

*Pandemic: One Small Step for Oblivion and a Big Leap into Managed
Democracy*

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Abstract: The pandemic that we are still surviving represents a step forward in the process of the ethical disintegration of the State. It is a process that has been going on for a long time, but has, over the last few decades, been increasing, to the point of making even more evident that we live under a regime that we call here one of managed democracy. The legal-political decisions taken during this pandemic have catalysed this process. On the part of the frightened and perplexed citizens, the recurrent oblivion acts, throughout history, as a contributory factor in this process of severe democratic involution.

Keywords: pandemic, oblivion, democratic ethicity, managed democracy, totalitarianism

Charles Chaplin used to say that the world, seen in close-up, looks like a tragedy, while, in a long shot, it resembles a comedy. We are experiencing this pandemic—at this moment in which I am writing this paper and, surely, when its first readers read it—with the intensity and tragic din of the close-up. Here and now, in our present continuous—during which existence reveals to us—everything that is happening to us pushes us to live in a constant catastasis while our daily epic unfolds, always living on the edge of catastrophe, but without allowing events to be unleashed or precipitated. This way, the intrigue never ends, because that would mean that, due to a fatal error, the Hero, that hero who emerged in Modernity to fight for an eternal freedom and emancipation, would suffer his tragic disappearance. Contrary to how ancient tragedies used to resolve, what we aspire to is to get his redemption: The hero must achieve his Salvation. Every dramatic event, in our modern spirit, is just an epitasis of what comes next, so that this epic tale of our existence continues endlessly. “The show must go on”¹ was deliciously sung by a famous artist, whom we will all remember for his music and because he died from another pandemic.

It will still take a few years for this pandemic—which is still being lived in our present continuous—to become, later on, a mere fact belonging to any simple present, which will be observed from the calm that distance and long shot provide us. Comedy will come. We will have to wait, not much, to be able to look at what happened and what survived during this pandemic through the totalizing vision that long shot gives us, so that what happened can give us the image of a comic entanglement scene in fast motion. Something that could appear to us—as Aristotle said—as an image of what only wants to be noticed, with indifference, as ridiculous, in the form of a simple mistake or a deviation from what should have been, but could never be. We will still have to wait for this pandemic to become a constitutive part of our collective memory, although not because of what we have experienced as a whole and how we have experienced it, but because of the way we will remember how to tell it.

Shocking events are recurrent in our hectic world. We, here and now, want to emphasize some aspects that suggest that all the events that are occurring during this pandemic, the one we are still experiencing, constitute just one more step towards the totalization of control over our democratic lives by the action of an ethically disintegrating State. This totalization has been taking place in a more evident way since the beginning of our current century. The authoritarianism that drops on the existence of citizens and that we have been experiencing in our democracies for several decades is the product, we assert here, of a gradual deterioration of the principles that provided content, once a few centuries ago, to the model of rule of law that should reign in our world. Through a constant updating of modern libertarian mythology, we have been emptying the myth of its content, thanks to a systematic emptying of significance of actuality; at the same time, we were promising ourselves a civilizing and presumably democratic Eden that, sometimes, seems elusive to us. The various political vanguards, which have historically been able to access depoliticizing mechanisms against our societies, have systematically carried out sophisticated actions aimed at social control. Today, we, the citizens, must accept and resign to a reality that surpasses us and that forces us to adapt to such adverse circumstances in the best possible way, if what we aspire to is that, in an indeterminate future, the mystery of the plot will be solved for us.

Carrying out a systematic demonstration of what we have previously denounced exceeds the reduced limits of this space, although we believe that the reader may agree with us, to a greater or lesser extent, with some aspects of this diagnosis. Here, we want to invite our kind reader to accompany us on this short trip through a camera pan that we will practice on current events. However, we will not do it from a heterodiegetic, extramundane, omniscient and disdainful perspective, but precisely the opposite: from the reader himself as a living citizen, the protagonist of his own tragedy. That reader who experiences, in the first person, the significance of this pandemic actuality in his being-as-a-human-being. We will begin, with the complicity and company of the kind reader, our sequence shot, introducing ourselves phenomenologically in the ways in which, in our modern spirit, oblivion operates in the internalization of this supervening pandemic

reality and in the ways in which we overcome it. In this moment of the Spirit (Hegel 1807), I believe that we will clearly see the ways in which a fragmented consciousness of what we are being and living is being built in front of us. In this broken consciousness, oblivion is responsible for agglutinating its pieces, so that, at any time soon, we can reorder them in some way and explain what we harbor in our collective memory.

