

WALL-PANDEMIC.

REGARDING A NEW REGIME OF WALLS¹.

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[Translated to English by Alejandro Engelhardt]

*«Disturbances are good
for the man who has walls growing everywhere.
Happy the men who spring over them
before the walls get too high».*
ELIAS CANETTI – **The Human Province**

*«...but one gets the impression
that he remains the prisoner of other walls
still standing within himself».*
FÉLIX GUATTARI – **Molecular Revolution**

Some time ago, on the occasion of three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the author of this essay proposed an approach to the walls in our times. It was referred both to the idea of the wall itself and to certain social and political practices that –much like walls– continually enclose us. Thus, it was possible to account for –at least– three new *regimes of walls* that are present and that cross our environment with different forms and implications². In that regard, the urgency to seek the cracks in these *regimes of walls* becomes evident. It is our duty to pierce these walls, to provide tools to do so or at least, to account for new regimes when they are being established. It is the always pending, always urgent labour.

Hence, it is essential to rethink the implications of the 2020 pandemic in that same direction. And it is urgent to realize, first, which are the «walls» that are being constituted in the social sphere, sheltered from what has been the disruption of what we took for granted. Based on this, it is also possible to describe to what extent this new *regime of walls* opens up territories for its own cracks and for the emergence of unsuspected potencies.

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² It was a conference presented for the *2nd International Meeting of Objects and Walls (2do Encuentro Internacional de objetos y muros)*, held in Mexico City, Bogotá and Berlin on November 9th, 2019, with the organization of Tlaxcala 3, of Mexico City, and of The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER), of Berlin. It was published in June 2020 as part of the book *Objects Before and After the Wall* (Pacheco Benites, 2020). Book available at: <https://bit.ly/3hfp5DZ>

THREE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE WALL-PANDEMIC.

The pandemic has not only exposed –and emphasized– structural crises and disasters typical of the current economic order; namely: its dynamics of inequality, its lack of access, its logics of privatization and erosion of public systems, its inclination towards the precarity of work and a long etcetera (the thoughtful analysis of these implications, although necessary, exceeds both the interests and focus of this text³).

In addition to all this, the pandemic also supposes a redrawing of the subjects' quotidian dynamics, which occur at the level of interactions, approaches, *the sense of space* and subjectivity itself. Such dynamics, of course, also imply their socioeconomic and political aspects, their own traces and microphysics of power, but these are not comparable to the former. Hence, the focus of this essay is to account precisely for the daily and «nearest» dynamics. In other words, making a cartography of the walls that are typical of this context, the «micro» *forms* of the *wall-pandemic*. And it is this new regime of walls that seems to delineate the subject-in-itself as a wall. It goes through the most basic interactions, it configures from *physical distance* (imposed as a norm), to *confinement* (with control and precariousness logics), also passing through a seize of the visage (through the mask as an accessory *par excellence* of the future).

Thus, the *wall-pandemic* implies, in the first place, the effects of a wall-isolation, referring to government actions during the first wave of the emergency. That is, confinement and isolation as a method adopted around a good part of the globe at various levels and scales⁴. Although it refers to a condition that has been provisional, the truth is that the measure opened the path to considerable turns that will resonate in the long term. From a reconfiguration of employment and education (tele-work as an hegemonic form), to a rethinking of the very idea of confinement, absence and death; without considering that said confinement measures are latent to be reinstated, as dictated by the –almost inevitable– outbreaks of infections at a global level.

In the second place, there are two walls that correspond to the body. On the one hand, the wall-social distancing, referring to the introduction of forced physical distance as an ingredient in interactions. This will change the way public spaces are configured, and even the more intimate and familiar places too; from changes in capacity and in the ways in which people move through cities, to the impossibility –paranoia?– with respect to the proximity of another, or to hug someone «close» until further notice. In times when the immediacy of screens seemed to have also dissolved the sense of *distance*, suddenly the most basic form of distance settles down as the norm of the coming together.

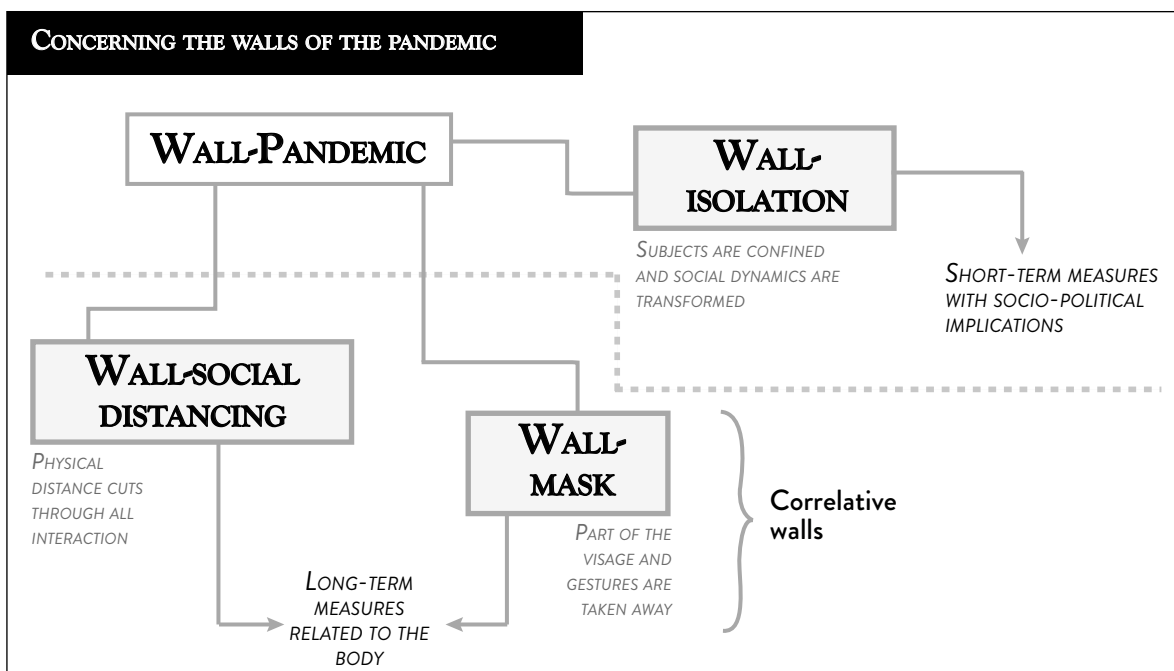
³ It is worth mentioning, along these lines, that currently there is already an immeasurable amount of reflections (books, academic articles, in-depth journalistic analysis, etc.) that address the socio-economic implications of the pandemic; although it is a corpus that rests –at least at this time– far from being able to achieve something that looks like a bottom line. In this regard, see the well-known book *Sopa de Wuhan [Wuhan's Soup]* (Agamben et al., 2020), which collects reflections from authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Franco «Bifo» Berardi, Byung-Chul Han, among others, including Slavoj Žižek, who has published a solo book about it (Žižek, 2020). Likewise, in Peru there are already several books that compile reflections on this context. See: Bruce et al. (2020), also: Salcedo, Muñoz and Perona (2020), Manrique Guzmán (2020) and UARM (2020). As a Spanish journalist announced, this wave of essays around the pandemic will only increase (Llorente, 2020).

