


# Testimonies during the pandemic: psychoanalytic reflections on trauma, State, economy and death


Testemunhos durante a pandemia: reflexões psicanalíticas sobre trauma, Estado, economia e morte

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## Abstract

This study aims to reflect on subject's experience in the face of the covid-19 pandemic from a psychoanalytic perspective. The material discursively analyzed was constituted by testimonies of undergraduate psychology students published in a website during the period of social distancing. The subjectivation processes emphasized in our analysis were discussed in four thematic groups: facing the traumatic potential: being able to witness the fall of the Other; the (un)protection of the subjects by the State: the potentiation of psychological suffering; the superegoic imperative of capitalist production and the productive traces of unproductivity; and (im)possibilities of mourning: changes in our attitude towards death. Finally, we seek to critically evidence the destructive and authoritarian aspect of the state management of affections on subjects and the transformative power (analytical and political) of the experiences of unproductivity, indeterminacy, and helplessness.

**Keywords:** Pandemics; Covid-19; Coronavirus; Psychoanalysis; Social Theory.

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## Resumo

Este trabalho propõe-se a refletir sobre a experiência do sujeito perante a pandemia de covid-19 por meio de uma perspectiva psicanalítica. O material analisado discursivamente foi constituído por testemunhos de estudantes de graduação em psicologia publicados em um espaço virtual durante o período de distanciamento social. Os processos de subjetivação destacados em nossa análise foram discutidos em quatro núcleos temáticos: enfrentar o potencial traumático; poder testemunhar a queda do Outro; o (des)amparo dos sujeitos por parte do Estado; a potencialização do sofrimento psíquico; o imperativo superegoico da produção capitalista e os vestígios produtivos da improdutividade; (im)possibilidades do luto: transformações da nossa atitude diante da morte. Ao fim, buscamos evidenciar criticamente o aspecto destrutivo e autoritário da gestão estatal dos afetos sobre os sujeitos e a potência transformativa (analítica e política) das experiências da improdutividade, da indeterminação e do desamparo.

**Palavras-chave:** Pandemia; Covid-19; Coronavírus; Psicanálise; Teoria Social.

## Introduction

The pandemic theme has become unavoidable nowadays. Predominant in the media, the theme largely occupies the academic environment in the most diverse areas, from epidemiological discussions to economic projections, political-sociological and psychological considerations. On the one hand, there are discourses seeking to circumvent the malaise experienced by the subjects, providing them with a knowledge aimed at helping them; on the other hand, there are discourses that seek to produce, manage, and control the affections of fear, terror, and insecurity.

In addition to the physical distancing required in this context of uncertainties, from the psychoanalytic experience, we know that, together with such discourses, processes of individualization of suffering may arise, which deny its collective, social, and historical dimension, as well as processes of derealization of singularity of the experience undergone by the subjects, their nonrecognition by the other (Appoa, 2018). Among the subjects, every time we talk about covid-19, there is a feeling of anguish usually followed by a reciprocal silencing. Unable to articulate the malaise that inhabits them, which is an effect of the current situation, but also of their own history, subjects watch as spectators of their own suffering an increasing rise in levels of anxiety, compulsions, sleep disturbances, and other symptoms.

Psychoanalysis, anchored in its ethical praxis, responds to the pandemic crisis, providing reflections and interventions of its own theory and clinic, which especially seek to create devices for listening and the elaboration of suffering that include the unconscious subject beyond external discourses that disentangle such subject from this process. Being inserted into this debate and recognizing its precocity, the objective of this study is to reflect on the process of subjectivation of the situation of social distancing due to the covid-19 pandemic.

This is a qualitative psychoanalytic study whose objective was to obtain testimonies given by university students in a virtual diary available from a blog created by a professor on March 20, 2020. The blog was organized into three sections: "Send your testimony," "Diary," and "Our Proposal."

