

Complexity of a transition period?

Critical Analysis

I am always struck by the rapid assessment of any situation we want to change. This attitude contradicts empirical experience as well as theoretical research. Social phenomena are too varied, shaped by too many factors, to allow a condensation in a nutshell. In Portugal, many opponents to the regime previous to 74 would resume all the difficulties and mistakes in a title: "fascism". Others would say: "capitalism". Others again: "imperialism".

This could be accepted as slogans in demonstrations. It was more difficult to accept oversimplification from political leaders, exiled opponents, persons with intellectual responsibilities. And yet, sitting around the table of the Cabinet during the transition period, I went from surprise to surprise listening to the foundations of some of the indicated measures. Most suggestions (proposals) were based on the logics of reversal of trends. So much so that my last session in the provisional Cabinet was a very heated discussion on "nationalisations"!¹ No analysis was made on the fact that there was already a large public sector as the regime could to some extent be labelled as "State capitalism". No consideration was given to the high deficits of several public enterprises. The rationale for serious nationalisation was not taken into account.

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Neither the linkage between a particular branch of activity and the national security nor the impact of technological evolution on the type of property in every branch were taken into account. The "book" said that rationalizations were the recipe and so it was done.

It doesn't seem to me that these dangers have been avoided in the transition processes taking place in the world. The attitude prevailing in relation to Communist regimes has been one of a very simplistic nature - the same simplistic attitude which also characterizes the belief in "the market".

¹ Seeing the opposite trend at work after 89 in the Central European countries was a too well-known symptom which made me sure that the way couldn't be that one. The elections in Poland have just confirmed it.



Global issues of transition

The transition at the global level can be seen as a cumulative effect of the different transition processes but also as a process in itself. Two fundamental changes have occurred which have opened up two fundamental transition periods.

The most obvious transition process is the passage from a highly militarized world gathered around two super-powers and constituting a continuous threat to a world in a (slow) demilitarization path, without any lasting rivalry on the horizon. Together with this process, there is a basic change. On one side, in the first phase (the one we are leaving) the antagonism led to the predominance of the paradigm of the winner, the mutually excluding alternatives. Then everything is based on either/or perspective. Plurality shrinks to positions and facts to be contained within each term of the alternative. Small conflicts, small "either/or" resolve the opposite trends, ideas, aspirations that confront each other from the inter-personal level to the inter-national level.

The transition (even to a single power) leads to a predominance of the "both/and" over "either/or". Opposing views can find ways to be accommodated as negotiations replace confrontation. The binome loser-winner is replaced by an almost unthinkable winner-winner in the sense that in a negotiation whatever has to be conceded is a gain in relation to peace.

This in itself is a tremendous change.

Likewise - and it is the second example - in the world of science we are entering a new period. Up to recent years, there was still the conviction that all mistakes created by science could be corrected by the same science. Hence the idea of progress always in the upward sense. Today we know that the curve cannot remain unlimited. Science itself and, most of all, technology cannot be along the "winner" paradigm, the limitless concept.

Complexity as a tool

During the transition period simultaneous contradictory processes take place. The overall attitude and value-system of the first phase is abandoned in rhetoric and legislation. At the same time, in practice, some groups maintain the value-system and in everyone the inertia principle doesn't allow the value-system to vanish. Moreover it can be argued that the value-system may embody some elements worth considering².

At the same time the composition of the value-system in the new phase tends to impose itself. Both in a theoretical, often idealistic perspective, and in a practical, pragmatic and realistic way. From the first idealized principles and belief in change overnight pave the way for disillusionment and deception³.

The more pragmatic steps imply often unclear value-system as some compromise is needed - and it is easier to acknowledge what is wellknown and to leave unnoticed the unknown. Hence the suspicion of not enough radical action.

All this piles up during the transition in a mix that is varying all the time and which is differently perceived by the different actors. The interactions taking place among all the components of the mixed value-system are, in fact, guiding the transition, accelerating or slowing it, or even refraining it from actually taking place. What is born then is a kind of

² e.g. In the collapse of communist regimes it may be considered that some of the social aspects of the safety net were interesting in the new system; likewise though being the instrument of the repression of freedom, a communal spirit, a sense of the collective good may be kept and transplanted into a democratic regime.

³ e.g. in democratic transition in Africa the concern from the international community about "free elections" may have created the conviction that the same international community would stand by all the efforts to instaurate the democratic system. To acknowledge - as people in Angola - that the international community has no way to implement its advices and injunctions may lead to disbelief and disregard for the necessary steps to be taken.

"limbo" without clear indications of steps to be taken.

One word expresses the mix: complexity. The ingredients at play are not only diversified but springing from opposite judgements and aspirations in relation to the very core of the transition. Interacting with each other they create a climate of undefined clashing aspirations leading to a state where dissatisfaction is generalized.

What can act on this situation? Complexity is certainly puzzling but is not impossible to understand and to manage. A new type of leadership is needed: the leadership capable of managing complexity (Entre-savoirs).

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