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# THE CAPTIVE MIND AND THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE. FACES AND SYMPTOMS

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## Abstract

Starting from the idea that the captive mind -- a socio-mental alchemy with deceptive propagandistic ingredients is a "banal evil" in the spectacle society in which we all live -- this essay reviews some faces and symptoms of the captive mind in communism and after communism. The stake of the essay remains, however, deciphering the states and feelings hidden behind the faces and symptoms of the captive mind.

**Keywords:** the captive mind, society of the spectacle, voluntary servitude, phenomenon and syndrome, fear, sin, the banal evil

## I. Introduction

From the beginning, I have to make two clarifications of a terminological nature. First: in addition to the phrase "the captive mind" (Miłosz, 1953), two other keywords appear in this essay - "the voluntary servitude" and "the society of the spectacle" - coined by two authors from different eras. At the dawn of modernity, Étienne de la Boétie described in his famous *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* the insidious connections between tyrannical political regimes and the voluntary enslavement of the masses bought with "bread and circus" (Boétie, 1576/1975). Four hundred years later, in an anti-system book entitled *The Society of the Spectacle*, the writer Guy Debord, one of the theorists of the Western protest movements of the 1960s, critically analyzed the manipulative political-media strategies of the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967/2009). But things are connected! The captive mind, the (in)voluntary servitude and the society of the spectacle coexist in the vicious circle of complicity and mediocrity.

Second clarification: without abandoning the established expression "the society of the spectacle", I will sometimes use phrases such as the *spectacle-society*, the *society as a spectacle* which seem to me, in certain contexts, more direct and more conclusive. Society is not only a society of the spectacle, but is itself a spectacle, the *spectacle-society* as such. When society becomes a generalized and permanent spectacle in which we all participate, when our thoughts, feelings and actions are automatically transposed through the media and social networks in a continuous display, it means that society is not only a society of the spectacle but, it becomes a *spectacle-society*. In the *spectacle-society*, the illusions and temptations, prejudices and vanities maintained through the propaganda apparatus and the political-media manipulative strategies project a pseudo-reality superimposed on the objective reality, in other words, it is configured a fictitious super-reality and the human mind, stucked in its own limits, falls victim to prejudices and temptations. This is the disease of the captive mind! How could we treat this disease? How could the personalization of the captive mind *phenomenon* and, implicitly, its transformation into a personal *syndrome* help us?

## II. The Captive Mind: Phenomenon and Syndrome

The mind fallen into the captivity of errors, prejudices and illusions is perceived as a phenomenon when it is researched by an external observer placed at a psychosocial distance that does not affect the objectivity of the research. To an outside observer, the phenomenon of the captive mind in the case of ordinary people manifests itself when their inability to overcome their own limits and vulnerabilities, illusions and prejudices is combined with (in)voluntary dependence on other people and interest groups. But the phenomenon of the mind trapped in its own limits and prejudices, illusions and vanities is also manifested in the case of autocrats and dictators. At this level, conduct deficiencies and character weaknesses translate immediately into actions and political decisions. Maintained, often through the cult of personality, the phenomenon of the captive mind in the case of autocrats and dictators exerts a devastating impact on the collective mind. Analytical and impersonal, the outside observer approach can provide a number of useful references and explanations about the manifestations of the captive mind in various circumstances: the mental blocks of political and military leaders in geostrategic power games, the delirium of some strata of the population manipulated by empty propagandistical promises, the harmful impact of corruption in public life, the functional illiteracy and occupational imposture.

Unlike the external, uninvolved observer, for whom the captive mind is a phenomenon perceived from a distance, an involved observer, placed in the midst of the manifestations of the captive mind phenomenon, can become aware of its effects on his own judgments and evaluations. The observer placed inside the captive mind phenomenon may sooner or later come to feel and evaluate the captive mind syndrome in his own person. The experiences of the involved observer mark the transition from the impersonal, objective, positivist approach from the outside of the captive mind phenomenon to the personalized, reflexive, therapeutic approach elaborated from the experiential interiority of the captive mind syndrome. Assessing captive mind syndrome by exploring its symptoms on a very broad scale -- from inflexibility of thought and decisional voluntarism to mental dependence and (in)voluntary enslavement -- helps the concerned observer to approach with a deep and comprehensive understanding the captive mind states. Being involved, the participant observer feels the phenomenon of the captive mind as a syndrome of not finding self-awareness and, implicitly, of the influence of foreign groups and centers of interest on one's own person. These two defining aspects of captive mind syndrome intertwine because the loss of self-awareness can be explained by influence and sometimes (in)voluntary dependence and in turn the (in)voluntary influence/dependence can be explained by the loss of self-awareness. Arriving here, we could define the syndrome of the captive mind as *a state of mental dependence, insecurity and not finding of oneself both in personal life and in public life*.

