalization in death among subjects and sovereigns, rich and poor or noble and peasants. After three years of epidemic, Europe's population had declined by almost a quarter (in some countries even by half), which determined the workforce to be in high demand and well paid for. Thus, the Black Death determined a profound change in feudal relations and generated the premises for the liberation of peasants from servitude. The Renaissance changed the balance of powers in the rural environment of medieval castles, to the free cities of Italy and Flanders, and the urbanization favored the emergence of modernity. This is just a single example of an intermediate stage out of many that changed the face of the world throughout human history.

However, unlike the visions of Hegel or Marx, history does not always lead to progress, i.e. a historical stage is not necessarily better than the previous one. From many points of view – economic, state wise, civilizational, sanitary, etc. – the Roman era was better than the medieval one, even for the poorest Roman citizens. Instead, the Middle Ages opposed the Roman

Stoic skepticism through an extraordinary faith in the future (especially a transcendental one). Whoever visits the tombs of Sicilian Christians from the sixth century may notice the immense millenarian faith and hope that times would soon come to fulfilment. The end of the earthly world after the end of the political world (the fall of Rome that had taken place a century ago) seemed as an exceptional, although mystical, but entirely rational end. Unless for the absolute ban on committing suicide in those times, we would have probably witnessed a mass suicide of the entire former Roman province, hoping to escape the intermediate reality and to live in a happy eternity. Tension caused by the vandal conquests and the on-going wars between the Byzantines and the Ostrogoths (known as the Gothic War), the disappearance of the entire civilizational heritage and economic stability in a decade – all this generated an utterly morbid optimism: Death will save us. Thus, physical death became a vehicle for escaping from time – the time seen as a place of suffering and decrepitude – and entering eternity, the eternity in the terrible life on this earth being replaced by a good life in eternity.

For our contemporaries, such a belief seems completely absurd, and that is because, whether one is a believer or not, the value of life on this earth is defended by a set of values derived from humanism and Kantian moral principles. That is why the act of suicide is presented as an eccentricity, and the terrorist act of blowing yourself up in order to kill other people seems an absolute morbid eccentricity. Humanism has placed human life, considered rational by excellence, at the center of its ethical exercise and as a fundamental principle of human society the social act as a moral act, any action that hurts a human being is an act that hurts humanity as a whole. Humanism of the Enlightenment generated a political revolution through these ethical assumptions: the consciousness of equality in freedom forged the liberal modernity and the great political processes of

states transformations from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Enlightenment Revolution (equally important or even more important than the French Revolution, as they share multiple values) was a long and very difficult process for the most to understand: because the Enlightenment no longer placed man in a historical position, but on the contrary, the history was completely uninteresting in comparison with a future considered good *par excellence*, as long as placed under the influence and light of Reason. Unlike medievalists, the modern people look towards possible futures and not towards a single immutable future, which is imposed from the outside. The reality, from Immanuel Kant's perspective, was rather a mental construct than an objective reality. Accepting the fact that man is only able to know at the phenomenon level, and that it is impossible to comprehend the thing-in-itself (which represents the absolute knowledge rather than an actionable divinity), the being has only the possibility of alternative constructions: in order to survive, Man has to use his own will to build fictional explanations for phenomena **as if** (*als ob*) they reflected reality itself. In the world of physical materiality, one should know **as if** the mentioned world would be in the absence of the knowing subject, in the social universe one should behave **as if** ethical norms were possible, and at the faith level **as if** God existed. Kant implicitly recognized that the world he built for Man is a fictional world where there are at least several few possible realities. The scope of reason – as the expression of science – is that at least one of these realities might be in accordance with the direct experience of the being [Kant 2011].

This world of possibilities allows us today to be democrats, to live together in different social life programs, but in accordance with the social limits universally imposed by the Human Rights (issued from the same Enlightenment period and from the same hope in the practical reason of the Enlightenment). But in this

world of possibilities, the perspective of time changes as we are no longer talking about a space-time continuum, but about possible times and real times, which manifest somehow in parallel – from this perspective about time, the string theory was born later (time is seen as a fabric where the threads intertwine or go in parallel).

However, if the modernity allowed a different approach to time and history, relativizing them both, the individual end was almost entirely shadowed (and continues to be until nowadays), as the personal end was a part of a natural process that could not by any chance be temporally fictionalized. Hence the incredible tension that marks the rupture of contemporaneity from modernity, as the socio-political-economic individualism of modern liberalism fails to solve the great problem of hoping for a better (or worse) eternity of the being. Freedom saved life by abandoning death.<sup>1</sup>

In the contemporary era, the problem of earthly time has become a part of the existential trauma of the world, which has gone through two devastating world conflagrations. The industrial death as part of the concept of modernization has ridiculed the beliefs in a better future, as well as the others in an after-life. For more than a decade after the World War II, the dominant philosophy was existentialism: the human being lives the trauma of life with the fear of death that you fail to evade, but you only contemplate. Emil Cioran's late existentialism led to this fatal condition of human existence at the height of a form of nihilism of despair. The reality of death was no longer hidden, on the contrary, it was exhibited through all forms of visual arts and more. This apotheosis of the death, rooted in Bosch or Durer, was no longer opposed by the religious salvation of

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1 That is why Freedom or Death - a slogan often used by the European Romanticism - was just a slogan of intellectuals without any echo in the consciousness of the people, still religious. Because the premodern freedom does not exist - not even conceptually - and to some extent, death does not exist (except for the physical one) but is only a transfer from one reality to another.

a good deity, but by the orgiastic bacchanals of antiquity. The over-abundance of sexuality made the death futile, emptied of its mystery.

