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► **To cite this version:**

Alberto Pacheco Benites. *Against the Requiem for Empathy.. Another Place: Perspectives on Empathy and its Potencies*, EPIS Press, 2022, 979-8799140304. <hal-04685504>

HAL Id: hal-04685504

<https://hal.science/hal-04685504v1>

Submitted on 3 Sep 2024

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AGAINST THE REQUIEM FOR EMPATHY

AN ESSAY ON THE EMPATHIC (AND ITS RECAPTURES) IN THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT

By: Alberto Pacheco Benites

[Translated to English by Alejandro Engelhardt]

«One day, the social will be perfectly realized,
and only those excluded will remain».

JEAN BAUDRILLARD – *The Conspiracy of Art*

«But if the fight is directed against power,
then all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment,
all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain
and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity)».

MICHEL FOUCAULT – *Intellectuals and Power*

One should wonder what empathy has been translated into in current times. What it implies, today, given the avalanche of so many self-help discourses that sell the idea of «putting yourself in the other person's shoes» as a marketing slogan or a chic competence for the labour market. One should wonder, too, what is the political power of empathy when confusion arises from the mediatic, academical and political scopes. An overlap from which a kind of «representationalism» is placed as if it were empathy, but which is nothing more than a politically correct distance.

Although the most basic assertion of empathy refers to the act of *identifying with others*, the truth is that in our context it is problematic to even *pay attention to others* (self-identification, then, seems too demanding). It is something that is even more discouraging when, in the quotidian, we are faced with countless *others* who confront or present to us abysmal differences, even if we are blind to them. What is certain, however, is that to make our own life *bearable* we are instead instructed to systematically ignore the wide –very wide– spectrum of *others* that surround us, as well as what sustains the state of things. From our *blindness* to those who have been displaced by society that we encounter every day, to our ignorance –indifference, ultimately– of the economic system and how it works. Although its regulation and legal framework sometimes seem designed to feed a low-cost meat grinder, we have assumed them as part of the «normal», part of «what is there». From *avoiding* those who urge us for change at a stoplight, to *complaining* about those who do not perceive any presence of the State, either far from our centralized capitals or in their «marginal areas». From the feeling of being *resigned* and thrown to our own fate in societies infected with corruption and inequality, to the *normalization* of discrimination, abuse and crime. All under the idea that our only chance is to focus (only) on our *own life*, being grateful that *we* –so far– have not been hit by crime, or femicide, or death at the hands of a lacking public health system, or a disastrous education as our only option, or a scarcity of water, among so many other things. «Such is life». It is what we have.

Today, the most common thing is to not concede or (re)cognize the situation or the conditions that are not «ours». This, either due to distance, ignorance or, in the extreme, that indifference in which we are also surviving. It's urgent to start, then, by tracing how and from what tensions empathy has been so reduced. To the point that even those who feel involved or *interested in others* fall into logics that transform that *interest* (and its legitimate potency) into a mere camouflaged distancing or cosmetic closeness, unlikely to participate in action and the transformation of what is happening. Thus, what we seek to do here is, on the one hand, map how the logics of the neoliberal socio-economic system trigger an exile of the *empathic*; and, on the other hand, to give an account of the strategies involved in a reterritorialization of empathy, either by way of total banalization or by transforming it into a rickety –but acceptable– media and academic discourse.

EGOISM, INDIFFERENCE AND A SYMPTOMATIC YEAR: ON THE NEOLIBERAL

The year 2019 was symptomatic. Towards October, in Quito, large demonstrations were held against a package of neoliberal measures, which were not accepted by the population and which aroused the indignation of different groups of workers and the indigenous population. Shortly after, also from October (and still prolonged until well into 2020), in Santiago de Chile, what has probably been the most important demonstration against the neoliberal model witnessed in the Latin American continent would begin. To illustrate, a poster read in the midst of protests and brutal state repression: «Neoliberalism was born and will die in Chile». Over weeks, millions of people took to the streets, pushed to the limit by the accumulation of four decades of increasingly pronounced gaps in terms of inequality and access to public services in the state. Four decades of undermining the public health, education, and social security systems¹. In Bogota, since November, protests also began in relation to the discontent generated by the same model and, in Haiti, since February people took to the streets to protest against the deep social inequality of the country. In a different vein, towards the end of the year, in Lima, two young people, barely 18 years old, were electrocuted to death in an establishment of McDonald's food transnational. The incident brought up the discussion on the media stage (once again) about the precariousness of the working conditions of the current framework. It also raised an unusual response on social networks that was focused not only against the chain, but against the neoliberal order as a whole. Thus, the tragic event was taken as a symbol of their forms of exploitation².

But it was not just a Latin American issue. That year was welcomed, in France, with massive demonstrations of the «Yellow Vests», against the economic reforms that the government of that

¹ The situation went around the world and was particularly symptomatic of the problems that the neoliberal model entails, in terms of its gaps and inequalities. As the headline of an article published in October 2019 by the sociologists Emmanuelle Barozet and Ivan Sainsaulieu in the French daily *Le Monde* points out: «La protestation collective au Chili fait écho à une actualité sociale planétaire» [«Collective protest in Chile echoes global social reality»]. Likewise, to review the coverage of the most important media around the world, whose reading was in good agreement with what *Le monde* referred to, see an article published in *Pousta*, entitled «El Neoiberalismo nació y morirá en Chile» [«Neoliberalism was born and will die in Chile»].

² Inhumane 12-hour shifts, lack of training, lack of adequate insurance, etc. are part of the menu of what this standardized operating condition means by a system that does not accuse demanding regulations.

country was seeking to undertake. The protests, which lasted for months, also received a fierce response from the state. Towards the end of 2019 itself, the issue escalated with a strike organized by some of the most significant labor unions in the country³.

On the other hand, 2019 was also symptomatic of concern about the climate problem, which targeted the neoliberal system itself as a correlate of the most dramatic phase of our planetary crisis, something that did not constitute a new claim, but that had a greater presence in the media universe. Both the global visibility achieved by the fires in the Amazon rainforest and those in Australia (towards the middle of the year and December, respectively), as well as the slaughter of environmental activists (which places Latin America as the most dangerous region in the world to dedicate to such work⁴) and, even, the media activism of Greta Thunberg gave greater presence to this questioning in informational platforms around the world, almost constantly throughout 2019. It could be said, then, that it was a year in which discontent, discredit and questioning regarding the current economic order was particularly emphatically evident. Even the Nobel Prize winner in economics, Joseph Stiglitz, wrote an article in which he proposed the end of neoliberalism, as well as a «rebirth» of history (as opposed to what Francis Fukuyama had posited as if this system –in the post-Cold War context– was the conclusion of itself).

However, as always happens, in the face of all these symptoms, those who wield macroeconomic indicators of all caliber were also present, those who talk about how today we have more average income than at any other time. The same ones that rely on statistics pointing to a higher life expectancy and working conditions «with humanity» that were not imaginable in any previous period⁵, as well as a whole series of data that –although reliable– do not illuminate the gloom of our context⁶. And it is that this type of defending knights of the system, stacked behind said type of flags, do not realize that, just as there is a greater life expectancy, in today's world there are also a much greater number of lives without expectations, or hope. While it is true that the neoliberal model in many cases has generated macro-economic growth (in «macro» figures, which is what seems to matter to them), the truth is that it has eaten away at social institutions (given its depoliticization logic), as well as the role of the State in a transversal way in society. Furthermore, this «macro» growth has not translated into a reduction in gaps or inequality; on the contrary, it has made them more evident, by dynamiting state action in social terms. That, of course, not to mention that in most cases in Latin American region, the implementation of the neoliberal model has always

³ It should also be noted that many other massive protests were sparked across the planet, although not all were related to discontent from the economic system. Bolivia, Catalonia, Hong Kong, Iraq, London, Nicaragua, among other places, had a significant number of people on the streets, raising claims against the political-social frameworks that circumscribe them.