Depending on the position and the degree of involvement, each of us can perceive states of the captive mind from a dual perspective. I perceive the captive mind as a *phenomenon* when I am outside of all personal involvement and experience. I perceive the captive mind as a *syndrome* when, by its symptoms, I become aware of the effects of the captive mind phenomenon on my own experiences and actions. The interchangeability of the positions of the uninvolved observer and the involved observer favors the complementarity of analytical perspectives: the impersonal investigation of the captive mind phenomenon by the uninvolved observer, respectively, the personalized assessment of the captive mind syndrome by exploring its symptoms by the involved observer. So, throughout this paper, a series of impersonal observations regarding the phenomenon of the captive mind are interspersed with the exploration of the symptoms of the captive mind personally experienced over time. Starting from this double hypostasis of the captive mind, I advance the following hypothesis: *filtered through critical self-analysis, the captive mind syndrome can help us understand how we become mentally dependent on other people and centers of interest foreign to our*

*interpersonal security*. As an internalization of the phenomenon of the captive mind, the syndrome of the captive mind passed through the filter of critical self-analysis proves to be a privileged experiential posture for studying and countering the phenomenon of the captive mind in the society of the spectacle.

### **III. The Captive Mind in the Society of the Spectacle: A Socio-Mental Alchemy with Deceptive Propagandistic Ingredients**

From childhood to old age we live in a spectacle-society that often reveals itself to be as inconsistent and derisive as it is aggressive and dangerous. The spectacle, in itself, is neither new nor a bad thing. New and worrisome in the terrible times we live in are the global dimension of the phenomenon and, above all, its perverse effects. The confiscation of public communication by political propaganda apparatuses in non-democratic regimes, the politics perverted into a media show, sometimes of dubious value, in democratic regimes, consumes more and more of the time of those who allow themselves to be seduced. On a constant basis, we consume every day not only material goods delivered through advertisements, but also ideological prefabs packaged propagandistically. We risk becoming, in these circumstances, captive minds that can be manipulated through the oldest and newest propaganda-media techniques. Living in the world of the spectacle at any cost -- the spectacle meant to conceal and often distort the true problems and realities -- we are living, in fact, our own alienation against the background of an increasingly overwhelming surrealism. In this way, we sometimes end up in the strange and harmful situation of not being used to thinking with our own mind. The spectacle of the sensational and the ridiculous transformed into a consumer product becomes, under these circumstances, the drug of the captive mind, the tool of mental laziness, of manipulation and enslavement.

Phenomenon and syndrome, the captive mind is the unfortunate result of a socio-mental alchemy designed to penetrate as many social environments as possible. Such alchemy resorts to an ideological "cocktail" with attractive and deceptive propagandistic ingredients able to numb personal, critical thinking and, at the same time, arouse individual and collective emotional pulsations. "Class struggle is the engine of history"; "The sharpening of the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie leads to the socialist revolution"; "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement"; "The dictatorship of the proletariat ensures the victory of the socialist revolution"; "The proletarians have nothing to lose in this revolution except their chains. They have a world to gain"; "Law represents the will of the ruling class raised to the rank of law. Communist law represents the will of the masses elevated to the rank of law"; "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs"; "Religion, the opium of the peoples" -- here are some ideological-propagandistic formulas promising in a peremptory tone what the British political scientist of Romanian origin, Ghiță Ionescu, called "the communist system of political happiness" (Ionescu, 1984). Later, when I had come to read Raymond Aron's books, I understood that this propagandistic "cocktail" -- the "opium of intellectuals" seduced by Marxist-Leninist ideology -- mixed messages and slogans that functioned as a "pass ticket" through various social environments sensitive to promises that are as attractive as they are vague and misleading (Aron, 1955).

And Czesław Miłosz wrote about the ideological-propagandistic ingredients designed to induce the symptoms of the captive mind. Drawing on themes and terms specific to Eastern civilizations, he referred, on the one hand, to "the Murti-Bing tablets" -- so named after an imaginary Mongolian philosopher who was said to have succeeded in finding a means of organically transmitting happiness through the consumption of pills -- and, on the other hand, to "Ketman," that style of double life lived in falsehood, submission, and hypocrisy, assumed and practiced to perfection under the tyranny of Oriental despotisms. By

using these expressions, the Polish thinker was referring, in a metaphorical manner, to a generalized method of "brainwashing" and inducing an artificial state of happiness (Miłosz, 1953). Systematically administered in the pace of party propaganda, these psychotropic ideological ingredients maintained what Jean François Revel later called the "totalitarian temptation," that fascination for the total political power felt to the full by those intoxicated by the exercise of total power, but also by those who, paralyzed by fears and helplessness, end up abandoning themselves with frenzy to the Supreme Leader perceived as the final and universal solution (Revel, 1976). Emotional states with a strong negative impact, the "drunkenness of power" felt by dictators and the "fear of freedom" experienced by the masses coexist in the totalitarian temptation that still haunts the minds of some of us. The euphoria of the unlimited exercise of power proved a fatal political narcotic, in the end, in the case of Mussolini, Hitler, Ceaușescu or Gaddafi, but each of these dictators took full advantage for a period of time of the fascination of the masses for the total power of the Dictator and, at the same time, for the fear of masses assuming their own rights and responsibilities.

