Psychology, Interregna and the Struggle for New Orders

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Time of the Monsters

By

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FOREWORD

This book begins with a quote that is as simple as it is profound in its sombre conciseness:

> *"La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati."*[1]

Antonio Gramsci's words, often paraphrased, occasionally shortened and quoted in different contexts, serve here not only as a rhetorical prelude, but as an intellectual anchor point for a philosophical and economic consideration of the dynamics of transitions. They are not merely the historical reflections of a thinker in the prison of fascist Italy, but a timeless diagnosis of those phases in which societies, economies and individuals stagger between the ruins of the old and the vague outlines of the new.

We are undoubtedly in the middle of a Gramsci gap, a historical interregnum that manifests itself with frightening clarity in the political, economic and social dynamics of our present. Gramsci's famous diagnosis that "the old world is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a multitude of morbid symptoms appear" does not merely describe a past epoch, but hits the nerve of our time with disturbing precision. The symptoms are visible everywhere: in the erosion of political institutions, in the growing inequality of the global economy, in the loss of trust in science, the media and democratic structures, as well as in the escalating climate crisis, which is revealing the planetary limits of economic activity.

We are surrounded by a palpable sense of dwindling order. The global power structures that suggested stability after the Second World War and during the Cold War are crumbling. Liberal democracies, long celebrated as

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[1] "The crisis lies precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: In this interregnum, the most diverse morbid phenomena occur."
Antonio Gramsci: Quaderni del Carcere (1929-1935), issue 3 (§34), "The Morphology of Crisis". Quoted from Gramsci (2024), vol. 4, issue 3, §34.

the "end of history"[2] , are showing deep cracks. Authoritarian movements are gaining influence worldwide and populism is flourishing, fuelled by collective insecurity and the need for simple answers in a world that has become complex. Technological progress, which was once a source of optimism about progress, has become a source of disorientation in many areas. Platform capitalism and digital surveillance are not only transforming our economy, but also our social relationships and our self-image.[3]

Economically, we are living in a time in which the grand narratives of neoliberalism are losing legitimacy without a coherent alternative paradigm being recognisable. The financial crisis of 2008 marked not only the collapse of banks, but also the collapse of faith in the self-regulation of the markets. The years of austerity that followed exacerbated social inequalities and led to widespread frustration with the political and economic elites.[4] However, instead of a new, progressive economic order developing from this, the global economy remains in a state of ideological vacuum, in which old models are provisionally stabilised while new approaches remain fragmentary. The climate crisis exacerbates this feeling of paralysis. It is probably the clearest example of a morbid-symptomatic phenomenon in the Gramscian sense: a problem that arises from the contradictions of the existing order and exposes its inability to find appropriate answers. The ecological catastrophe is no longer a distant future scenario, but an omnipresent reality. Droughts, floods and extreme weather events are symptoms of a system that has overtaken itself. Yet despite the urgency of the problem, the necessary structural change has largely failed to materialise. The existing political and economic institutions seem incapable of bringing about the radical change that would be necessary to avert the impending catastrophe.[5]

On an individual level, we also experience this gap as a crisis of identity and self-image. In a world where traditional social roles and life plans have become fragile, many people are struggling with a sense of alienation. Paradoxically, digital networking creates isolation, while the pressure to

[2] Cf. comprehensively Fukuyama (1992).
[3] See Zuboff (2019), p. 48f.
[4] See Blyth (2013), p. 127f.
[5] See Latour (2017), pp. 72-75.

constantly optimise oneself leads to new forms of psychological stress. Burnout, depression and anxiety disorders are not purely individual pathologies, but symptoms of a system that overburdens its own members.[6]

The idea behind the Gramsci Gap is not an abstract concept. It is what we experience every day: The rift between the knowledge that things cannot go on like this and the inability to clearly recognise the path to a new order. We sense the end of the old, but the new remains vague, diffuse, without clear contours. This creates a collective existential uncertainty that is expressed in the morbid symptoms of our time: political radicalisation, economic instability, ecological crisis and psychosocial erosion.

But precisely in this gloomy diagnosis of the system lies an opportunity. Gramsci's interregnum is not only a time of decay, but also a time of possibility. In the dissolution of old certainties lies the potential for radical renewal. History shows that great social transformations often emerge from moments of the deepest crises. Crises do not merely function as destructive events, but as catalysts that make hidden contradictions visible and question existing power structures. At such moments, previously invisible alternatives suddenly become conceivable and the impossible becomes a real option. The challenge is to find the courage to confront the monsters of the interregnum, to recognise the symptoms not just as a threat, but as signals of a necessary change. However, transformation is not a linear process that automatically emerges from the crisis. It requires collective imagination, political mobilisation and a conscious confrontation with the forces that want to maintain the status quo. In this context, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony gains significance. The dominance of certain ideas and values in a society is not static, but the result of a permanent process of negotiation. In times of interregnum, the hegemonic terrain shifts, opening up opportunities for both regressive and progressive forces to establish new narratives.

