

# Pandemic and Desacralization: the New Political Order Founded on the Bare Life

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**Abstract.** This article aims to approach the COVID-19 health crisis through the category of precarity in two senses. On the one hand, in the face of power, a state of exception has been configured as the new form of political handling of the new normality. On the other hand, the loss of public space has meant that community ties have been broken, fostering greater atomisation and loneliness. Both processes were already present in modernity and post-modernity and foster an increasing uprooting of the individual through the loss of the symbolic axes of socialisation, as well as more intense social control. In short, the defining characteristic of the pandemic is the precarity of life.

**Keywords:** precarity, pandemic, COVID-19, social control, uprooting.

## Introduction to pandemic precarity

An analysis of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be separated from a fundamental starting point: the signs of a new form of power and a diffuse malaise among the population were already present beforehand. The pandemic has not only confirmed such phenome-

na, it brought them to fruition. From a political point of view, the drift of the new pandemic order has laid bare the solution to the great problem of modernity and post-modern politics, namely, how to manage human freedom through the control of bodies and minds. At the same time, from an anthropological and sociological point of view, the uprooting of identity characteristics of post-modernity has served as a basis for the introduction of measures to restrict fundamental freedoms without great resistance and with the enthusiastic participation of the public.

From both points of view, the constant underlying both processes, which we will try to elucidate throughout this article, is the precarity of the post-modern subject. The confluence of a ubiquitous system of power that resides in the soul of the public and the uprooting of the subject's construction of identity have characterised the success of the new pandemic normality. Signs of a vital burnout were already very present in society due to these processes and were reflected in mental health, which in Western societies had already been in decline for decades (Desmet 2021) (In other words, the signs of both processes, the political process on the one hand and the anthropological-sociological process on the other, were already underway and had already gone a long way in the deterioration of fundamental freedoms and the uprooting of personal identity.

In this regard, the concept of precarity would come to signify and permeate the life of the pandemic subject. They are precarious in the face of power because they live the loss of their freedoms with an innocuous docility and have lost all capacity to oppose a power that is already *within* them, a power that acts and orders their life to fulfil the duty imposed, even if this means the loss of any kind of freedom or autonomy in decision-making. And they are also precarious in their most intimate lives as they have been stripped of of vital resistance that could confront this new typology of power. No resistance can be born if the cause of the problem cannot be visualized because power is no longer something external but is a "continuity" in the other and "shines in its own absence". (Han 2019b, 5; 40); since the person does not detect it, being no longer close to himself but already in his interiority. Now, the condition of the pandemic subject is that of being atomised, depoliticised and socialised with

the culture of media entertainment which, as Han states, is an “unburdening of being” (2019a, 72) that elicits a perverse pleasure.

In this pandemic context the media and the pandemic information overload played a major role in reducing human lives in various parts of the world to a form of isolation and continued alienation, as well as to create a collective state of hypnosis typical of totalitarian regimes. In this regard, Desmet (2022, 114) points out that “totalitarian systems have always been maintained primarily by systematic indoctrination and propaganda, injected into the population on a daily basis via mass media”. This is the voice that has continually resonated through the incessant enumeration of pandemic data and repeated health warnings to prevent infections. The scientific methodology was able to communicate its biased view of the world:

They generally take their scientific fiction for reality, confusing their numbers with the facts of which they are a distorted echo. The same applies to a large part of the population, blindly trusting this scientific ideology, with no other ideological hiding place, given the fall of religion. Numbers and graphs presented in the mass media by someone with credentials are considered *de facto* realities by many people. (Desmet 2022, 37).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, while silence reigned in the streets, homes were filled with the media voices that became the only voice controlled by scientific experts with their predictions, graphs and data that had suddenly transmuted into the new reality. On the drift of medicine and the imperative of health at all costs for social control, it had already been observed that it was “becoming the new repository of truth, the place where absolute and often final judgments are made by supposedly morally neutral and objective experts [...] in the name of health” (Zola 1972, 487). The new communicative space formed by the media was occupied by health information and was composed by the continuous counting of the infected, the patients in intensive care and the dead due to the complications of COVID-19. The interpretation of the data was mediated by science that spoke through the experts and television talk-show hosts. An intense aura of death and desolation swept through

