

## The neoliberal syndemic: critical narratives and struggles from southern Europe

**Mario Espinoza Pino**

Universidad de Granada ✉ 

**Carolina Meloni González**

Universidad de Zaragoza ✉ 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.82156>

Envío: 24 mayo 2022 / Aceptación: 14 enero 2024

**ES Resumen:** El impacto social del brote y propagación de la pandemia del COVID-19 nos ha mostrado que no estamos ante una mera enfermedad infecciosa, sino ante una sindemia neoliberal. Esta sindemia ha acentuado todas las desigualdades, opresiones y conflictos que estaban en la base del sistema de gobernanza neoliberal; contradicciones que han alcanzado una dimensión global desde la Gran Recesión (2008). En este artículo analizaremos las consecuencias del virus neoliberal en diferentes ámbitos (macro y micro) desde una perspectiva crítica y materialista: desde la gestión de la crisis por parte de los Estados hasta las transformaciones subjetivas que la sindemia ha provocado en la población. Centrándonos en el caso español, repasaremos algunas de las principales reacciones, narrativas y luchas que se han enfrentado con la crisis del COVID, en lo que entendemos como una nueva fase más autoritaria del capitalismo neoliberal. Una etapa que precisará de una articulación radical de las luchas sociales para subvertir un horizonte que amenaza con nuevas opresiones.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; neoliberalismo; sindemia; marxismo; interseccionalidad; luchas sociales.

**ENG Abstract:** The social impact of the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that we're not facing a mere infectious disease, but a neoliberal syndemic. This syndemic have stressed all the inequalities, oppressions and conflicts that were at the base of the neoliberal system of governance, contradictions that have reached a global dimension since the Great Recession (2008). In this article we will analyze the consequences of the neoliberal virus in different spheres (macro and micro) from a critical and materialistic perspective: from the management of the crisis by the States to the subjective transformations the syndemic has provoked in the population. Focusing in the Spanish case, we will go over the main reactions, narratives and struggles that have faced the covid crisis into what we understand as a new and more authoritarian phase of neoliberal capitalism. A phase that will need a radical articulation of social struggles to subvert a horizon that threatens with new oppressions.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; neoliberalism; syndemic; Marxism; intersectionality; social struggles.

**Sumario:** 1. Foreword: Pandemic neoliberalism. 2. The Outbreak of the Neoliberal Virus. 3. The Political Irruption of the Virus: Tensions Through the State and Civil Society. 4. A Sketch of Pandemic Subjectivities: Lock Down, Vulnerability and Lines of Fracture. 5. Bifurcations and Emancipatory Lines: The Need to Organize Beyond Disaster and Hope. 6. Bibliography.

### 1. Foreword: Pandemic neoliberalism

The social impact of the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that we are not facing a mere infectious disease, but a neoliberal syndemic. This syndemic has stressed all the inequalities, oppressions and conflicts that were at the base of the neoliberal system of governance, contradictions that have found a global dimension since the Great Recession. We will analyze the consequences of the neoliberal virus in different spheres (macro and micro) from a critical and materialistic perspective: from the emergence of the virus and the management of the crisis by the States, to the subjective transformations the crisis has provoked in the population. Focusing on the Spanish case, we will go over the main reactions, narratives and struggles that have emerged during the Covid crisis, a situation that is evolving into what we

understand as a new and more authoritarian phase of neoliberal capitalism. A phase that will need a radical articulation of social struggles to subvert a horizon that threatens with new oppressions, and a moment that requires, of course, as much creativity and political imagination as we can provide for. There's an imperative need for change and reinvention of the ways in which we relate to others, a need collective to reshape the links between community, society and environment beyond the logics of neoliberal capitalism. So, at the end, what we need is to overcome relations of production –material and subjective– and the different types of oppressions these logics entails.

## 2. The Outbreak of the Neoliberal Virus

From the Justinian Plague to the Spanish Flu, every historical period and every society has fallen victim to its own collective diseases. The COVID-19 outbreak is not an exception to this rule. We can consider the spread of the virus as a complex biological and social phenomenon that is grounded on the development of what we can call “the neoliberal era” –a period that goes from the end of the 70's of the twentieth century to our days–. This is the social, economic and historic terrain that has triggered this situation of social emergency. In general terms, our view presupposes an inner relation between capitalism and epidemic or pandemic outbreaks, a dialectic between the organization of labor, the exploitation of nature, the transformation of entire ecosystems and patterns of capital accumulation –linked to the development of technology and productive forces.