We studied the posts published in the “Diary” section between March and April 2020. During this period, students wrote 251 anonymous posts. In the section “Our Proposal,” the author of the blog invites students to post a diary of testimonies in order to create a collective-intimate space for the elaboration of the social distancing experience. This post was not compulsory. The diary was open to accounts of any nature, and students were encouraged to freely narrate their experiences, thoughts, affections, desires, anguish, or anything else that seemed relevant to them during that period.

We selected all posts that were analyzed through content analysis (Bardin, 1977), through which a qualitative survey of four meaning nuclei (trauma, State, economy, and death) was carried out and their classifications were organized into thematic categories that could be created and discussed based on some key readings provided by psychoanalytic theory and social theory. It is noteworthy that the production of this text, the selection, and the sensitive listening of the material also took place in the context of social distancing, and the authors themselves are involved in it. Thus, unconscious subjective elements of the researchers themselves, as subjects, are part of this analysis.

The testimonies published by the students in this virtual diary indicate, in a sensitive way, the multiplicity of affections that permeate them in this experience (fear, hope, or helplessness) and the various symptoms that are suddenly and increasingly developed (anxiety, panic, and insomnia), considering the implicated manifestations of the unconscious that present themselves in this context, seeking to inscribe their singular knowledge (fantasies, dreams, nightmares, and Freudian slips). They also show how subjects, faced with an unusual situation of a pandemic, must face not only the objective dangers of the virus infection, but also a series of discourses that enhance their suffering and depose it as subjects.

The ethical aspects established in Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council were observed. The authors clarify that this research is characterized as minimal risk, the materials used are publicly accessible, available online and protected by anonymity, and thus it was not possible

to identify their authors. In addition, we chose not to identify, with the pseudonyms used by the authors of the posts, the fragments used in the course of our analysis.

In this sense, our qualitative endeavor to extract, from these testimonies, what the subject affected by the experience of the pandemic has to say. Ethically, we know that this recapture “depends on there being a place, space, desire (particularly, the analyst’s desire) sustained in devices capable of guaranteeing the free course of the word, so that what happened and its effects come to light, its traumatic consequences are recognized and inscribed in language, in the collective” (Ramos, 2018, p. 15, free translation). We understand that the process of writing testimonies, sharing among peers and, now, the analysis of reports and their theoretical production can compose several modalities of inscription and recognition of this experience. The ethical assumption that guides and inspires this study is shared by the ethics that guides the Clinics of the Testimony (Appoa, 2018), an attempt to produce twists in the discourses that (dis)organize the social bond, in order to enable the beginning of the construction of a collective memory that allows the elaboration of the experience and resists the dominant and abusive structures of power.

## Facing the traumatic potential: being able to witness the fall of the Other

“Trauma” has become a trendy word in these pandemic days. A notion tenaciously investigated in psychoanalysis since its origin, when Freud was still struggling with the real or phantasmic nature of the traumas of child abuse narrated by his hysterical patients. Freud (1990) based his thoughts on a quantitative reasoning in which trauma is an excess of psychic energy that, unable to circulate, clots itself in the form of a symptom (Freud, 1996a). From 1920 onwards, the psychoanalyst thinks of trauma considering its relationship with repetition: the traumatic individual produces compulsion to repetition (Freud, 1996b), an attempt by the subject to revive the trauma seeking to reduce its psychic energy and its symbolization. What cannot be remembered at the symbolic level returns as a repetitive act.

The conception of repetition of unpleasant situations and feelings demonstrates another way of psychic functioning beyond the pleasure principle, thus emerging the death drive, an unceasing effort to return to the previous state of things, a nostalgic effort that is very present in the current pandemic days.

In 1920, in the text *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Freud's attention is drawn by the fact that, in the traumatic and repetitive dreams of subjects who experienced war, there was an unceasing return to the situation of horror, despite all the displeasure and suffering contained in such situation. Similarly, we may think of the classic scene of the "fort/da" game – Freud's nephew would say "fort," when throwing the spool of string, and "da" when pulling it – as an attempt to recover, now actively, what he had passively suffered: the feeling of helplessness resulting from his mother's departure.