⁴ By April 2020, in Latin America the vast majority of countries had applied very restrictive confinement measures (BBC, 2020a), while in Europe quarantine was characteristic of various States to a greater or lesser degree of severity (La Vanguardia, 2020).

All available, accessible and instantaneous through the screen, while the closest ones cross the distance. The interaction, even with our closest circles, is normalized (and standardized) through pixels and screens.

On the other hand, there is the *wall-mask*, which implies the quotidian interaction stripped of the gesture or, more precisely, with the face turned into a gaze. Having made the mask an indispensable part of the outfit in times of pandemic, the truth is that another aspect of everyday interactions is walled off. Suddenly, something as taken for granted as the exchange of gestures (along with the whole repertoire of non-verbal transactions of intercommunication) is «mutilated». The interaction of the smile has been stripped of the complete gesture of a face. The only thing left is to express everything with the (not lesser) resource of the gaze. The «mask» that already is our face is cut out, in terms of what the symbolic interaction implies. It is trimmed with the sanitary mask, which leaves it fenced off only to the eyes.

Such would be, then (and only until today), some of the detectable features of the walls of the pandemic. Surely there must be many others that can be revealed. In any case, here we start by accounting for these, which consideration seems urgent.



WALL-ISOLATION.

ABOUT THE MUTATIONS OF CONFINEMENT

The forced social isolation was a kind of first manifestation of the *wall-pandemic*, its first appearance. Suddenly, it left us walled up in our homes, implying the reconfiguration of all social dynamics. The *wall-isolation* was raised and with it four recognizable mutations appeared: the *insertion of technoproductivity* in various spheres (although mainly in education and work), the *pseudo-authoritarian drift* (manifested –ironically– from the side of the populations), the *marks of inequality* (more evident in

realities such as Latin America, where the capacity for confinement is synonymous with the economic capacity of a minority) and, finally, *the mutation of the value of the absent*.

Of these mutations, the first three correspond to the most «macro» implications of this *wall-isolation*. As already noted, that level of dimensions cannot be approached in this essay with the breadth that this would demand, so only reference will be made to its main dynamics⁵. The fourth mutation of the *wall-isolation*, however, does not necessarily occupy a leading place on the stage of the media or in academic discussions. Due to its more «micro» nature, it tends to be overlooked within this dimension of the *wall-pandemic*. For this reason it is rescued here, despite the fact that its implications also demand a much greater development.

With respect to the first mutation –the *insertion of techno-productivity*–, the labour and the educational have been the areas *par excellence* in which the confinement implied some simultaneous «openings» towards new logics and operations. Thus, work has «opened» towards a tele-production system that involves dynamics of unprecedented demand and vigilance. Suddenly, it was assumed as «normal» (and even «expected») that workers had almost constant availability. Working hours began to be extended, without considering the over-cost of production itself, which now falls on the workers' side, nor the precarious conditions that are beginning to appear. This, especially in countries where labor legislation is not strictly observed (if it exists).

A few years ago talk of an «uberization» of work and the economy (cfr. Morozov, 2017) had already started, the insertion of the *wall-isolation* now gives rise to the concept of «zoomism» falling into the drifts of labour, «a microeconomics of self-enclosure», which may signify a leap as radical as that from *fordism* to *toyotism*, and which implies a shift and discipline especially for the salaried middle classes (for the most precarious working classes, however, the conditions have certainly not undergone great mutation) (cfr. Estévez, 2020)⁶. But, of course, in circumstances of generalized economic crisis and massive job loss, the remote middle class digital worker accepts such conditions, under the idea that having a salary still implies «the privilege» of being able to continue being exploited.

In the case of education, the route is similar. The prolongation of distance education on many levels not only affects the processes of learning itself and its quality⁷, but also reconfigures the employment conditions of the teachers themselves. The levels of demand on their work have increased considerably, not counting the implications (even at the health level) of this new form of

⁵ This, considering that it would far exceed the scope of this text and that, in addition, the vast majority of current publications choose that path, even those that were made since the dawn of the confinements at a global level or those that were published locally. See: Sandoval (2020), who launches a very early reading, around mid-March, as well as Zizek (2020) and the book *Sopa de Wuhan* itself.

⁶ (TN): When possible, literal citations have been taken from English editions, in which case the bibliographical information refers to them in itself. In all other cases, citations refer to Spanish editions that have been translated along with the original text.

