

SOLITUDE, LONELINESS AND MARGINALIZATION: SOCIO-POLITICAL INDICATORS OF THE QUALITY OF OUR TOGETHERNESS

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***Abstract.** Solitude is a kind of initiatic labyrinth, accessible for the human being and, within limits, rather beneficial. Loneliness is a socio-political situation, not merely a personal state. First, we acknowledge the solitude of human interiority, a universe where thoughts, inspiration and memories resonate. Conscience speaks louder in solitude. Right there one encounters the poetic, the metaphysical calling or even the political projects of emancipation and the vindications that gain contour as socio-political faces and facets of solitude (the diverse versions of loneliness) emerge and attain meaning. The genius, the philosopher, the poet, the revolutionary and the misfit confront solitude, while challenging the predetermined order of the world. Everyday people have their own contributions to creativity and historicity, too. For example, for the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), the human being is destined to acquire knowledge and confront the tremendous all-encompassing force of mystery, through thought, inspiration and creativity. The study investigates the political connection of loneliness with marginalization, indoctrination, individualism, neoliberalism, excessive mobility, new technologies, generational change, social media and virtual realms. Solitude is rather a socio-political trump and an entitlement related to the right over someone's own person and to the right to happiness. Loneliness is political: it poses questions that address our commitment to sociality and togetherness and emphasizes their shortcomings. Solitude and loneliness are the two eloquent extremes according to which we might describe with precision the quality of our togetherness.*

***Keywords:** solitude; loneliness; marginalization; neoliberalism; togetherness*

Introduction

If solitude were to be a space, a labyrinth, it would be definitely situated at the core of the labyrinth of human existence, between solipsism and relationships, interwoven with friendship, love and creativity in an intricate

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mixture. On the other hand, loneliness stays between *Le moi est haïssable* (Pascal) and *L'enfer, c'est les autres* (Sartre). Yet, this is not a physical situation, but a metaphysical kind of situation: solitude is the core of each stage, path and ramification of individual life. Solitude is a kind of initiatic labyrinth, accessible for the human being and, within limits, rather beneficial.

On the other hand, loneliness is a socio-political situation, not merely a personal state. First, we acknowledge the solitude of human interiority, a universe where thoughts, inspiration and memories resonate. Conscience speaks louder in solitude. Right there one encounters the poetic, metaphysical calling, or, the political projects of emancipation and the vindications that gain contour as socio-political faces and facets of solitude (the diverse versions of loneliness) come to the fore bearing socio-political meanings.

Under the “star of loneliness” we find the archetype of the old man (“the old man king Lear”, in Mihai Cimpoi’s interpretation of the old man in Mihai Eminescu’s *Poor Dinonyus*), although any human being has her own loneliness star. In the poem entitled *Departa sunt de tine... (Afar I am from you...)* solitude comes from the unbearable existential and romantic distance created by a barren heart (“Afar am I from you and lonely by the fire/.../ awakening before me wee trifles of the past”), or by the absence of love: in Eminescu’s metaphysical poetry loneliness is governed by sentiments of melancholy, loss and estrangement and by the awesome lucidity of witnessing personal death, as either genius, poet, not-himself type of alter ego (Fichte). The genius, the philosopher, the poet, the revolutionary and the misfit confront solitude and maybe estrangement, while challenging the predetermined order of the world. Everyday people have their own contributions to creativity and historicity, too, plucked away from sorrows and solitudes.¹ For the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), the human being is destined to acquire knowledge and confront the tremendous all-encompassing force of mystery, through thought and philosophy, inspiration and creativity.² Mystery “fights back” whenever man acquires knowledge. In Lucian Blaga’s philosophy, the human being is the solitary hero relentlessly confronting mystery for creativity and knowledge sakes. Human being assesses her existence addressing, opposing and resisting mystery. It is not communities and societies that make history, as it is the specific creative matrixes (Lucian Blaga), there are the abyssal tremendous forces in man that are launching people into creativity and history, through individual contributions, against the forces of mystery, while bringing people together in terms of structuring creative matrixes and manners to relate to the world, too.