The repetition present both in the traumatic dream and in the child's play seeks to inscribe a non-symbolized experience in the symbolic sphere. For this process, subjects invest most of their psychic energy, which can promote an impoverishment of "all other psychic systems, so that the result is an extensive paralysis or lowering of any other psychic operation" (Freud, 1996b, p. 30, free translation). The effect of this intense psychic work can manifest in complaints of profuse fatigue, stress, anxiety, and depression in the pandemic scenario.

Compulsion to repetition, then, shows that subjects "carry with themselves a story impossible to be symbolized and therefore communicated" (Betts, 2018, p. 118, free translation). Impossibility that is illustrated in the Greek origin of the word, *traûma*: wound, damage, or malfunction, which sustains the Lacanian corruption of *troumatism* (Lacan, 2018), in which "trou", which means "hole" in French, does not refer to an injury in the objective reality, but in the symbolic one, referring to a hole in the production of meaning. In an attempt to illustrate this impossibility, we resort to the traumatic dream reported by Primo Levi:

Here is my sister, and some friend (who?), and many other people. Everyone listens to me as I tell them about the whistle with three notes, the hard surface of the bed, the neighbor I'd like to push aside, but I'm

afraid to wake her up because she's stronger than me. I also tell the story of our hunger, and the lice control, and Kapo who punched me in the nose and then told me to wash my face because I was bleeding. It's an internal, physical, ineffable happiness, being in my house, among friendly people, and having so much to tell them, but I realize they don't listen to me. They seem indifferent; they speak to each other about other things, as if I were not there. My sister looks at me, gets up, walks away quietly. (Levi, 1988, p. 60, free translation)

We highlight that the anguish in this dream is not objectively related to the inhuman experience witnessed in the concentration camp, which generates terror and, then, awakening from the dream consists in the scene where the subject tells about the horror experienced and the fact of not being listened by the Other. We see that the traumatic event witnessed in this manifestation of the unconscious is not of the order of facts, but of the failure of the symbolization process, of not being able to make it a shareable experience.

We believe it is not by chance that sleep problems arise as the first ones to affect subjects during the quarantine period. Insomnia, recurring nightmares, unregulated, unsatisfactory sleep: *The first thing I realized during this time is that my sleep is not like it was before. It takes me a while to sleep, I have strange dreams, and I wake up a few times at night. This is probably because of I'm worried; today my father woke me up and he was wondering if I had a nightmare during the night, as I started screaming. I don't remember any of that.* On the other hand, the sleep also emerges as a psychic place in which we can escape from the "nightmare" of reality: *I feel like every day is gray, I have trouble knowing what day it is and when I wake up bewildered, I just want to keep sleeping.*

Based on the dream of paradigmatic anguish previously described, we can analyze one of the testimonies of the diary, a narrative in which, first, an acting out is presented, then the report of a dream, both occurring during the period of social distancing:

*Today I was talking to my husband about movies, searching for a movie on Netflix to watch, and I made a Freudian slip, I told him I never saw the*

movie "Who Wants to Be MY Millionaire." I laughed out loud. I saw myself inside out. I instantly thought that if we were rich, our quarantine would be very different. I had a dream that same night. My parents had bought a mansion and invited us to live with them. The first night an evil being walks around the house, my father doesn't believe my warnings. I tell him it wasn't in my head.

On the facade of this dream, we note the presence of affections, such as hope, fear, the feeling of being at the mercy and a structure of denial ("this is in your head") common to experiences of the pandemic period. Based on the presented material, we can take the dream, which occurs on the same night, as an answer to what is presented in the acting out as a question. Who wants to be my millionaire? The dream answers it: my parents. But, at the same time, it indicates something beyond this fantasy: what is the point of having "your millionaire," being rich, having a mansion now, if that does not guarantee any protection? Considering that the father's denial of thinking that "this is in your head" is what actually puts you in danger, and such, apparently, is not solved by millions in your pocket.