⁴ So far 1,500 activists have been murdered in Latin America since 2002. See: Aitor Molina, «El precio de ser activista medioambiental en América Latina» [«The price of being an environmental activist in Latin America»], in: *Revista Contexto* N ° 219 (May 2019).

⁵ In comparison, always, with the feudal servility of the Middle Ages or with the institutionalized and official slavery systems that were maintained during the colonial orders.

⁶ In this sense, a long list of names could be recorded, but perhaps the most recognizable would be those of authors such as Jordan Peterson or Steven Pinker and even Fukuyama himself.

depended on two types of political conditions: rescue of a bankrupt country or dictatorship in power.

At the end of the day, we live in a society that is bleeding to death, which has overflowed both the foundations of its modern order (science-capitalism-democracy) and the promises of its project of progress, something that was already beginning to be felt in the drifts of the Twentieth century. This is a society that is sinking into inequalities and in which the bond of «the social» seems to have been completely undone, due to the tensions to which it has been subjected for a little less than half a century. This is based on an economic system that has been in charge of simultaneously making the State precarious and converting economic development into a value *par excellence* and synonymous with a cult of individual «success» (worship of entrepreneurship, the desire to be a self-made man or whatever you want to call it). A society whose logic is detrimental to a notion of belonging or recognition of the collective, with precarious foundations of the modern social contract, of liberal impulse and enlightened cut.

Of course, in almost five decades of rampant neoliberalism, effects and spillovers have accumulated whose analysis far exceeds the interests and scope of this text⁷. However, there is a dimension that rests on the way in which the current phase of capitalism determines and shapes subjectivities and affects. This is directly related to what empathy implies. And it is that neoliberalism has managed to configure the idea that each subject is his resource and that his living conditions (or precariousness) basically depend on his own effort, translated in turn in terms of economic profitability. In other words, the precariousness of empathy is a correlate of that logic according to which «one is poor because he wants to» or «because he does not make an effort» based on what the economic context offers. In good account, «the subject is master and captain» of his development and economic potential, at the expense of what is meant to correspond to the State.

Thus, while the culture of the self-made man and entrepreneurship are worshiped in most areas of society as an aspirational formula, what is done is nothing more than configure a perspective of the importance of *self-achievement*. It is a criterion that runs through society, from the mode of operation of companies to the dynamics of the subjects themselves (converted by neoliberalism into *companies themselves*).

Pretending that concepts such as «corporate social responsibility» (CSR) can give a scent of «social character» to all contemporary business activity is naive. It supposes thinking that the type of *legal entity* that constitutes a company will be led by anything other than what it was created for: enriching its owners above anything else. This, even, at certainly pathological levels. Along these lines, let us remember how several years ago the documentary *The Corporation*⁸ proposed to make an analysis of the characteristics of the behavior of that (legal) *person*, which is the company, as if it were the

⁷ At the moment of the publication of the English version of this essay, the author is working on a research project related to the effects of neoliberal-digital order over subjectivities and institutions (IN).

⁸ *The Corporation*, directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott (2003; Canada: Big Picture Media Corporation).

behavior of a *natural person*⁹. The conclusion was overwhelming: if they were natural persons, some of the largest companies would certainly qualify as psychopaths, given their actions and –let us emphasize– their very low empathy. To this we could add, how in the «most internal» dimension of «organizational» environments, there is still a cult of the figure of the leader, always related to performance indicators. In the end, «the leader» is always the one who manages to produce the most, the one who leads the *others* to become *objects of production*. His role is in relation to the company and not in relation to those *others* that he leads. Likewise, there is the whole logic of the *ascent* through the *typical business ladder* (trainee-assistant-analyst-boss-manager-director and its variants). It emphasizes, once again, the notion that each person is his resource and that he must continue to exploit it in pursuit of promotion, which means that he is in an endless competition in which each subject must constantly «optimize».

So to think that concepts such as CSR, or all that «organizational» and «collective» figuration of the company, can constitute a kind of «antidote» to this logic of selfish tenor, is absurd (or at least too credulous and «innocent»). Instead, it is a recurrence towards the logic of *self-achievement*. First, in the figure of the companies and in the way they work, most recently –since the neoliberal consolidation–, also taking into account the very idea of the *subject turned into a company* and in the subjectivity that is carved out of it. This is to the point that university education today boasts of being oriented in tune with that generalized «entrepreneurial spirit». Its programs and curricula conjure up good workers (innovative, creative, modern, etc.), but understood as the most gifted in *soft skills* and in *competencies* that the company seeks. But they do not lean towards configuring critical citizens, as a conscious part of the State. Thus, underlying such general dynamics of the neoliberal system is the erosion of empathy, which is not in accordance with the values or the logic of this late stage capitalism. Instead, these are focused on the economic self-determination of their agents, whether they are people or companies (although, again, in the logic of *entrepreneurship-as-value*, they are considered almost the same). In this dynamic, in addition, two levels are distinguished in which these changes occur.

The first level, more «formal», explicit and institutional, corresponds to the way in which the neoliberal model erodes the figure and the economic role that the nation-state had from its modern conception of enlightened and liberal stamp. Although this was central to the articulation of the modern system, the neoliberal context has reduced its roles in order to suppress their participation in the «free market». This is advocated under the umbrella of «*laissez-faire*», assumed to the point of caricature of a dogmatic mantra (distorted, by the way)¹⁰. This «erosion» also means opening doors

⁹ Perhaps it is worth mentioning what the First Article of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights indicates, in relation to what it means to be a Human Being: «...endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood».

¹⁰ This idea, in reality, supposes a tremendous distortion of the thought of Adam Smith, for whom –in the logic of classical liberalism– the State should have a central and medullary role in relation to the well-being of the population. In addition, as Carlos Rodríguez Braun points out in the preliminary study of Smith's text, the famous metaphor of the «invisible hand» only appears once in the –huge– volume. See the Spanish edition of *The Wealth of Nations (La Riqueza de las Naciones*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1996, p. 8 and 554).

to a broadside against all the roles of the State, including that so-called «statist assistance», which is always denounced from neoliberal jurisdictions. Thus, the social role of the State is attenuated and, at the same time, the social contract itself and the fabric of belonging to the community are weakened. In parallel and in addition, it seeks to depoliticize the whole of society, and advocates, for example, the depoliticization of education, which is transformed into hygienic and aseptic training – as mentioned, focused on *skills and soft skills*– of a future *functional* worker («executive education», the slogans announce). Work environments are also depoliticized and their political bodies are diluted, such as unions and workers' unions (today almost disappeared). What this general depoliticization achieves is the focus of society in productive logics, banishing any collective action. Any consideration that leads to consider *others* as part of a *we* in which each subject is recognized, dynamiting characters that would suppose and that would open doors to the promotion and legitimation of empathy as a political mobilizer, as an articulator of political action, is banished.