¹ Henrieta Anişoara Șerban, “The Faces of Solitude in Philosophy, Society and Politics” paper delivered at “Alone Together: An International Pandisciplinary Symposium on Solitude in Community”, York University, United Kingdom, 10-12 April, 2019.

² Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia cunoașterii (Trilogy of Knowledge)*, Bucharest, Editura Minerva, 1983. See also, Angela Botez, R.T. Allen, Henrieta Anişoara Șerban (editors), *Lucian Blaga: Selected Philosophical Extracts*, Wilmington, Malaga, Vernon Press, 2018.

The Open-Ended Solitary Experience – the Sociality of Solitude

Solitude is deeply subjective, a human, psychological and socio-political phenomenon, a dual and open-ended experience.

As we have previously shown in *Mapping Marginality*³, within society, radical difference brings along awe and fear, radical rejection, marginalization and loneliness, which are often, at least partially, the result of political game and political manipulation (whenever it is not translated into fascination and creativity, fashion movements and vogues). However, there is no solitude and no loneliness unless there is an observer who interprets, thinks and experiences things this way. In this process the only observer might be the self, or there can be others who observe, sanctioning, criticizing or approving someone's solitude, or loneliness, although ultimately the self decides the nature of these states and situations. The self is the official "narrator", the Wizard of Oz, directing the show.

Solitude is defined as a positive state and as a state of choice, while loneliness is negative, related to discontent, rejection and sufferance. As solitude and meditation go together, sometimes solitude opens the door to the tragic understanding of life and to loneliness, while it may very well be a doorway, a passage into projects and action, a route toward a creative state, and toward a future transfiguration of being. Solitude brings clarity; it sustains deeper attempts to finding oneself. Solitude gets one closer to her inner and truest being. However, the clarity of human solitude is bound to be tragic: solitude is not always serene and even when it is grounded in spiritual meditation is not always thoughtless and detached.

Understanding human solitude is not just a matter of assigning precise meaning to feelings, events, things etc. Personal experience enriches the denotation of solitude. Solitude and consciousness go together, too. Consciousness and conscience include at some point within the human universe of thoughts and feelings the disturbing acknowledgement of the fact that each human being is born alone and dies alone, which is not so far from the paradoxical understanding of human destiny as "an irreversibility of our daily death".⁴ Emil Cioran (1911-1995) captured this idea as following "You cannot live otherwise than dying. Death begins at once with life itself"⁵.

The comprehension of human life implies the comprehension of its limited nature, of the frail, fallible and paradoxical nature of the human being, a healthy foundation for the understanding and comprehension of democratic politics, too. In solitude, we identify how much of these limits are something we create ourselves,

³ Henrieta Șerban, Viorella Manolache, *Cartografierea marginalisation (Mapping Marginality)*, Bucharest, Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations "Ion I. C. Brătianu" Publishing House, 2010, passim.

⁴ Emil Cioran, *Omul fără destin/The man without destiny*, "Vremea", No. 308, Oct. 1933, in *Singurătate și destin/Solitude and fate*, Humanitas Publishing House, 1991, p. 243. Although men tend to proclaim easier that man (the individual) is born alone and dies alone, women tend to understand easier a different perspective where the human being is born *with* the mother going through a shared process of birth, which opens the perspective of the existence blessed with the symbolic company of the "mother" as is, for example, the communion with nature and for some people, with the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and God, or, for others, with other prophets, saints, deities, main luminous religious figures and associated beliefs.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

something that could be overcome. In loneliness, we suffer contemplating the exterior limits imposed to human frailty and powerlessness.

Prudence and wisdom have to make room for living, because, as we know from Plato, “unexamined life is not worth living”, but also because as Alphonso Lingis pointed out “only a truly lived life is worth examining”. This paradox reminds us of the paradoxical Biblical warning “Whoever tries to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17: 33). A well lived life pushes life to excess and exceptionality, to the point where it endangers it. This means that an accomplished life needs more interaction with others, not less, with respect for their limits that echo ours and more involvement in common things, in improving togetherness. Then, why should anyone resort to solitude?