Of course, not all these perspectives over time were necessarily diachronic, but they continue to survive, coexisting and influencing each other. Despite all scientific evidences, a certain form of sacralization of death continues even today despite its demystification, a form of crushed hope still exists, a possible spiritual reunion. This ambiguous sacredness of death was brought into play in this intermediate reality of the coronavirus pandemic.

This year of 2020 was and is, probably, the most representative for the concept of intermediary time, as it has all the appropriate data. As a naked time, suspended between the past that is beginning to be mythologized (how good it was/how much freedom we had before) and an ambiguous future (would a vaccine to solve this crisis be made or not?), the year of 2020 is permanently present. Of course, historical events occur, politics boil from the United States to Belarus, racism becomes a hot topic once again that will influence or/and already influences the elections. But still, at a personal level, the year of 2020 is completely different. The possibility to travel has extremely decreased, so the universe (even from a physical point of view) has been limited and this has made even interpersonal encounters to be limited or has changed their characteristics due to the transition from reality to a virtual dimension. It is hard to see your family, your friends or even your children through a screen in some cases, either big or small, without being able to hug them. And even if it is possible to meet them in flesh, the new rule of keeping social distance and of wearing a face mask prevents us from any exuberance, or even worse, makes it morally reprehensible and sometimes even criminal. In reality, we do live in the world of *Als Ob*, because we pretend that we can live as if nothing has happened, but we are constantly



warned that something serious is happening and that this is an epidemic and therefore deadly. This fleeting schizophrenic time that seems also to stay, where many events (concerts, shows, congresses, etc.) seem frozen and remained only in the eternal stage of possibility and never of potency; this time hides its future in itself.

In the article published in *Foreign Policy* on March 20, 2020, Stephen Walt [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>] wrote that at the end of this pandemic, the world would not be the same: it would be less prosperous, less open and less free. Some days ago, Jan Zileonka [<https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-03/coronavirus-demokratie-nationalismus-globalisierung-europaeische-integration-oeffentlicher-sektor>] expressed his fears - and he was right to do so - regarding the revival of European nationalisms and of blocking the European project.

Are things so bad in the world and on the old continent? If you have a look at what happened in Hungary during the first months of the year and at the extremely discreet response of the European Union, yes!, things look really bad. If you look, however, at the extraordinary change of the world economic paradigm, you might say that things are changing for the better in the civilized world. And from this perspective we could raise the question that worries us all these days: what will the post-epidemic world be like after SARS.CoV2, COVID19 or coronavirus? And the second question: Is the world really prepared for a change? If we look at the Central and Eastern Europe, the change - for the worse - began a long time ago, the epidemic has only accelerated things towards the suppression of civil liberties [<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/04/01/how-hungarys-leader-viktor-orban-gets-away-with-it>]. Viktor Orban's Hungary began this process of dismantling liberal democracy already from early 2013 by the constitutional changes and later on by the electoral laws imposing an illiberal democracy that limited

press freedom (directly or indirectly), blocked citizens' participation or put pressure on civil society through laws similar to those from Putin's Russia. Not even then did the EU political structures do enough: they warned, lamented, threatened using Article 7, but cohesion money continued to come and Hungary continued to attract them – Mr. Orban participated in and voted during all EU Councils, and big German automotive companies made record investments in Hungary, not questioning too much the issue of democracy, the issue of the rule of law or of corruption. Few days before (i.e. on Monday, March 30), the Prime Minister Orban made sure that he could lead the country by a decree and an emergency ordinance, the Hungarian Parliament giving him all the political power for an indefinite period because of the epidemic crisis. He is allowed to punish journalists if they are considered to spread news that do not conform to reality (I have always liked the euphemisms of political language), to punish citizens who do not obey, and Orban tried (and partially succeeded) to close the country's borders with all EU states and with Ukraine. Excepted for a faint criticism coming from the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Ryenders, who said no far-reaching voice took a stand against the fact that Viktor Orban has made use of overt dictatorship, as *The Economist* said. Therefore, we have the first dictatorship allowed in the European Union by the European Union. How many states in the communitarian bloc will access this option? Let us hope not many, although skids from participatory liberal democracy will undoubtedly exist. On April 2, 2020, the Prime Minister of Romania, Ludovic Orban, according to Emergency Ordinance 34/2020 renounced the decisional transparency, i.e. the social dialogue, the dialogue with the business environment, etc. Other states as France or Great Britain have postponed the local elections and probably Romania will do the same. The same thing is happening in the USA where more and more voices speak about a possible delay of the presidential elections from November

2020, as CNN suggests [<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/28/politics/coronavirus-2020-election-challenges/index.html>].