But, this ideological alchemy filled with propagandistic ingredients that fuel the totalitarian temptation continues to claim victims even today, in the bloody days of the Russian Federation army's invasion of Ukraine. Against the infernal background of the war, on Russian television there are scenes in which preopponents compete in threatening statements about the activation of frozen conflict zones controlled by the Russian Federation (Transnistria, Chechnya, Ossetia and Abkhazia or even Kaliningrad), about the location and the possible detonation of atomic bombs, the erasure of Ukraine and Great Britain from the world map, etc. This propaganda delirium that heats up the captive minds of politicians and a good part of the misinformed and manipulated population is maintained by an ideological alchemy which combines Sovietism, Russian autocratic imperialism of Eurasian origin and radical conservatism. Loyalty to the Soviet Union, but a Soviet Union without Marxism-Leninism and communism, is fueled by the nationalism and militarism of Russian imperialism, the anti-modern rhetoric, the hostility towards democratic principles and liberal values, the criticism of Western civilization, the promotion of Christian-Orthodox values, the recourse to Orthodox messianic spirituality and mysticism, the defense of the traditional family, the imposition of militarism as a defining ethnic-national virtue.

The entire ideological-propagandistic scaffolding on which the Russian Euro-Asian empire is built reveals the totalitarian temptation and the illusion of the infallibility of total political power. Like everything human, limited and vulnerable by its nature, the infallibility of total political power, however, sooner or later proves to be an illusion. "The Emperor is empty!" exclaims the child in Andersen's famous fairy tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in his sincerity. And yet many of us, although aware of this, still use ourselves in a profitable complicity with the traffic of illusions. Like the servant advisers of the emperor who competed to buy more and more expensive and non-existent clothes, we too do not stop getting drunk on the deceptive political illusions sold at an overpriced price through the megaphones of demagogic populism and aggressive nationalism. And this all the more because, not a few of us, refuse to assume clear judgment and public responsibility, preferring hypocrisy, opportunism and voluntary servitude perceived as much more convenient and profitable. As far as can be seen, it is much easier to mechanically reproduce patriotic and xenophobic slogans than to manage the economy, health and education on the basis of the rational projects and fair tenders.

The communist regime collapsed in Romania at the end of 1989, but the totalitarian temptation, the dogmatic belief in the ability to solve all problems by seizing power by a charismatic, "virile" leader that easily promises saving solutions is present in the minds of many among our peers. To maintain these illusions, it is enough to periodically be launched new promises in the cadence of mobilizing slogans, because many people like the emperor's

new clothes, however deceptive they may be and, therefore, the emperor's clothes must always be renewed. Then, if many of us like the political-media spectacle full of unfulfilled promises, accusations against others and evasion of our own obligations and responsibilities, why not offer it to them -- instead of the really important thematic public debates realized under the sign of the competence and of the professionalism --, the show of the imposture, of sterile politics and of the bad taste ?! Speaking, in this context, about an amalgam of confusions and ambiguities of thought, I am referring, in fact, to the phenomenon of alienation and enslavement of one's own thinking in which all layers of society participated and continue to participate. Thus, we all participate in a generalized and meaningless spectacle in which we meet (pseudo) fanatical agitators and activists, cynical rulers, intellectuals enslaved to power, ("the betrayal of the scholars"), enslaved media companies, but also ordinary individuals, more or less ignorant, more or less naive and gullible, but vulnerable to misinformations and populist-demagogic, aggressive nationalist and xenophobic manipulations. Caught in such agitation, the individual and the collective mind allow themselves to be captivated by the convenience of verbal stereotypes and slogans empty of content, but full of false promises. The individual and the collective mind thus enter into the captivity of the public evil embodied by the phenomenon of the captive mind.

#### **IV. Faces and Symptoms of the Captive Mind in Communism and after Communism**

Seen from the perspective of an outside observer, the phenomenon of the captive mind presents itself under different faces and symptoms. For example, when extremist political ideologies are accepted without their critical analysis and evaluation, and the aberrant orders of some hierarchical heads are executed without hesitation, the captive mind takes the face of the *dogmatic mind*. Disciplined and reproductive, inertial and ritualistic, incapable of initiative and creativity, dogmatic thinking enters the minds of leaders and executors, most of the time, because of fear, illusions or complicity. To the strange mixture of fear and illusions in relation to the possession and exercise of absolute power is added the convenience of the automatic reproduction of ideological theses and propaganda slogans. In our part of the world, the one that generated and maintained the dogmatic mind in the last century, first through the tentacles of the Third Communist International in Moscow, then through direct political-military occupation and entry into its zone of influence, was "the Soviet political mind" (Tucker, 1972). Today, in the Russian Federation, the "Soviet political mind" has turned into a dogmatized ideological corpus widespread in all strata of the population composed by: the belief in the superiority of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes in relation to democracy; the cult of absolute power held by the supreme leader; the messianic exceptionalism nurtured by the Orthodox faith preached by the Russian church; the aggressive nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Westernism.