And it is that there is no empathy on sight in the reliefs of neoliberalism. Even (re)thinking –just superficially– a concept as basic as «Human Resources» the issue becomes clear. When more resources and when more human? As obvious as it may seem, it is a question that already banishes empathy, by placing the other as part of the gear of *someone's* production. And, of course –as is the case with CSR–, in the neoliberal context, concepts such as «Talent Management» or «Human Capital» have been developed, or whatever euphemism that discursive apparatus that is the discipline of *management* invents, in order to continue feeding the meat grinder that is a contemporary economic system. That grinder in which the facilities in pursuit of «free enterprise and markets» have ended up in lax and deregulated systems by the State, in the precarious conditions that even carry deaths. That grinder in which the *workers* become «collaborators» and in which the foreman disappeared but, in his place, figures such as «production quota bonuses» or «worker of the month». The latter, who is the one who produces the most and therefore the one who imposes the production regime the most, demands of himself in a more effective way than the strictest foreman would have dreamed of. In the end, if he doesn't want that job, there will be a long list waiting for his position. That same grinder in which the platforms of the digital *informational regime* have not only provided facilities for the development of work (from *remote work* to the dynamics of the «digital transformation» of processes). In addition, they have configured much more precise, much more constant, much more open control mechanisms (but more «soft», let's not forget), in which the workers of this phase of capitalism are even optimistic. Today there is talk, along these lines, of a generalized «uberization» of employment. It would be nothing other than the establishment of conditions in which each person can be an economic agent through an app that completely commercializes spaces and activities of routine life (without clear regulations or laws, too). Today, then, *every means of connection is a means of economic self-production*. The self-made man is portable.

So that, in the end, all those euphemisms that *management* theorists and prophets may darn are looking for nothing more than to give a sadly more «human and social» (more «empathic», they tell us) look to a system and economic logic that overflows with signs of their absolute lack of empathy. There is no empathy in the tons of food thrown away annually as famine devours millions, just for

the purpose of delivering cosmetic good-looking food on the display shelves or gondolas¹¹. Much less, in throwing bleach on food in good condition (thrown away by the supermarket due to lack of sales), just for the sake of not being eaten by the homeless¹². But neither is there in the contemporary conception of products, designed to feed over-consumption –consumerism– more than any real need (already with the emergence of marketing in the 1950s it was clear that the business was precisely that of «Invented needs»). Products, those whose over-production is not bearable even at an environmental level by the planet and which, in order to comply with «competitive» market quotas or deadlines, leads corporations to sinister extremes. If not, let's remember how, also in 2019, Boeing bypassed some test controls for its 737 Max aircraft model, in order to be able to launch it to the market in a *competitive time frame*. The balance: two accidents and 346 deaths. All distances saved, it is the same lack of importance that *the other* has when it comes to weighing income. The one that killed the two young men at the McDonald's in Lima, that filled the streets of Quito or that outraged the people in Santiago, in accordance with decades of eroding public services, to hand them over to the dictatorship of the market economy. In short, the very functioning of this system as a whole, leaves no room for the development of empathy as a value or as a *praxis*.

The second level is related to the constitution of subjectivities and concerns something more «micro», if you will. And it is that, along with the erosion of the State, with the depoliticization of society and with the dismemberment of collective logics, what is also eroded is the ability to recognize oneself in (and with) *others*, at a level of one's own subjects, their subjectivities and affects. In other words, the neoliberal bio-political logic centers subjects in the isolation of their own economic optimization (focused on their insertion into the productive dynamics), which also delineates their relationship with the world. Foucault himself was already aware of this at the end of the 1970s (just a few years after the first implementations of the neoliberal model, through the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships). For the philosopher, the central feature of neoliberal bio-politics is precisely the constitution of a new *homo oeconomicus* (our current self-made man) as an operation at the level of subjectivities. For Foucault, this «is not at all a partner of exchange» but «an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself (...)being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings»¹³. Now, if something highlights the idea that each subject is his own resource and the only captain of his economic performance, it is the idea that the subjects are thrown into a certain selfish state. That of focusing on themselves as *potential* (of a *productive* nature) to exploit and develop, while *the others* remain in the place of virtual

¹¹ Suzanne Goldenberg, «Half of all US food produce is thrown away, new research suggests», *The Guardian*, July 13 of 2016, accessed on January 6 of 2020, <https://bit.ly/3aKaZqU>

¹² This practice was assumed common until a few years ago in France, to the point that a 2016 law prohibited making discarded food in-consumable. In this regard, see an article published by France 3 on February 5, 2019: «Gaspillage: un supermarché Leclerc asperge des invendus de javel» [«Waste: a Leclerc supermarket sprinkles bleach to unsold products»]. Also, another published by France Inter on February 3, 2015: «Face à la justice pour avoir pris de la nourriture dans des poubelles» [«Facing justice for taking food from garbage cans»].

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), p. 226.

competitors in that stock market trance of returns and economic optimizations that each one makes of himself. The idea, for example, of constant training (more commercially called «continuous education»), typical of the Deleuzian society of control¹⁴, is a correlate of that logic of self-training to which anyone who wants to climb through an organizational/company ladder must be subjected, as well as anyone who wants to «insert» himself more adequately in the current economic maelstrom. The correlate of this focus on the *subject-as-isolated-entity* (and as «alien» to what happens in a politically unstructured society) is one of the great victimizers of contemporary empathy. Finally, it is the opposite of that logic to assume that economic problems and deficiencies (with the underlying hardships that are part of the social landscape), fall only on the responsibility of *isolated subjects-as-entities* and not on the collective. Nor do they fall, thus, on the dynamics and structure of the system itself, which is aimed at prolonging poverty in large sectors, under the promises of a «trickle» that never comes¹⁵.

Ultimately, this notion of a subject as separate from a social fabric is reflected in the neoliberal *dictum* that «the poor always take» from the state. Just as addressing their claims accounts for that «statist assistance» or that is equivalent to some form of populism, driven –they usually say– by «leftist forces» (whatever they may be). In the same way, the logic of the egoistic tenor (and «counter-empathic», to call it something), proper to the understanding, on the one hand, that the subject constitutes the exploitable resource of himself is established. On the other hand, the precariousness in society is consistent only with their economic performance, as if there was no responsibility of the State (or of society as a whole). So that whoever is successful (and, it is understood, this is basically measured from the consumption capacity) is placed in the favorite place of this culture of financial success. While all those who fail to place themselves in the empowered place of that success, whether due to lack of access, structural precariousness or mere chance, become a kind of «undesirable burden» for the State. And it is added –as if it were not already too much– that it should not attend to them because it generates a «populist paternalism», a «dependence on state populism», and a promotion for the generalized laziness of «certain classes». This claim is exacerbated if it implies, for example, higher tax burdens. Anyway: what is the slightest chink of empathy one could talk about if that is the caliber of our social context.

What happened throughout 2019, then, in good account illustrates a panorama of discredit in relation to all this socio-economic order that neoliberalism has offered and that mainly has not generated anything other than greater abysses in terms of inequality of access and regarding the coverage of those conditions that guarantee a dignified life. It has been about the symptom that has generated the erosion of our public health systems, public education, public space (core for the

¹⁴ See: Gilles Deleuze, «Postscript on control societies» in: *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 177-182.

¹⁵ The «Trickle-down economics» or «Trickle-down theory», in good account assumes that workers' wages should not be regulated, because this would be detrimental to business productivity. Instead, by regulating themselves, through the logic of the market, they are supposed to increase on their own account as productivity and company revenues increase.

development of our citizenship), etc., to be handed over to the logic of purchasing power and the game of indiscriminate supply / demand. The possibility of being educated, of being cared for, of carrying out a harmonious daily life have been taken from the populations and they have surrendered to the economic law of the strongest (the law of the one who has the most). With this, one does nothing more than participate in the game of commercializing the possibilities of a dignified life and turning it into a matter of access. It is no longer a concern shared by society, thus dynamiting any possibility of empathy as something that runs through the discourse of the system. In the end, in the abyss of this difference in access, what is achieved is the precarization of life for the great majority. And that is what is boiling in the depths of that gap, which ends up overflowing in the class of demonstrations that occupied 2019. Let us add, in that vein, another symptom thrown by the same year (a «pop» symptom, if you want): the response that the film *Joker* had from the public worldwide and the media phenomenon that it constituted¹⁶. In good account, the character of Arthur Fleck, in his psychopathy, awakens an empathic look in a large part of the spectators since, in turn, he tunes in with the needs of all the neglected. That is, of all the «clowns» who were the poor versus the rich, all those «Thomas Waynes» in the world. The character, throughout what the director presents, ends up constituting a symbol of all the contempt of a privileged class that systematically ignores its poor. The poor, in addition, are thrown into the indifference of a system that structurally turns its back on its marginalized, its unemployed, its sick dependent on social programs. That is to say, precisely to all those who –some defenders of neoliberalism would say– depend on that «statist welfarism» that is so vilified. Thus, rather than glorifying a violent character, as was denounced at some point, in good account the film is an imputation to many aspects of the crisis of current capitalism. Hence, a large number of viewers have, indeed, developed some kind of recognition (perhaps even empathy) with that character, whose levels of violence and crime could, riskily, be overlooked.