At this point, we will focus our lens on the phenomenon in its objective dimension, already operating in the field of democratic ethicity (Honneth 2011), from which we will highlight the existential position of the citizen in his sociopolitical effective reality. This is determined, according to our hypothesis, by those recurring ways of oblivion that substantiate our to-be-being-democratic and that have led us, without realizing it, to a present in the form of an almost inevitable “managed democracy”.

We will fade to black, finally, with an exhortation to forget oblivion, through writings like this. A claim to leave the territory of the unpolitical, to recover, once again, the thread of a history in which resounds the echo of those voices that have been silenced (Benjamin 1942), but that, today, and tomorrow, and always will be claiming to be remembered. An echo that was produced from the close-up experience of one or many tragedies and that, however, now resounds in the agitation of the comic scene of the long shot, during the presentification process of what we barely remember that existed in any past.

Oblivion: A Moment of the Spirit

It was getting towards the end of winter. It was already expiring in the direction of its inexorable encounter with the time of thaw, of multicoloured flowering, of the awakening of hibernators and the return of—what we call—migratory birds. It was the time for the renewal of life, when, suddenly, looking out the window, the image ceased to be the typical picture of the frenzy and agitation of cities, of the economy, of the world throbbing, as we have always believed it throbbed and that it inevitably should throb. A new peripeteia began. The pandemic, the new “invisible enemy” that joined our daily epic, had entered the scene with impetus. This made us think, at least for a moment, that we could finally change things. That we could stop that daily agitation that we had incorporated as a “second nature”. That the rampant and conspicuous consumption of our own nature could come to an end. We abandoned the public squares; those spaces historically built by and for cooperative action; we seclude ourselves in the shelter of our *oikós*, the unpolitical place par excellence, as Agamben (2015) described to us; we started telling ourselves our own soliloquy. In this isolation, that we started living, each one of us began to create new dreams in the hope forward (Bloch 1959). At the same time, in front of us, passed, through the television screens, the dystopic spectacle of tragic images. They, progressively, filled us with fear

of disease and made that dread towards the “undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns”, even greater as we will all remember, the Great Poet sang to us.ⁱⁱ

A “new normality”, therefore, had to arrive. That was, perhaps, a cathartic moment, a moment of transient purifying paralysis of our passions, however transitory after all. Perplexity, in which we were immersed, without a doubt, needed us to appear as that *Deus ex machina* that we are always asking to appear on the scene, when there is no longer any possible resolution of the intrigue in the plot.

From here, the cessation and loss of immediate memory of the occurred events began to operate. Perplexity, in which the experimentation of the unknown usually plunges us and the speed with which time is narrated to us, during present continuous, pushes us to quickly forget what torments us, in order to stay alive in the tension of our collective tragedy oriented, let us remember, towards the redemption of the hero. During the pandemic, we call this forgetting “resilience”. It meant the resignifying adaptation of the events that hurry us during present continuous, due to our inability to approach and understand what is new, in order to explain it to us based on an objective correlative that can match what happened with the emotions felt at the time. This is being done, thanks to the recurrent presentification of previously learned experiences that we are telling ourselves today, because we allow ourselves to approach them in the form of any simple present, thanks to the totalizing vision of the long shot and its ability to hide, in the entanglement of comedy, everything that we once wanted to forget.

This is how we tell ourselves the present continuous: the hero of the myth and his prodigies are updated in an epic story of transcendental actions of our existences, directed towards the construction of our collective memory, which is, essentially, a story made of small, recurrent and necessary oblivion. This is how we tell ourselves the *relātus* of our to-be-being-in-the-world: a presentifying narrative, not too long; in it we synthesize what is already known, with the emphasis placed on those situations that seem essential to us, while existing in close-up. On the one hand, we explain to ourselves, in a way that brings us relief, the torment resulting from the convulsion that we live in the present continuous. On the other hand, we preserve the greatness of the prodigy and the resistance of the hero in his facing adversity, towards salvation.

Therefore, the tale explained during present continuous—vivid verb and action tense—differs from the explanation of the facts—past participle of what happened—when we evoke them in the simple present. At this time, we barely tell each other little things, small fragments that, unfortunately, can never address the totality of existence in its own facticity, in what it is being and how it is being.

I pose the question in this way, in order to explain the ways in which this pandemic is being signified in the factual reality of our democracies. The way in which the shocking experiences that are happening to us are necessarily heading towards a certain mode of systematic oblivion, which will become evident to us,

in its apparent invisibility, but consubstantial with the visibility that memory holds, when this period abandons the gloomy tragic foreground, to give way to the story in long shot. In the meantime of this process, we are abandoning ourselves to an unpolitical seclusion that seems inevitable to us, with our minds set on an end to this tragedy, whose outcome we will join full of forgetfulness.