As can be seen, the above lines refer to the dogmatic mind perceived as a phenomenon and characterized as such by an external observer. How could we move from the dogmatic mind phenomenon perceived by an external observer, an objective and uninvolved observer, to the dogmatic mind syndrome felt in personal consciousness? To make such a transition, the perspective of the outside observer should be changed to that of the participant observer. Therefore, in order to reconstruct, from the inside, the perverse dogmatization of my thinking since my early school years during the communist regime, I will once again resort to mental focus and autobiographical memory.

Subjected from the earliest age to a treatment of systematic dogmatization, the generations that appeared immediately after the establishment of the communist regime in Romania lived in a regime of captive mind politically directed through a generalized propagandistic spectacle in the whole society. Carrying the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and of the leaders of the Romanian Workers' Party from Gheorghe Gheorgiu Dej,

Gheorghe Apostol, Emil Bodnăraș and Chivu Stoica to Alexandru Moghioroș, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Petre Borilă and Alexandru Drăghici I was parading together with my colleagues at the festivities of May 1, August 23 and November 7. Imitating the Soviet model, we were shouting then communist slogans of glory to the Soviet Union and its brilliant leaders, "In the fight for the cause of Lenin and Stalin, be ready !" Ready anytime !"; "Fighting for the cause of Lenin and Stalin, forward !". I would say and repeated automatically, together with my colleagues, these slogans that, at that time, I did not really understand.

During reading classes, we were learning Mihai Beniuc's poems "Leading the Communists", "Song for Comrade Gheorgiu-Dej", "The Party Taught Me". Deeply impressed, we were reciting the poem "Lazăr from Rusca" dedicated by the poet Dan Deșliu to the memory of the poor peasant Lazăr Cernescu fallen in the battle against the class enemy: the bourgeoisie and the exploitative landlords. But, we were also reading *Mitrea Cocor* by Mihail Sadoveanu, the novel of the moral transformation and communist indoctrination of the poor peasant Mitrea during his captivity, as a prisoner of war, in the Soviet Union. A great destiny was prepared for him then. Returning to the country thus re-educated, Mitrea Cocor would become the leader of the forced collectivization of peasant households in his village. After I became a pioneer, I regularly was reading, as a subscriber, the permanent columns in *Scânteia Pionierului* (The Spark of The Pioneer) newspaper: "Let's know the fiery struggle of the communists !" or "From our elder brethren, the Utemists" (UTM, Uniunea Tineretului Muncitor / Union of Working Youth). But, reading the column "Faces of the working class", I was impressed by the activity of illegals such as Ilie Pintilie, Bela Brainer, Filimon Sârbu and, above all, by the heroism of the young apprentice Vasile Roaită, shot by the gendarmes while pulling the siren calling the workers from the "Grivița" workshops to strike.

A few years later, I realized that I lived part of my childhood in a cage of the thinking directed not by my parents nor by our wonderful teachers. Much later I would learn that what I and my generation we lived in those years was an experiment of the captive mind by captivating and manipulating the innocent mind of some children by the communist party's ideological-propagandistic apparatus. And, much later, I realized that in fact this mind-capturing experiment had, through an ideological alchemy of attractive and deceptive propagandistic ingredients, engulfed the entire society in a generalized spectacle of manipulation in which would be participate and other faces of the captive mind.

Another face of the captive mind is the *fanatic*. The most dogmatic individuals become, overnight, the most fanatical executors. The conformism and unconditional submission of the dogmatist easily turns into the aggressive self-sufficiency, the intolerance and lack of discernment of the fanatic. This is able to commit extremist acts in the name of a false authority and leaders whose mind - itself captive - issues decrees with a harmful impact on the life of every citizen. The fanatic does not doubt, has no moments of hesitation. Believing himself the sole repository of truth, the fanatic acts automatically and relentlessly. If we agree with Amos Oz that fanaticism is "a ubiquitous component of human nature, a malignant gene" (Oz, 2016), I find it rather difficult to believe that the remedies proposed by the famous writer -- imagination and literature -- could work. As for the sense of humor, I would be a bit more confident but, unfortunately, the fanatics are immune to any manifestation of it, whether it is the situation comic, the healthy laugh or the fine irony. I can't imagine, for example, how the principal of my high school in the picturesque city at the gates of the Danube Delta -- a short and full of himself guy - who was reading with zeal from the documents of the Party at the megaphone in the school yard -- might have been amused at some political joke whispered by a braver colleague.