⁷ This may be due to a problem of access to adequate technological resources (connection, supports, etc.), or to the lack of training and handling of the platforms, but, above all, to a naive optimism and technological determinism, which imply that a «methodologically» adequate appropriation of digital tools is a royal road towards better education. As if technology somehow guaranteed a «better» teaching process. Finally, as long as the logic of teachers and students is not changed, the tools (digital or not) do not have to guarantee anything.

teaching (cf. Figueroa, 2020 and Gallo, 2020). But such are, in the end, the working and educational conditions proper to this *wall-isolation*. Although this was a temporary and transitory condition, the effects of such insertion are likely to have a considerable echo afterwards.

Regarding the second mutation –*the pseudo-authoritarian drift*– it is urgent to draw a cartography of the terrain of all the surveillance and control technologies and techniques deployed by governments at the beginning of the constitution of the *wall-isolation*. From the deployment of the army in the streets in many countries, to the algorithmic sophistication of surveillance cameras distributed in cities (with the possibility of facial recognition and body temperature measuring (BBC, 2020b) or, even, detecting crowds automatically (El País, 2020)), these are all symptoms that could have a considerable authoritarian stench.

It is not unwarranted, in this sense, that an endless number of articles and essays echo the logics of power proposed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose concepts of disciplinary power, bio-politics, bio-power or governmentality have been protagonists in discussion in various continents and languages. But the truth –and still in a Foucauldian line– is that perhaps the most terrible (and subtle) of authoritarianisms has occurred at the level of subjectivity. In this regard, it is worth remembering what the philosopher points out in relation to fascism, when he designates it as «the major enemy, the strategic adversary». But he does not refer only to institutional and party fascism (such as Nazism), but to «the fascism in us all», which makes us «to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us»⁸. Together with these «macro» implications of authoritarian edging (given at the institutional or policy level), at a «micro» level a particular shift occurred in various sectors of the population itself. These, either assuming a kind of «guilty role» with respect to the spread of the virus (something encouraged from the official mediatic platform) or because of the marginalization and stigmatization (also mediatic) of those who disrespected the measures, chose to reinforce the idea of a «strong handed» government as a way out. And thus, as a correlate of the *wall-isolation* and its landscape of deserted and silent streets, the idea that a «disobedient population» should be corrected through a «tough role» on the part of the state apparatus was reinforced⁹.

On the other hand, the third mutation, referred here to the idea of some *marks of inequality*, refers to the fact that –in realities in which government aid, subsidies and bonds did not reach a large part of the population– the confinement uncovered tremendous abysses of inequality. Let's say that what was evidenced by the *wall-isolation* was *social distance* rather than *social distancing*. Forcefully, the pandemic spat in our faces the logic of a system that makes the survival of large sectors of the population a habitual praxis and the indifference of the rest the *norm*.

Ultimately, the possibilities of supporting the conditions of confinement are correlated with the economic resources available to the subjects. Hence, one of the central reasons why isolation could not have been fully fulfilled from the beginning lies precisely in the tensions generated by such

⁸ This was proposed as part of the Preface that Foucault wrote for the first English edition of *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. xiii).

⁹ In this regard, there are also countless articles and texts. Regarding Peru, see: Pecho Gonzáles (2020), Morales Tovar (2020), Fawkes (2020) and Montoya Rojas (2020).

distances. To put it in terms of the French sociologist Hamza Esmili, «confinement is a bourgeois concept» (cfr. Paredes, 2020), something that the author points out from his perspective on what happens in the poorest neighborhoods of Paris, but which has also been evidenced throughout various Latin American cities. Thus, for example, in realities such as Peru, the massive turnout of people to markets is consistent with the fact that around 22% of poor households in the country do not have a refrigerator at home (cf. Pighi Bel, 2020).

Added to this is the stigmatization that the media imaginary carries out with respect to the poorest sectors, who are also blamed for massive infections. Hence, the (pre)trials, translated into a certain contempt or an attempt to judge all «those ignorant people» or people from «those areas» who have not respected isolation, have been dispensed from a comfortable quarantine, typical of the privilege of a full stomach and a warm bed.

On the other hand, there is the fourth mutation of the *wall-isolation*, which has been called here *the mutation of the value of the absent*. This refers to the fact that, despite its momentary condition (lasting months in the case of Peru), the *wall-isolation* reconfigures the features of the idea of routine itself, as well as absence and loneliness, and even death.

And it is that this stage of confinement implied that a sector of the population –that «fortunate» sector of the middle classes that was able to keep their (tele)employment– faces a «routine» composed only of the operations of their economic functioning, without the possibility of consolidating that «other space», the symbolic and social space of *labour*. No matter how «connected» workers are –from their homes–, the possibility of exchanges typical of the *territory* of labour, as distant/different from the *personal* sphere, has been lost¹⁰. Any scaffolding of social exchanges that accompanies productive work and that constitutes the *territory* of the workspace has been eroded.

With the productive routine stripped of this dimension and stripped also of the consumption possibilities offered by the pre-pandemic world, the way in which neoliberal-digital Capitalism has made the existence of these middle classes a precarious state should have become more transparent. Namely: to on a daily basis go through vehicular traffic *for hours* (a consequence of poor public transport conditions and urban planning), to produce in front of a screen inside a cubicle (also *for hours*)¹¹, and then to arrive at a house where the worker is disconnected by hyper-connection (mobile, tablet, PC, TV, etc.) and in which, many times, he can only have breakfast, dinner and sleep. All this to accumulate a salary that –come the weekend or the holidays– disappears due to exacerbated (and unnecessary¹²) consumerism or possibilities and ease for debt accumulation¹³.

¹⁰ Something as simple as exchanging or talking freely with peers is blurred: How to speak fluently, for example, of the frustrations inherent to the domestic territory (or the work environment itself) if it has to be done from the domestic platform or through the supports of labor?