However, oblivion in this pandemic does not only dwell in our most recent history. Our century was just dawning, when the myth of a civilized, self-sufficient and incontestably sovereign world was shattered, as Judith Butler (2004) wrote, because, surely, the echo of what was silenced once by oblivion resonated with enormous roar in the form of a self-conscious “vulnerability”, from which we could no longer live apart from now on. There, in the tragic dimension of a close-up that suddenly came to us, oblivion returned to operate. We ignored the precariousness that challenged us. The world fled forward in the form of expansive policies of control of all spheres of political, economic and social life within the superpowers and the expansion of this model for all those countries and peoples, in their same planet, where strategic and energy interests are the reason and interest of the State. Meanwhile, we, the citizens, have chosen to seclude ourselves in the shelter of the unpolitical, to collaborate in the substantiation of the current civil regime that operates today in our socio-political actuality and which we will give the name here of “managed democracy” (Escobar-Vicent 2022), making an expansive but constructive use of the idea of “inverted totalitarianism” that we borrow from Sheldon Wolin (2008), as we will see immediately below.

Managed Democracy: About its Deployment in the Spirit

Modern libertarian mythology—let us remember—filled with fury and utopian yearnings a society that began to see and know itself as an agent, as the protagonist of its particular tragedy, as the narrator of its own epic and as the author of its own destiny. A new society was born in the light of emancipatory thought, science and knowledge, which would feed a civil regime, as Kant used to say (1784), that believed itself to be of “sufficient age” to flee from its “self-inflicted immaturity”, thanks to “courage and resolution”, in order to use its understanding in favour of its own liberation. However, the strength of the myth has been suffering a progressive deterioration, because, we could say here, it has been motivated by such persistent oblivion, to which we tend to be pushed due to the manifest impossibility of making the dream come true. Let us explain, below, and from the perspective of the present simple, some causal chains that have inevitably become the casual conditions of our to-be-being today in our world. We want to scrutinize certain interpretive keys of the facticity with which our present continuous is unfolding in our democratic existence.

The epic of glorious revolutionary moments embodied the figure of the State in its person. This should indicate the differentiated form through which said State would be the result of an ascending instituting process of a civil regime fully

emancipated from all domination. In this way of organizing ourselves, the necessary procedural bases of the rule of law were detached, to which principles all people would adhere. In this way, the repressive action of the State would be contained, because, now, between the person of the State and its citizens, legal relations would be established based on the eminently representative character of the social totality and the shared wills of said citizens.

The content of this libertarian and emancipatory fable is embedded in the shared set of beliefs within our political culture. However, its factual result, its material reality is being and is manifesting itself in an evident form of what Sheldon Wolin (2008) has called “inverted totalitarianism”. He says that it means the current way of being of the actual State. It tends to a severe totalization, based on an increasingly robust and sophisticated machinery, to the point of taking expeditious control of life itself and of the fate of its citizens, thus becoming the sole, de facto, and, perhaps, legitimate administrator and manager of the citizen’s rights and freedom and, consequently, of democracy itself.

According to Wolin, the phenomenon of inverted totalitarianism acquired its most evident manifestation as a result of the inclement and ill-fated events that occurred due to the attacks of September 11, 2001. According to him, such a “state-centred phenomenon” experienced by those countries, which we usually call International Community, represents the clear demonstration of the arrival of “the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry”. This event was the justification for the creation of a sophisticated mythology based on the idea of a “permanent war” between the good, which embodies everything that is known, and the evil, which is embodied in “invisible enemies”. To this, global citizenship should adhere without objection, for the sake, as is evident, of validating these stories. Such a way of self-conceiving the State has consolidated thanks to the conspiracy of a mass media increasingly defending the “official version of the facts”, of an intelligentsia related to the regime and of corporative economic and political powers. Altogether, perfectly harmonized, designed the main reference around which the institutional political body of the Nation would establish a “new [global] order” aimed at governing the lives of citizens. It ran, in a single day, from the old and already obsolete “Holy Politics” to a renewed and intense “Wholly Politics”.

At the beginning of our century, we entered the era of the management of ideas, feelings, sex, creed, and ways of life, life itself, freedom and, of course, democracy. The State expanded its powers relentlessly, creating a new world in which everything became larger than life itself. The mundane existence of people should be traversed by the “axis of evil” at one end, and the mythological “free society” at the other. From this moment on, Wolin explains to us, we began to witness the emergence of a new model for the exercise of politics. It has been shaped as a complex machinery set of private and public agents who will conspire in favour of internal security, of civil peace, of life and survival at the

price of accentuating the political disconnection and the demobilization of all citizens in deliberative opposition.

