

## 8. The Heraclitus Law<sup>5</sup>

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The *Heraclitus Law* (or Principle) is a label for a particular characteristic repeatedly observed by any given civilisation or culture for which there exists substantial evidence. The law describes a mechanism according to which the factors responsible for the rise of a particular civilisation or culture are usually the same as those which, in the end, instigate its crisis, meaning thus a quick and deep loss of its complexity, immediately usually followed by a stage of regeneration and a following rise. Next, there is a second observation – if we want to understand why a system is facing a real or apparent crisis, it would be a mistake to focus only on the imminent phase of the crisis. It is much more productive to concentrate on the stage during which the civilisation or culture was emerging. It is there, if the factors involved in its rise are identified, that we usually find the key to understanding the actual stage of the crisis.

Along with this, I will attempt to point out some specific features of the concept of the cyclical reappearance of certain general phenomena. This discussion on the topic of cyclicity may be a revealing line of research in social sciences as such (for a comprehensive overview see, for example, in Czech, Bárta, Kovář, eds. 2011; Bárta, Kovář, eds. 2013; in English, Tainter 1988 and Morris 2010).

In 2011, I, together with the Czech historian Martin Kovář, edited a book on the development of civilisations from prehistoric to the present times. The title of the book published in Czech was *Collapsee and Regeneration. The Roads of Civilisations and Cultures. The Past, Present*

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<sup>5</sup> This text combines some new reflections of the author as well as modified older text passages originally included in the monograph *Příběh civilizace. Vzestup a pád stavitelů pyramid (The Story of a Civilisation. The Rise and Fall of the Pyramid Builders)*, Prague: Academia 2016. See also Bárta 2019.

*and Future of Complex Societies* (Bárta and Kovář, eds. 2011). It comprised about thirty analytical studies. It was thanks to the independent analyses of its individual authors that an observation came to light: factors that usually trigger the rise of a social system at the same time navigate this system into a crisis. By analysing various cultures and civilisations, the authors of the book showed that usually specific factors that could be considered pro-growth were the same as those that logically became affected over time and, in the end, drove the system into a period of stagnation and eventual crisis followed by a collapse (Bárta 2011).

After some research, it became possible to identify some earlier authors who had arrived at, more or less, the same conclusion referred to by the Heraclitus Law. The first was the Russian American sociologist and theoretician of culture, founder of sociology at Harvard University, Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889-1968). In 1941, he published a work entitled *The Crisis of Our Age*.

In this book, Sorokin discusses the cyclical nature of the development of civilisations. He draws a distinction between 'sensate' and 'ideational' culture. Where richness, diversity and individualism prevail in a society, the culture is thus sensate. Where religion, stagnation and the collective spirit dominate in a society, the culture is hence ideational. This is a phase which, according to Sorokin, we are supposed to be entering into in this period (Sorokin 1941). Sorokin elaborates on the causes of an imminent crisis and concludes that the roots of the upcoming 'tragedy' go far back and are intrinsic to sensitive culture. He concludes that the same forces that led to the rise of these spectacular creations were also the cause of the inevitable spread of the phenomena of their crisis and disintegration. However, Sorokin was not the first to discover the principle of pro-growth factors that would then transform into ones that would lead the system into crisis.

## **Heraclitus of Ephesus**

Heraclitus was one of the most outstanding pre-Socratic philosophers. About him, his life and his work, very little is known. Only fragmentary quotes from his thoughts and writings have survived. Some details about Heraclitus' life can be found in texts by the historian Diogenes Laertius, who lived seven hundred years after Heraclitus and was author of the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Heraclitus was born around 540 BCE and died around 480 BCE. What we do know about him is that he descended from a royal family. His ancestors played a role in the foundation of the Greek colony of Ephesus, which is located on the territory of what is today Turkey.