There is a natural antagonism of people which brings them within society, in competition and which withdraws men from society, in solitude. On the one hand, we recall that Kant defined people paradoxically as the unsociable-sociable beings: “By ‘antagonism’ I mean the unsocial sociability of men (*i.e.* their propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society). Man is inclined to associate with others, because in society he feels himself to be more than just a man... But he also has a strong propensity to isolate himself from others, because he finds in himself at the same time the unsocial characteristic of wishing to have everything go according to his own wish. Thus, he expects opposition on all sides because, in knowing himself, he knows that he, on his own part, is inclined to oppose others. This opposition it is which awakens all his powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness and, propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw.”⁶

However, competition does not exclude cooperation. This is why we discuss as well the human “ultrasociality” and the human “ultrasolitude”.⁷ Although human “ultrasociality” has similar aspects, phenomena or moments, when compared, for instance, to insect “ultrasociality”, human societies are different. We can easily comprehend that there is a direction of correlation among collectivism (enjoyed group adhesion), cooperation and sociality (togetherness) and another correlation dimension among individualism, competition and solitude. Not only that human society could be classified in two main categories collectivist and individualist societies, but also there is no homogeneous orientation of society toward either collectivism or individualism, as neither societies nor groups are thoroughly homogeneous. The correlations are valid, but they are probable correlations, not necessary correlations. When comparing human societies to insect societies Elisa K. Campbell emphasized that human sociality is social in

⁶ “The Forth Thesis”, in Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, translation by Lewis White Beck, in Immanuel Kant, *On History*, Indianapolis, Indiana, The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963 (1784).

⁷ Elisa K. Campbell, “Beyond anthropocentrism”, *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, Special Issue: Charles Darwin and the Human Sciences, 1983, pp. 54-67.

nature and not biological; and that there is a different evolutionary path to be acknowledged in its whole meaning and in its consequences. Investigating different societies, we ought to identify different dynamics sociality-solitude, dynamics that differ even from social group to social group. Also, we should highlight that the way human society regulates this dynamics sociality-solitude is specifically influenced by historical-cultural-religious, social and political evolutions.

The political regulation of solitude (and sociality) gives the right measure of an open society, as it is instrumental for coercion and control, for social sanity and social safety. A totalitarian regime reduces the room for solitude along with a reduction of the room for intimacy and thus, control is almost all encompassing. Over the centuries, solitude was either a socio-political luxury of a cultural, scientific, artistic, cultural or royal elite, or, a modality of socio-political control and coercion of the radically different social fringes or individuals (for instance, the deviant or the sick, as we know from Michel Foucault).

Solitude and the resorts of individual power, or solitude and the resorts of autonomy are intimately connected. Sociality and solitude are basic human rights and it should be the decision of the individual within the areas of normality in the free societies. For the inner life, for subjective living, it is the best framework to close the wounds of those who have suffered in life, because nowhere else than in a mountains-like solitude could someone have a serene understanding of life.”⁸

The philosopher-advocate of serene detachment understood best how solitary contemplation can bring someone on the “heights of despair” (the title of another work of Emil Cioran). Human consciousness and conscience thrive in the realm of serene heights, although, as Cioran notes “Consciousness is the source of the tragic in the world.”⁹ At the same time, “the great intuitions take place in solitude and darkness”¹⁰, as we understand it, in introspection.

Studies show an important duality and complementarity between sociality and solitude: “The important point is that the need for sociality and for solitude probably co-evolved – sometimes in conflict (as when solitude leads to feelings of loneliness) but sometimes complementing one another (as when solitude leads to feelings of intimacy).”¹¹

The fruit of solitude may be serenity, although it is often different than just a sweet berry of clarity, for clarity itself may bring paradox, dilemmas and dissonance – a bitter fruit of knowledge. This is the reason why solitude may very well be a path toward darker feelings and thoughts of loneliness. Like a twin sister of Janus solitude may turn into loneliness, or into despair, or into a deep disappointment with human race, the undesirable facets of solitude, as possible results of solitary meditation, for the restoration of creative force and inspiration are not the only results.

⁸ Emil Cioran, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

¹¹ Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill, “Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 33, No.1, 2003, p. 39.