In any case, it is about illustrating how the contemporary economic order takes ground away from empathy and, even more so, dynamites the rate of the two proposed levels: eroding, on the one hand, the logic of the collective in institutional functioning and, on the other, delineating the subjectivity of the subjects towards a logic of selfishness and survival. Because in a context in which the figure of the State does not really guarantee the minimum to sustain a dignified life, what happens is that people are surviving as best they can. And empathy cannot even be considered as a possibility, if everyone is thrown to his luck, if everyone is of the idea of making oneself more profitable in economic terms. As long as the public service systems are languishing (something so typical of this stage of neoliberalism) and the majority are not guaranteed the minimum for a decent life, what is configured is the *selfishness of survival* for the majority of the population. In the anguish to which this economic regime submits, there is no possibility of making *our* concern *for the other* and even more difficult to recognize their anguish. So in our economic order, we must ask ourselves where does the development of *empathy* lead us in respect to others, when so many people are neglected, discriminated against, turned away from social programs or public services, disenchanted

¹⁶ *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips (2019; United States: DC Films).

with the systems of political representation and their rulers (be they from the left or from the right). What can trigger empathy as a mobilizer in the depoliticized contexts of neoliberal societies? Likewise, it becomes clear to ask ourselves how this same system integrates the idea of empathy and seeks ways to transform any actively empathic impulse (or discourse) into a passive part of its socio-economic gear.

THE RECAPTURE(S) OF EMPATHY: THE BANAL AND THE POLITICALLY CORRECT.

The sinister gift of capitalism is that it survives because it does not really need to oppose or confront what threatens it. Instead, it is more effective –and more profitable– to introduce such «threats» to its market logic and power dynamics. Make it play by its own rules, if you will. In other words: if you can't fight your enemy, seduce him on a buy-and-sell basis (and create a niche for him and a target audience of consumers). Or banalize it to become a media content oriented to its circulation, make it a «meme» (squashed on the screens and its innumerable broadcasts). Or make it solemn and give it a space in the academic discursive machine (where it will become a legitimate version, another tombstone of the «official» version of knowledge). To say it with Deleuze: if something functions as a *line of flight*, the system must *reterritorialize it*¹⁷. Well, that is precisely what has happened with empathy¹⁸.

In this regard, given how problematic empathy could be to the current system (as a mobilizer for political action), two operations are carried out that make it part of the *territory* of the current economic system and its discursive scope. On the one hand, with a rather «banal» consequence –but also more evident– is the fact of turning the empathic into one more of the innumerable forms (and formulas) of current self-help. These present the ability to «put yourself in the other's shoes» as if it were something that could be acquired through any «coaching» program or «leadership and innovation» course. On the other hand, with a more solemn tenor, there is the risk of overlapping empathy with the discourse of «representationalism», which today is not uncommon in politics, in the media, in academia and even in the artistic. That is, to pretend that the *representation* is given, *per se*, an empathic logic in relation to what is *represented*.

¹⁷ From Deleuzian logic, deterritorialization and reterritorialization can be understood as dynamics and functions that operate in symbolic territories. Thus, while a *line of flight* accounts for what somehow «escapes» from a territory (is deterritorialized), reterritorialization functions as the «recapture» operation, which somehow «leads» the territory to those limits. In this regard, see: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and Gilles Deleuze, *Derrames: entre el capitalismo y la esquizofrenia [Leaks: Between Capitalism and Schizophrenia]* (Buenos Aires: Cactus, 2005).

¹⁸ It is something that would invite us to ask ourselves, for example, if it is not also about what happened with the empathy raised by the film *Joker*. That is, it has been recaptured only as cosmetic sensitivity. And it is that, for the majority, it seems that «the effect» of said empathy had been extinguished at the rate of becoming only «sensitive» publications or memes with a certain «revolutionary tenor». These, shared shortly after leaving a movie theater, finally drowned in the flow of social networks and their short deadlines, as well as the fact that people continue to worry about their daily survival in the neoliberal environment.

Let's go to the first operation, linked to that almost cosmetic but utilitarian approach that is made of empathy. This occurs when it is converted into another *competition* valued by the economic context, capable of being developed, cultivated and profitable like any other *productive aptitude*. Or, when it is placed as a component of the package of the contemporary discourse of self-help and personal improvement, which –«step-by-step» and in the form of a manual– seeks to provide a social and «tuned» meaning to existence in scattered times. In both cases, empathy is transformed into something «banal» and its symbolic deterioration is total, as is its political «de-potentialization». It is taken to an instrumental plane that, unfortunately, would be the one from which its most recent importance has been revalidated. In other words, if today we hear relatively frequently about the «importance of empathy», it is usually precisely from its understanding as part of the contemporary worker's abilities or as a kind of «virtue» included in self-help discourses.

Such discourses tend to be in favor of pseudo-psychological formulas to the extent that they are useful to the system to immobilize political action and in which they are depoliticized in themselves. Not to mention that they reinforce the cult of the self-made man and the culture of «individual economic success». And it is that, in the end, they seek to make it more viable to deal with the instability and anguish that the political and –above all– economic precariousness to which the neoliberal model subjects us.

In all the logic of «improvement», «development» and personal «growth» (placed in terms of manual formulas), the idea that such «progress» is translated into a better –or *less difficult*– insertion in the productive dynamics of this society. In the whole idea of «Let go of what hurts you in these simple steps» or in the search for «harmonic balance» (but passive) as a *modus vivendi*, underlies an efficient way to *appease*, to *calm*, what should rather boil from the indignation that would arouse empathy. As already mentioned, considering that we live in the midst of the anguish and precariousness of large majorities, as well as the unsustainable climate crisis, the empathic should rather account for a response from dissatisfaction, instead of contributing to a sort of generalized state of calm. Rather, these discourses are presented as a more «bearable» way of surfing the chaos of the world we inhabit, while seeking to pass on to empathy as if it were a component of them.

On the one hand, then, we build a culture of «own development as the north», which tends to promote values and objectives that are as unquestionable as they are unattainable: happiness as the maximum, *mindfulness* as the goal, empathy for *everyone*, and so on. To do this, there are endless workshops, seminars, publications or *bootcamps* where they offer everything from stress techniques to themes with a *new-age* tenor, to «neo-yoga» applied to the company or «spiritual post-pop», among so many other similar things. Everything is labeled under various versions of «self-help» and it is precisely among these that empathy is included, leaving any sense of consciousness, response, indignation and action dissolved.

But, on the other hand, the precariousness of living conditions for the bulk of society is consistent with said fragility and such anguish that prevail throughout the globe and are constituted as generational common denominators in these times. The system has become so precarious that the effects reveal a generalized vulnerability and a crisis of meaning, where it seems that one lives *ad portas* of emotional overflow and where all the «techniques» necessary to live «quietly» find an

answer¹⁹. And, as was said at the beginning, this occurs within the framework of an almost systematic training to *ignore* the other. Indifference towards others, while one is trying to deal with his own crisis of meaning, with his own anguish and with his own fragility as a norm (correlate of contextual precariousness). Being truly empathetic might be too demanding for these times. Too much commitment. The system has known how to banalize empathy until it is blurred and transformed into something else, but it has also known how to make being empathic extremely difficult.