Between platitude of the dogmatics and zeal of the fanatics, another face of the captive mind appears: the *arrivists* ( the go-getters). From the ambition to reach the power

and privileges quickly and by any means, the arrivists arise, a combination of opportunists and careerists in a banal and harmful form. Seemingly mobile compared to dogmatics and fanatics, profiteering and cunning individuals, the arrivists move skillfully between groups, interests and slogans. But the agitation of the arrivists in the vicious circle of compromises and group arrangements offers no real solutions to a political deadlock or constructive solutions for public policies. Trapped in duplicitous behaviors focused on concealment and simulation, the captive mind bears the marks of the hypocrisy of the opportunists and the ambition of the arrivists. Opportunistic, greedy and duplicitous, the arrivists seek by all means to occupy an advantageous position in parties, ministries, departments, embassies, universities, even through matrimonial alliances and profitable family combinations. We can fall into the trap of the arrivism very easily, especially when the competitive spirit and competition are replaced with the ambition and opportunism of the careerist. Opportunistic and ambitious, the arrivists aim by all means to occupy a position or position as advantageous as possible in parties, ministries, departments, embassies, universities, but also in various matrimonial alliances and family combinations. When the prestige based on honest work is replaced by aggressive advertising, job hunting and the pursuit of success at any cost, we are dealing with minds that have fallen into the captivity of the avarice and vanity typical of the arrivist.

But, the captive mind occurs most often in the case of the *ignorants*. Easy to misinformed and manipulated through political, economic, religious, historical prejudices and untruths, the ignorants become a corruptible clientele through various forms of electoral bribes and pseudo-social aid that encourage laziness, corruption, unemployment. The mind in the captivity of ignorance can take different faces according to the nature of ignorance. When Socrates was saying, "I know that I know nothing, and I do not know this either", he was actually referring to the natural cognitive limits of the human being. When the symptoms of the captive mind express the natural bio-genetic cognitive limits between which we evolve as a species of Homo Sapiens, it manifests itself what I would call the *liminal ignorance*. But, the awareness of ignorance as a natural fact that expresses the liminality of human knowledge gave to the great philosopher, at the same time, the power to believe in the self-transcending capacity of human knowledge, because he also said: "I know that I know nothing, but I know that I can know more than I know". The Promethean will to overcome the natural limits of ignorance remains the existential challenge to human knowledge. On the other hand, we face a *conjunctural ignorance* generated by socio-educational deficiencies, especially when we are part of a disadvantaged population, easily misinformed and manipulated by spreading slogans and maintaining political, religious, ethnic, racial prejudices, gender. Against the background of socio-economic underdevelopment, the disadvantaged groups of the population can become a captive and maneuverable mass through various forms of electoral bribery and pseudo-social assistance that encourage idleness, corruption and unemployment. In the society transformed into a generalized and mediocre spectacle, the ideological and emotional manipulation of the social body contributes, in same time, to the increase of individual and collective dependence on underworld groups and mafia networks of influence and power.

In the real life of the spectacle-society we observe, however, how the faces of the captive mind combine depending on the different situations we face. We can be dogmatics and fanatics at the same time, or ignorants and dogmatics, fanatics and ignorants. We can be dogmatics and fanatics precisely because we are ignorants and superficials. Anyway, the impact of the dogmatists, the fanatics, the arrivists, the ignorants contribute to the increase of individual and collective dependence on influence groups and power networks and, implicitly, to the decrease of personal and interpersonal security. Not infrequently, groups of political-financial-media power act in the sense of diverting attention and emotional

manipulation of individuals and the social body by weakening free, critical, creative thinking, diminishing the spirit of discernment, amplifying and directing negative emotions. Diverted and dogmatized by propaganda and attractive promises, attracted and manipulated by entertainment shows of dubious quality, poisoned with hatred and irrational, populist-nationalist and xenophobic impulses, fallen into prejudices and comfortable stereotypes, the human mind is thus directed towards unconditional obedience. But, unconditional listening is potentially insecure listening. Even worse, the man of the captive mind is not aware, most of the time, of the fact that the mind no longer belongs to him, that his mind is no longer, in fact, his mind, that the words said and repeated over and over again are, in fact, no longer his words. The man of the captive mind can live, more or less contentedly, such states shorter or longer periods, sometimes even for his whole life. Dissipated throughout life, the potential and insidious danger of the captive mind constantly threatens us all. But what is hidden behind these faces of the captive mind ?