The "time of monsters" is therefore not only a state of loss of control, but also a moment of creative destruction in the Schumpeterian sense. Old orders are breaking down, not because they are being attacked from the

[6] See Han (2015), p. 31.

outside, but because their internal contradictions can no longer be concealed. This dynamic opens up spaces for innovation - not only technologically, but also culturally, politically and socially. However, change does not happen by itself; it requires conscious acts of resistance, reorganisation and solidarity.[7]

It is crucial not to see this phase as merely waiting for a "new normality". The desire for stability can lead to a dangerous longing for authoritarian solutions that promise to eliminate the uncertainties of the interregnum. However, real transformation does not come about by returning to old patterns, but by enduring ambivalence and actively shaping new ways of living together. It is important to realise your own role in the process of change: Every crisis harbours the potential for emancipation if we take responsibility for understanding it as a collective task.[8] The courage to confront the monsters of the interregnum is therefore not just an individual act, but a collective necessity. It is about understanding the crisis not as an end point, but as a threshold - a threshold that marks the transition from the old to the new world. In this threshold lies the potential for radical renewal, for the possibility of not only overcoming the symptoms of the crisis, but also redefining the foundations of our coexistence

There is no question that we are currently living in the Gramsci Gap. But the question is not how we escape it, but how we shape it.

This book is an attempt not only to describe these symptoms, but to understand them as a reflection of deeper psychological, economic and philosophical dynamics. It is not an analysis of individual crisis phenomena, but a look at the pattern behind them: The logic of transitions, the nature of the interregnum and the mechanisms that allow the monstrous to emerge in these times. It is not just about the "what" and "how", but above all about the "why": Why do moments of change give rise to figures, systems and ideologies that simultaneously fascinate and terrify us? Why do societies react to phases of uncertainty by longing for authoritarian solutions or fleeing into radical narratives?

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[7] See also Schumpeter (1942), p. 83f.
[8] Cf. Arendt (1969), p. 64f.

The perspective of this book is deliberately interdisciplinary. It combines economic theories with psychological insights, philosophical reflections with historical analogies. For no area of human life exists in isolation, and especially in times of upheaval, it becomes clear how closely the spheres of economics, politics, culture and the individual psyche are intertwined. The monsters we are talking about here are not mere metaphors. They are real phenomena that materialise in economic bubbles, authoritarian movements, social divisions and digital disruptions.

However, this book is not a guide to practical crisis management. It does not provide simple answers to complex questions. Rather, it is an offer for reflection, an attempt to interpret the seemingly chaotic movements of our present in a larger context. Because perhaps the first step towards shaping a better future is not to defeat the monsters, but to understand them. In their monstrosity, they not only reflect the end of the old, but also the possibilities of the new.

I invite you to follow these thoughts - not with the expectation of finding support in the tried and tested, but with the willingness to look the uncertainties of our time in the eye. For it is precisely there, in the uncertainty, between the ruins of the familiar and the contours of what is to come, that the potential for real realisation lies.

With best wishes,
In February 2025

Prof. Dr. Dr. Oliver Hoffmann

INTRODUCTION:
THE GRAMSCI GAP - A TIME OF MONSTERS

> *"Like Friedrich Hebbel, I believe: 'To live is to take sides' ... Indifference is a powerful factor in history ... That's why I hate those who don't take sides, who are indifferent."*
> —Antonio Gramsci, "La città futura", 11 February 1917

The transitional phases of history are always characterised by profound uncertainty and social destabilisation. In these moments of upheaval, a central psychological dynamic is revealed: people experience a state of disorientation as the old structures and narratives lose their legitimacy while new orders are not yet fully established. Antonio Gramsci's famous dictum that "the old world is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" describes this state as a phase of historical *in-between*, characterised by social contradictions, ideological instability and the emergence of "monsters". However, these "monsters" are not mere anomalies or random phenomena, but structural manifestations of a system in transition. They symbolise the profound conflicts that existed in secret in the old order, but only become visible at the moment of its dissolution.

The quote about the transition from the old to the new world exists in various versions. Probably the best-known paraphrase is: "The old world is dying and the new one cannot be born; in this interregnum a multitude of morbid symptoms appear." This formulation is a loose translation that has been popularised by Slavoj Žižek in particular. In its rhetorically sharpened version - "Now is the time of monsters" - it condenses the core of Gramsci's analysis into a powerful image that emphasises the emotional and existential dimension of the interregnum.[9] However, while this version intensifies the drama of the statement, some of the original analytical precision is lost

[9] Cf. Žižek (2010), p. 85f.

The lesser-known but closer translation of the original explicitly refers to the "occurrence of a multitude of morbid symptoms". However, this aspect, which is often omitted in quotations, opens up a crucial perspective: it directs the focus not only to the metaphorised "monstrosity" of individual phenomena, but also to the systemic spread of pathological conditions. It is precisely this inconspicuous addition that lends the quote a deeper meaning, as it understands the interregnum not only as a phase of spectacular exceptions, but as a broad spectrum of social, political and psychological dysfunctions. The actual epistemological value of the quote lies in this difference, as it points to the omnipresence of the pathological in times of change - not as an anomaly, but as a structural symptom.