In this sense, as the dream reported by Primo Levi, we could say that what seems most frightening in this dream is not quite the evil being that surrounds the house (a very representative image of the pandemic virus), but the failure of the paternal figure to recognize this being and the dreamer's concern of not making him believe it. Does not the knowledge evidenced in the interpretation of this dream precisely point to this truth that must be permeated by the dreamer? The truth is that, despite trying to respond to his demand for support by fantasizing the figure of the father who protects the dreamer, this hope of support is ephemeral and even dangerous in the context of the dream. The only way out is for the subject to face this evil alone, to face it through helplessness.

## The helplessness of the subjects by the State: the potentiation of psychological suffering

If the simple act of narrating your story already demands much from the psychic economy,

the situation gains another dimension when the Other as a State places certain interdicts. State to which citizens wish for protection, support, and recognition, especially in times of crisis, regardless of the veracity of the information, as illustrated by the following entry in the diary: *yesterday I became aware that the United Kingdom has a Ministry of Loneliness. Fancy that! A minister to care for people's loneliness... we desperately need this care.*

However, testimonies demonstrate an inverse situation in Brazil, in which the State is absent or even shares the feeling of insecurity: *after that speech made by the president a few days ago, I choked... It seems that hearing those words of that human being intensified my fear.* The question, therefore, gains new and serious contours when the trauma is perpetrated by the figure that would supposedly have the function of providing and protecting the subject, paternal, maternal figures and, also part of this category, the State. "Terror, when spread by the State, inevitably affects society as a whole. When regulating agents of social bonds place themselves in illegality, it is the very normative substance of society that dissipates" (Abrão, 2014, p. 16, free translation).

Safatle (2016) argues that, from a Hobbesian perspective, the State manages the insecurity of the population as a strategy to make itself indispensable. It is a strategy to make itself necessary, though which, by allowing a controlled level of terror, it emerges as the last bastion of security, showing all of its relevance. Thus, according to the perspective of Safatle, the function of the State of promoting well-being is not absolute, but regulated by its own interest of self-preservation. The government in force only inherits such logic of state survival and administers it according to its political interests. Therefore, confronting the pandemic is compromised by this firefighter-incendiary dynamic of the State, in which state welfare will always be in the forefront in relation to social welfare.

It is a melancholic use of power, that is, the internalization on the part of citizens that they are deserving of anguish, that nothing can be done, and that the State, in the present organization, is the only viable option. It does not matter whether this threat is illusory or even delusional (as the threat

of “the communist” intrusive object). Once fear and helplessness have been instilled, the citizen returns to the protective State. From this perspective, it does not seem distant to think about the possibility that certain ideological discourses appropriate the policies (or the non-policies) of pandemic management, not to manage the dangers of mass contamination, but rather to manage the affects that perpetuate the current political status quo at the cost of social fragmentation and that of lives.

By prioritizing its survival rather than that of its population, the State is absent from its social protection function and puts the social pact at risk. Psychoanalysis demonstrates the risk of such a breakup, because the symbolic sphere unauthorized by the State will return in other formats, that is, the State becomes a producer of symbolic fractures of traumatic potential. Latent traumas arising from the (in)actions of a significant part of the Brazilian State during the crisis, perceived by many as an additional malaise imposed by the Other that, by reversing its function, amplifies fear and insecurity. In this sense, the traumatic imminence of our current scenario calls for spheres beyond the clinic, the whole community, justice, the media and, especially, calls the State to occupy one of its fundamental functions.