¹¹ Of course, these conditions can be arranged in the best possible way so that the worker feels «at ease» (that is, to produce more). Even with optimized environments to constitute a «Best place to work» or some other drift that is supposed to be focused on the worker.

¹² If not, it would be necessary to see the crisis in which industries such as luxury clothing, perfumery or dispensable accessories in general are currently in.

But, again, despite the fact that the conditions should have made the implications of such precariousness transparent, the matter seems to have passed far from a kind of generalized «awareness» or a shift towards another way of life. On the contrary, in the face of these overflows, there has been a discourse of «general optimism».

The entire industry of «positivity» and «happiness as a mandate» became the order of the day to delineate the perception of these new intramural routines. Together with the *wall-isolation*, the *device* of the «tyranny of optimism» has been reinforced, which operates as a maxim in subjectivity in the face of these unfortunate times. Something like *optimism-against-paroxysm* as the only «correct» way to deal with the confinement.

For some years now, the way in which subjectivity is delineated on the basis of the mandate of *happiness as success* (and vice versa) has been questioned, for which –of course– the system itself constitutes an *idea* of what happiness is. There have been ways of looking that present from direct questions the shapes of that happiness built by the system (Ahmed, 2010), to analyzes that account for the appropriation that Capitalism has made of such discourses to guarantee –and optimize– the productive performance of its workers (cf. Purser, 2019 and Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). But, undoubtedly, in the context of the pandemic, it would be urgent to account for the territories – increasingly larger– occupied by the «formulas» or «solutions» that drive the mandates to «*be productive and happy* at home», to «stay 'up' in these trying times», of «not losing optimism to not give up» and a long etcetera. This type of marketing maxims (which most of the time overlap the idea of being happy with that of *continuing to produce*), are usually packaged in various forms of coaching or an exit to the problems of routine through the «*neo-mystical*» route, from self-help or from some other «*post-new-age*» drift.

Now, transversely to the circumstances, the scarcity of contact and the remoteness of those who are close to us have redrawn everything, leaving a *royal road* to the diffusion of this type of «*products*». The truth is that many people had to learn to deal with themselves. Especially those –like the one who writes these lines– who remained (and continue to remain) in a period of solitude. If something is clear, after months in the shadow of the *wall-isolation*, it is that loneliness is not a void but a saturation. A saturation of voices and images that occupy everything. It could be said that loneliness is the saturation of all that is absent, which claims more and more edges and corners for itself. There is no loneliness without its correlate of absence.

It is probably in this sense that the Bulgarian writer Elias Canetti points out that it is only possible to be alone «only if one has people waiting at some distance. Absolute loneliness does not exist. There is only that cruel loneliness in waiting» (1978, p. 80).

The thing greatly strengthened by the pandemic has been the absence. In retrospect, the most trivial moments and the most bland twists and turns of our lives shared with others are some of the most

¹³ In this regard, we should remember the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who stated in relation to our *societies of control* that «a man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt» and that, in the end, «one thing, it's true, hasn't changed –capitalism still keeps three quarters of humanity in extreme poverty, too poor to have debts and too numerous to be confined» (1995, p. 181). It would be necessary to coin the fact that, if the *isolation-wall* has achieved something, it is precisely that productive confinement in which the avatars-workers of «zoomism» continue to feed the machinery.

treasured today. Now one lives not only with the absence of others, but also with the ghost of their potential departure. It is curious, in this sense, the way in which the *wall-isolation* has altered the place of death and the way of processing it.

In the first place, there is what the media apparatus has fostered, who seems to have «washed» – «disinfected»?– death to introduce it into everyday life. Constantly surrounded by death rates and death figures –as if it were the temperature, the weather or a sporting result– it seems that we have made death even more common than it already was on the rostrum of the media. Of course, in recent decades, the exacerbated informational display of death had already «murdered» it; it was the «death of death» by mediatic action, through a kind of pornography of violence and crime, which eroded its symbolic force in social discourse (cfr. Pacheco Benites, 2008). But the context of the pandemic seems to have normalized it in another way, in an «aseptic», «clinical», «clean» way. As if keeping track of our own dead has become part of that new setup. Someone's departure is dissolved in the rotor of state and mediatic arithmetic, while the images of pain and the tears of those who pray for a less precarious health system are (con)fused in the ocean of death tolls. All diluted by informational saturation.