The most terrible images from the pandemic came from Italy, the 8<sup>th</sup> largest world economy. These images were more like those of the failed states: thousands of people simply left to die because the hospitals were unable to treat them, families starving and begging in the streets in front of grocery stores, endless rows of military trucks carrying coffins to cemeteries and crematories and a huge number of infected people trapped in their homes with almost no support. Mrs. Von der Leyen's reply and apologies came too late, and without any practical effect. Chinese soft power (i.e. the PR exercise of sending doctors and supplies) has reached its target and generated another wave of Italian criticism towards the EU. We are not discussing here the quality of Chinese medical supplies or how many European states have sent supplies, but the fact is that Italy voted *en masse* for Salvini and its sovereign program during the last regional elections, and the EU blockades will further be used by Salvini as electoral ammunition. Sovereign and Eurosceptic populism will flourish (if it has not already borne fruit) in Italy, a country with a government comprising another populist protest party (such as *Movimento Cinque Stelle*) as its majority party. Therefore, Jan Zileonka's thesis applies not only to the states of Central and Eastern Europe, but also to Italy.

In my opinion, not all is lost for the European Union yet, however. EU is left with another playing field: the economic one. The whole world will have a hard time recovering from this epidemic accident from an economic point of view. The United States announce a peak in unemployment of 47 million people - almost one sixth of the US population, which will cause the US market - the richest on the planet - to contract so much that the fact that other economies (like the Chinese one, for example) had started their engines earlier is useless, because of the extremely low demand. The European economic system differs a

lot from the American one, being, however, much more social. In this respect the Union has an advantage, I think – the advantage of a quieter restart that will not generate too many social shocks. Because unlike the 2007 crisis, the only thing that is not missing now is money. Everyone announces that money will be given, and money will be issued so that states can protect their population and economy. The European Central Bank announced on March 19, through its president Christine Lagarde, that it was preparing a package of 750 billion euros in addition to the 120 billion already launched to combat the economic effects of coronavirus and has a reserve of 3,000 billion for the same purpose [<http://europa.eu/press/blog/date/2020/html/ecb.blog200319~11f421e25e.en.html>]. And this statement calmed the markets far more than the thousand dollars offered by Trump to all American citizens.

Now, the European Union can indeed prove its interest and closeness to its European citizens, regardless of their national citizenship. Of course, the response of Mark Rutte (Prime Minister of the Netherlands) and of the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, to the demands of Italy, Spain (the most affected countries) supported by France (also severely challenged) was not very encouraging. All these required Eurobonds in order to be able to save their national economies at the European expense and to share the debt with all the other states members of Eurozone (and in my opinion, this must be the purpose of the single currency, the reason why it is a single currency). Ursula von der Leyen's answer is essential now, after the apology to Italy: now she will have to show whether she is the Chief Commissioner of Europe or only of Germany and whether various nationalisms (economic or ethnic) can be defeated by the European solidarity of a political and solid bureaucratic structure. I think that this short incursion in the immediate reality is necessary for us in order to see how we can look into the future: with optimism or pessimism, depending on the trust we have

and on whom/what we trust. What we know for sure is that no matter how we will look into this future, it has some definite data: certain decisions must be taken soon.

All those things, which used to generate passion in large groups, things such as football, art, rock or opera concerts, weddings and religious services, were forced to take a break. Also did politics, European or domestic. It is just that this break – unexpected and difficult to understand for the majority – will come to end one day. Will we be able to return to our previous lives and passions so easily? And especially to the old political passions? And here comes my second question: is the world really ready to change?

Social psychology shows us that social groups are quite inertial and that social change (and why not personal change) is not an easy task at all. If at a personal level a little bit of will can move things somehow and one day, at a social level the will does not help at all, only cooperation does. Fascist voluntarism and communist development-alism failed because national or universal goals stop where the individual interest begins, whatever it might be, and because you try in vain to build a better or fairer society if at that very time you fall in love or you are hungry – the goal may have to wait. Changing the social paradigm is a long process with a multitude of meanders.

What changed – at first harder and then faster - was the social and economic environment, which ultimately led to changes at the political level. The access to another cultural, economic and axiological space produced more desire for change than all the public policy advice and attempts claiming to bring change.

Only (personal or group) crises determine change because they incorporate the will. Or now we are undoubtedly experiencing a crisis. An unexpected, global and extremely unpleasant crisis - because it puts us all in an exceptional situation: we would like to, but we cannot, we would do it, but we cannot. Homo Faber must befriend the Thinker (from Hamangia or Rodin's). There-

fore, if there needs to be a change, it will mean that the world of crisis should make room for the world of cooperation. But will it be possible?

Of course, in history there has always been a future of cooperation and concord: it has been and still is the most desirable and, at the same time, the most dystopian possible future. The social gear based on competition is part of the well-known mundane universe, of progress and innovation. Or, escaping the crisis reality means defying its perpetuation and returning to the dialectics of historical time. At a historical level, this crisis seems rather an interregnum, a short leap where history has stumbled in order to move further, more vividly.

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