*Neighbors here are going to kill themselves for politics someday. The world bleeds and political collusions and maladies do not end*, as the participants report. We understand that the broken social fabric, for being shared by all as a support for discourses, will need to be collectively sutured. The recognition and expiation of actions on the part of the public sphere are fundamental to accomplish the most complete and comprehensive reparation as possible; however, as shown in the aforementioned excerpt, this remission at the present moment seems to be quite distant on the political horizon.

Sometimes, this kidnapping of the symbolic record, which may be operated by some figures of the State, seeks to dictate the guidelines of this inscription. When minority discourses, but not necessarily of population minorities, are silenced, when there is a dispute of narratives, we perceive this maneuver in progress. Such situation is illustrated in the historical negation of events such as the holocaust, the Brazilian dictatorship, and now the

pandemic. Vastly proven and studied events are simply discredited, reliable sources and experts are deprecated by “notions” based on the media and the internet. The severity of the virus, its lethality and spread rate became the focus of a narrative dispute, being constantly questioned by rulers despite all scientific evidence and even in the face of events taking place in other countries. The operation of considering facts as fantasies, hysteria, according to some politicians, disorders the symbolic record of the subject. Thus, terrifying experiences have not only their possibility of inscription interdicted, but also their very existence is questioned such as Levi’s dream and the analyzed testimony.

The State, by managing the insecurity of citizens, enhances the fear of the subject, who is divided and thinks in terms of a false choice: present or future, health or economy. Hence, subjects are required to constitute their symptom in a single way, that of work, of strengthening the economy, reducing it to the condition of an object submitted to an absolute master. Phrases stated by the current President of the Republic, such as “this is just a cold,” “you’re going to die eventually, so what?,” demonstrate the subjects being deemed as objects, in which what is of the order of suffering, of subjectivity, does not matter.

Such illegalities in institutional contexts end up seeking to undo the very normative structure of the social bond and constitute new traumas by the fracture of symbolic figures. In this sense, we are dealing with two disasters at the same time: the natural and the symbolic. The virus is a natural disaster, an external event, biologically and medically explained. Unlike impositions arising from the violence of another human being and from the institutions that would supposedly serve as a support, the latter reach the symbolic field, that of the scope in which we recognize ourselves in our suffering.

## **The superegoic imperative of capitalist production and the productive traces of unproductivity**

In pandemic times, the main arena of dispute in Brazil seems to be the economic one. On the one hand, those who care about the current

lethality of the virus; on the other, those who make economic projections about how many deaths will be caused by unemployment. In other words, there is a postponement of the present viral danger to a dark scenario of the macroeconomic future. Starve to death due to unemployment seems to be more concrete than dying from the virus. The neoliberal subject amid the direct pandemic experience continues to face the deleterious effects immanent in capitalism on its financial and service-related phase. Unemployment, precariousness, and outsourcing of work reify subjects and force them to continue producing, even at the expense of profound psychological suffering or even possible contamination. The State, once again, can handle all these issues in its favor, not offering support consistent with the exception situation caused by the virus.

Lustoza (2009) argues about how capitalism, emphasizing the accumulation of surplus value as a movement without a quilting point, leaves the subject in a constant state of dissatisfaction, always looking for the next and fleeting jouissance. Production-jouissance relationship that Lacan did noticed: “What Marx denounces in surplus value is the spoliation of jouissance” (Lacan, 1992, p. 76, free translation). This excess is resignified within a neoliberal fantasy in which the cause of desire is replaced with surplus value (Quinet, 2002), therefore, even in times of social distancing, the Lacanian superegoic imperative “Enjoy yourself!” (Lacan, 2005a) is still in full operation.

In the discourse of the Other as a capitalist economy, the labor function dictates the subjects’ coordinates, placing them in a space where they are desired based on what they produce. This generates a destituteness of significant that, attributed to the subject, reduce their condition to that of a mere producer/product, becoming easy preys for discourses that exalt their value in the productive chain, that recognize, perhaps, the only function they are allowed to fulfill in society.