For Emil Cioran loneliness is the opposite of sociability. In his view society is the realm where each (and everyone) we meet (or we have met) displays a false sociability and a false loneliness, which brings us in meditation closer to the bitter truth of loneliness, perceiving the deeper metaphysical grain of solitude in man as a sentence to loneliness and misery.¹²

Being alone is as if one is situated on a mountain top, while being lonely is as if one is situated on the edge. From high up on the mountain top everything questioned and severely assessed finds eventually a new balance: the weak points are matched with the resources for their improvement and the qualities with their sustainable foundations. There is loneliness triggered also by acute philosophical sensitivities “Is this me? Or, isn’t it? I remain perplex in front of the years, events, and so many meaningful and meaningless words. How could I not be contaminated by an inexhaustible pride, by the belief in myself and by the victory over fear from ridicule? The truth is that I believed in myself and that I have arrogated a fate and that the interior tension was sustained by turmoil at once refined and wild. My secret was simple: no sense of measure. Eventually this is the key to any vitality”¹³ However, one should decide if she is solitary or that she is alone, solely by the subjective assessment.

Sometimes, the mountain top and the edge may very well be exactly the same position, at occasions, the interpretation of someone’s own situation being a question of either exactness or inexactness of the subjective assessments, interpretations and perspectives. Some of the marginal people in our societies are just confused (for instance, some of the adolescents) and then their loneliness is mainly a question of interpretation, different or radically different (too fat, too skinny, the only one with glasses in their class, the only different ethnicity in their social circles etc.), depressed or seriously sick. *Sociality starts with clarity, well-balanced attitude and willingness to interact. Loneliness starts with despair.* From high up on the mountain top everything questioned and severely assessed finds eventually a new balance: the weak points are matched with the resources for their improvement and the qualities with their sustainable foundations.

All in all, the loneliness of radical difference and serious sickness approaches the absolute. “There are days when solitude is heady wine that intoxicates you, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall”.¹⁴ There is creativity emerging from an experience of solitude as positive and intoxicating as a “heady wine”, from meditation and other spiritual practices, which may as well bring together people in healthy positive spiritual or artistic communities and communions. However, negative experiences of solitude are painful and harmful – the “head against the wall” type of loneliness.

¹² *Ibidem, passim.*

¹³ *Ibidem, p. 7.*

¹⁴ Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill, “Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 33, No.1, 2003, pp. 21-44.

Solitude is Relationship Laden

Society may be a place of distrust, misrecognition and rejection and, at the same time, also, a complex interaction of all sorts of individualisms and communities as fruitful and offering as envisioned, albeit imperfect. Solitude is a paradoxical, multi-faced social phenomenon.

Solitude is relationship laden. In bitter or heart-breaking individual loneliness as well as in creative self-chosen solitude, either the failure or the success in our relations is present. The functional or dysfunctional networks that affect people more closely or loosely are following them into their solitary experiences and put their distinctive mark on the experience. The well-adjusted are going to recharge and create, while the rejected ones rather experience the depths of alienation, their specific trauma, which on rare happy occasions may result in a creative episode. In most occasions, solitude by rejection leads to depression and sometimes even suicide.

Solitary heroes, revolutionaries, reformers, moral educators trigger social movements and practices that keep the social dynamics on an evolutionary and development path; numerous kinds of solitaires and hermits have long played influential parts in human societies. „Solitude offers many advantages to the individual, and it has played a vital role in the history of societies”, as well as marginalization and alienation bring about socially undesirable forms of loneliness and negative actions associated to them, from suicide to violence and crime. The relative social disengagement associated to solitude and loneliness is merely apparent: one way or another, solitude is social or socio-political, at least via its impact and reverberations.

As researchers conclude, we should understand that solitude and interaction are not completely opposite and solitude is not necessarily a sign of social weakness or social deficiency: “When in a situation of reduced social stimulation, the person whose characteristics facilitate feelings of comfort and control over his or her particular surroundings is more likely to find solitude rewarding than is the person prone to feel at the mercy of a specific environment. To be sure, the relative importance of personal characteristics versus environmental characteristics depends upon the context: Many famous solitaires have mastered bleak and difficult physical environments, and countless experiences of loneliness occur daily in mundane settings.”¹⁵ Independence and self-reliance, emancipation and education are crucial in the capitalization of solitude. Whenever the solitary condition represents a freely selected choice and not an imposition coming from marginalization, alienation, social rejection, social intolerance or poverty, it is obviously more of a resource and less of a trauma.