#### **V. What is hidden behind the faces of the captive mind ?**

The dogmatists, fanatics, arrivists, ignorants are some of the visible faces of the captive mind, expressions through which the captive mind manifests itself in the world. Behind these, in its deep layers, the human psyche lives, however, certain complex experiences that shape the visible faces of the captive mind. The mind in bondage to *fear* and the mind fallen in *sin* seem to shape the visible faces of the captive mind. The boundlessness of the unknown, the precarious state of health and the fear of death, the risk of job loss, the disinformation and manipulation maintained by some media channels, the low level of security and the fragility of human civilization, etc. generates in us an *existential* fear. In these circumstances, fear as a state of fact becomes the generative fear of captive mind syndrome. Lucky or unlucky, winners or losers, confident or skeptical, sometimes we can't escape the emotions and feelings of fear and dread that trigger the blockages of the captive mind. Life experiences, individual and collective psychologies, multiple and controversial social histories generate a diversity of options, motivations and reactions to managing fear and the captive mind phenomenon. Of course, life is not and cannot be only fear. Life is rich, diverse and too complex to be felt only as fear. And yet, the paralyzing fear that holds the human mind captive remains an experience in itself and, at the same time, a theme of reflection that always challenges us. Life haunted by individual and collective fear has darkened the evolution of humanity since cave prehistory and continues to haunt it today, in the times of pandemic crisis and of the global clash of civilizations. Why do existential fears and anxieties return to the consciousness of human beings, beyond our more or less fleeting successes and achievements ? Probably, because the overlapping of different forms and manifestations of fear accumulates into a bigger and deeper fear, an all-encompassing and paralyzing fear: the *fear itself*. When I talk, as an outside observer, about the accumulation of the forms of fear, I think of a lot of fears whose sources differ: political tyranny and police reprisals, economic-financial crises, ethnic-nationalist conflicts, ideological-religious fundamentalisms and terrorism, military threats and the apocalyptic specter of a new world war.

How could these negative emotional states be controlled ? I think that training the ability to live in the vicinity of fear could be important to counteract it. By learning to face the fear, this will no longer follow us with the same intensity throughout our lives. Referring to fear for political reasons, I would say that the training of the ability to live in the vicinity of fear is not foreign to those who lived a part of their life during the communist dictatorship. I have often thought about how the ability to live in the vicinity of fear was shaped in my mind. I experienced the first shock of a terrible fear in secondary school, around 12-13 years old, when, in the middle of the Romanian language class, the school principal suddenly

entered our class accompanied by three strangers in civilian clothes and two militiamen. Frightened, the teacher immediately interrupted her lesson, we were searched, then taken out of the classroom, and our books, notebooks, satchels were rigorously checked. This show of force lasted for over two hours. Scared, we didn't know anything, we didn't understand what was happening to us. The next day there was a special assembly in the school yard where we were told in a stern and threatening tone by an unknown person that three classmates had written and distributed manifestos hostile to party and state politics. The initiator, one of the best students in our class, would have attracted two other colleagues in this subversive action aimed at the stability of the socialist order in the Romanian People's Republic. I then learned that the parents of the three colleagues were called to the Prosecutor's Office for explanations and intimidation, and the three colleagues were expelled from school for a year. Experiencing such a shock at such a young age marked me deeply. I was beginning to understand that, in addition to dogmatization and fanaticism exercised through the propaganda machine, one of the ingredients of power in a dictatorship is the sowing of fear in every cell of the human being since from childhood.

Is there a vaccine against the fear ? Growing up, I always looked for it. A memorable moment was when, in the middle of the summer of 1964, I saw on the Danube quay at Tulcea a large and silent crowd of men with very short hair and poorly dressed waiting to be boarded. In the hours that followed, on the ferry and then on the night train ride through the Moldavian plateau, I plucked up the courage and started talking to some of them. Speaking in a whisper, I understood that they had been released from the Periprava extermination camp after years of hard labor to cut reeds in the Danube Delta. They were young, middle-aged, but even older peasants whose fault was that they had opposed the taking of land and machinery from their small family farms. I had in front of my eyes the victims of the process that was presented to us at school under the pompous and false headline, "the socialist collectivization of agriculture under the wise guidance of the party and state leadership." I saw and understood, then, that in our country there was a political resistance to the forced collectivization of agriculture. There were people, and not a few, who, in despair of losing their little earning and of their way of life, overcame their fear. So, it is still possible ! We can defeat our fear by always facing it.

Another memorable moment in my fight against the fear was that wonderful Sunday of October 22, 1978 when, in the speech that marked the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II spoke Christ's exhortation, "Don't be afraid !". Why, at the beginning of his mission, this new pope with a rich and courageous pastoral experience in communist Poland felt the need to utter this exhortation ? The exhortation of the Sovereign Pontiff coming from communist Poland had in mind, I think, in addition to the theological background, the fighting for the freedom and security of people here on earth. In a sense, it was a call to all people on the planet to overcome the fear. It was aimed, therefore, the human liberty and security needed by men, women and children all over the world, a world increasingly faced with rapid transformations and ideological-political challenges. "Don't be afraid !" the exhortation spoken by Pope John Paul II on the day of his enthronement marked the birth of a hope whose threshold was to be crossed by us, those living in Europe beyond of the Iron Curtain, only after the collapse of the communist dictatorship.