The term interregnum itself opens up a further semantic field of tension. Etymologically, it refers to the Latin *regnum*, derived from *regere* (to govern, to rule), and thus points not only to the temporal space between two systems of rule, but also to a fundamental crisis of order. An interregnum is not merely a historical vacuum, but a state in which the normative power of the old rules is exhausted, while new principles of order have not yet found a hegemonic form. The connection between rule (*regnum*) and rule (*regula*) is not a coincidental linguistic legacy, but refers to a close relationship between power and measurement.[10]

This connection between rule and measurement points to a fundamental aspect of control: The sovereign is not only the one who decides on exceptions, but also the one who sets the measure by which normality is defined. In times of interregnum, this standardisation collapses. The old "standards" lose their validity and a vacuum is created in which alternative forms of normativity struggle for hegemony. The "monsters" of the Gramsci Gap are thus not just political actors or ideological phenomena, but an expression of a crisis of the measurable itself - the inability to grasp the social in stable categories.

The metaphor of the "monster" in Žižek's version may seem poetically condensed, but it refers to a real psychological and social phenomenon: the

[10] For example, the term *ruler* in English carries the meaning of both sovereign and measuring instrument - a semantic overlap that reveals the close interweaving of political authority and epistemic order.

sudden appearance of figures, structures and dynamics that seem to emerge from nowhere and break the usual patterns of interpretation. These "monsters" symbolise the disordered, the unreasonable, that which defies previous logic. They stand for that which remains repressed, marginalised or invisible in stable times and now erupts uncontrollably in the interregnum, in the void between the orders. They do not merely function as disturbances of a system, but as its symptomatic manifestations that point to inner contradictions and tensions that have been kept under the surface until now.[11]

In this respect, the time of the "monsters" not only marks the failure of old orders, but also the beginning of a process of epistemological reorientation. The usual categories of thought - be they political ideologies, economic models or cultural narratives - lose their explanatory power in the crisis. The monstrous therefore refers not only to the radically different, but also to the fragility of what was previously taken for granted. In this sense, the interregnum is not merely a period of scarcity or the absence of order, but rather a productive space of transformation. It becomes a laboratory for alternative orders in which new forms of measurement, evaluation and understanding must be developed.[12]

The term "monster" refers to the paradox: it is both a threat and a possibility. The monstrosity not only harbours the horror of the strange, but also the hint of the as yet unknown, the potential of the new. Precisely because it eludes the previous order, it opens up spaces for radical imaginations and alternative futures. Following MICHEL FOUCAULT, it can be said that the monstrous marks those borderline phenomena at which knowledge transforms itself by making the "outside" of previous discourses visible.[13]

The interregnum is therefore not just an interim period, but a critical space of possibility in which the monstrous manifests itself as a harbinger of the new. It challenges, destabilises and forces us to question the familiar. But the transformative potential of the crisis lies precisely in this imposition: it not only forces us to confront the old, but also opens our eyes to what is

[11] Cf. Žižek (2010), p. 87.
[12] Cf. Koselleck (1979), p. 211f.
[13] Cf. Foucault (1970), p. 25.

possible beyond the familiar. The monster thus becomes a paradoxical symbol of hope - not despite, but precisely because of its strangeness.

The psychology of these transitional phases points to a fundamental characteristic of human thought: the inability to endure uncertainty leads to the projection of collective fears onto certain symbols, people or systems. In phases of upheaval, there is an increased tendency to construct narrative structures that compensate for the loss of stable orientation. This happens in particular at moments when traditional authorities and institutional order are no longer considered reliable. In these phases, a cognitive dissonance arises between the previous convictions and the new, still unclear reality. The psychology of the interregnum is therefore closely linked to the human tendency to create meaning, which often manifests itself in the creation of enemy images or the deification of individual actors. This dynamic can be seen in historical examples: The collapse of the Roman Republic, for example, was accompanied by the deification and demonisation of individual figures, while the transitional phase following the French Revolution led to the construction of figures of heroes and horror. Such narratives are not mere side effects, but essential elements of the transition itself, reflecting the psychological handling of uncertainty.[14]

The concept of the Gramsci Gap can also be viewed from an economic perspective.[15] Economic systems, like social orders, are characterised by periods of stability and change. In times of crisis, when existing economic structures no longer appear viable, new mechanisms of value allocation emerge, but these only gradually become institutionalised. These transitional phases are characterised not only by economic volatility, but also by a psychological state of uncertainty, which is reflected in changing consumption and investment patterns. Financial crises, for example, are not only economic but also psychological phenomena, as they shake deeply rooted expectations of stability and growth. In these moments, it becomes particularly clear that economic values are not objectively given, but consist of social constructs that are scrutinised in times of crisis. While established economic theories have long been based on the rationality of markets,

[14] Cf. Koselleck (1979), p. 203f.
[15] See also Fiori (2013), p. 166ff.

empirical analyses show that economic decisions in phases of change are increasingly influenced by emotional factors such as fear, hope or panic.[16] The Gramsci Gap can therefore also be understood as a moment of economic interregnum, in which new values and economic paradigms emerge but have not yet taken on a hegemonic form. In such phases, it becomes particularly clear that economic orders are not static or natural, but historically contingent constructs that are shaped by social negotiation processes. The collapse of old economic models not only reveals their internal contradictions, but also creates a space in which alternative ideas compete without a clear dominance already being established.[17]