That is why all these variants of the self-help discourse work so well today: they alleviate in a functional (and less ritualistic) way all the anguish and uncertainty typical of our socio-economic order. In good account, it is a kind of «neo religion», in times in which the traditional religion has lost followers, either due to the accumulation of complaints of pedophilia in some cases, due to the mercantilist appearance in some others or because of the excess of conservatism of the majority, with respect to current social dynamics. In any case, all this self-help discourse (within which empathy is included as if it were another skill), leaves it reduced to a «formula», to an empty cliché and without power as a political element: empathy as «*selfie* sensitivity» and not as a mobilizer based on a recognition of *the other*. It is, on the other hand, an «empathy» that only enriches the subject himself, because it is part of *his personal* «overcoming» or «development». For the logic of the current system it is much more utilitarian that this is the case, precisely because the empathic is problematic. It is not gratuitous, then, that neoliberalism promotes efficiency and not criticism. Finally, the critical evaluation of the world that surrounds us would inevitably lead us to «empathize» with all those shortcomings and precariousness. Instead, it is well known that neoliberalism advocates ignorance.

The second operation of this reterritorialization, of this recapture, is related to what has been referred to here as a risk of «representationalism» and involves touching the boundaries of an extremely broad and complex discussion to which only reference will be made. And it is that the tensions that dwell around the notion of *representation* refer to a very long-standing academic drift. This covers, in the case of social sciences, from the critical view regarding its discursive role for the functioning of power (from the consolidation of Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology towards the XIX century), to the problems that rise throughout the 20th century, with the discussion of non-hegemonic or peripheral epistemologies²⁰. Likewise, the question about *representation* may even refer

¹⁹ There is already a long discussion, not just academic, about the effects that neoliberalism has on mental health (on this see the article by Ruth Cain published in *The Conversation* in January 2018). It is, however, something that is becoming more and more acute. Today, even frailty is almost the norm among most young people, as noted by North American researchers Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (*The Coddling of the American Mind*. New York: Penguin, 2018). And the fact is that the precarious conditions, together with the logic of the digital informational regime, leave the way open for, among the younger generations, a kind of «epidemic» of mental health problems is generated. These can range from anxiety to depression and are becoming more frequent (any university professor could account for this, perhaps globally). It is also worth mentioning that there are practices that tend to normalize this feeling of emotional fragility. This is the case, for example, of «sadfishing», which is how the dynamic that leads people –especially young people– to seek care through social networks, from generating sorrow or pity with your self-exposure.

²⁰ Such lines of work include, for example, Foucault's own gaze or that of Immanuel Wallerstein in relation to the CCSS or the proposal of Boaventura de Sousa Santos regarding non-hegemonic forms of knowledge. It is also worth mentioning the approach of Roger Chartier, in the case of the analysis of cultural history and the problem of

to a problem centered on the binary logic of modern thought itself or the implications of this concept on the aesthetic plane and its social action. All this, without taking into account other spaces for the discussion of *representation*, such as the media or that of our political systems.

What is called «representationalism» here, on the other hand, alludes to the act of waving a flag of supposed «defense of the *representation*» of a certain cultural group in political, media or academic jurisdictions. And it is that, in such spaces, different discourses tend to traffic the idea that an empathic gaze also underlies said «representation», implicitly or tacitly given. In a way, it is as if *talking about* certain cultural groups from a hegemonic position, is about *speaking for* them and –what concerns us here– *speaking in tune* (or *empathically*) with *them*. This generates a tendency of an almost «aseptic» or «hygienic» tenor, mainly in the media and in academia, which would cover the idea of empathy, eventually taking its place.

Thus, the media assume the role of being the space for the (re)presentation of neglect and the overflow of populations that are considered marginal. This generates, in good account, a mediated «postcard image» of these. With it, they contribute and reinforce, from the *imaginary dimension of the stereotype*, the correlation that the *symbolic dimension of prejudice* with respect to those populations supposes. The most regrettable thing is that this media (re)presentation is raised as the appropriate way to «give voice» to such groups, as if it were a way of tuning in with their daily hardships and precariousness, a supposedly «empathic» way of giving them visibility, when in good account it is almost totally lacking.

The media platform also constitutes a space parallel to that offered by the institutional channels of the State (precarious and inefficient), both for questions and complaints in all social spaces. Although in the case of digital social media this occurs, apparently, without any «media intermediary» to *construct* the representation criteria, with the more traditional mass media (radio and television) a particular logic is proposed, which leaves *via regia* to the «representationalism» noted here²¹. And it is that the traditional mass media (and especially its informative content) constitute a space that would supposedly «more directly attend» the unsatisfied needs, at the same time that it would generate a place for participation, approaching such shortcomings (and with a whiff also falsely empathic) with greater proximity.

That is to say that, at the *margins* of official circuits and the more formal institutional recognitions, the media tend to become the platform / court *par excellence* that is available to those groups that, in the official circuits, find neither exposure nor solution (sometimes not even an answer). However, such «representation» usually occurs with the edges of a false «inclusion» that, instead of being representative, leads to the reinforcement of prejudices through the propagation of stereotypes.

representation in History. In any case, these are only a few points of view, which can serve to illustrate a vast field of discussion and academic production that is only alluded to here.

²¹ It is urgent to mention, however, that the situation in the digital universe goes through very particular tensions in the neoliberal context, turning subjects into objects of exchange, through the commodification of the data that they constitute from their consumptions and drifts. See: Alberto Pacheco Benites, *Mutaciones de nuestro Régimen informacional* [*Mutations of Our Informational Regime*] (Lima: UCAL, 2018).

And, with it, the reinforcement of distances with respect to *those others*, as well as an erosion of empathy. This «space» that accommodates problems and demands is usually done through the *spectacularisation of misery* (the whole tradition of reality shows, for example) or that kind of *pornography of violence*, with which the news contribute to the consolidation of an imaginary in which poverty (certain *groups, populations and areas*) is stigmatized with violence and criminality, among others.

By covering a precarious space that does not find a way in institutional structures, this logic of the media is said to be representative and empathetic with those whom it «supports» or «defends». That is, with whom it *shows* and converts into content. It is, therefore, a deformation that occurs, on the basis of media *representation*, in terms of what an empathic gaze is supposed to be. And the thing is that nothing is more distant –and, worse still, utilitarian– than that look of *miserabilist exoticism* of the media discourse regarding problems and realities that would be made invisible by institutional functioning. There is thus, as a background, a dislocation related to the idea of the empathic, based on this sort of empty «representationalism» of the media.

It happens differently with other discursive devices. Academically and politically, the implications of this «representationalism» reveal even greater depths. When a discourse is said to be «representative» in these jurisdictions, it tends to carry the idea that it is *representative* insofar as it faces some hegemonic narrative. The underlying problem, again, is that the discourses built around this idea of «*speaking on behalf of*» do not necessarily imply «*speaking emphatically with*». They do not imply being empathetic neither with the visions, nor with the struggles and nor with the own discourses of those who are considered to be on the *margin of the hegemonic*. On the contrary, what usually happens with this logic of representation is that it ends up becoming a hegemonic apparatus in itself. And a supposed *correct form* –generally aseptic and neutral– to represent these cultural groups is entrusted. Thus, enclaves of political correctness are constituted in terms of the approach and treatment that must be had of each group represented. Baudrillard already said that we were witnessing «the prophylactic use of ideas and concepts»²², precisely what would correspond to what is here called «representationalism».