But, fear is not the only deep experience from which the captive mind is born. Falling into bondage to *sin* is the other hidden experience that often generates the captive mind syndrome. In addition to the natural-instinctive substratum, *Homo Sapiens* has built, over time, a cultural-spiritual substratum on which the order of moral principles and values rises. The one with a mind fallen into sin is willing to relativize and disorganize this axiological order to the point of destruction. The ugly and hidden face of sin is the one that supports the visible faces of the captive mind, the visible faces in the behavioral dysfunctions of the

human being, in its slippages from legal, moral, spiritual-religious principles and values. Deviations from legal principles and values are sanctioned, as we know, by the competent institutions depending on the case, from contraventional culpa to criminal culpa. Deviations from moral principles and values - truth, honor, justice, honesty, correctness, kindness, solidarity, charity, etc. - lead to moral guilt. The moral guilt can be assumed through a deep and honest examination of conscience of the person concerned. Deviations from spiritual-religious principles and values lead to the theme of sin, which is the focus of all world religions. In the sense of spiritual-religious guilt, the sin means going astray; work against nature; walking on the wrong road; missing the target; deviation from sacred, supernatural commandments; the disobeying the divine Will perceived as the supreme Value and the absolute Reference. Although they have their own identity, legal, moral, spiritual-religious slippages know many interferences in the complexity of real life. Theft, lie, betrayal, etc. they are found, simultaneously, in the plane of jurisdictional procedures, moral reflection, spiritual-religious meditation, but they are treated and sanctioned in a manner specific to each of these planes.

The mind in the captivity of sin is, unfortunately, a fact. *But in what relation to sin is the mind that has not (yet) become a captive mind?* Is the mind that has not become a captive mind, a mind out of the danger of sin? Can we say with certainty that the free, critical and creative human mind is a mind freed, forever, from sins greater or lesser? Exposed to external threats, but also to our own vulnerabilities, are we throughout our existence, both in the public space and in the private space, safe from the danger of sin? The fact that we are naturally fallible does not, however, throw us directly and irremediably into error and guilt. The fact that we are vulnerable and exposed to mistakes does not automatically make us guilty, guilty without fault. The presumption of innocence shows us that there must be a fault, a material incriminating act for which a person is judged and penalized. On the other hand, the much invoked legal principle of the presumption of innocence cannot exclude the anthropological principle of culpability and the risk of sinning. Invoking the principle of presumption of innocence in a particular case does not mean that the person in question is really innocent. Of course, following the law and legal procedures, the person in question must be proven guilty with indubitable evidence. But, even if a person is, at a given moment, innocent, this does not mean that said person is, in a guaranteed way, non-guilty for the rest of his life. Even if he has not yet made a mistake, any person can make a mistake at any time because, being *fallible*, he is also *culpable* and, thus, can fall under the influence of guilt in legal, moral or spiritual-religious terms. Moreover, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, biblical wisdom reminds us of the condition of ever-falling creatures, in search of the blessing of the divine Omnipotence. There is always - the *Holy Scripture* reminds us - the risk of making mistakes knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, by deviating from the values and norms imposed by people, but also by not understanding the divine economy and disobeying the heavenly Providence. There is, therefore, the permanent risk of falling into the captivity of the "devil's part" in us.

When I say that the captive mind is the mind in captivity of the "devil's part" in us, I mean that the devil is not a delusion, not a distant ghostly apparition. On the contrary, the devil is in us, more precisely, there is in the human being a "part of the devil" to which we often fall into an accomplice captivity. The problem for the honest man - the man of assumed fallibility - is the identification in his own person of the "part of the devil" and the energetic application of appropriate therapies to counteract the harmful effects. "To reveal the reality of the devil in this world of ours - Denis de Rougemont was writing in a famous essay dedicated to this tormenting problem - is not equivalent to increasing the fear of the devil, but means giving to the devil his true appearance. (...). The devil is the anti-model par excellence, his essence being precisely the disguise, the usurpation of appearances, the shameless or

subtle forcing of nuances - in short, the art of making forms lie. (...) The first trick of the devil is the incognito in which he maintains himself. God says: < I am that I am >. But the devil, always jealous and desirous of imitating God, even in reverse, tells us as Odysseus tells the cyclops: < My name is Nobody, there is nobody here. Why would you be afraid ? Do you tremble in front of the non-existent ? >” (de Rougemont 1994, p.7, 11). Hence, the cunning of the devil who, pretending that he does not exist, masks the true appearance of the demonic that lies within us and makes himself invisible even in the midst of our temptations and mistakes. But since the devil claims to be gone, to be "nobody," and our mistakes, falls, and sins persist, it means that *the "devil's part" is within us*. And the captive mind, the mind unable to recognize the palpable fact that the "devil's part" is within us, is nothing more than a captured mind, or worse, a mind captivated by the "devil's part" that lies within each of us. The captive mind thus becomes -- sometimes with our knowledge and will, sometimes without our knowledge and will -- the accomplice of the "devil's part" in us, the gate of our personal and interpersonal insecurity. The complicity of the captive mind with the "devil's part" in us reveals, once again, a fact that is only apparently surprising: the "banality of evil".