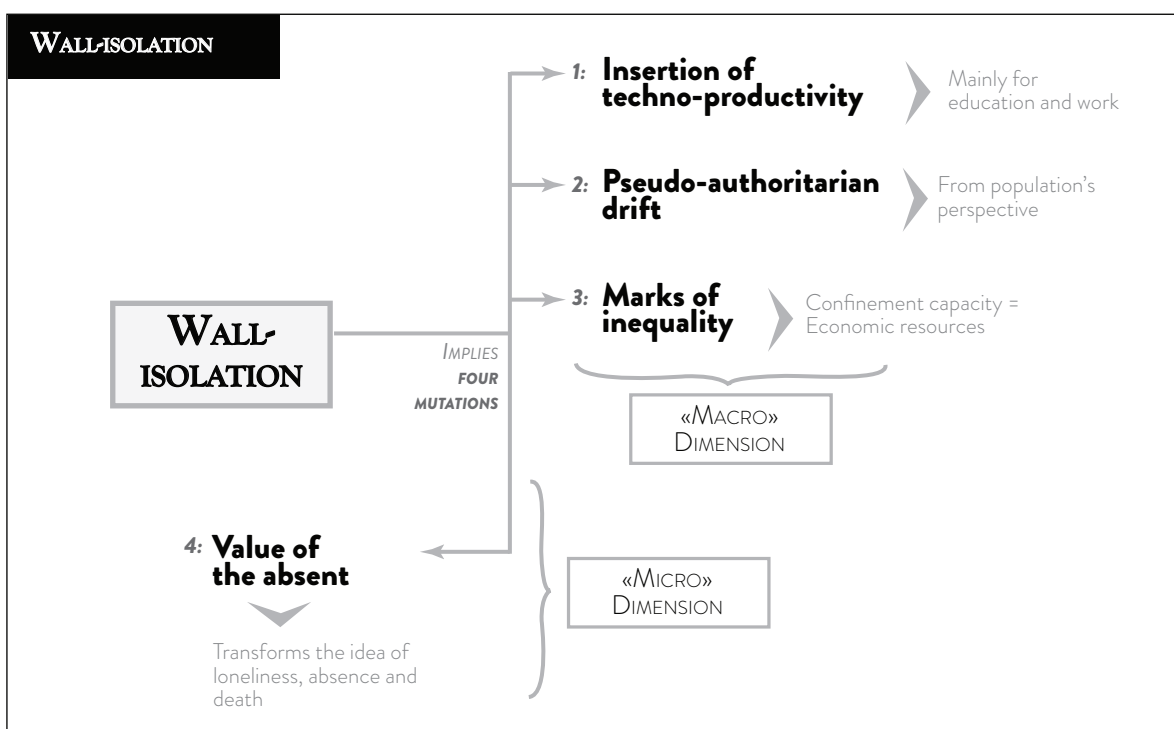
Second, there is what happens more precisely with the death-absence relationship. And it is that one of the most difficult aspects of the death of someone close has always been to *process the absence* of them, to make it a habit. But, with the enclosure of the *wall-isolation*, the absence is already established. The difficult thing with death is getting used to the absence of the one who is gone. What, then, does it do to death that we forcibly get used to such an absence before it comes? In today's context, the one who leaves does so after *not having been around* for a long time. Even after the initial confinement, there are still prolonged absences (either due to suspicion and resentment of contagion or due to the material conditions given). Hence, when death arrives, the habit of emptiness of that *someone* is already well installed. It is as if it were only the closure of a dynamic of absence that began much earlier; the corollary of a scarcity –already normalized– of who no longer *is*.

Finally, in third place, there is what the farewell itself implies, and from which the *wall-isolation* took away many of the typical rituals and symbolic procedures that come with it. In this regard, it is worth remembering what the painter Andy Warhol points out in relation to death, in which he says «I don't believe in it, because you're not around to know that it's happened» (1975, p.123). And, indeed, the transition that implies death is not for the one who leaves, but for those who remain dealing with that departure. The one who leaves «is no longer there» to bear that absence. The others remain. It is for the others that death has always been what remains to address. It is precisely the pomp and funeral rituals that account for the passage of these transitions, especially because they express affection for the one who is leaving. Much of the ritual around death ultimately constitutes that: a gesture of affection. If not, let us think about what the French prehistorian Jean Courtin points out, who –when asked about when the concept of *love* appears in our species– affirms that «the loving

feeling goes hand in hand with the consideration that one has for the dead», something that is traced precisely to Homo sapiens (Courtin, 2004, p.17)¹⁴.

Along these lines, the *wall-isolation* in times of pandemic also suspended such rituals. Instead, the impossibility of accompanying our dead, led to the decision to announce a distant cremation, without time or truces for other farewells. It was even possible to make a «live» transmission of the proceedings (in another of those video-call «sessions»), but without the collective sense by which such circumstances are characterized. Farewells on screens of individual mourning, which occur after absences have already become the norm. Such was the most «micro» and most affective dance between the pandemic and death.

So these *four mutations*, of various scales but of very wide scope, are the ones that took shelter in the foundations of the *wall-isolation*. Many of its implications will still resonate for a long time and the character to account for it will always remain necessary. But the truth is that the entire *wall-pandemic* involved two other forms of wall, which rest on even closer tenors. Certainly on the body itself.



WALL-SOCIAL DISTANCING & WALL-MASK.

ABOUT THE REVENGE OF DISTANCE AND THE SEIZE OF THE VISAGE

Gradually, after the *wall-isolation*, a second and a third way of walling up the quotidian has been given way: the *wall-social distancing* and the *wall-mask*. While the former is configured from the initial emergency (justifying its implications in the context of such atypical measures and actions), these other two aspects of the *wall-pandemic* are established as part of the repertoire of what becomes normal, rather than «soft» and perennial form.

¹⁴ Courtin states that this care corresponds to human characteristics that were developed by the Cro-Magnon around 100,000 years ago in Africa and the Near East (2004, p.17).

Thus, on the one hand, societies are already beginning to coexist crossed by the *wall-social distancing*, which implies a revalidation of physical distance, a normalization of marked and imposed stretches between subjects. On the other hand, the quotidian gives accounts of semi-anonymous faces and mutilated gestures. This is the *wall-mask* as part of what has to be included in the order that is configured. Both aspects of the *wall-pandemic* are features of the way in which the various spaces and interactions in general will be appropriated. From protocols that delineate even the most basic interactions, to reconfigurations of public places, the truth is that in the day-to-day, *masks* and *distances* (in addition to *devastated economies*) will seem to constitute the most plausible effects that will be lived with for a good time.

The pandemic revealed an additional dimension with the power of making a wall: *being the wall yourself*, the wall of presence as a threat, a wall of non-immunity, which will separate all of us even further. In a way, the body will be the new wall, planted at the very heart of physical interaction, which has always been the basis of our social dynamics.

With the *wall-social distancing*, physical distance is imposed as a component of interactions, as a feature in the appropriation of spaces, in a world in which distance –as many discourses promulgated, especially from the advertising technophilic– no longer was an axis to consider in the quotidian of large cities and «connected» societies¹⁵. Physical distance takes revenge at a time when the economic and communicational order *gave the impression of* having suppressed it as one of the difficulties to overcome (due to the *absolute speed* of information and digital flows). In this regard, the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman had already said that «in the world we inhabit, distance does not seem to matter much. Sometimes it seems that it exists solely in order to be cancelled» (1998, p.77). At such a time, in which the instantaneous flows of communication seemed to have reduced in some sense the amplitude of the world, suddenly, *distancing* sneaks into the center of the quotidian as a «new norm», as an inevitable feature of all drifts.