lives and cities, promoted by the new communicative space. All this took place in the psychic intimacy exposed to the violent avalanche of pandemic news. The privatisation of the pandemic experience was therefore one of the most important points in the narrative construction of the COVID-19 phenomenon. The uniformity of this pandemic narrative and the silencing by derision or discrediting of any kind of alternative or dissident voice quickly created a need to find meaning in a collectivity artificially recreated through the media. The formation of impersonal and obedient masses has been engendered first and foremost by breaking the most immediate ties of the individual, exposing them to forced solitude and collective guilt. This is highly indicative of a seemingly unexpected effect that occurred immediately after the first days and weeks of lockdown. The disciplinary rigour that prevented movement and fundamental freedoms seemed to have broken the productive and vital exhaustion in which existence seemed stagnant in pre-COVID times. From this point of view, the diffuse acceptance of the lockdown was perceived as a liberation of people from their psychological routinization (Desmet 2021) Acting as a kind of relief from the acceleration of social life; the productive standstill reopened the possibility of a new flow of time, including a reconquest of a non-productive space. Pre-pandemic normality was not a desirable place to return to. The construction of the new pandemic reality was the final stamp on this great truth that had been hidden under the terminal exhaustion of postmodernity.

## **1. Loss of shelter and new precarity**

The measures taken to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore an almost forgotten aspect of politics. Political life is a shelter for man (Voegelin 1997, 18) in the sense that it offers man the first rationalisation of the disorder present in things. From a theological perspective, it is known that this disorder is the fruit of original sin and is the subversion of the natural order of things. In any case, this cosmic chaos presents itself to man in its immediacy and the political constitutes the first emergence of order in the face of chaos. Modern mytholo-

gies about a state of nature of men and his inability to live in community partially reflect this scenario (Hobbes 1996, 114). From this perspective, the political activity of the governing power through the laws can be seen as the emergence of a brake on the violence of the strongest and offers man a place in which to dwell. In this exercise of political power, also in the modern vision of the political community, the question of how to limit the immoderate selfishness and of the ruler who must be “just in itself and yet a human being” (Kant 2009, 15–16) cannot be avoided. For Kant, “this problem is therefore the most difficult of all” because “out such crooked wood as the human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated” (Kant 2009, 15–16). The problem of how to regulate this will of the ruler is the great political problem. In a certain way, it is the problem posed by St. Augustine about the *libido dominandi*, the passion for domination by which men “are worst than a wild beast either in cruelty or in lust” (1962, 287). Already in Plato’s Republic (2011, 35–6) the question of power emerges as a problem that is difficult to resolve, particularly in the face of the position of Thrasymachus and the superimposition of justice and force. The metaphor of the ruler-shepherd of Thrasymachus is always lurking to disprove any political self-representation that would seek to exempt itself from this character and it must somehow be concealed in order to achieve political representation that still bears a minimal relation to the function of the shelter, for no one could believe a political narrative that is completely revealed. The form of symbolic interpretation of the masses with regard to power must somehow preserve, albeit in the form of a simulacrum wrapped in disparate civil theologies, the notion of shelter. The political truth announced by Thrasymachus must be driven away or perhaps exorcised. If this does not happen and the ultimate mechanism of power as *libido dominandi* is revealed, the political structure itself might not withstand this revelation and the principle of obedience and loyalty that binds ruler and ruled would fall, thus returning to a state of helplessness and chaos. The need to keep the political structure in place as a shelter is so deep that power nurtures at every historical moment the necessary mechanisms to avoid losing this link with its foundation. This explains the narratives and political the-

ologies that strengthen and confirm the presence of a shelter in political life under the guise of a common destiny implicit in a nation, a history or, at the very least, a constitution. Law is, at least in the Western world and according to the Christian revelation, the great *katekhon*, which performs the function of a barrier to the emergence of a political force that is totally detached and shorn of its symbolic function. Its removal would coincide with the appearance of the *anomos*, the son of perdition, the full realisation of iniquity and unrighteousness that St Paul describes in the second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess 2:3–13).