In this case, this dialectic is based on the centrality of finance capital as a tool of capital accumulation, exploitation and social dispossession. As Frank Molano pointed out, to allow the expansion of finance speculation “the intensification of commodities exchange accelerates with new and massive technologies of marine, aerial and ground transportation, and with the destruction of jungles and forests, to give way to commercial agriculture and farming that could supply the global markets” (Molano, 2020). So it is no surprise that the agro-industry seems to be at the base of the outbreak: the voracity of agro-business, that invades forests and wild areas to satisfy the demands of accelerated and competitive markets, destroys ecosystems and favors the necessary processes of zoonosis that are at the core of the mutation of the new virus. Therefore, the interconnection of the world market is responsible for the spread of the pathogen.

Although the global contagion of the SARS-COV-2 has been labeled as a pandemic by the majority of governments and the media, a term that has popularized massively since 2020, we believe that it is better to call it syndemic (Merrill Singer, 2009). This neologism, that mixes two Greek words in origin, synergy (συνεργός) and demos (δῆμος), seeks to imply different factors and dimensions –social, political, economic– in the emergence of a disease and in its effects, going beyond the monocausal biomedical paradigm. It is very important for us to stress the links between economy and society, to politicize them and grasp the context in which SARS-COV-2 has developed, because they determine the unequal distribution of harm worldwide and reveal different types of inequalities and vulnerabilities in the population.

From this perspective, it is easier to show the other face of the neoliberal economic paradigm and its anti-social policy: not only the leading of finance capital and its volatile dynamics, but also the steady and calculated destruction of the Welfare State, trade unions and labor rights, creating a social landscape characterized by increasingly punitive politics, precariousness and structural inequality. As Rob Wallace and others have indicated, first of all, we must understand the difficulties in the containment of the virus not only in the context of massive spread of the virus –with clear asymmetries in the governments' responses–, but also decades ago “as the shared commons of public health were simultaneously neglected and monetized” (Wallace, 2020). Although this diagnosis is based on the United States context, it also applies to countries like Spain or Italy in Europe, which have suffered an enormous pressure from healthcare private corporations during the last decades.

There is a strong causal relation between the privatization of healthcare and the population's increasing vulnerability to the virus –especially in the case of households with lower incomes and migrants deprived of basic rights–. COVID-19 has put in evidence that the mantras of public-private partnerships, with the rhetoric of a cheaper and more efficient service, are false and practically criminal in the face of a pandemic: they destroy national healthcare systems and their valuable resources, not to mention that they create inequity and they are more expensive than public healthcare. The study *When the market becomes deadly* (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021) has demonstrated<sup>1</sup> the violent effects of privatization of healthcare during the pandemic. So, the marketization of health, in alliance with other features of neoliberal governance, played a key role in the SARS-COV-2 spread as a syndemic.

The marketization of public enterprises and the extreme commodification of life are effects of neoliberal rationality, a normative thinking and a form of governmentality, in the Foucauldian sense– founded in the operations of the capitalist market and its competitiveness (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Precisely, one of the most prominent theses of classic Austro-American neoliberalism –for example, Friedrich Hayek– is that traditional morals and markets have to be the normative foundations of all human activity, both conceived as spontaneous orders without planning, as they were a natural expression of individual freedom (Brown, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> As it is affirmed in the report: “What's more, and of paramount importance in the context of the pandemic, a cross-country analysis (Assa and Calderon, 2020) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) looking at the effect of healthcare privatization on COVID-19 found that a “10% increase in private health expenditure relates to a 4.3% increase in COVID-19 cases and a 4.9% increase in COVID-19 related mortality”. In other words, greater privatisation of healthcare “significantly raises the rates of COVID-19 prevalence and mortality across countries” (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021: 8)

But what is at the matrix of the capitalist market is not an exchange between equals, but the exploitation, asymmetry and commodification of nature and human life. All of these are grounded in an atomistic and narcissistic vision of the individual, where an egocentric concept of freedom breaks with any sense of equality and otherness. A vision that destroys the common ground of society and erodes democracy.<sup>2</sup>