These transitional phases are also characterised by uncertainty, instability and an increased sensitivity to crisis phenomena. Economic players - from states to companies and individuals - are operating in an environment in which the previous rules of value creation and capital allocation are losing legitimacy. At the same time, there is a lack of consistent new narratives that could offer comparable stability and orientation. This leads to a paradoxical situation: while the crisis is destroying old certainties, the path to a new economic order remains uncertain and characterised by contradictory tendencies.[18]

In this context, the "morbid symptoms" appear not only as economic dysfunctionalities such as financial crises, debt bubbles or currency instabilities, but also as ideological distortions. Neoliberalism, for example, which had been the dominant paradigm since the 1980s, came under massive pressure after the global financial crisis of 2008. However, this crisis did not lead to the immediate establishment of a new economic policy paradigm, but rather to a long-lasting interregnum in which various competing ideas wrestled for hegemony.[19]

In this phase of economic interregnum, it becomes clear that economic values are not only determined by market mechanisms, but are deeply rooted in cultural, social and political processes. Value is not an objective

[16] Cf. Kindleberger / Aliber (2005), p. 87f.
[17] Cf. Polanyi (1944), p. 136.
[18] See Blyth (2013), p. 41.
[19] See Mirowski (2013), pp. 28-31.

measure, but a result of collective negotiation processes that are particularly open and contested in times of change. The struggle for the definition of economic value - be it in the form of money, labour, resources or technological innovation - thus becomes a central arena of the Gramsci Gap.

However, the invisibility of a new hegemony does not mean that there is no dynamism. On the contrary: radical ideas that were considered unthinkable in more stable times often unfold in these interstices. This applies to both progressive and reactionary currents. On the one hand, movements are emerging that propagate alternative economic forms such as the economy for the common good, degrowth or the solidarity economy. On the other hand, authoritarian and protectionist economic concepts that promise simple solutions to the crisis are gaining influence.[20]

In this sense, the economic interregnum is a double paradox: it is both a moment of crisis and a moment of possibility. The Gramsci Gap not only marks the end of an economic epoch, but also opens up the space for the emergence of new paradigms whose hegemonic consolidation is never guaranteed. It is an open field in which economic, political and ideological forces reconfigure themselves in a dynamic, often conflict-laden process.

The current era is particularly characterised by such a gap. Technological transformations, geopolitical power shifts and ecological crises of unprecedented proportions are destabilising existing orders and creating fundamental uncertainty as to which structures will take their place. The digital age is further accelerating this process by weakening traditional institutions and creating new, often as yet unformed power structures. The digital economy, in particular platform capitalism and algorithmic governance, challenges existing concepts of property, labour and value without yet offering a coherent alternative model. At the same time, the omnipresence of social media reinforces the psychological dynamics of uncertainty by intensifying emotional reactions and reinforcing polarising narratives. This shows particularly clearly how the perception of crises is

[20] See Harvey (2010), p. 75.

characterised not only by material changes, but also by discursive and psychological mechanisms.[21]

This book aims to analyse the psychological mechanisms behind the Gramsci Gap - that strange time when the old no longer exists and the new does not yet exist - and to examine its impact on society, the economy and individual experience. By demonstrating the connection between the individual psyche and collective processes, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges of the current interregnum. The central thesis of this book is that monsters - whether as individual actors or as dysfunctional systems - are not only symptoms of disintegration, but also have a function in the formation of new orders. They force societies to deal with repressed problems and act as catalysts for change. However, the mere presence of monsters does not guarantee progressive development: without critical reflection and conscious design, they can manifest themselves as destructive forces that block the transition to a new order.

The next four chapters will analyse this specific topic from different perspectives. First, the psychological dimension of transition phases will be analysed to show how uncertainty and fear shape individual and collective reactions. The focus is not only on the obvious manifestations of fear, such as political radicalisation or social regression, but also on more subtle psychological mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance, projection and the construction of enemy images that enable individuals to cope with the loss of familiar structures of order.[22] This section also examines the impact of collective trauma in times of crisis and the role of emotional narratives in stabilising or destabilising social systems.[23]

The economic aspects of the Gramsci Gap are then analysed, in particular the role of crises as accelerators of structural transformations. The analysis focuses on the connection between economic instabilities and social dynamics. Crises are not only seen as short-term economic shocks, but as systemic ruptures that initiate profound changes in production methods,

[21] See Zuboff (2019), p. 132.
[22] Cf. Festinger (1957), pp. 10-14.
[23] Cf. Alexander (2004), pp. 1-18.

consumption structures and power relations.[24] Particular attention is paid to the role of financial markets, the dynamics of speculative bubbles and the shifting of economic hegemonies in global crisis contexts.

A final central theme is the question of how digital technologies and global dynamics affect the current interregnum. This chapter analyses how digital infrastructures and algorithmic systems are transforming not only economic, but also political and social processes. The focus is on how digital technologies reconfigure power, fragment the perception of reality and both destabilise and reproduce existing hierarchies.[25] In particular, it examines how digital platforms reinforce emotional polarisation, enable new forms of social control and at the same time open up spaces for resistance and innovation.

By combining psychological, economic and social perspectives, this book offers an interdisciplinary approach to analysing the "time of monsters" and shows how societies can deal with the challenges of change. The book focuses very closely on the systematic decoding of the dynamics of interregna.