Parallel to this phenomenon, the obvious difficulties of citizens to provide themselves with the necessary resources for a comfortable and pleasant life have allowed the penetration of the belief that the world can only be changed based on limited objectives for each person. Somehow, we can sense, through the observation of such behaviour, a certain quasi-scrupulous application, although surely unconscious, of the political maxims that derive from the doctrine of “true individualism” promulgated by Friedrich von Hayek (1945), many decades ago. We, the citizens, have been incorporating ways of being in which, as individuals, we feel impelled, urged only by the knowledge of what is immediate to us, in terms of our most elementary needs, as well as of society as a whole, reducing the spectrum of our orientations to a reduced sphere of family and friends. Through this, it seems to be, we confer on ourselves a great capacity to grasp the limits of our responsibility and the consequences of our actions. In this way, we will be able to make intensive use of our conscience and our faculties and knowledge, in order to make the best decisions about what is immediate and close to us, which, Hayek emphasizes, is the only thing that concerns us. (Hayek 1945)

That conduces, inevitably, to making the citizenry an a-ethical mass of singulars who live their tragedy in the strictest foreground. At the same time and in a necessary way, the States are required to expand their domination globally, in order to collectively guarantee us the minimum resources, which are increasingly scarce, to provide us with that dignity, that “Highness” (Waldron 2009) that is so necessary to keep up our civilized model of life. Here come into play, already on long shot, the devotion to technology (Anders 1956), certain degenerative modes of collectivism (Claeys 2017), the resigned acceptance of the emergence of powerful economic and political corporatism and the impossibility of avoiding those opinion leaders who convince us that they know more of such matters. All this, to mitigate the disenchantment caused by seeing the way this totalitarianism is spreading in all areas of our lives, meanwhile it becomes an *étatisme* that is as hostile to social spending as it is insensitive to the vital and mundane reality of persons-citizens (Wolin 2008). At the same time, the states of the superpowers are pushed, from below, towards a new given vocation: The State is the sole and legitimate protector and redistributor of freedom and law. Little by little, the original idea that gave rise to the establishment of the rule of law has transmuted. In exchange for guarantees of the right, the State has established itself as the protector, supplier and manager of freedom, rights and, inevitably, democracy. This circumstance represents, for Wolin, the origin of the subversion of the processes of constitutional legitimation. It happens, because they cause the reinforcement of an “imaginary of state power”, which is required to expand its current capacities not only beyond its borders, but from these inwards, under the pretext of being the only person capable of fighting against those invisible enemies that devastate the peaceful coexistence of its citizens.

The expansion of state power, which Wolin has outlined for us and by which we can see that our democracies today are systematically managed in an increasingly sophisticated way, has been boosted during this pandemic. In fact, this novel “invisible enemy” has acted as the catalyst in charge of accelerating the degenerative processes of the modern myth, which gave birth and life to so many utopias. Reasonable similarities can be glimpsed with what has happened since 2001: the disturbance that we live within this ring of disinhibitors that these two tragic episodes suppose, only invites us to react, giddily, and in any sense but as soon as possible, to do the right thing. Moreover, of course, to make us strong in forgetting everything that disturbs that civil, social and vital peace that the myth insists on reminding us. Contrary to its promises, this myth pushes the impious amongst us, to forget all those critical events, of any unknown nature, that threaten our respect for some idealized well-being. An ideal that can barely be seen on a horizon that stays always at the same distance and that tells us, however ostensibly, that we are vulnerable, that our lives are precarious, that our idealized ways of life are fragile and that the hero of the myth is as brittle as frequent are the tragic mistakes into which he or she falls.

This renewed version of the totalizing expansion of state power, which we are still experiencing throughout this “permanent war” that traps us, has been well captured by the ways in which all the States of the planet have disposed of fundamental rights, in a choir statement that is echoic of the well-known chant that proclaimed: “There is no alternative”. We will all remember that great Lady who proposed it and who, although she did not die from another plague, at worst, who introduced a new one. It has been easier for the State to overcome the difficulties caused by the limitation of said rights, contrary to the theoretical principles that substantiate them (Alexy 1986), contrary to the very principles that make them unavailable to any public power (Ferrajoli 2001), than to overcome the State’s own totalizing tendencies of which the political vanguards are already prisoners today.