So, as we see, the COVID-19 pandemic must be understood as a neoliberal syndemic, both in its causes and consequences, that are conditioned by the political, economic and social architecture that neoliberalism has globally constructed during the last four decades. First, an aggressive exploitation of wilderness to fulfill the expectations of speculative markets, propitiating the emergence of the virus; second, the subsumption of Welfare States and public enterprises into a spiral of marketization, enforced by the austerity policies since the Great Recession (2008) —along with a steady attack on workers' rights—; third, the effects of the spread of the virus in an increasingly polarized society in social and economic terms, where economic precariousness is the rule and race and gender oppressions function as modes of hierarchization of the population —generating different degrees of vulnerability and harm—.

From this theoretical framework, we will try to explore in different steps the development and the effects of the syndemic in our societies, focusing mainly in Spain. First, we will take into account the measures that various states have implemented to contain the virus and their consequences, with special attention to their discourses and the ideologies expressed in their political actions —from social Darwinian positions, quoting Sandro Mezzadra, to positions concerned with the defense of public health through state intervention (Mezzadra, 2020) —. These measures were implemented in a polarized public sphere that, at the same time, they brought about. Then, going from the public to the personal sphere, we will analyze the lockdown processes and curfews and their impact on our social subjectivity, elaborating a critical phenomenology of the transformations the population suffered during the worst months of the pandemic. Fear, melancholy and the erosion of the social world created a confined *Weltanschauung* that expressed itself mainly in virtual ways, but also in the streets, visibilizing nonconformity and resistance in ambivalent manners. In the last part of our analysis, we will try to elaborate a global vision starting from the existent social struggles, thinking in the need for a radical articulation of the conflicts to confront what we understand as a new and more authoritarian phase of neoliberalism. A post-pandemic neoliberalism featured by the increasing presence of the extreme right and the corrosion of democracy.

### 3. The Political Irruption of the Virus: Tensions Through the State and Civil Society

The irruption of the virus took place in the political and economic context resulting from the Great Recession (2008) and its polarizing social consequences. To sum it briefly, in the case of Europe, the southern countries of the EU —derogatorily called PIIGS— had to face the structural adjustment policies designed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank during the subsequent years of the crisis. The indebtedness of the States, who saw their resources compromised with the burdensome task of rescuing their countries banking architecture, triggered neoliberal economy adjustment plans imposed by the Troika. For instance, Spain —governed by the Socialist Party— modified its Constitution to prioritize the payment of the sovereign debt and to adapt the whole scales of governance to the principles of budget stability. This entailed cutbacks in public healthcare, social services, public education and deregulation of workers' rights.

As William Davies stressed, since the global economic crisis we are facing what he called a new phase of punitive neoliberalism, a moment in which neoliberal governmentality suffered a mutation far from its belle époque (1990–2007), characterized by the “third way” ideologies. “Under punitive neoliberalism —Davies says—, economic dependency and moral failure become entangled in the form of debt, producing a melancholic condition in which governments and societies unleash hatred and violence upon members of their own population” (Davies, 2016). Austerity measures and the assault of the last decade on welfare has to be seen almost as an irrational revenge upon the poorest population —disciplined by the debt and the compulsions of the market—. This has the collateral effect of corroding more and more the institutions of liberal democracy.

As if it was an ominous form of “the return of the repressed” (Freud), we can say that the liberation of the powers of financial capital of any institutional bridle and the parallel corrosion of democracy and social cohesion has awakened the monster of the extreme right in a global scale. A serpent that was probably contained by the social stabilization generated during the Keynesian hegemony of the *Trente glorieuses* —when public inversion and policies of full employment limited social polarization in the West—. But now the reemergence of a populist extreme right has become a global threat to civil and social rights. Beyond their ethno-nationalist and fascist overtones, with their insistence in territory, borders, racism and sovereignty, this global wave of reaction is still faithful to many neoliberal economic principles.<sup>3</sup> This extreme right seeded the political stage of irruption of the virus with their polarized discourses —as we will see next—.