Proximity, vicinity and neighbourhood diminish aloneness, loneliness, alienation, anxiety distrust only as far as they mean shared values and the sense of belonging and cooperation among individuals, for common relevant goals. Togetherness by respect, mutual acknowledgement, inclusion, consideration and cooperation represent the stark opposites for loneliness, disrespect, marginalization and/or alienation.

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

The authoritarian and totalitarian societies nurture solitude by indoctrination. The official truth and its artificial language insulate people from each other and from profoundly felt common values, from an authentic sentiment of belonging.

The excess, the superficiality and the entertainment character of communication and, sometimes, relationships in democracy mark the distance of both individuals and societies from logos, from the contemplation of ideals and truths.

Particular aspects of estrangement come from the consumer-type happiness which is the overarching model for our times, although, in our view, not the consumption is the problem as the low quality of the available goods. Neoliberalism produces social wrenching loneliness.¹⁶ Neoliberal ideology pairs with technological change and they induce competitive and extreme individualism, the obsession with self-interest and success; ever more unrealistic goals. But neoliberalism is at the same time an ideology not preoccupied with the creation of opportunities which sets the stage for a harsh competition environment. People see each other as competitors and as quantifiable social standards. The article published recently by George Monbiot¹⁷ relates to scientific investigations proving that neoliberalism and social media connected personal worth with the standardized slim and smooth image of young woman and also with the idea of generalized competition a sort of “post-Hobbesian dystopian war of everyone” against everyone, but also *against themselves*. Social rupture should be “treated as seriously as broken limbs” especially since the studies show that “social pain and physical pain are processed by the same neural circuits”. Other alarming studies show that in England “one in four women between 16 and 24 have harmed themselves, and one in eight now suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder”, while another 26% in the same age group suffer from anxiety, depression, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder.¹⁸ Social realms are realms of consumerism and, therefore, human value-voids, deprived of manifestations of affection and caress.¹⁹

Estrangement caused by marginalization via poverty is especially difficult to overpass. Poverty is more of a sentence nowadays that it has previously been. Poverty increase and neoliberalism is a connection emphasized in another study that concludes: “American children born in 1940 had a 90% chance of earning more than their parents. For children born in 1984, the odds were 50-50. Most accounts of this trend focus on the breakdown of upward mobility: It’s getting harder for the poor to become rich. But equally important is the decline of downward mobility: The rich, regardless of their intelligence, are becoming more likely to stay that way.”²⁰

¹⁶ George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism is creating loneliness. That’s what’s wrenching society apart”, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/12/neoliberalism-creating-loneliness-wrenching-society-apart>, accessed 27 September 2019.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Michael Hobbes, “The ‘Glass Floor’ Is Keeping America’s Richest Idiots at the Top”, 10 October 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-glass-floor-is-keeping-americas-richest-idiots-at-the-top_n_5d9fb1c9e4b06ddfc516e076?ncid=newslushpmgnews__TheMorningEmail__101419&guccounter=1, accessed 12 October 2019.

Exacerbate competition and self-harm couple in a self-consuming frenzy with negative environmental and social consequences.²¹ The health portrait of the connection between neoliberalism and loneliness includes high blood pressure, comfort eating-obesity-low economic status, heart disease, strokes, low immunity, accidents, dementia, smoking and other various types of drug addiction and social isolation are also associated to complete the bleak portrait of neoliberalism, the “recommended” and most respected ideology of our times, the only one around which critics take all the possible and imagined precautions.²² There is no policy that could remedy this reality, says George Monbiot, because, as we can see it, this is a much more complex problem of social consciousness and we agree, emphasizing that what is necessary is an education for realistic goals that starts from proclaiming out loud the consumerist media and social media cultivated goals as negative, toxic, unrealistic and dangerous: in family, in schools and classrooms, in private conversations, in published materials of all levels, in media and social media, through the moral reformers among the beloved status symbols and in a multiplication of human affectionate encounters, if possible.