Thus, insisting on producing constitutes a traumatic element without elaboration, a trauma so broad and diffuse in society that simply perceiving it already reaches the edges of reality escaping from the symbolic sphere. As Žižek provocatively reminds us in a sentence attributed to him, “it is easier to

imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” *Even a subfebrile sensation... I gave myself up, I couldn’t resist... And I let time pass by, even with guilt flying around like a true Dementor [creatures of the Harry Potter saga that feed on human happiness],* witnessed a student who took a chance and produced to the limits of developing a fever.

“Routine” seems to be the watchword for continuing to produce: *When I started with the new routine, I felt much better, more willing and productive.* Here, the adverb “better” qualifies the subject in a curious way, based on his/her production: the individual feels better because he/she is productive. This use leads us to wonder whether there is indeed a creative experience of health or just a normalization of production in relation to previous levels. What matters is to continue producing, which takes on the status of a reference to the Other. Thus, we have a productivity that aims to meet not an inventive, singular desire, but the desire established by the neoliberal order.

This same logic would be valid for the other supporting activities, let us say, for the type of capitalist production system that we experience, illustrated in education, which is poorly understood as mere professional education and training. It is evident, at the present time of the pandemic, that parents are concerned with their children not being impaired in terms of their education or that university students do not have their semester canceled. How much more tragic, or rather, how much more real would it be to miss a semester, even a year, compared to losing one’s life? To paraphrase Žižek, it is easier to imagine the damages of missing a school year than to imagine losing one’s life.

Again, the diary is plentiful in testimonies with such questions. *I feel pressured by college every day, there’s a huge amount of assignments, weekly activities; I find myself way behind in college assignments, lost, anguished and anxious... Anxiety, something I rarely experience, and this morning I found myself sweating with anxiety, thinking about the assignments...; Today the day was more productive, I studied a lot, I did a lot of reading ahead of schedule, but I’m worried about what this semester will be like.* Through the testimonies,

students are able to conceive and symbolize the financial-material, even psychological, losses of a delay in education.

*Honestly, on the one hand I thought “I deserve to rest and do nothing sometimes, tomorrow I’ll do something,” but on the other hand I thought: “Gee, I need to do something productive”; just like at work, where I have always been praised for being productive, and now I can’t finish anything properly; yesterday was such an unproductive day, I stayed in bed all day...* To analyze these excerpts, the concept of “acting out” seems pertinent, which can be understood as another form of resolution of trauma, this time coming out of the symbolic sphere and dealing directly with the real dimension (Lacan, 2005b). It is an act that carries a semantics with the purpose of responding to the desire of the Other, a nature of supplication to this desire, a demand for attention and symbolization, a possible response to the anguish of the moment. Miller (2016) shows us that subjects act as such in this scenario, before the Other, the spectator, a repressed material, so that the latter (the spectator) endows subjects with meaning and validates them. Thus, an alienated modality of the relationship with one’s own desire is constituted, relationship which summons the Other so to be elucidated about their own desire. In these excerpts, we see how the diary presents a profusion of reports in this sense: subjects faced with a deadly virus can seek to elaborate their trauma as long as the inscription does not hinder their production, moments of poor investment are not well accepted.

Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that there is an index of indeterminacy concerning the meaning of such productivity in the testimonies. This notion is not only a mass production in the Fordist sense of the term, but also of a singularity that persists, which insists on summoning subjects in what their desires seek to produce. From this multiplicity of productivities, we can extract what Dunker (2015) calls “productive experiences of indetermination,” that is, a gap between the significant imposed by the Other, in which subjects have a space to interpellate their own desire.

By highlighting the breaking point of the symbolic sphere, the encounter with the reality of the virus can favor such experiences of indetermination,

exposing the insufficiency of the significant masters who apparently governed a single possible world, paving the way for questioning several statuses such as that of neoliberal capitalism, a question quite present in the current debates about the pandemic. Latour (2020) argues that covid-19 threw out the fallacy of the impossibility of suspending capitalist production and, thus, proposes acts that ban the return to the pre-pandemic model and propose new, more community-based and cooperative systems. Likewise, Žižek (2020) reflects on being possible to think ways of productions that forge social bonds rather than weakening them, as neoliberal capitalism does.