<sup>2</sup> As Wendy Brown has shown, despite their differences, neoliberals like Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek and the Ordoliberal tradition had two main objectives in common. First, the dismantlement or disaggregation of the social sphere, reducing it to individual relations by theoretically and practically using the model of capitalist market or implementing “demassification” policies —“human capitalization” and “entrepreneurialization” of life—. The objective was to attack social justice policies and the field of collective protest. The second purpose was to attack democracy by limiting popular sovereignty with an oligarchic State or a Technocratic one (Brown, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> We stress this ambivalence, because this postfacist/populist extreme right seems to be a global force that only questions partly the neoliberal creed: on the one hand, they are close to conservatism and traditional values, like many neoliberal intellectual families (from hayekians to ordoliberals), but on the other hand they have a definition of the state and sovereignty that goes beyond

When the pandemic broke out in our societies, two main courses of action appeared in relation with governmental rationality: the discourses of Boris Johnson (UK), Donald Trump (USA) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), that were representative of neoliberal reason and even of “post fascist” features (Traverso, 2018), and the public messages of other states, like Spain, France, Italy or China, for instance, that planned an intervention focused in the “re-qualification of public healthcare as a fundamental tool to face the emergence” (Mezzadra, 2020). Of course, as we stressed before, in many countries “punitive neoliberalism” had marketized or privatized national healthcare systems, limiting their capacities to intervene in a global pandemic scenario. In one way or another, neoliberal reason ruled, but with important differences: the neo darwinian states –with their faith in herd immunity and the prioritization of economy–, claimed for individual freedom, facing disastrous rates of death and infection. The case of Brazil is striking, holding the second position in the world’s death rate –behind the USA– and whose president has been accused by the Brazilian Senate of crimes against humanity because of his management of the pandemic. Bolsonaro is well known –like Trump– for maintaining a “COVID denier” position about the pandemic and vaccines, a narrative that has become very popular in many movements and parties of the extreme right.

Other States, like Spain, tackled the situation with curfews, confinements and policies that, in agreement with the Spanish economist Daniel Albarracín, we could call “of compassionate neoliberalism” (Albarracín, 2020). By that, we mean governmental interventions to alleviate the effects of the economic, social and health crisis triggered by COVID-19, but not to face the structural problems rooted in the productive model or to transform neoliberal rationality. The Government –a coalition of the Spanish Left<sup>4</sup>– declared the State of Alarm, regulated by an Organic Law (4/1981)<sup>5</sup> that allows the State to control mobility throughout the national territory, the economy and all the available resources. The main objective was to stop the spread of the pandemic. But the general confinement and the insufficient range of social measures showed the Spanish people –and in a blunt way– the unequal structure of the country. Although confinement measures were appropriate to limit the spread of the virus, the collateral problems that they created were not minor: society was “closed” and under police and military surveillance, and this authoritarian management of mobility generated visible cases of abuse of power. Not to mention the effects of confinement in the subjectivities of an “encapsulated society” –we will deal with this question later–.

Spanish society had not recovered from the consequences of the Great Recession when the COVID-19 crisis started. So, the pandemic could only worsen the already severely damaged material conditions of Spaniards. Despite the so called “Social Shield” displayed by the Spanish government, which included measures such as the temporary halt on evictions, the creation of a minimum wage and the general extension of the Record of Temporary Employment Regulation (popularly known as ERTE), the center-left coalition could only contain the worst effects of the economic crisis, but couldn’t face the social process of impoverishment. The middle class was more or less relieved, but it was the working class that suffered the most. An overview of the poverty rates of Spain shows the impact of the neoliberal syndemic –a crisis that overlaps the previous recession–: 12.5 million people (26.4%) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion –the general rate of risk of poverty encompasses almost 10 million people–. But one of the most disturbing facts is the increase of people affected by severe material deprivation: 3.3 million citizens (7% of the Spanish population) suffered harsh deprivations in 2020.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 crisis acted as a catalyst or an accelerator: it stressed and magnified immediately all the inequalities that were at the base of the neoliberal society, including those concerning race and gender –as we will see now–.