With the communal function of shelter exhausted, life with others is now a source of contagion and danger. This community breakdown was made possible through laws that dictated isolation and social distancing as a healthy norm, a rule for a good life, thereby dissolving the first characteristic of any community, which is proximity, and at the same time fostering suspicion among peers. This rupture of the community through norms, under the pretext of preserving it and keeping it healthy, is perhaps the most central element of the normativisation of political life in pursuit of overcoming the pandemic. In this regard, Voegelin points out that the political order acts as a *cosmion*, “a little world of order” (1997, 225), a shelter of meaning in the face of the “shapeless vastness of conflicting human desires”. Its function is “to assuage the existential anxiety of man by giving to his soul, through evocation of the community, the assurance of having a meaningful place in a well-ordered cosmos” (1997, 81). The COVID-19 prevention measures have struck at the heart of this political reasoning. The community became the venue of disease, contagion and death through a sad litany of pandemic data backed up by the opinion of epidemiological experts. The loss of reference to community has been, in the new pandemic order, a huge source of disorientation and life distress: “when the magic spell loses its force, the primordial anxieties are set free again, the surrounding world becomes a disorderly vastness, full of unknown dangers, pressing in on the human soul, and the mind that is exposed to this experience of disorder may crack under the strain” (1997, 81). The experience of the world as a liveable place has been lost and anomic forces of disorder have been awakened. Attempts to rec-

reate a surrogate community through media slogans laden with positivity and resilience (like the homemade rainbows “all will be well”) or through a dreamlike solidarity manifested by applauding healthcare workers on doorsteps were totally insufficient.

The loss of shelter through the pandemic threw people into the experience of cosmic disorder as the world had once again become an inhospitable place and *the other* had become a danger to be protected against. But more than fear of the contagion from the other, there was an experience of meaninglessness, which is the extreme of precarity, for when the structure of communal meaning is lost “the possibility of the utter senselessness of a life ending in annihilation is envisaged” (Voegelin 1997, 226). In this context, the *katekhon* of law was exhausted and lost in the promulgation of regulations that have accelerated community destruction. A new political configuration based on the exceptional nature of precarity resulting from the loss of the community’s shelter was therefore emerging. The suspension of fundamental freedoms through pandemic regulation generated a pressing need for meaning that eventually resulted in a docile obedience to the exception. In the new pandemic order where contagion by an invisible virus is the only evil to be avoided, life had to be disinfected of all negativity (Han 2015, 3–4; Esposito 2011, 1), of all otherness and risk because the encounter with the other is a source of contagion and the only other that has remained is the governmental power that has taken possession of the interiority of the person. The figure of the asymptomatic carrier is, in this sense, very indicative of the collectivisation of guilt and of the inability to know that is the very basis of law. In this renewed precarity, continually exposed to potential death, we all must assume our guilt for causing the loss of shelter. Faced with this insurmountable dissociation and exposure to meaninglessness, precarity has been easily transformed into blind obedience.

## 2. Pandemic exceptionality

The collective guilt introduced by the risk of contagion is the principle of the suspension of the presumption of innocence. When the body itself

becomes the element to be preserved in order to safeguard life and the community, it is clear that something has gone wrong in what we usually call democratic order. The mere fact of existing is considered a problem in the eyes of the community and the authorities. This idea links back to the question of political sovereignty, which, according to Schmitt's classic definition (2005, 5) "is he who decides on the exception". In the pandemic context, the sovereign decision to suspend fundamental freedoms with the consequent suspension of personal activities in order to prevent risk was taken by nation states under the guidance of supranational bodies such as the World Health Organisation (2020) which in turn was ultimately ratified by an infinite number of local commissions of emergency experts. In the light of what has happened, it is worth inquiring again about the nature of the sovereign act of the ruler and its link with the concept of *bare life*, which Agamben has already worked on extensively (2020), since the contagious body is directly linked to the inclusion of the body in the ultimate decisions of the sovereign.