Thus, this new wall appears, inserted into primary exchanges. That which made us cultural and interactive beings is crossed by the wall of a potential contagion: the *wall-suspicion of the body* of another as a threat. It is about a non-erected wall, a *wall-void*, a *wall-blank space* between all, raised in each possibility for interaction.

Physical contact without any resentment is reserved for those who have shared the previous confinement or who share a house, as long as the precautions and sanitary protocols are respected by all the cohabitants. *Wall-protocol*, *Wall-sanitation* surrounding the body. Otherwise, contact is a risk. Even if closeness is normalized between interacting people who decide to ignore all this «aseptic logic», it is known that there is a risk in it, the distaste of suspicion creeps in. What does the impossibility to touch freely do to the body? How does one process weeks (or months, in some cases) of not having touched anything alive? How do decibels and folds of desire mutate?

¹⁵ Of course, in contexts where connection and instantaneity have not been the norm, distance (and its difficulty) as an articulator of quotidian life has always been highly present. This is the case, for example, of people who have to walk for hours to access a hospital or school.

But in cities, communicational immediacy even pales the effects of distance translated into time (traffic, for example, as a privileged place for ecstatic disconnection from digital flow).

It may seem merely «logistical» or even «superficial» compared to the compromise of self-survival experienced by a large section of the population. But the truth is that it is an adjustment that will anchor several of the most specific dynamics between subjects, which mutates certain valuations and ways of (not) getting closer. Without a doubt, in any case, it supposes the emergence of a wall that should not be overlooked. The insertion of the *wall-social distancing* dilutes all subtlety in the arithmetic of distances, all the symbolic effect of proximity is crossed by the sanitary priority of *distance-as-survival*. If not, let's think about the story *The Adventure of a Soldier* by the Italian writer Italo Calvino and how he describes that subtle dance of approachment between two anonymous characters sharing a train journey. In silence and to the rhythm of looks and gestures, they gain centimeters of closeness in that sort of fencing that is flirting sheltered in proxemia (cf. 2017, p. 3-16). Such logic is inconceivable in light of the post-pandemic world and its new regime of walls. The *wall-social distancing*, in the end, leads to the *wall-contagion*, the *wall-virus*, the *biological-wall*.

But this physical distance also operates between people whose faces have been turned into gazes. Gazes that are part of gestures hidden behind the *wall-mask*, another consequence with which the world of the pandemic will have to live with.

As with physical contact, the face becomes something that is seen alone or that is shown only to those who are close, those who have participated in our confinement or who share our hygiene protocols under the same roof. That is, with those who exceed the threshold of suspicion of contagion. In any case, it is no longer completely free: in the end, the *wall-mask* marks the same suspicion about the body.

Curious, since –in a certain sense– our face has always been a mask, but not in the tenor of something «false» that «con-ceals» or «re-covers» a supposed «different depth», but in the more basic assertion of *masking* as an articulation of social interaction. The face as part of the resources for our *performance* in the daily dramaturgy of interaction, what the American sociologist Erving Goffman called «*personal front*» (cf. 1956, p.13-19). In other words, «the activity of an individual (...) marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers» (p.13). It is worth remembering, in this sense, that the primary meaning of *person* also travels the same path. *Person*, in principle, means *mask*¹⁶.

But with the *wall-mask*, the plastic piece is established as a «split» of the visage turning it into a gaze that becomes overflowed. It is a look that bears the weight of a communicative need that is no longer possible to share with the entire gesture. It is a gaze that is also crossed with having to express-process the fear and suspicion that each exchange implies. Hence, such an overflow falls into a more pronounced staging of the body, be it through the corridors of prosody through the modulation of the voice, be it through kinesics in the arching of the eyebrows or in body movement. As if the subjects were playing pretend, imitating the ability of the actors and actresses of the Japanese *Noh* theater, capable of transmitting various emotions above (or below) the masks they wear, imprinted with the marked gesture of a recognizable emotion.

¹⁶ Etymologically, *person* comes from the Latin term *persona*, which designates theater masks. The Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano also recalls that «in this sense it was introduced into philosophical language by Stoicism to indicate the roles played in life by man» (1974, p.909).

It may be that by dint of the quotidian, which requires functioning above all, not many people notice it and, on the contrary, they do not even acknowledge much difference with respect to the dynamics of interaction prior to the pandemic. In the end, as long as the interactions *function* and *functionable* exchanges work –redundancies are valid–, rethinking that seems futile. But the truth is that at such a «micro» level a great leap in the axis emerges –a mutation– in relation to the visage and that which enables and exchanges. Its implications have not yet begun to be outlined¹⁷. And the fact is that the –«live»– face loses its preponderance as a showcase par excellence towards the unknown(s). Now it is, in any case, a showcase always covered, always suggested, always with a half flavor.

The face, which now houses a *wall*, has always functioned as the first source of *bridges* that cross towards others. From the bridges that lead to the *trustworthy*, to those faces that are home to us –the familiar faces, the faces that give us shelter–, to the bridges of the moment that lead towards the unknown faces that hold our gaze or that outline a gesture, whether at a crossroads in the street or in a supermarket aisle. The face has always been the tributary of first approaches, the place where the initial and most primary «scan» among the subjects occurs. But –suddenly– the *wall-mask* is erected cutting the bridge, eroding that most basic gaze.