Ironically, this «representationalism», from sharply opposed academic (and political) shores, is usually endorsed by the idea of the decline of the *great narratives* of the Western world, in line with what was proposed by Jean-François Lyotard²³. Let's say, this revalidation of «little narratives» would come as a result of the «fall of the grand narratives». As if in the postmodern there was an underlying revalidation of all minorities as north, in order to constitute with them a kind of counter-power, something that, on the contrary, distances itself from that way of thinking.

However, on the one hand, from the claim raised by some *right-wing* fiefdoms, the postmodern would seek to blur hegemonies, in order to raise ambiguous discourses. In addition, it would imply a banalization of culture in general, which would leave *via regia* –it is said– to nihilism, individualism or generalized indifference. And, from there, the postmodern is pointed out as responsible for a

²² Jean Baudrillard, *The perfect crime* (London-New York: Verso, 1996), p. 139.

²³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

contemporary banishment of empathy to, instead, impose a supposed «agenda» of claims of all minorities as isolated fiefdoms.

This is what these positions –generally contributory to an iron neoconservatism– have come to call the «new left», term under which they place all the current struggles (which they label as «progressive»): the environmentalist, the feminist, that of the indigenous minorities, etc., which they also seek to distort and link with that same «statist populism» which constitutes this black beast²⁴.

But, on the other hand, it is pointed out from *the left* that the postmodern would be precisely what would entail the neutralization of all political action. This, since multiculturalism (which is placed as a direct consequence of the postmodern) is the «pacified» version of all differences, which in turn would imply a deterioration of empathy as a political mobilizer. In another order, those would rather generate the necessary tensions for the questioning. It is the claim raised, for example, by Slavoj Žižek, when he points out that liberal and depoliticized multiculturalism constitutes a hegemonic form of thought and characteristic of the current context. For the Slovenian, this position accounts for a depoliticization of difference and is therefore a correlate (and responsible) for a general depoliticization²⁵.

Furthermore –it is pointed out from that *left*– it would also be a feature of the postmodern to advocate that said multiculturalism expands and consolidates on a planetary scale, in the consecrated place of being the most acceptable «order» of the social, consecrating itself as legitimating of the neoliberal order²⁶, when it is certainly the opposite, as will be seen in the next section.

But, regardless of which side of criticism is, the truth is that «representationalism» is usually translated –in the extreme– into the practice of political correctness and an aseptic approach that, in the end, is not consistent in any way with empathy, despite the fact that it is usually interpreted that way. From the academic or political spaces, this mechanism of *representation* as a more empathetic way towards non-hegemonic sectors or groups (with its back to the official narratives), has not built bridges. On the contrary, it has generated fiefdoms of circumscribed hegemonies, with greater distance from *the others*. Thus, regardless of the criticism that may be raised, it is clear that «representationalism» is effectively another way of recapturing the empathic in order to make it part of the discursive apparatus of neoliberalism. And the thing is that nothing makes what is not hegemonic more immobile than the aseptic and «neutral» dynamics imposed by this representational logic that is also placed *as if it were* a form of empathy.

²⁴ When they go to extremes, the arguments used by these types of positions swing between the humorous and the frankly worrying. In any case, it is a speech that has begun to have an important response in Latin America, especially after the work and media presence (as well as the viral popularity) of authors such as Gloria Álvarez, Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez. In general, corresponds with many of the conspiracy theorist that emerge in political extremism manifestations now a days.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *En defensa de la intolerancia [In defense of intolerance]* (Madrid: Sequitur, 2008).

²⁶ It is precisely this logic that is in the criticism that Žižek himself makes of Deleuze in part of the book in which he dedicates to study his work. See: Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 183-213.

Finally, as a balance of what has been proposed so far, it can be affirmed that the current socio-economic order cannot accommodate empathy due to its own logic, but it deals with it in ways that do not go through either its denial or its combat (obviously). On the contrary, it seeks to transform it into something that the system is capable of constantly integrating into its operations.

Hence, the two forms of recapture proposed here seek to describe how empathy is re-territorialized, either on the side of its banalization (cosmetic or instrumental) or on the side of its integration into media, academic and political discourses (under the idea that it is a component of the representation, as configured in those sectors). Thus, neither being a specialist in a certain group or cultural expression, nor being an empowered spokesperson for them –from a hegemonic discourse that legitimizes such a spokesperson–, or even giving it a space in the formal media menu, would suppose –as is usually preached - empathize with that group or cultural expression. On the contrary, despite the fact that the discourse re-territorialized empathy based on that logic, the effects of this overlap precisely involve emphasizing a greater distance.

But, if the system is conceived in such a way that it banishes empathy (at least as a power for mobilization and political action) and, furthermore, re-transforms it into a de-empowered and empty notion (marketable, in the end), would it even make sense to rethink that there are other ways to *empathize*? Or is it that we can only do an autopsy and participate –all– in the requiem for empathy?

RESISTANCE, INDIGNATION AND EXTINCTION:

LET US REMEMBER ANOTHER ANNIVERSARY.

2019 also marked the commemoration of another central date: it was 100 years since the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. A century had elapsed since the document that closed what is considered one of the most brutal wars in the history of mankind was drawn up. A treaty that was conceived with the –blurred– objective of ending all the warlike confrontations when, in the end, it did nothing but lead to the next great tragedy, in less than twenty years.

In relation to that war, however, it is worth recalling here the well-known event that occurred on Christmas Eve 1914. Throughout various points of the front, enemy combatants loomed over the hell of their trenches to give themselves an –extra-official– truce in which they celebrated together. Perhaps it is, in the course of our history, one of the most sincere postcards of empathy. And it is that, if war constitutes the most brutal expression of the contempt of humanity itself and constitutes the symbolic territory in which the greatest possible distance is marked with respect to the other, what happened that night makes clear the power of empathy as a mobilizer. In the context of this event, how can one not to be empathetic with *the other*, who arrived there driven by the tyranny (be it imperial, republican, democratic, liberal, absolute, participatory, legal, but always tyranny) of interests that play with his life on behalf of a State. How not to (re)cognize the other who is also thousands of miles away from his bed and his family, fighting on behalf of the one who is far from the unfortunate fate of the front line. How much distance, on both sides of the trench, with respect to those who send meat to the canyon. And what better sample, but precisely what that 1919 treaty was, whose conditions assumed an air of disproportionate revenge. These were the denial of any

empathic tenor in relation to the defeated, trampled on by some victors who, with their demands, ended up condemning the world to the tragedy of a Second World War.

Well, if that war and such events can be remembered for something, a little over a hundred years after its occurrence, it is because history and its hazards give us grounds to raise at least two observations. The first is that today even the *war itself* does not seem to mobilize empathy, despite its always overwhelming magnitude. If not, let's think about the reaction generated by the attack perpetrated by the United States at the beginning of 2020²⁷, which raised alarms of an armed conflict in the Middle East in which other powerful countries could even participate. Regardless of the war-political drifts arising from the fact, the possibility or the hint of a third world war (quite unfeasible, by the way) became a synonym and pretext for jokes. Ironic publications on social networks and, in general, an immeasurable barrage of *memes* worldwide, translated the very idea of a war to the empty surface of an image that is exchanged and validated by *likes*, laughter or by the *sharing* that conjures up²⁸. This is the fatal extreme of what Baudrillard announced in the early 1990s in relation to the Gulf War, when he claimed that it «did not take place» because it took place as a simulacrum of the war, on the surface on the screens²⁹. Today, the war not only becomes the hyperreal image of it through the mass media, but it also becomes one more content of the digital flow of our *informational regime*. Let us not doubt, in this sense, that our next wars, at one extreme, will not take place symbolically either. They will be turned into *memes* that, under the ecstasy of the digital flow, will correspond to the most absolute and forceful indifference regarding the pain of those who do have to experience that war in their own flesh.