So, what is left of cooperation as the main route to sociality? Individualism is the main highway for loneliness and cooperation is in most occasions replaced by competition. There are almost two decades since the work of R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, saw the light of public sphere.²³ The book registered a steady decline of social capital, human connection and the trustworthiness that arises from relations and reciprocity since the '60s. Political participation, civic participation, religious participation, workplace networks, informal networks, mutual trust, and altruism were important dimensions followed empirically in the study of Putnam. There is always a need for reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity without which society does not function and this is why the study of R. Putnam was alarming. We may find worth mentioning that Putnam did not jump to pin the decline of social capital on the usual suspects (educational deficiency, destruction of the nuclear family, race and racism, big government and the welfare state and market economics), but he validated the causal connections with other factors: the increased mobility of individuals, the lack of time and money, the passive attitude induced by television and, most of all, the generational differences. People translate aspirations into realities differently. In our view, the accent falls nowadays on the scarcity of time, so people are more and more selective of the causes they sustain: they are not anymore going to manifest against war, but rather against a specific negative aspect brought about by a specific war, or, about a specific ecological problem of a specific plant, while preferring to sign a petition and not waste their time on the streets. Causes are better defined and they interest more selective categories of people. These are relevant aspects of the reality of declining social capital, nowadays, too.

²¹ George Monbiot, *op. cit.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, esp. pp. 2600-295, 356, 358-359.

Much earlier than 2000, the year of publication for the *Bowling Alone* study, Gilles Lipovetsky has published *L'Empire de l'éphémère: la mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes* [*The Empire of Ephemeral: Fashion and its destiny in modern society*] (Gallimard, 1987) and *Le Crépuscule du devoir* [*The Twilight of Duty*] (Gallimard, 1992) with specific warnings and lucid investigations of the transformations taking place in contemporary times. This year, Gheorghe Dănișor published a philosophical study of loneliness seen via the problems occasioned by the disjunction of *ratio* and *sermo* in *logos*, with the accent placed on *sermo*, no longer explained by *lego* (connection), with origins in late Hellenism and exaggerated out of scale during our times.²⁴

The main phenomenon of our times is that “sociality” becomes more and more “virtual sociality”, “social media sociality” and its “rules” and “requirements” tend to govern current individual existence to extraordinary extents. Apparently, there are no rules and requirements for virtual sociality. Nonetheless, in fact, online sociality is under the thumb of the ephemeral, of fashion and group approval even more than modern and contemporary sociality have had to face. For example, superficial standards for beauty and success shape an almighty empire-of-the-visible at the core of online sociality, as fake as the fake news it indulges²⁵.

However, nowadays, the emergence of online spaces has brought along the online type of sociality and solitude. Even more, we may talk now about virtual causes and virtual ideals, for causes and ideals, as faint as they may be, they are the long-lasting shadow of the human being. Online causes still gather genuine solidarities around common concerns. Some concerns and causes are generous and humanitarian, while a few are even heroic, although many are more of a show than anything else.

We can raise here another question: socializing in the VR or within games such as “second life” is really socializing? And another: Is living multiple virtual lives besides the old fashioned offline one really living more? Don’t they merely take up time and other resources, opportunities even, from the offline life?

Within the virtual realm, solitude cannot have more benefices than “old fashion” solitude. Both solitude and loneliness are rejected in the virtual space as signs of weakness. Roaming the virtual realm instead of the inner, meditative ones cannot increase creativity or replenish more the inner forces. Virtual existence results in more conformism to a presumed (well-understood or misunderstood) social standard of self-accomplishment and perfection.

Virtual endeavours and presence often mask solitude under a complementing *quantity* of friends, or under the mask of an assumed online, virtual identity.²⁶

²⁴ Gheorghe Dănișor, *Însingurare. O filosofie despre istoria eșuată a umanității* [*Estrangement. A philosophy about the failed history of humanity*], Bucharest, Editura Universul Juridic, Craiova, Editura Simbol, 2019.

²⁵ Which does not exclude the possibility of exceptional genuine online family and friendship relations; it just captures the characteristic of superficiality of the main online manifestations and trends.