Meanwhile, we, the citizens, subjected to the hustle and bustle of our collective to-be-being, surviving the intensity with which, in the close-up, a reality, of always uncertain origin, spawns in front of us, we let ourselves be trapped by this recurring oblivion, by this systematic loss of memory, as a relief to enjoy, gathered in the land of the impolitic—there, where memory loses itself. Perhaps, because we feel that there is no alternative. We have no other way to forget those felt injustices, to which we cannot give sense and, therefore, we leave their solution to the factual powers, even to manage our own fundamental rights, because they have convinced us that they know more about these matters than we do. We forget injustices, because, only in this way, we will keep alive the irenic myth that we once promised ourselves and by which we would amputate any possibility of an abject stasis that could destroy our Eden of peace and harmony, giving strength and legitimacy to the “management doctrine, that is, a doctrine of the administration, the manipulation and the internationalization of internal conflicts” (Agamben 2015).

In addition, there is no alternative to this totalization, if what we aspire to is to survive in an environment of rampant scarcity, which—survival and scarcity, at the same time—can only be given to us by the person of the State itself. It has been easier to justify the limitations, sometimes severe, close to their suspension, of fundamental rights, than to recognize that hostility to social spending, inherent in political praxis for a few decades, could be the reason for many of the problems arising from the pandemic itself and from its own management. This is very much in the tragic style of Oedipus, who left no stone unturned, let us remember, due to his refusal to recognize and accept that he was the cause of the plague in Thebes.

Having said the above, it reinforces our thesis that this pandemic is just a small step among many more that could come, while we, citizens, seclude ourselves, increasingly, in the depths of oblivion. Neither the death nor the sacrifice nor the disappearance of the modern hero could stop this tragedy in its umpteenth act, unless we stand firm against oblivion. This explains the reason for this way of telling ourselves what we-are-being and why we want to take our reader through our sequence shot, from the intimate perspective that our own mundane existence gives us, from our own experience of what is happening.

Aristotle left us in no doubt that tragedy is not just any narrative, but the result of acts carried out by specific characters. In a democracy, ourselves, the citizens. The complex and thick plot of the tragedy of our democratic reality, the characters that participate in it, the elocution with which we narrate the heroic and save deeds in pursuit of our rights and freedoms are harmonized in a song, whose chords configure the way we exist. This to-be-being becomes a spectacle that sticks us, terrified, to the chair, long before being a genuine reason for the beginning of a sincere fight for our purification, for our catharsis.

An exhortation to forget oblivion

We have spoken, here, about the pandemic we are experiencing in our present continuous. Our purpose is to leave written its experience, so that, when it has already become a past participle, the oblivion of what it was will be recovered in the reconstruction of our memory, through which we will tell each other what we will barely remember. This writing is an exhortation to forget oblivion of what we forget during this tragedy, this current pandemic that we are living in close-up. Our intention resides in the hope that, when we see ourselves in the midst of the entanglement of the upcoming comedy, it does not happen to us as it occurred to Antipholus of Syracuse in Shakespeare's *Comedy of the errors*, who, searching for Dromio, finally had to accept, that in the end, he lost himself. Today, in the midst of the hair-raising noise of this disgust of our tragedy, the one we are experiencing in the foreground, that we must warn that oblivion will come as the essence of what will substantiate our memory, when the scene

returns to the agitation, to the entanglement and the indifference with which we look at the past. When this episode has become a mere phenomenon, a simple alienated object of our social being, we will no longer see ourselves recognized.

Each written testimony during this present continuous must operate as one more avoidance of oblivion. All the contributions that are poured out today from what is being lived and existed, from any sphere of knowledge and experience, will not only be an inalienable testimony, but will also be essential to fill memory. To fill the upcoming presentified tale with enough content to prevent oblivion from colonizing our memory and silencing what we have experienced and what we will be experiencing in a not too far present continuous.

The comedy will come. It will be, from that moment on, when we will have to take back the reins of those fundamental rights that, since the beginning of our century, have been reduced to a simple semantic juggling exercise and have been subjugated—and perhaps emptied of their original meaning—by the public authorities in connivance with corporate powers. Let us not forget that without a scrupulous and enormous respect for the rule of law that grants fundamental rights a constitutive meaning in the totality of the constitutional system, their validity and effectiveness will be null and void (Häberle 1993). This will be the moment to rewrite the plot, not on the basis of what we have told ourselves, but by bringing out of exile all what we have forgotten before.

Finally, let us remember that new causes of oblivion will come immediately after this pandemic. The form that these will take is still unknown to us, although we have a wide repertoire that can easily be repeated: wars, atomic blackmails, new pandemics, famines, climate change, etc. Just remember, altogether, those unstoppable totalitarian tendencies that push the States to curtail our freedom, our lives, our conscience, our democracy.

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ⁱ Sung by Freddy Mercury on the *Innuendo* album by the rock band Queen, published in 1991.

ⁱⁱ From playwright William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1, Soliloquy.