## VI. The lesson of the "banality of evil" and the captive mind syndrome

In a famous book written on the occasion of the trial in Jerusalem of the war criminal Adolf Eichmann -- the Nazi bureaucrat, zealous executor of the plan to exterminate the Jews - - Hannah Arendt revealed the dangerousness of the "banal evil" hidden behind an ordinary individual. Hannah Arendt warned us that banal evil, the evil in the minds and actions of each one of us, can favor the organization, institutionalization and amplification of political evil. The phenomenon is known in history, unfortunately, always repeating itself. Multiplied in the mass of individuals, the banal evil of our vulnerabilities -- from ignorance and indifference to illusions and temptations -- facilitates the rise of individuals, organizations, demagogic-populist, extremist parties towards the levers of state power. This is *political evil*, the institutionalized expression of the pathology of power that haunts the minds of autocrats, dictators and their minions. In its turn, political evil encourages the perpetuation in positions of power of its accomplice, the *banal evil* with its entire procession of vicissitudes.

But let's look more closely at how easily the banal evil can lure us into the trap of the captive mind. Not always being able to be sufficiently informed and attentive, we easily become pawns in the games of interest groups foreign to our own values and ideals. It can happen to us, for example, to fall into the trap of propagandistic promises or to be deceived by the populist speeches of some demagogic politicians. The captive mind, however, is more insidious. It happens to us, and not infrequently, that we are not aware of being stuck in prejudices and errors, that we allow ourselves to be deceived by illusions and temptations, that we do not free ourselves from misinformations and manipulations. No one is exempt from such dysfunctions and absences of free and critical judgment. Naturally limited by our own ability to know and process information, vulnerable to the avalanche of rumors and ideological-propagandistic manipulation, insufficiently aware of the dangerousness of their own prejudices, fearful in the face of the pressures and threats of power, we present in private life and in public life, more than once, the symptoms of the captive mind. I have now referred to the banal evil and the syndrome of the captive mind among ordinary people. Apparently harmless, the involuntary phenomenon of the captive mind hides, however, a series of dangers that transform it, at any time, into a phenomenon with a major social impact. This transformation occurs when, for various reasons, incapable of self-control we, ordinary people, enter a state of mental dependence and (in)voluntary servitude to other people and interest groups, becoming thus pawns and maneuvering masses on the stage of public life.

The captive mind syndrome manifests itself, however, on other levels as well. If at the

bottom end of the power axis are we, ordinary people often falling into a state of mental dependence and (in)voluntary enslavement, at the top end of the power axis, political leaders are not exempt from falling into the traps of the captive mind. I have in mind here, at the level of political decisions, first of all, *the discretionary egocentrism of dictators*. Dazed by the "drunkenness of power", blinded by the importance of his own person trumpeted by the chorus of flatterers, the dictator frozen in his own delirium is unable to see his limits and correct his mistakes. Ridiculous sometimes in the forms of manifestation, dramatic always in the harmful effects, the discretionary egocentrism of dictators exercised through state terrorism brutally throws us into the world of injustice and absurdity. Another level of the captive mind syndrome is that of *the incompetence and corruption of many politicians*. Mediocre, immoral, careerist, this type of politician appears most often in autocratic regimes and also in formal, fragile and ineffective democracies. The egocentric and discretionary manifestations of dictators, the excesses of incompetent and corrupt politicians, the mental addiction and the (in)voluntary enslavement of ordinary people seem to me to be the main levels of the captive mind syndrome in public life. Derived from the life situations sketched earlier, the lesson of the "banality of evil" might sound like this: *the political evil may pass sooner or later paid for with great sacrifices, but the banal evil of our own vulnerabilities always remains, favoring through its generalization the syndrome of the captive mind and the perpetuation of public evil*.

Making some remarks on the "banality of evil", we could say that in Romanian society the coexistence of the *banal evil* (human vulnerabilities) and the *political evil* (the dictatorship of the Communist Party followed after 1989 by the dysfunctions of a formal and ineffective democracy), led to the perpetuation of the *public evil* (the captive mind phenomenon). Generalizing, we could state that, *the banal evil of human vulnerabilities instrumented by the political evil of the pathologies of power maintains the phenomenon of the captive mind, one of the forms of public evil*. So, when I talk about the phenomenon of the captive mind I am not referring to mental illnesses treated in psychiatric offices and hospitals. I have in mind, instead, the main levels of the phenomenon of the captive mind in public life: the mental dependence and (in)voluntary enslavement of ordinary people, the discretionary egocentrism of dictators and autocrats, the populist demagoguery of many politicians.

## VII. Instead of conclusions

In the terrible times we live in, when political pathologies become more and more threatening, it is natural to seek answers to some difficult questions: how could we fight against the "devil's part" in us ? How could we secure ourselves as a society and as individuals in the face of mind "games" captivated by illusions and delusions, temptations and immeasurable pride ? Exasperated by the expansion of evil in the multiplicity of its seen or masked forms, is the emancipatory adventure of the mind still possible ? To what extent could the knowledge of psychocultural deficiencies in Romanian society help us to design an operational reflexive-therapeutic scenario ? Starting from these questions from the position of the participant observer, the observer who explores the faces and symptoms of the mind enslaved by its own errors, illusions and prejudices, the next step should lead us to seeking a remedy for clearing the mind. But, about all this in a future essay.

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