²⁶ This critical position refers first and foremost to the topic of solitude. In personal and work-related relations online technologies brought about changes, some of them good, some of them rather bad. Online and virtual technologies are often beneficial, useful and fascinating, with amazing applications in various important

Virtual space is the space of the *winners at all costs*. Of course, this is verified especially for the really disadvantaged, for the less educated and for the disempowered ones (or, also, for the deviant ones), all these categories, all the more prone to pretend they are someone they are not; but there is as well an invisible “hand”, an invisible pressure of this medium toward a particular message (“I am interesting, up-to-date, well-connected, successful, extraordinary”) of success, of the standardization and imposition of a smallest denominator vision of success, no matter what. For the most superficial “virtualnauts”, both solitude and loneliness are weaknesses, meant to be hidden and, if not, mocked.

Within the socio-political realm, solitude is the socio-political luxury and not just a meditative prerequisite. Socio-political solitude is enjoyed and vindicated by the free and active individual claiming a right to privacy and intimacy.

Solitude signals power or solitude is an index of power. The powerful of this world set up physical and symbolic distances against the other, which sometimes secures the desired solitude and other times establish that it is loneliness at the top. As the Machiavellian Prince, the rich and powerful may just choose to be feared and avoided, not loved. On the other hand, loneliness is the hallmark of alienation and marginalization signalling the situation in the outskirts of community.

Both solitude and loneliness are relationship laden. In a book entitled *Mapping marginality*, co-authored in 2010 with Viorella Manolache, I was emphasizing the multiplex variety of marginal situations, the multiple aspects of the marginal reality, the fluid metaphorical capital of marginality from a philosophical socio-political and ethical dialectic between the whole and the parts, the centre and the periphery, the main and the secondary. Marginality (the slams, the outskirts and the suburbs) is an exile within society, but also a reservoir (a tank, a fountain) of creative and changing, updating, postmodern civilizational resources.²⁷

Such marginality renews perspectives and meanings in socio-political ethics as an engine towards a wider, more inclusive vision of community. Technological advancement may give an impulse to knowledge society, as well as it may deepen the gap between the informational and the non-informational world, or it may perfect the insulation of people at the top. Contemporary “Princes” might have decided already that they enjoy and need to protect their “loneliness” at the top. However, they are challenged by marginal hackers of either terrorist or “Robin Hood” type. There are marginal power games, always in progress.

sub-fields of medicine, industry etc. Fact is that, when a technology is invented, only certain uses, applications and implications are envisioned, not *all* of them. We do not advocate the idea that this is a sufficient reason not to invent new things, or to be, in general, fearful of technology. We do advocate the idea that the reflexive exercise of nuanced thought, the ability to discern various aspects of a problem, is crucial for our contemporary societies; all the more so, since general and higher education tends to purge out or reduce philosophy classes. In politics, as well as in social cultural and economic life, online possibilities bring about more democratization: various individuals have more similar opportunities to express and disseminate their thoughts and information about political, social, cultural and economic initiatives and activities when compared to personalities, to important people, the rich. Online, there are obviously new spaces of manifestation, petition, ideas exchange, etc., sometimes reducing marginalization and some aspects of socio-political inequality, politically relevant and sometimes beneficial. However, we should notice that these new spaces are new spaces of opportunity for social competition and inequality (not only for cooperation, relationships and communication), for manipulation, indoctrination or/and disinformation, too.

²⁷ See also Ion Goian, “Post scriptum”, in H. A. Șerban and V. Manolache, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-220.