In summary, this includes three central topics:

1. the psychological constitution of individuals and collectives in times of upheaval,
2. the economic mechanisms that both cause crises and have a transformative effect, and
3. the role of technology as a catalyst for social change.

This thematic focus makes it possible to understand the idea behind the Gramsci Gap not just as an abstract concept, but as a concrete analytical lens through which current and future transformation processes become visible and comprehensible.

[24] See Kindleberger / Aliber (2005), pp. 52-60.
[25] See Zuboff (2019), pp. 132-150.

1. TRANSITION PHASES AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

"Humanity is still completely Aristotelian. No one doubts that cognition is 'seeing' instead of 'doing', that truth is beyond us, and you risk being thought crazy if you claim the opposite."
—Antonio Gramsci, "Quaderni del Carcere" (1929-1935)[26]

Transitional phases not only mark historical or social breaking points, but are also profound psychological phenomena. They are times in which old orders are shaken and new orders are not yet established - those "in-between spaces" that Antonio Gramsci referred to as the *interregnum*. In these interregnums, in which "the old world dies and the new cannot be born", "a multitude of morbid symptoms" appear, according to Gramsci. These symptoms are not merely marginal phenomena of change, but central expressions of collective insecurity and individual fears. They manifest themselves in social, political and cultural dynamics that reflect the psychological experience of insecurity, loss of control and disorientation.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to analysing these transition phases from a psychological perspective. The focus is not only on the macro-social transformation processes, but also on the micro-psychological mechanisms that accompany and reinforce these processes. The focus is on the mental and emotional reactions of individuals and societies, which are confronted with the loss of stability and the unpredictability of what is to come. Transitional phases are times of "in-between" in which traditional certainties disintegrate and new orientations have to be painstakingly developed. They are characterised by ambivalence: they offer space for both renewal and regression, for both creative transformation and destructive dynamics.

At the centre of the study is the question of how individuals and collectives deal with these challenges. What happens when familiar narrative structures

[26] Gramsci (2024), Volume 10/II.

collapse? How do collective fears and uncertainties affect individual experience? What psychological defence mechanisms are activated to deal with uncertainty? And what role do symbolic orders, projections and the phenomenon of the "monstrous" play in these processes?

The following sub-chapters address these questions from different perspectives:

Firstly, the psychological core of **transitional phases** is examined in order to understand why they generate not only external crises but also internal conflicts. Transitions are not just linear processes of change, but complex phases of disintegration and reorganisation of meaning systems. They force individuals and societies to come to terms with the unknown - a challenge that is often accompanied by fear, resistance and a longing for simple answers.

In the next step, the chapter is dedicated to the mechanisms of **projection and symbolism in transitional phases**. It shows how collective fears and hopes are projected onto symbolic figures or "monsters" that function as personified threats or promises of salvation. These projections are not random, but follow specific psychological patterns that are deeply rooted in the collective unconscious. The interplay between the individual and collective psyche is described as a circular process in which personal fears and social narratives mutually reinforce each other.

Finally, the question of the **ambivalence of crisis and opportunity** is raised. For as threatening as transitional phases may seem, they are also times of potential. In the dissolution of old certainties also lies the opportunity for radical renewal. Historically, major social transformations have often emerged from moments of deepest crisis. The challenge lies in recognising the "monsters of the interregnum" not only as a threat, but also as signals of necessary change.

This chapter aims to interpret transitional phases not only as historical or political phenomena, but to understand them as existential spaces of experience that affect the foundation of the human psyche and collective identity. An interdisciplinary approach is pursued that combines psychological,

sociological and philosophical perspectives in order to grasp the complex dynamics of change, crisis and transformation.

The central thesis is that transitional phases are not just crises of external order, but crises of meaning. They force us to reinterpret the world - and therein lies both their challenge and their transformative power.

1.1 What characterises an interregnum?

The concept of the interregnum describes a state of political, social and economic transition in which the old order breaks down while a new one is not yet fully established. The term comes from the Latin (inter = between, regnum = rule) and originally refers to the phase between two periods of rule, for example after the death of a monarch and before the enthronement of his successor. However, far beyond this original context, the interregnum can be understood as a universal structural pattern for times of change, in which not only political power vacuums occur, but also normative, cultural and economic uncertainties. It is a state of limbo characterised by both the erosion of old certainties and the invisibility of new principles of order.[27]

Interregna are not mere temporal gaps or passive interstices; they are dynamic, conflictual fields in which old power structures attempt to maintain their dominance while new actors and ideas fight for hegemony. In these moments, the normative stability of a society is fundamentally shaken. Values, institutions and narratives that were previously taken for granted lose their legitimacy without a coherent alternative paradigm being able to fill the resulting void.[28] This constellation not only creates political and economic crises, but also profound existential insecurity, which is reflected in collective and individual psychological crises.