They will normalize, under the humorous *meme*, the most absolute lack of empathy with respect to those who have to receive the bombs.

Much has happened, then, since the first war photos were released in the second half of the 19th century, when the impact of knowing graphically the consequences of the war was even overwhelming. But this is what media regimes do: they simultaneously normalize a type of record and a type of content. They make it «normal». This is what has happened with violence in general and, as part of it, also with war. Today we consume, at the speed of the same screens, war, messages from our personal lives, entertaining content, urban crime, etc. Everything, while we consume breakfast or dinner, while we circulate in traffic, inserting that flow into the «normality» of our daily routines. One might ask, then, what it would do to our ability to develop empathy, to *normalize* –

²⁷ It refers to an attack with military drones, perpetrated on January 2, 2020 at the Baghdad airport. In this attack, ordered by the Trump administration, Qasem Soleimani, leader of Al Quds, an elite group of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, died, which generated an angry response from governments around the world, even leading to a joint pronouncement of China and Russia, calling the attack «illegal».

²⁸ Regarding the phenomenon in Latin America, see an article published in the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* on January 3, 2020 entitled «“Tercera guerra mundial”: los memes del conflicto entre Estados Unidos e Irán» [“Third World War”: the memes of the conflict between the United States and Iran]. On the other hand, the journalist Ian Bogost gives an account of the phenomenon at a global level in an article in *The Atlantic*, published on January 4, 2020, titled: «A New, Meme-Fueled Nostalgia for War. On TikTok and Twitter, anxious posts about World War III recall a simpler era of global conflict».

²⁹ See: Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

through the torrent that makes up our imagination— the pain and misery of others, at the mercy of banalized violence, turned into a *meme*.

The second observation that can be raised, based on the reference made to the First World War, is that the world today is going through a time of symptomatic risks and not (only) due to the possible escalation of war recently unleashed. But because, just as the disenchantment of the Versailles treaty was the breeding ground for incubating the belligerence of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, the disenchantment currently produced by the neoliberal model causes contemporary far-right positions to find a response to their discourses, also belligerent. They walk over the rubble of inequality and precariousness that the current socio-economic system leaves behind, feeding on frustration and discontent as vultures do with the detritus of the dead.

This is something with great relevance for what has been expressed here, precisely because contemporary xenophobias, neo-conservatism and the resurgence of exacerbated nationalisms (*sine qua non* ingredients of the current far-right), try to divide the social world based on an *others-against-us* dynamic. So did fascism a hundred years ago. These are discourses that promote and reinforce the absolute lack of empathy in relation to all other social actors. Speeches that endorse not being empathic with the pain and effort of the *migrant* (who is always placed as a *threat*), with the need and precariousness of *the poor* (who is accused of *depending on the State*), with the *injustice* that experienced by those who escape the traditional *binaries of sexuality* (who are taken to the extreme of the *amoral* and, worse, *abnormal*), among many others. So, on the edge of these times, what is needed is to revalidate a thought of questioning and resistance to totalities. More than ever, *tools* and *praxis* are required for a «non-fascist life»³⁰.

If the postmodern was mentioned in the previous section, it is precisely because its logic is that of a type of thought that seeks to fight against power, that resists in those territories in which it seeks to consolidate or specify a totality of power³¹. Contrary to the image delineated by the contemporary system in relation to the postmodern (also re-territorialized, recaptured and banalized to an almost laughable extreme³²), this does not correspond to a discourse that legitimizes the neoliberal order, but rather provides the *tools* to question it. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of postmodern thought is the

³⁰ «An Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life» was precisely how Foucault described the book *Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in the Preface he wrote for the North American edition. In the text, the author points to Fascism as «the major enemy» of the book. But it does not refer only to institutional and partisan Fascism, which knew how to make and use the desire of the masses, but that «fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us». See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. xiii

³¹ See: Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, «Intellectuals and Power», published in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 205-217.

³² As mentioned earlier, there are many misattributions to the logic of postmodern thought. On the one hand, it is read in tune with nihilism, individualism, indifference, etc. as well as the establishment of extreme and aseptic political correctness as a defense of all minorities. On the other hand, it refers only to the «terminological games» (of which the «Sokal incident» is always a reference) or, in the worst of the extremes, it is assumed that all postmodern thought is summarized in the deconstructive proposal, when this mainly corresponds to the work of Jacques Derrida. This is fatal when, for the current system, «deconstruction» has become almost just another term in the entire self-help and improvement package or a business innovation strategy. Nothing constitutes a greater example of the way in which the current discursive apparatus has recaptured –reterritorialized– the postmodern, precisely because its logic of questioning is uncomfortable for it.

way in which it has also been re-territorialized, precisely because it is problematic, when its potency is precisely that of fighting against totalized and totalizing life, that of proposing a *thought of resistance* and a *thought as resistance*.

Well, it is worth emphasizing that if this is brought up it is not to justify, point out or suggest in any way that empathy constitutes a feature of postmodernity, postmodern thought or something similar. Rather, what it is about is to collect that eagerness to question and disarm the totalizations that this type of thinking has, as a feature of the potential for political action that empathy has. Rescue that *thought from the resistance* that mobilizes postmodern questioning and re-appropriate empathy as that: a way of resisting. Finally, empathy is resisting the imposition of what the «major becoming» dictates in order to choose to (re)know oneself with the «becoming-minor». And, in this sense, it is necessary to specify that the notions of *becoming-major* and *becoming-minor* pass very far from what is normally understood by majorities and minorities. *becoming-major* is the one that endorses a *hegemonic place* and tries to preserve it, through the way in which it configures the socio-economic and discursive apparatus. The *becoming-minor*, on the other hand, are those that occur at the *margin of that hegemony*. But they are not *minorities* in the strict sense, rather they are the vast majorities of the world, who rest in the precariousness and anguish that the neoliberal system configures them or in the marginality of official spaces³³. It has nothing to do with the quantitative, since the true minorities are precisely those that are privileged by the orders of power. The *minorities* are those who are «above», not the groups that fight from «below»; there, on the other hand, are all of us who make up that great *majority*. Precisely the vice of «representationalism» is to pursue the revalidation of a minority in pursuit of a hegemonic place, even ignoring the tensions of other non-hegemonic groups.

The *thought of resistance* is not the one that seeks to become hegemonic, but rather the one that seeks to crack any hegemonic order that is being constituted or that seeks to be constituted. It is the one that arises precisely from the moment in which power begins to operate and is inherent in it; to sum it up with Foucault himself: «Where there is power, there is resistance»³⁴. And, in the context of an order such as the neoliberal, which thrives on the suppression of any objection to *others*, empathy constitutes a privileged way to articulate resistance. This is precisely because it implies a view from *becomings-minors*, but not in «neutral» or «pro-hegemonic» terms (as occurs with «representationalism»). It just does the opposite and tunes in to the potential of those *becomings-minors*. From this, it resists indifference, which in turn is the *mechanism* with which order avoids the ebullition of social tensions. Those that sleep in the ever-widening sinks of inequality, in the constant liquidation of the State or in the hardships that the neoliberal economy offers. Ebullition, the one that seems to have crowned the year 2019 in some way or another, with overflows resulting from looking to the one «on our side», despite the fact that the entire discursive, media and social hulk makes it invisible to us always. To look at them and know how to recognize that our anguish and his are not the *same*, but are *one*. Recognize that both are part of a constant precariousness of social life, which is imposed on us by this regime, but in a *soft* and *friendly* way, at the point of

³³ Deleuze y Guattari, *A Thousand...*, p. 75-110 and p. 232-309.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *History of sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 95.

consumption, at the point of disconnecting ourselves due to digital hyperconnection, at the point of knowing that we are «grateful» for what we have, which is «what it is». Hence, empathy, in reality, is the root of an always healthy and urgent indignation. One that corresponds to the fact of ceasing to assume that constant and generalized precariousness constitutes a functional part of the current system. Indignation against resignation. Against a requiem for empathy, then, resistance must be opposed to power and its logic, which has constituted *indifference as a mechanism, inequality as a device, and injustice as a norm*. It is, therefore, when the groups truly notice that the anguish of the other is part of a precariousness that has become normalized and that serves the system, that outrage can develop (and on its basis, action and transformation).