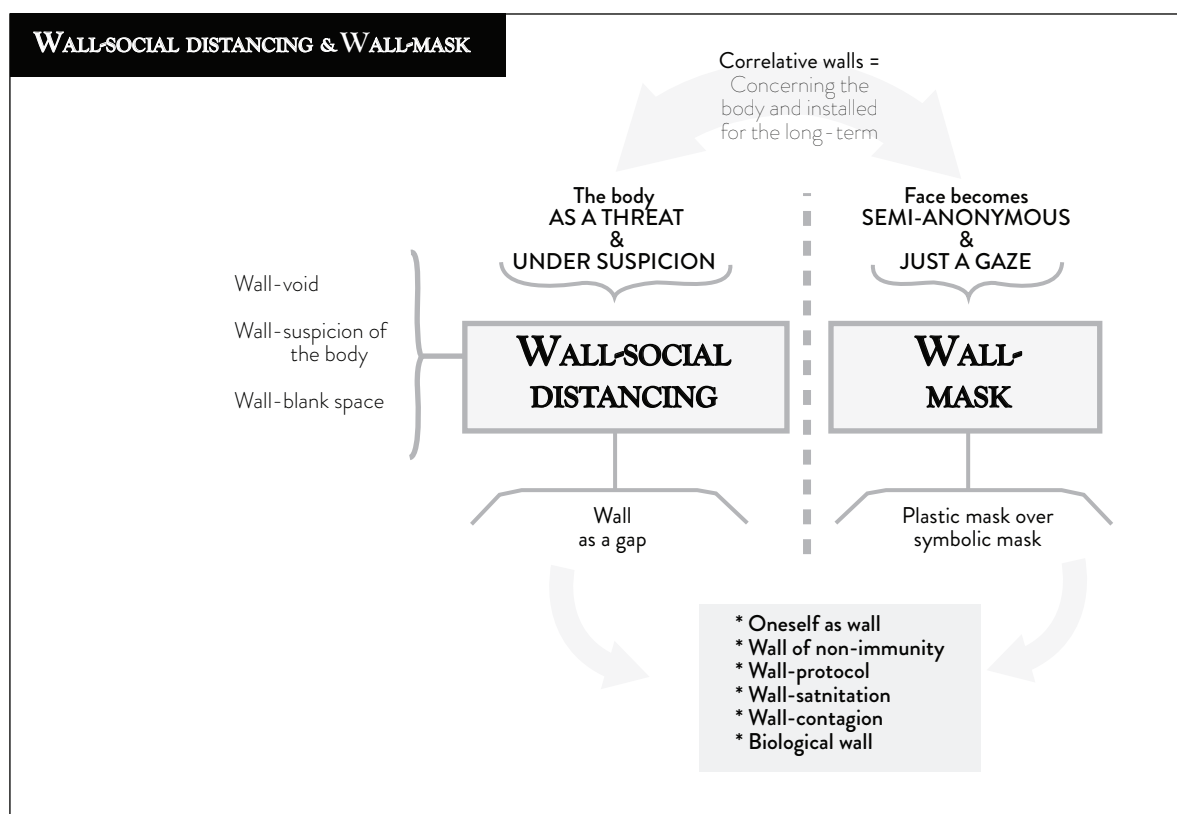
The kind gesture for the stranger must be replaced by a –more intrusive– oral interaction or by forced and shared indifference. Otherwise, the *wall-mask* has to hinder the readings implied by peeking into the world of the other. There is now a (re)covered space on the window –once always open– of gestures. The reading of the unknown is now a partial reading. It is difficult to find what the very famous Italian portrait painter Tullio Pericoli highlights when stating that «the individual is in the visage» (2006, p.29).

The face is no longer public domain or display, the reserve of the danger represented by having it discovered is imposed. Even during visits and exchanges between people who are *close*, the masks disappear just to share food, then it is quickly repositioned, as when a truce ends. Thus, the pandemic takes away the freedom of the face (or, at least, a good part of it), enclosing it with the *wall-mask*. Always understood as a window towards the affective of the subjects, without warning it becomes a covered, walled corner. The mask walling off the gesture, turning it into a gaze (which is not a small thing, but it betrays itself insufficient, incomplete). The bridges are eroded, but it is a change that not only occurs in terms of the dynamics of the subjects. Beyond that, it mutates the transits of the interaction itself. And it is that «the face is social (...) it is drawn and sculpted by relationships» (Pericoli, 2006, p.35), hence, from the pragmatics of communication to symbolic interactionism, they have been interested in the face and its dynamics. Always understood as a swinging door towards constructed spontaneity –typical of social *staging*– the face becomes mutilated in public space or in any place where there are *other people*.

¹⁷ So important is this loss of the face that there are already numerous companies dedicated to development of masks made of transparent materials, which would allow us to not lose the possibility of seeing a smile, but with the levels of sanitary protection demanded by the pandemia. Along these lines, one of the most known projects has been the one developed by the Leaf company, which has also raised more than four million dollars through a *crowdfunding* strategy, which reflects public interest in development of the product. (see: www.leaf.healthcare).

Today, the *wall-mask* establishes the form of generalized semi-anonymity in the face of the –very real– ghost of possible contagion. Wall that, just as it forces us to translate (and interpret) the most basic emotions with fewer resources, also transforms the simplest gestures. If not, let us think about how the yawning, sneezing, adjusting the hair or the sigh have been blurred. They mutate either through the *wall-resentment* of the transmission or the *wall-plastic* of the cover.

In the end, our face has always functioned as a tool for what –precisely from symbolic interactionism– has constituted the last stage in which our *performance* of the quotidian slides. Face as a mask, always, but as a mask that operates in all deepness, as a surface with all the depths contained within itself, which serves as a moving depth, a depth of response. This is precisely what Deleuze refers to when he accounts for its «surface effects», around which, in addition, he rescues the powerful phrase of the poet Paul Valéry: «what is most deep is the skin» (1990, p.10). The face has always been that «deep mask», permeable *to others* –and *modulated* with others– that can even become a *mask-mirror*, almost as it happens with Alan Moore's Rorschach¹⁸. But the pandemic and its drifts imply covering that mask that is (of) one another, that is alien. A different mask: plastic, neutral, aseptic and dead. Medical mask on symbolic and social mask, to cancel –in part– the potencies of gestures, the turns that broil in the corners that inhabit below the gaze line¹⁹.