Historically, numerous examples of interregna can be identified that illustrate this dynamic. The transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire was characterised by political instability, power struggles and civil wars, which fundamentally transformed not only the political system but also the self-image of Roman society. Similarly, the transitional

[27] Cf. Koselleck (1979), p. 208f.
[28] Cf. Arendt (1969), p. 35.

phases of the industrial revolution in the 19th century destabilised not only the economic relations of production, but also the social structures of Europe, which led to the emergence of new ideological movements such as Marxism. The interwar period of the 20th century, especially the Weimar Republic, can also be seen as a classic example of an interregnum, in which the morbidly symptomatic phenomena - from political extremism to economic hyperinflation - manifested themselves in a dramatic way.[29]

Interregnums are not just historical episodes, but constitutive conditions of modern societies. Unlike in pre-modern systems, in which changes of rule often took place in rigid, dynastically regulated patterns, modernity is characterised by permanent change, which makes the interregnum appear not as an exception but as a normal state. In this era of constant upheaval, the interregnum becomes an integral part of the social fabric. As already explained in the theory of *liquid modernity*, stability in modern societies always appears temporary, as identities, institutions and norms are constantly in flux.[30] This dynamic means that transitional phases are not experienced as isolated breaks, but as continuous, flowing processes in which the interregnum itself is barely recognisable as such - it is absorbed into a system that is constantly transforming itself.

At the same time, the high degree of interconnectedness of modern societies - be it through digital networks, global economic interdependencies or transnational communication systems - increases the (individually perceived) intensity of these transition processes. The increasing interdependence of local and global dynamics leads to greater interaction, whereby crises and transformations not only occur simultaneously, but also in a dense network of feedback loops.[31] In this context, the disintegration of traditional structures is often experienced simultaneously with the emergence of new principles of order, making the tension between continuity and rupture almost indistinguishable. The dynamics of modern interregnum are therefore both

[29] Cf. Hobsbawm (1994b), p. 54ff.
[30] Cf. Bauman (2000), p. 8f.
[31] Cf. Giddens (1991a), p. 114.

destructive and creative, with the constant clash of old and new paradigms setting in motion a permanent process of transformation.[32]

This permanent transformation leads to the interregnum being perceived as a state in which local and global developments are inextricably interwoven. The interregnum does not appear as a singular, delimited event, but as an omnipresent companion of modernity, which constantly generates new intensities due to the high degree of networking and the acceleration of social processes.[33] This field of tension reveals that the distinction between permanence and change is becoming increasingly blurred. The interregnum thus represents a permanent challenge that significantly characterises the constitution of modern societies and at the same time forces them to continuously question and renegotiate their own structures and norms.

In this sense, the permanent interregnum opens up a radical cognitive space in which the inherent uncertainty cannot be viewed as a purely negative phenomenon, but rather as a source of potential for innovative and transformative processes. The willingness to accept this ambivalence and actively shape the resulting dynamics is an essential prerequisite for the development of new social orders. Modern society must learn to understand constant change not as a disruption, but as an integral part of its existence - as a state in which the unpredictable and the fluid itself become the basis of collective self-organisation.

From a psychological perspective, the interregnum poses a particular challenge, as the human psyche is orientated towards stability and coherence. Transitional phases generate cognitive dissonance by undermining familiar patterns of interpretation and world views, thus creating not only an intellectual but above all an existential problem of fear and disorientation. This emotional reaction manifests itself both in the individual and on a collective level, with societies often reacting with an ambivalent mixture of nostalgic recourse to a supposedly orderly past and utopian projections into a hoped-for future. This dynamic gives rise to both progressive impulses that open up spaces for innovation, creativity and

[32] Cf. Beck (1992), p. 95f.
[33] Cf. Castells (1996), p. 74ff.

social renewal, as well as regressive tendencies that favour authoritarian structures by offering simple solutions to complex problems.[34]

These dynamics are currently evident in political developments, which are characterised by a constant struggle between adherence to traditional values and the urge for radical reinvention. In many countries, we can observe how populist movements either deliberately ignore the old principles of order or overvalue them in order to legitimise nationalist and often exclusionary ideologies. This paradoxical phenomenon - on the one hand, the endeavour to idealise past structures as a safe haven and, on the other, the simultaneous striving for a revolutionary break with these traditions - illustrates the field of tension in which modern societies operate. The recourse to the past order not only serves as a nostalgic glorification, but is also instrumentalised in order to offer simple, monocausal explanations in times of global uncertainty and technological disruption that do not do justice to the complex changes.[35]

The collective dynamics in such transitional phases reveal a constant interplay between the need for support and the urge for self-empowerment. While on the one hand authoritarian forces attempt to enforce stability by reverting to traditional norms and symbols, on the other hand there is growing potential for progressive social movements that develop new forms of co-operation and political engagement out of the same sense of disorientation. This dialectical process, in which tradition and innovation are inextricably interwoven, is becoming the central challenge facing modern societies. It requires us to critically reflect on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that become effective in times of change and to understand them not just as symptomatic phenomena, but as an expression of a deeper process in which the old must not be completely abolished, but transformed into new, sustainable orders.[36]

The transformative potential of the interregnum is revealed in this dialectical tension between clinging to traditional concepts and the need to

[34] Cf. Fromm (1941), p. 182.
[35] Cf. Agamben (1998), pp. 44f.
[36] Cf. Habermas (1981), p. 320f. as well as Debord (1994), p. 59 and Sloterdijk (2011), p. 102f.

radically engage with the unknown. It opens up a space in which psychology can serve as a critical tool to analyse the underlying fears and cognitive dissonances that accompany social change. At the same time, this space offers the opportunity to deconstruct authoritarian tendencies and instead develop innovative, participatory approaches to shaping the future. The challenge is to understand this process not as a linear sequence of crises and solutions, but as a continuous, dynamic dialogue between past and future, in which the monstrous is not interpreted as a static evil, but as a signpost for new possibilities.