The paralysis of the economy and the systematic surveillance of the streets by the police affected unequally the Spanish population. Migrant people and racialized people confronted the worst rates of unemployment when the economy slowed down to limit the virus.<sup>7</sup> They were also more vulnerable to police abuse<sup>8</sup> and the pandemic disease due to their social condition – especially migrant people without residence permit–. In an atmosphere intoxicated by fake news and hate speech, the extreme right targeted migrants as a scapegoat for the crisis, giving fuel to stigmatization and discrimination. We can say that the syndemic has showed the coloniality of the virus, that is to say, clear patterns of vulnerabilization based on race that were magnified and visibilized during the COVID-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, these patterns of discrimination and violence are structural in western neoliberal societies –we only have to remember the dramatic case of George Floyd

---

the neoliberal technocratic State. There is a clear withdrawal towards a nationalist ideology. But what it is more difficult to see is whether this radicalization is functional for neoliberal reason –in the terms of punitive neoliberalism– or presents some threats to it. Or even whether it develops fresh patterns of global capital accumulation –with the hegemonic tension between USA and China in the background–.

<sup>4</sup> It is actually a center-left coalition, because the PSOE –Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party– is a “third way” party, therefore a socio-liberal one. Unidas Podemos, the other part of the coalition, integrates the traditional Spanish communist left and a new left that is partially linked with the *indignados movement* of 2011, the so called *15M*.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter II, “The State of Alarm”: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-1981-12774>

<sup>6</sup> *The state of poverty. Tracking the indicator of poverty and social exclusion in Spain 2008 – 2020*, EAPN/Gobierno de España, 2021: <https://www.eapn.es/estadodepobreza/ARCHIVO/documentos/informe-ARPE-2021-resumen-ejecutivo.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Two facts: “Between September 2019 and September 2020, registered unemployment among foreigners grew by 44%, more than twice as much as in the Spanish population (20%)” (Mora, 2021: 16). Verifying the same tendency, during the first semester of 2020 almost all of the unemployment affected only the foreign population.

<sup>8</sup> The report *Racism and xenophobia during the State of Emergency* (RIS/Workgroup of International Decade for People of African Descent, 2020) shows 70 cases of abuse, humiliation and violence during the State of Alarm in Spain. The cases go from police brutality upon racialized people to the urban and social segregation of Huelva’s agricultural laborers –all of the migrant workforce–, excluded from the healthcare measures to stop the pandemic.

in the USA—. In the case of Spain, we would only need to analyze the State's management of the South border with Africa to confirm the racist and colonial foreign policies of Spain.

Along with migrant and racialized people, women have been one of the most vulnerable population groups during the worst moments of the syndemic. In general numbers, 76% of the 49 million health workers of the EU are women, so a majority of women stood in the front-line taking care of those who were infected by COVID-19. But women are also over-represented in other service branches that were essential during the most dramatic moments of the pandemic: they represent 95% of employments of cleaning and domestic help, 93% of care workers and childhood educators, let alone the fact that they represent 82% of cashiers.<sup>9</sup> Women not only were super exposed to the disease, but have also faced an increase in the gender wage gap, which in Spain means that women earn around 23% less than men. Also, women accounted for the highest rate of unemployment during 2020 and 2021 (60%), and their unemployment rate is more than four points higher than men (18.13%).<sup>10</sup> We will later explore what happened during lockdown in the domestic space, where the sexual division of labor is most visible, a patriarchal division that has overburdened women with care work—a double workday, in the words of Silvia Federici. The confinement exposed many women to direct gender violence too.

As we see, neoliberal—or capitalist—inequalities of class, gender and race were deepened by the COVID-19 crisis. The levels of social precariousness have increased worldwide; Spain is only one example from which we can draw many analogies with other countries. And although some economies have tried to temporarily modify their “normal” mechanisms of inversion trying a neo-Keynesian approach of emergency, apparently opposed to the neoliberal calculus, it is difficult to be optimistic with the outcome of the measures of this “compassionate neoliberalism”. In the case of the EU, it seems clear: the European recovery plan (ERP) will be conditioned to new neoliberal reforms in different areas of the socio-economic policies—pensions in Spain, for instance—and they are not aimed at strengthening public services or reinforcing democratic control in economic resources. It is more of a reconversion of a productive model towards a pseudo-green capitalist transition and an initiative to gain better position in digital economies' economic niche. Housing, labor rights or poverty will not be the main objective of this funds. And the majority of them will be managed by private actors. If we take into account that only 45% of the 1.8 trillion of the ERP will be destined for subventions and the rest of the amount will be loaned, it is easy to foresee that the problem of the debt with the BCE will explode sooner or later—probably with new measures of austerity—. But what happened with the subjectivities of the citizens during the syndemic and in its ambivalent fading phase?