Understood in this way, empathy as *praxis*, not only entails a collective character, but also implies exercising a constant and healthy awareness regarding the fragility that crosses our own possibilities. It implies unraveling our own totalizations and how hegemonic our advantages are. And it is that, oriented towards the deficiencies generated by the current order of things, empathy arises as a remedy against assuming that what one has can be taken for granted. That it is «normal» to be on our own, with eroded public services, or that our situation corresponds in some way to «what we deserve». To be empathetic, then, with respect to circulating needs and precariousness that prevail, is to be permeable to one's own always latent precariousness, which hides behind the corners of chance and the decisions that decide us.

And thus, from the advantages obtained in a kind of a warm bed, a roof over our heads and a full belly, it should not be lost sight that the same urges of those who do not have the basic coverage insured are part of our own social fabric, which should not only be recognized and understood, but with which it is necessary to empathize. To be empathetic is to be able to move the blindness with respect to the precariousness and fragility that the system raises and with which the anguished life of all the dispossessed of neoliberalism is guaranteed (its outcasts, its displaced people, its migrants, its «vagrants» or «incapable», their homeless, their under-employed, exploited and the endless etcetera of marginality). Moving blindness to the gasp of those who die while waiting for public medical attention that never comes, to the ribs marked in the bellies of those who die in the street, to the children who die of drowning (whether in the coasts of Turkey or in the rivers of Mexico)³⁵, regarding the longing that –from the other shore– floods the sunken eyes of the migrants, who hope to jump over the *transparented walls and the factual walls that separate us*³⁶.

³⁵ In 2015, the body of a 3-year-old Syrian boy was found on a beach in Turkey. He drowned as did his entire family when they tried to reach Greece. Four years later, in 2019, the bodies of a 23-month-old girl and her father were found drowned on the banks of the Rio Grande, still clinging to each other. They were trying to cross from Mexico to the United States. Just two postcards of the bleak implications of the current migration crisis.

³⁶ «Transparented walls» are those that are physically in the world (from the gates that segment the public space to the border crossings). Due to its daily presence, its presence is «normalized» and therefore makes us habitual of both the presence of the wall and its implication and symbolic value, to the point where they become «transparent» for us. On the other hand, the «Factual walls» most of the time are not even seen and are the most difficult to cross. They correspond to the wall of inequality, of the difference in access, poverty, etc. These walls, then, can be extended over deserts and oceans, and are usually the ones that migrants have to deal with, who most of the time avoid those other transparent *physical* walls. See: Alberto Pacheco Benites, «Three regimes of walls», published in: *Objects Before and After the Wall* (Berlin: TIER, 2020). Available in: <https://bit.ly/3bGezV1>

However, in light of this, it is not being considered here that the option to develop empathy is for people to choose to voluntarily «get out» of the neoliberal socio-economic system (this is simply not feasible). Neither does the majority become anchorite or go down the path of a kind of community neo-hippism. It is not that there is anything to be criticized in all this, but they are actions that do not constitute, by far, ways of resisting from empathy in our context of digital neoliberalism. On the contrary, one must start by assuming that making the logic and workings of our economic system «empathic» is practically an oxymoron. It is attacking mills, to the same extent as «living with your back» to this order. For this reason, what is necessary is to raise criticism and questioning –this logic of resistance– from the privileges of their daily functioning. Not grandiose crusades, but everyday little cracks. Education, for example, is one of those territories that urgently needs to wake up. Of course, currently neither the curricula, nor the directives, nor the guidelines are no longer guided and marked by the logic of this system (more than ever education is utilitarian, commercialized and instrumental). But at least it is terrain where cracks can be opened. In which, from the small jurisdictions, you can give rise to the critical, to the logic of resistance. But, of course, the pending task is to find other jurisdictions in the functioning of the social and it is that, ultimately, it is not sensible to think that it is possible to escape or move «to the side» of the system. Perhaps even the dynamics of the planet itself would not give us respite in this regard, since finding a way to «leave» this environment would do little to change the situation on Earth. The important thing is to resist the logic of the system, to create forms of resistance.

Starting from this idea and to close, perhaps it is possible to account for what today is also often referred to as «empathy» and which –despite the *stricto sensu* it is not– refers to considering these *others* not only as ones of our species, but also to the natural context we inhabit and to the other species with which we coexist³⁷. The truth is that survival, at its base, depends on a minimum «empathy» (an understanding and harmonization, rather) with respect to the environment and its dynamics. This link, so basic, is essential to also develop an awareness of our own fragility, of the chance that is already our presence in this world. If anything should be clear to us, in any case, after the massive fires in the Amazon rainforest throughout 2019 or the fires in Australia at the beginning of 2020 (only two samples from a very long list of alerts), it is that indeed, it does not matter what our economic order continues to play at, it could matter little. If Greta Thunberg appealed to something when she stood in front of the men in suits and ties who make decisions about the world, it was precisely a quota of empathy with respect to the generations that will inherit the world. And it is that, if we have not ended up learning something as elementary as this and if, in the end, we turn out to lack that «empathy» with what surrounds us, so basic (almost primal and functional *survival instinct*), perhaps the most ecological turns out to be, ultimately, our extinction. The most «empathic» with the other species, seen this way, would perhaps be leaving this planet where, as rebellious

³⁷ There are voices that even speak of an «environmental empathy», however the central difference between this notion and empathy –as it has been understood here– would be that from this perspective, the empathic does not correspond to a sense in favor of the collective, but to a relevance centered on the very survival of the specie. More utilitarian, if you will. It is worth mentioning, on the other hand, that following the direction of this idea of supposed «empathy», there are those who even argue that human rights should be applied –in their entirety and strictly– to other animals. This is not the position that is defended here, even when opens a field for discussion.

hairless monkeys –the «alienated gorilla», Cioran³⁸ would say– we did too much damage over the past centuries. Perhaps that is the bet that we play with our lives focused only on preserving what is *immediate* (and not our broader or collective), a bet of which we are not aware: if we have not learned to be empathic with *ourselves*, or with all *the others* that make up the planet, perhaps it is our turn to go out through the false door of time (and not of *history*, which is another invention of ours). Get out, with our legacy of logging, carbon, plastic, extinction, and war. Thus giving a truce to this world, which has had species that have lasted much longer (and harmed much less) and of which today there is no gap or trace, beyond a few bones.

Finally, by way of closing (but not concluding): it is not a question of assuming that we have to attend the requiem for empathy. Nor, despite the latter, that we are necessarily attending the requiem for our species.

Rather, it is about resisting. Convert empathy into a form of resistance to the indifference that this economic order and its discursive apparatus decree. What is pertinent (and necessary) is to *resist* and make swerves in all possible (and feasible) jurisdictions to stop drilling gaps that will end up devouring the social order and that will put a red carpet for reactionary totalitarianisms and populisms, nurtured by dissatisfaction and discontent. Swerves to understand that empathy is, by way of indignation, the mobilizer of the action that is pressing in our context.

Along these lines, perhaps we can find spaces and «liberated territories» within the relief of this socio-economic order, perhaps we can undertake small revolts rather than great revolutions. Perhaps the vital thing is to fight for it, over and over again.

Written between December 2019, in Lima (Peru)
and January 2020, in Tours (France).

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³⁸ Emil Cioran, *The Trouble of Being Born* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995), p. 193.

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