We do not intend to ignore the socioeconomic context in this theoretical and clinical observation, nor to disregard the reality of many people, in which abdicating from work can generate a deep state of misery; on the contrary, we propose a radical reflection on this modality of existence, that is, of production, considered as the only possible. Striving to sustain the current mode of production unchanged, as if there were no alternatives, is the naivest and therefore the most dangerous negation. It is choosing to alienate ourselves in the face of the current situation we find ourselves in, it is opting for the phantom of normality as if a change in the production system was an unprecedented anomaly and not the most ordinary of historical phenomena as already predicted by Marx.

In our manic society (Kehl, 2015), we seem to be increasingly escaping from the paradox of a productive unproductivity, that is, the possibility of a singular, non-massified, unique production, without capital value, or not yet producing at all and allowing ourselves moments of poor libidinal investment and reorganization of affections. The forced stop imposed by the pandemic would be a favorable contingency to (un)production and (in) determination, which, together, could generate new significant for the subject; however, the manic society and its resulting superegoic imperative continue to operate even remotely, and in it, the jouissance remains producing for the Other. Thus, an opportunity for superegoic loosening and of disalienation in the face of the Other’s economic discourse is wasted.



## (Im)possibilities of mourning: changes in our attitude towards death

What disorients the subjects in the current times, beyond the social distancing and the covid-19 pandemic, has a close relationship with the failure of symbolization processes, the enhancement of helplessness carried out by some figures present in the State, and with the superegoic imperative of production. We can add one last perspective to our analysis. The last element that we explore in our analysis and that seems to be present in the suffering and feeling of disorientation currently experienced is, as suggested by Freud (2009), the disturbance of our hitherto everyday distance attitude towards death: *I think I'm so young to be stuck in this situation. I feel like I need to grow up every day to keep up with what's coming. I keep thinking about the people who have never been confronted with death, and what the next few weeks will be like, because I believe that many people are going to die; a lot of dear people. [...] It seems like I'm living within a parenthesis.* We must ask ourselves: what this daily approximation to death can produce?

Freud, in his *Reflections on War and Death* (2009), notes that the more we silence or distance ourselves from the truths that arise from our melancholic and mourning processes in the face of death, the more we nurture our illusion in the face of death, the more we produce neurotic symptoms that prevent us from enduring life. The author then asks whether it would not be better to attribute to death, in reality and in our thoughts, its rightful place and to let our unconscious attitude towards death emerge, which we have so carefully suppressed. Instead of silencing it, should we not recognize what really frightens us? It is in this sense that we resume the famous sentence: "If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death" (Freud, 2009, p. 31, free translation).

A testimony from the blog points to this: *I reflect and attest... the focus is on an old person. Sometimes deemed fragile, incapable, brainless, transgressive, outdated, incompetent; susceptible to illness and risk of death; prevented from socialization, deprived of autonomy and of the place of subject in his choices, actions, and responsibilities. And somehow this old person reveals herself in me in this pandemic time.* After an extremely sharp process of reflection, the author (older woman)

realizes that there is a discourse that inhabits her thoughts, in which she sees herself thinking of the "old person" as something external, distant, which does not concern her; but when being involved, and looking more closely, she finds herself, she takes risks, and this astonishes her: the astonishment of being alienated from herself. This speech demonstrates the real condition of death that constantly escapes from us: "deep down, no one believes in their own death [...] in the unconscious each of us is convinced of our own immortality" (Freud, 2009, p. 19, free translation).