#### 4. A Sketch of Pandemic Subjectivities: Lock Down, Vulnerability and Lines of Fracture

The fear of contagion marked the relationship with the pandemic from the start of the outbreak. A very real fear if we take into account the quick increase in death rates from COVID-19 around the world. Though hard and unequal, lockdown and curfews were crucial to stop the spread of the virus. These political and public healthcare measures confined citizens in their homes, reducing their social interactions at minimum. As a form of compensation, the virtual public sphere—from social networks to message app's—became hyper developed, projecting disturbing feelings, fears, hopes, political statements, fake news and conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, our bodies were encapsulated in an extremely reduced space full of prophylaxis norms under the shadow of the disease. “The biopolitical space of liberal democracies was becoming somatopolitical in the purest sense of the term: the body and the flesh, sweat and fluids, have become the clearest target of this ‘war’ against propagation” (Meloni, 2020).

The human capabilities of being together, the most basic forms of community and face to face interaction, were directly affected. Of course, this induced suspension of community has triggered different problems in the long run. Many of them are linked with mental illness: depression, apathy, social fear and different forms of anxiety. Politically, we can read this process as an extreme form of neoliberal individualization due to the risks of the pandemic: people were reduced to atoms without a common world to share, linked together thanks to a virtual environment that functioned as a substitute for the real social realm—the true embodied realm—. People could work or consume—two of the main features of neoliberal individuality—, but they couldn't interact normally. This situation provoked an effect of social dis-aggregation: it dismantled even the normal possibilities of protest and assembly. This doesn't mean that solidarity and struggle couldn't exist—both existed during the syndemic—, but not to such an extent that could create a massive protest to defy the neoliberal governmentality and gain more rights or to reconstruct a fading community—the pandemic was active and it limited social contact—.

As we have highlighted before, this process of encapsulation deepened the inequalities that were at the base of contemporary capitalist society. The different situations of confinement revealed different types of vulnerabilities. The situation of a woman that suffers from gender violence, confined with her aggressor, is far from the situation of a middle class family with the possibility of teleworking and almost all their needs covered. In a similar way, there were people that couldn't confront confinement because of the poor material conditions of their homes (energy poverty, tenure insecurity, loss of rent), or due to precarious work conditions, as for instance migrant day laborers in Spain—crowded in substandard houses and treated as semi-slaves—.

<sup>9</sup> These data are taken from the report “Understanding Covid-19's impact on women” of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20210225STO98702/understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-infographics>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

From one angle or the other, “normality” suffered a discontinuity that has driven the social body into a kind of general melancholy: time became linear and homogeneous and emotions—even desire—were trapped in the virtual sphere. The vivid colors of normal social interactions turned into gray during confinement.

The syndemic subjectivities were exposed to a regime of rapid spread of information that generated a bubble of contradictory messages. In an increasingly polarized virtual public sphere, the extreme right and conspiracy theorists—promoters of fake news—created a “misinformation pandemic”. Even “theory” was affected by these crossed messages and antagonistic visions elaborated by right wing groups and “covid deniers”. For example, the critic discourse of Giorgio Agamben is very descriptive about what happens when a philosophical theory loses itself in its own speculations, forgetting empirical data and widening its own concepts (“state of exception”) until they become distorted. As Ulrich Oslender has pointed out (Oslender, 2020), Agamben’s critique of the pandemic is driven to see “a growing tendency to use the state of exception as normal paradigm of government”, a tendency that is solidary with another: the projection of this exception to almost all the features of our present. The question is that the curfews and lockdowns are difficult to describe with the paradigm of the “State of exception”, because the rule of law wasn’t suspended at all—and this is a central feature of the figure of the State of exception—. In fact, there was a huge production of new sets of laws and measures in different countries—all of them transitory—to limit the pandemic. And the coercive norms could not be compared to exceptionalism or dictatorship—as some opinions have defended—. This Agambenian conceptual blurring, that started denying the pandemic and continued accepting it partially, stressed biopolitics as an absolute in which we can find commonalities with some neoliberal positions about individual liberties and even right-wing opinions.