The tension between the old and new order is not to be understood as a linear process. The transition is often characterised by setbacks, paradoxes and hybrid forms. Old structures can continue to work in new contexts, while new ideas still wrestle with the remnants of the old. This juxtaposition of decay and emergence is characteristic of interregnums and explains why they are considered both times of crisis and times of potential. In this context, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben emphasises that the interregnum is a state of "open time" - a moment in which history is not fixed, but remains open to alternative futures.[37]

We are currently experiencing an interregnum that is manifesting itself globally. The collapse of the post-war order, the crisis of the neoliberal economic model, the ecological catastrophes of the Anthropocene and the digital transformation are not isolated phenomena, but the expression of a comprehensive structural change. The "morbid symptoms" described by Gramsci - from political crises to economic instability and social fragmentation - are symptoms of this global interregnum. They make it clear that we are not in a linear history of progress, but in a complex transition whose outcome is open.

This openness is both frightening and liberating. It means that no development is inevitable, that there are no guarantees of stability or progress. But it is precisely in this uncertainty that we have the opportunity to actively shape the future. Interregnums are not only times of loss, but also

[37] Cf. Agamben (2005), p. 59f.

times of possibility - moments in which the potential for radical renewal becomes tangible.

1.2 Psychological dynamics in times of upheaval

Transitional phases, as described by Antonio Gramsci with his concept of the interregnum, are not only historical or political phenomena, but are also directly anchored in the psychological structure of the individual and the collective psyche. These phases are characterised by the disintegration of old orders and the failure to establish new structures - or the lack of clarity as to what exactly these new structures will be. The loss of stability and the absence of clear orientation create a fundamental experience of uncertainty, fear and disorientation. The psychological dynamics of such times are complex, as they involve both individual and collective reactions that are characterised by an interplay of cognitive, emotional and social processes.

Uncertainty is a central feature of transitional phases in which familiar points of reference disappear and the future appears in a diffuse, unpredictable light. Psychological research describes this state as a need for cognitive coherence that urges people to reduce ambiguity and create clear, stable structures.[38] The loss of guarantors of stability - be it political institutions, economic security or cultural norms - leads to cognitive overload, which often results in the natural reaction of anxiety. However, this fear is far more than a purely emotional reaction to concretely perceptible threats; it is also to be understood as an existential experience that is fuelled by the inability to adequately anticipate and control future events.[39]

Furthermore, this uncertainty affects both the individual psyche and social cohesion. On an individual level, the lack of stable anchors of orientation leads to deep insecurity, which favours identity crises and undermines self-esteem. This existential uncertainty is reminiscent of Heidegger's concept of "thrownness", in which people are thrown into a world that seems inherently alien and indeterminate.[40] In this field of tension between inner

[38] See Kruglanski (2004), p. 29.
[39] See Bauman (2006), p. 2.
[40] Cf. Heidegger (2006), p. 45ff.

fragility and the striving for order, a human momentum emerges that simultaneously places the individual in a state of resignation and creative reorientation.[41] On a societal level, uncertainty can both undermine and revitalise social cohesion. The loss of collective certainties destabilises traditional norms and institutions, which can lead to a fragmentation of the social order. At the same time, this uncertainty challenges society to develop alternative collective identities and new forms of coexistence. The theory of the risk society thus describes dealing with uncertainty as a central factor that influences not only the perception of dangers, but also the ability for collective self-organisation.[42] This ambivalent effect of uncertainty is paradoxically a necessary driver of social change: as old certainties are shaken, spaces open up for the emergence of new, resilience-promoting structures and collective patterns of action.

Uncertainty thus functions as a human momentum that mobilises both destructive and creative forces. In the complexity of modern systems, as described by the theory of self-organisation and complexity science, falling out of a stable equilibrium - triggered by uncertainty - can lead to radical restructuring and innovative reorganisation.[43] This perspective calls for uncertainty not to be interpreted exclusively as a destructive factor, but also to be understood as an essential condition of human creativity and adaptability. This makes it clear that the ambivalence of uncertainty as a catalyst for change processes is just as fundamental as its ability to provoke fear and disintegration.[44]

Dealing with uncertainty teaches us that the pursuit of cognitive coherence and social stability always seems to be in tension. The challenge lies in accepting the inherent indeterminacy of our existence and recognising in it the opportunity to reshape individual and collective ways of life. Uncertainty, as painful as it may be, opens up the space for transformative processes in which not only the old can be revised, but the foundations for a sustainable order can be laid.

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[41] See Taleb (2007), p. 113.
[42] Cf. Beck (1992), p. 97f. and Giddens (1991b), p. 36.
[43] Cf. Luhmann (1993), p. 58.
[44] Cf. Habermas (1981), p. 141f.