Considering this difficulty in accepting mortality, Leite (2019) insists on the importance of symbolic demarcation of death, relegating it to the reality dimension can prevent a due process of mourning, that is, the libidinal resumption and reinvestment in another object. Biological death, as belonging to the reality dimension, is never enough, it only exists when properly demarcated by the symbolic sphere. The memory of relatives of covid-19 victims is immediate; they are prevented from seeing the bodies of their relatives due to sanitary restrictions. What does that sealed coffin is hiding? Was the deceased and loved one really there? The pandemic turns us all into Antigones without being able to properly bury our loved ones.

Mourning demands time, a (re)allocation of symbolic representations, a decrease in identifications, a symbolization of what has been gone, an acceptance of loss and, as a result of this process, a transformation of the self. Making mourning impossible, therefore, would lead the subjects to a process of melancholization, of fixation to the lost object; it would mean creating an obstacle of the transformative process that coping with death can potentiate. After all, in these moments we should be able "to confront chaos, to confront what emerges as a certain concept of reason, as an abyss, and to feel good. Because this feeling is born from the certainty that we should not be afraid to go where we no longer find the lights projected by our own image" (Safte, 2012, back cover, free translation).

## Final considerations

Resuming the enunciative productions of the subjects who experience the pandemic, with their meanings, polysemies, and manifestations of the

unconscious showed us that there is a transformative knowledge that seeks to make itself recognized by these subjects. The possibilities of this transformative knowledge emerge, in the testimonies, as we have seen, in dreams of anguish, in which we notice the possibility of encountering a painful, tough necessary truth, a need of the subjects to allow themselves going beyond their demands for support. It emerges in their affections, such as fear empowered by figures of the State, which, based on it, create demands for care or authority. It emerges in their loss of working capacity, in the automatic search for the restoration of a routine, but also in the creative potential of a productive unproductivity, which attempts an openness beyond the imperative of capitalist production. Finally, it emerges in the distressing but potentially transformative encounter with death, which could allow subjects to dispossess the old individualities that made them suffer in a repetitive and stereotyped manner. However, we observed the limits of writing testimonies in the blog, considering that the posts in the diaries, at certain times, became protocol-like “confessions” about daily life, and the little interaction between students made it difficult to elaborate through a collective dimension.

Helplessness is understood in psychoanalysis as constitutive of the human condition. The question we must ask ourselves is how subjects experience their helplessness, and what privileged responses the State provides for this, its subjective effects and political consequences. It is common place to think that the affections of helplessness and traumatic situations generate suffering by themselves, which are dangerous and must be avoided at all costs. The State, medical knowledge, psychotherapy and other discourses arise, then, as devices that seek to meet these demands for care; nevertheless, we think that care is not necessarily equal to support, nor it can cease anguish. We reflected on and sought to demonstrate that there are transformative powers also in helplessness and indetermination.

What our reflections have been able to extract from the narrative of the subjects who experience the times of encounter with the real sphere of the pandemic is that, at far reaches of confinement, we see the transformative potential that is announced in the experience of the affection of helplessness. Subjects who cry in their testimonies (as in the awakening from a nightmare), who are facing a truth

that permeates them and that can turn them into a desperate level because they are unknown. A cry that does not seek to say “help,” which would institute new relationships of dependence, which would imprison the subjects in a temporality of waiting, so that they would passively return to who they were before; but rather, it seeks to say “enough!”, to demand something, in the temporality of the act, and to direct it to an independent exit, in which one can exercise the uniqueness of what the Self does not know.

Without denying the legitimate demands of support directed to the Other, we argue for the need to rearticulate this demand through the social dimension of individual suffering, we think that from the moment we can recognize the transformative value of the experiences of helplessness, we may be able to collect, in testimonies of the pandemic times, all its analytical and political potential.

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### Authors' Contribution

Souza Junior was responsible for organizing the research, data collection, data processing, writing, review, and submission. Henderson was responsible for organizing the research, data collection, data processing, writing, review, and submission.

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