As we see, the whole of society was affected by the regime of confinement and social distancing, sometimes producing intellectual or political monsters. But the depressive affects were many times challenged by demonstrations in the streets and collective forms of self-organization: in the case of Spain, we have seen it in squatted social centers or in neighborhood associations that created their own kitchens and markets to provide people with food and care. Or in demonstrations to defend public healthcare and virtual campaigns to foster a “social crash plan” promoted by many social movements. They demanded the strengthening of public healthcare, a “basic income of quarantine”, the suspension of rent payment, the halt on evictions, the public guarantee of electricity and water and the protection of the essential services workers. They also requested the closing of the Foreigners Detention Centers and the end of deportations. Some of these demands were more or less attended by the Spanish Government, but with many limits in the long run. For us it is very clear that the syndemic has caused a serious erosion of the existing social movements and counter power initiatives in the civil society. But despite of this, people tried to organize for their own survival and even produced new grassroots communitarian institutions—most of them supported by older initiatives.<sup>11</sup> At the end, the subjectivities that went through the pandemic reacted in ambivalent ways as an effect of the difficult situation and the polarization of the public sphere. Sometimes people reinforced dynamics of oppression, like “covid deniers” or anti vaccine groups, normally driven by the extreme right. But other times people struggled for social rights, creating support and care networks from grassroots emancipatory movements.

## 5. Bifurcations and Emancipatory Lines: The Need to Organize Beyond Disaster and Hope

The global effects of COVID-19 leaves us with many theoretical and political challenges. One of them is the need to “totalize” in a lukacsian inspired perspective: we need a global and concrete image of the consequences of the crisis worldwide. For sure, we can draw common patterns of its effects, as we have tried to stress before in our analysis of the Spanish and European context. Though contextually limited, part of our attempt has to do with finding common dynamics of the pandemic aftermath. And we can say, without doubt, that the oppressions, contradictions and social antagonisms that were at the core of the neoliberal society have been deepened like never before. Of course, the spread of the virus was unequal, and it affected nations in different degrees depending on the global distribution of wealth and the old patterns of the colonial division of labor. But the structural oppressions of class, gender and race in every society were clearly magnified in a tendency that we can qualify as universal. Not only the COVID-19 syndemic has showed the frailty and contingency of our civilization, but it has also visibilized all that was corroding the neoliberal society: precariousness, racism, gender violence, climate change, expanding inequalities and the limitations and deficits of contemporary democracies.

If class, gender and race inequalities have been deepened, as we have seen starting from the Spanish example, our duty is to stop and transform this destructive spiral. But just as we’re in a syndemic—caused by different but intertwined factors—, the globality of the COVID-19 crisis requires that we act globally and from different fronts—institutional and social—. Because we are in a crisis that encompasses many others: an environmental crisis, a biomedical crisis, a care crisis and an economic and social crisis. As the pandemic has showed us all, the State can intervene beyond the classic neoliberal logic, so formally, there would be tools to countervail the social damages generated between 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, we’ve seen that neoliberal rationality still prevails, even if some neo-Keynesian measures have been applied. The problem is that this “emergency Keynesianism” seems to be only a transitional way to deal with the brunt of the pandemic, but not a new economic point of departure. After this exceptional phase, it seems that we have just returned to

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the PAH (Platform of people affected by the mortgages), the Tenant’s Trade Union, many Squatted Social Centers and traditional neighborhood associations created the infrastructure to food banks and new care networks.

the old patterns of capital accumulation —besides, the shadow of a debt crisis is creeping over us—. But this return will be worse than the pre-pandemic normality: left to its own inertia, capitalism is evolving into a more authoritarian, more violent and anti-democratic regime. The rising of the extreme right is only an anticipation of what could come.

The capitalist mode of production is reaching its planetary limits —climate change is a clear signal of it—. Its predatory features are based on a disastrous contradiction: seeking an infinite economic growth in a world of limited resources. It's easy to foresee that COVID-19 will not be the last global disease if the neoliberal rationality and the capitalist machinery continue producing in the same way as usual. Following Immanuel Wallerstein, it seems that we're in a point of "structural crisis" and at the same time in a point of bifurcation of our world system. There are two possible paths. One of the possibilities could be a system "that retains the basic features of the present system: hierarchy, exploitation, and polarization" (Wallerstein, 2013), probably more feudal, despotic, illiberal and non-democratic —maybe democracy as we knew it could die, making the dream of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek come true—. The other option has to do with democracy and equality: we would be witnessing the invention of a new type of socialist and radical democratic option that goes beyond the limits of the old left of the 20th century. The challenge here is to give birth to a new political culture and ideology that could articulate a global alternative to neoliberal capitalism. A culture where class, race and gender are intersected and epistemically and politically intertwined, and where internationalism and ecology must play a new role in the world stage.