Fear of the unknown is a second, universal psychological phenomenon that is particularly accentuated in times of upheaval. This fear has the effect that the unknown is fundamentally evaluated negatively and perceived as inherently threatening, which leads to an increased susceptibility to simplified explanatory models and authoritarian narratives. In such moments, the chaotic potential of the future is experienced as unbearable uncertainty, which reinforces the need for stability and predictability. The resulting psychological defence mechanism serves to reduce cognitive dissonance - the state in which contradictory information or beliefs are held simultaneously, which is perceived as deeply uncomfortable.[45] The tendency to evaluate the unknown negatively is not only an expression of individual fears, but also a central mechanism in social cognition. In political and social contexts, this tendency leads to the polarisation of opinions and the radicalisation of ideologies. When traditional explanatory models fail, the appeal of simplified world views that offer clear-cut blame and simple solutions increases. These cognitive simplifications enable people to reduce the complexity of reality and achieve a sense of coherence, thereby alleviating the inner tension that results from contradictory perceptions.[46] At the same time, however, this tendency harbours considerable risks. The simplification of reality often leads to a dogmatic hardening of one's own convictions and excludes divergent perspectives, which fragments social discourse and weakens social cohesion. The standardisation of the perception of uncertainty contributes to authoritarian ideologies falling on fertile ground, as they promise a supposed order and stability in an otherwise chaotic environment.[47] Such developments undermine pluralistic debate and instead cement a hierarchical power structure in which alternative narratives are systematically delegitimised.

The psychological tendency to judge the unknown negatively can also be interpreted as a form of loss of control, where the need for predictability and certainty prevails over openness to new perspectives. In this sense, fear of the unknown acts as a catalyst for ideological reactions that aim to simplify the complexity of reality and thus provide psychological and social support.

[45] Cf. Festinger (1957), p. 112.
[46] Cf. Hogg (2007), p. 86 and Festinger (1957), p. 3ff.
[47] Cf. Tajfel (1982), p. 97f.

These mechanisms not only work individually, but also permeate collective ways of perceiving and acting, and contribute to the formation of social groups that distance themselves from the unknown in order to consolidate their own identity.[48]

The reaction to the unknown therefore goes far beyond the individual level and concerns much more underlying social and cultural structures. The fear of the unknown and the resulting search for simple explanations and authoritarian narratives are central elements in the dynamics of social crises. In times of upheaval, they not only lead to old orders being called into question, but also to new power constellations emerging that are often characterised less by openness than by the need to gain control over the unpredictable. These processes make it clear that dealing with the unknown - and the resulting cognitive dissonance - is one of the fundamental challenges of our time, the overcoming of which is crucial for shaping a resilient and inclusive future.

The **search for meaning** is a final central psychological process in times of upheaval that goes far beyond the mere pursuit of stable, predetermined meanings. In times of crisis, when old structures of meaning disintegrate and an existential vacuum is created that makes people existentially insecure and threatens their psychological stability, a comprehensive process of finding meaning is set in motion.[49] This vacuum evokes ambivalent reactions: on the destructive side, nihilism, cynicism and resignation manifest themselves, while on the constructive side it opens up the opportunity to construct new forms of identity and meaning. The search for meaning is no longer tied solely to existing social concepts or ideological frameworks, but challenges people to strive for authentic, self-chosen meaning beyond these traditional patterns.

The transformation of the search for meaning is understood as a radical act of self-transcendence, which involves overcoming the boundaries of established norms and entering a state of permanent indeterminacy in which people redefine their own identity as active creators of meaning.[50] This idea

[48] See Moscovici (1985), p. 47.
[49] Cf. Frankl (1963), p. 121f.
[50] Cf. Camus (1955), p. 43ff. and Sartre (1943), p. 132ff. (and others).

implies that people are no longer dependent on prefabricated, collective constructs of meaning, but instead achieve a creative redefinition by consciously confronting their own inner contradictions and existential fragility. The vacuum created by the disintegration of old patterns of meaning is thus understood as a space that harbours both the possibility of self-reflection and the active shaping of a new cultural and existential order. The radical search for meaning therefore also means freeing oneself from the shackles of traditional orders of meaning and recognising the ambiguity of one's own existence. People are called upon to question the illusionary stability of objective truths and instead accept a pluralistic, dynamic reality. This perspective opens up a transformative space in which the individual appears not only as a passive recipient of old norms, but as an active agent who lays the foundations for a new, self-determined creation of meaning through critical reflection and creative practice.[51]

Furthermore, theoretical approaches suggest that this confrontation with existential meaning goes far beyond purely individual processes. It forms the basis for social renewal, as it enables a paradigm shift that challenges existing power structures and hegemonic narratives. By confronting the existential questions that inevitably arise in times of upheaval, people are empowered to reconstitute not only their own lives, but also the collective structures of meaning.[52] In this way, the crisis of meaning becomes a catalyst for comprehensive social transformation, opening up the possibility of creating something new and more fundamental from the ruins of old ideologies.

The search for meaning in times of upheaval must not be understood as a recourse to outdated ideologies, but as a creative and liberating process that operates beyond existing social constructs. By recognising the existential vacuum as an opportunity to question and reshape their own identity structures, individuals become active co-creators of change. This process, as ambivalent and painful as it may be, is at the same time the foundation for a transformative future in which the possibilities for an authentic, pluralistic creation of meaning arise from the disintegration of the old.

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[51] Cf. Taylor (1989), p. 67 and Heidegger (2006), p. 89f.
[52] Cf. Foucault (1977), p. 203 and Deleuze (1988), pp. 45f.