From this theoretical interpretative perspective, we can establish the chain of influence from marginalization, to loneliness and alienation. It is interesting to consider these social and individual realities from the perspective of disrespect. Contemporary societies, even the democratic ones, provide many examples of loneliness by marginalization, generated mainly by disrespect, leading to alienation. In his work *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2007), Axel Honneth interprets democracy as the best chance against alienating individualism, against deficient cooperation and disrespect, following the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, in his conception of democracy as a form of reflexive cooperation, which cultivates a form of ethical individualism and sustains the life of community. According to Honneth, this is an individualism of “freedom, responsibility and initiative, oriented toward an ethical ideal, not one of crime”.²⁸

Such democratic individualism allows social cooperation as an ethical reply of one individual for the other, avoiding thus the over-ethicized republicanism and the barren, solely procedural regime. The diversity of individualism is like a equivalent of the work division at the level of justice, at the level of organization, at the level of culture at the level of ethics etc., bringing a lively breath into the ethical and socio-political democratic exchanges.²⁹ As a consequence of this ethical division, in Honneth’s view, we have in democracy a different but “symmetrical” respect for the other individuals based on recognized value in other individuals and on a “*pattern* of recognition represented by respect and mutual validation”.³⁰

Cooperation is based on mutual respect, which is always the most efficient measure against alienation, marginalization and loneliness. And, on this path, a post-traditional society is established by the opening of a “horizon where the individual competition for social respect is freed from the traditional shadow of grief and it is undisrupted by the experiences of disrespect”.³¹ At one extreme, people severely disappointed with others and the world do not have other chance than being lonely. However, this is obviously a matter of interpretation, a question of chosen self-narrative (the story we tell ourselves), depending on the chosen orientation toward the others and the world, which is central in someone’s identity narrative. That is, for certain human types their relation toward the exterior is governed by high expectations and requirements, which silence the empathy, tolerance and the sense of duty.

And I am not talking here about a lament against our times – the “twilight of duty” times. In Gilles Lipovetsky’s work with the same title, the reign of Duty is replaced by a reign of multiple codes generated by a more complex vision of good and of the individual’s contribution at good, as well as of the perspective on personal accomplishment, which includes with necessity the aspects associated with the right and the duty of individual happiness, which, in this interpretation, is not disconnected from the happiness of the others – hence the

²⁸ Axel Honneth, *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, p. 224.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 261.

complicated nature of the contemporary ethical codes. Besides the ones enrolled into the complicated quest of the “correct” pursuit of happiness, there are those individualists who could never enjoy the others or the things and or the events, because they always pine over something better or more. These are the ones destined to loneliness.

There is feeling alone by the power of detachment as when somebody is able to feel solitude at a party, or, there is sheer loneliness by inability to make oneself pleasant or liked, which is often related to personal intolerance, various physical, moral or educational shortcomings, incapacity to appreciate others, incapacity to understand the situation and the others enough in order to adequate...In sociological terms, we may feel lonely in our group of belonging, or we may be lonely in relation to a distant aspirational group.

Related to these states of mundane loneliness, which are scaring human condition, there are the socio-political faces of loneliness, all of them, faces of marginalization and intolerance. Considering the everyday facets of the loneliness against the metaphysical solitude, we find that there is no deeper aloneness than that of difference, sickness and old age. There are several estranging psychical illnesses. There are several illnesses that brought about stigmatization, social vulnerability, marginalization and alienation (we may think about the AIDS or certain skin diseases). Difference and loneliness go hand in hand most of the times.

Actual loneliness belongs to the most powerless among us. There is nothing more disempowering and more alienating than illness and old age. Difference, old age and illness render human beings’ stranger to themselves, which is more difficult, more tragic, more alienating than being “stranger to ourselves” by poetic or by philosophical disposition. In Julia Kristeva strangeness is the political facet of violence.³² Radical difference, illness and old age describe the most tragic part of the human metaphysically tragic experience with loneliness, marginalization and estrangement.

Conclusion

Loneliness represents the disconnection from ourselves and from the others in its most atrocious form; it is the impossibility of access to any form of socialization due to marginalization, memory loss, physical or psychic impairment.

Solitude is rather a socio-political *trump* and an *entitlement* related to the right over someone’s own person and to the right to happiness via interaction and sociality or not. Loneliness is also political: it poses questions that address our commitment to sociality, solidarity and togetherness, and emphasizes their contexts, shortcomings and stakes; it requires solutions and measures to alleviate or solve the socio-political disempowerment evolving toward the more aggravating form of alienation.

Solitude and loneliness are the two eloquent extremes according to which we might describe with precision the quality of our togetherness.

³² J. Kristeva, *Stranger to ourselves*, transl. by Leon Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

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