Maybe what we need is to haunt the present like the old specter of the 19th century —the ghost that announced the 1848 revolutions—. But until it appears, the most intelligent way to deal with the post-pandemic phase, this disturbing interregnum —some kind of Gramscian chiaroscuro—, is to organize ourselves, to articulate conflicts, to build bridges between the multitude. To reinvent new forms of community to resist, to develop new institutions of the common and even to dream, desire and act in the light of utopian thinking. For one of the things we need the most is to shake up our political imagination if we want to go beyond these dystopian times. Just as the old atomists thought, we need to reach a new clinamen that allows the emancipatory and democratic forces —now disaggregated— to reunite and create a new world (Althusser, 2006), a real alternative to the misery that neoliberalism condemns us to.

## 6. Bibliography

- Albarracín, D. (2020): "Entre la insoportable tibieza fiscal y la efímera política expansiva de gasto", *Viento Sur*, 19 de noviembre. Available at: <https://vientosur.info/entre-la-insoportable-tibieza-fiscal-y-la-efimera-politica-expansiva-de-gasto/> [Last consulted: November 9, 2024].
- Althusser, L. (2006): *Philosophy of the Encounter*, London, Verso.
- Brown, W. (2019): *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Dardot, P. and C. Laval (2017): *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, London, Verso.
- Davies, W. (2016): "The New Neoliberalism", *New Left Review*, 101. Available at: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/iii101/articles/william-davies-the-new-neoliberalism> [Last consulted: November 9, 2024].
- Davies, W. and N. Gane (2021): "Post-Neoliberalism? An Introduction", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38(6), pp. 3-28.
- Espinoza Pino, M. (2020): "COVID-19, el virus de la era neoliberal", *Jurisdicción Social, Revista de la Comisión de lo Social de Juezas y Jueces para la Democracia*, 210, pp. 13-18.
- Llano Ortiz, J. M. (2021): *El Estado de pobreza: seguimiento del indicador de pobreza y exclusión social en España 2008-2020*, Madrid, EAPN
- European Parliament (2021): *Understanding Covid-19's Impact on Women*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20210225STO98702/understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-infographics> [Last consulted: January 10, 2024].
- Meloni, C. (2020): "Comunidad intocable", *Apocaelipsis*, 29 de marzo. Available at: <https://lavoragine.net/comunidad-intocable-meloni/> [Last consulted: January 10, 2024]
- Mezzadra, S. (2020): "Una política delle lotte in tempi di pandemia", *Euronomade*, 14 de marzo. Available at: <https://www.euronomade.info/una-politica-delle-lotte-in-tempi-di-pandemia/> [Last consulted: January 10, 2024]
- Molano, F. (2020): *Capitalismo y pandemias*, Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños.
- Moscoso, M. (2020): "Guayaquil, 'colonial' virus", *El Salto Diario*, 4 de abril. Available at: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/el-rumor-de-las-multitudes/guayaquil-colonial-virus> [Last consulted: January 10, 2024]
- Oslender, U. (2020): "Greta's Wrath; or 'quédate en casa', Agamben: COVID-19 and the (Non-)State of Exception", *Geopolítica(s). Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, 11, especial, pp. 275-283.
- Paloma, V. and R. Garrido (2021): *ApartTogether: Estudio sobre el impactopsicosocial de la COVID-19 en población migrante y refugiada en España y el mundo*, Fuenlabrada, RECI.
- Rights International Spain (2020): *Racismo y emergencia durante el Estado de Alarma*, Madrid, Rights International Spain.
- Singer, M. (2009): *Introduction to Syndemics*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Traverso, E. (2019): *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, London, Verso.
- Wallace, R. (2020): *Dead Epidemiologists*, New York, Monthly Review Press.
- Wallerstein, I. (2013): "Structural Crisis, or Why Capitalists May no Longer Find Capitalism Rewarding", en Wallerstein et al., *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* New York, Oxford University Press.