¹⁸ This is a character from the graphic novel *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 2007). This antihero wears a mask that he considers to be his «real» face. This mask, in turn, covers his entire head with a white cloth that has two symmetrical and liquid spots that are mutating all the time on his face, resembling a Rorschach test.

¹⁹ Even in the pictorial or audiovisual representation inhabits a whole mystique regarding the role played by the «close-up» as that privileged amplitude used to portray the internal world of the characters. In the end, the aesthetic value of the face as an object has always been decisive for this purpose. And there is a force in *the face as an object* to be contemplated, an aesthetic value beyond that as a representative instrument, but as an image in itself.

Thus, these two walls related to the body (the *wall-social distancing* and the *wall-mask*) are also part of the *wall-pandemic*, of those walling dynamics typical of the global condition unleashed by the disease that rages. Both are relative to what is closest to the subjects, but they are conditional in the context and in its new economic and socio-political arrangements. It is precisely for this reason that they offer possibilities for resistances and overflows.

PIERCE THE WALLS

Where a wall appears, a *crack* appears. Where a border is created, a *crossing* is created. Whenever a limit (a power) is instituted, the *possibilities of crossing and surpassing* it are also constituted, which implies constant tensions (the potencies). In the end, then, «where there is power, there is resistance» (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). And it doesn't have to *organize* itself to appear; on the contrary, the organization of a resistance simmers down what has been an *emergency*, what has emerged. That is the truce that the walls give, in all its versions, in all its regimes. Hence, the implications of the *wall-pandemic* may also include some unsuspected overflows and potencies.

The *wall-isolation*, for example, while laying the foundations for mechanisms of job insecurity and greater control/vigilance over education, also opened spaces for crossings and exchanges that in previous circumstances would not have been so easily viable. The possibility of rethinking or at least establishing an open and more shared critique of the forms of life typical of the current economic order have opened up. Such is the case of the discussion around the unnecessary consumption of a large part of the subjects and the possibilities that rest on practices such as self-sufficiency. It is an increasingly widespread and generalized criticism, which results outright in possible micropolitical reconfigurations.

In addition, flows that once would have been unthinkable have been promoted, in academic and political fields, with logics that include nodular functions, more susceptible to mutations, more mobile than what the anchoring «physical» action allows. These are encounters that occur with the interaction of people from different contexts and visions, contributing to exchange, dialogue and the consolidation of forces that arise. Digital spaces, more than ever, bear witness to emergencies of what the philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call «multitudes» (cfr. 2004), which actuate and respond even under the circumstances²⁰. Although there is always the ghost of state surveillance, but above all the (ab)use of data by the private sector that has platforms and supports for such spaces, the truth is that articulations and connections for «molecular» emergencies and «micropolitical» alternatives are allowed, resonating what the French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari says (cf. Guattari and Rolnik, 2006, p. 60-83 and p. 149-158).

The *wall-mask* could precisely offer a way out with respect to digital logics with an authoritarian and control stench that are also emerging as a consequence of this pandemic. These walls on our faces

²⁰ This is the case, for example, of the «*Tiktokers*» and «*K-popers*» sabotaging a Donald Trump rally in the midst of a pandemia (cf. Lucas, 2020), or the organization and global support of the demonstrations in the United States, in the context of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police of that country (cfr. Ramsden, S., 2020 and Emot and Wen, 2020) and it is also what happens with the articulation of the protests in Chile in the context of the pandemia (cfr. BBC, 2020c).

make it difficult to operate the bio-surveillance cameras and all the facial recognition tools. How can they work if they have to go through the *wall-mask* on our faces? It becomes difficult to recognize a semi-anonymous face that has become a gaze²¹.

In times when the logic of surveillance by way of the informativization of life and its corners seems to prevail, the *wall-mask* suddenly seems to offer a way out in this regard. Sure, probably the arm of technological control –as always happens– fine-tunes its logic (debugging/optimizing its algorithms) and that leak will be neutralized, but until then the crack remains open.

Another type of power also unfolds, thrown into what relates to the subjects. The semi-anonymity of the *wall-mask* opens the way to greater possibilities of construction, especially in social and cultural contexts where the gaze –and the action– of the *other* can be intoxicated by the excess of police-like judgment. The possibilities subjects have of construct themselves in a semi-anonymity are important in that sense. The mask, in its terrain of non-recognition of the other, allows one to escape from the habitual casing that leads us to our *scripts and performances* in more habitual and expected scenes. In this sense, we can draw on the idea that the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli elaborates on the basis of a text by Georg Simmel: the mask «among other functions, has the function of integrating the person into an architectonic of the whole» and that it «subordinates» us to those «affinity groups» that we have chosen (1990, p. 166). The *wall-mask*, ironically, allows us to shed that social mask: this condition of half anonymity is also a truce from oneself. It resides in social anonymity, the invitation to go beyond the constructions and staging of our presentation in the quotidian.

Perhaps these are minimal manifestations that will not last long, limited only to the particular circumstances of the COVID-19 assault. But, again, it is necessary to articulate the ways of subverting, traversing, piercing –or at least accounting for the constitution and consolidation of– these (and other potential) walls. The task –when it is not possible to combat– involves at least (d)enunciating the consolidations of the possible new wall regimes. In showing them lies the possibility of forging their cracks so that micropolitical powers and emergencies seep through them. It is the pending task, the always urgent task.

Lima, the 20th of August, 2020

²¹ Currently, there are studies and a whole debate around the way in which the developers of recognition algorithms try to adapt them to this context (cf. García, 2020 and Metz, 2020). There are even makeup tutorials that teach ways to make facial recognition difficult (Odriozola, 2020).

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