In this sense, the pandemic has shown that democratic order cannot avoid the question of a state of emergency. Carl Schmitt had intuited this aspect according to which, many limitations and reciprocal controls might be made in the liberal order to regulate the state of exception, "the question of sovereignty would then be considered less significant but would certainly not be eliminated" (2005, 12). In other words, democratic mechanisms in the face of health emergencies have demonstrated that, ultimately, power resides outside the established legal order despite efforts to trap it with ordinary legal mechanisms. In this regard, political power cannot be limited by itself or by others, and can only be exercised as a form of limit which, like a subterranean river, returns to the surface when a state of exception is invoked. Here we can understand the nature of power and its link, as mentioned above, with the *libido domini*. The power that has emerged from the pandemic state of emergency has reminded us that, even in a democratic context, power cannot alienate itself and that its nature is directly aimed at the control of bodies and minds (Foucault, 1995). In this way, the pandemic order may well lie in an anomic context that need not necessarily coincide with anarchy but

may continue on according to a new order, even if this order is not of a legal nature:

what characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order. In such a situation it is clear that the state remains, whereas law recedes. Because the exception is different from anarchy and chaos, order in the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind. (Schmitt, 2005, 12).

If we apply this model to the management of the pandemic, it can be understood as a new legal order where the relationship with the body becomes central not only for the relationship of power with the subject but especially for the implementation of the state of emergency. However, given the constitution of power as *libido dominandi*, it is natural to raise certain questions about the continuity of this state of exception in what has come to be called the new normality, that is, the post-pandemic moment. If power can neither alienate nor limit itself, the return to a supposed normality is paradoxical to say the least, for power cannot want anything other than its own continuity. The new post-pandemic normality is nothing other than the continuation of the state of emergency without the formality of the declaration of a state of emergency. In this respect, it is with a certain irony that one can note the fact the state of emergency in Spain, declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (BOE 2021), has had no political consequences.

The new pandemic order is therefore a reality that will not shift so easily; the mode of governance through the exceptionality of an emergency time and again emerges as an unforeseen circumstance of public management (climate change, wars, other pandemics, etc.) and is becoming the rule despite democratic narratives. On this construction of power through exceptionality, biological life, the body of the subject, becomes the centre of sovereignty, “at the centre of its calculations” (Agamben, 1998, 6), without this being to the detriment of a penetration into the mind of the subject. The pandemic has shown that mere natural life (*zoé*) has aligned with politically qualified life, with the good life (*tò êu zên*), because the priority of power has been to preserve this mere life rather than a properly

human life. This has happened with the lively participation of almost the entire population, which has accepted to be subject to a power with which it shares the judgement of itself, i.e. a consideration of life as mere biological life. Subsistence in mere life has taken precedence over any other possible kind of life, not to mention the Aristotelian happy life; and its preservation over any other form of life has been prioritised even if this meant the loss of friendships due to social distancing; not seeing our faces due to the regulation of masks; the inability to join hospitalised relatives; and the loss of freedom in exchange for a vain security for the preservation of life itself. The agreement between the governed and the rulers about the meaning of human life reduced to *bare life* has been the most disturbing aspect of the whole pandemic experience. This judgement on the dignity of human life reduced to *bare life* is something that we cannot expect power itself to reconfigure, as it has become the condition enabling power to consolidate itself in the exceptional nature of its management. On this basis, the way is opened to treat *bare life* for what it is, in the name of the safety offered by power, with all the grave injustices this can produce:

We have to fix our gaze, instead, precisely on what the statue of Justice (which, as Montesquieu reminds us, was to be veiled at the very moment of the proclamation of the state of exception) was not supposed to see, namely, what nowadays is apparent to everybody: that the state of exception is the rule, that naked life is immediately the carrier of the sovereign nexus, and that, as such, it is today abandoned to a kind of violence that is all the more effective for being anonymous and quotidian. (Agamben, 2000, 112).

### 3. New(?) uprootedness and precarity in the pandemic

The direct experience of *bare life* due to compliance with the COVID-19 infection prevention regulations has found great acceptance in society. For this reason, as was stated above, this was only possible if the conditions for the reduction of human life to *zoé* were already present beforehand. Discomfort with the post-modern way of life, despite being desperately expelled in a multitude of ways, does not fail to leave its mark on the soul. The experience of the “zero line” that looks into nothingness (Hei-

degger, 1958, 35) is more comfortable if life is understood in a zoological way, at the cost of making human life coincide with this purely biological dimension. In this sense, the COVID-19 prevention measures have manifested the sacrificial character of power. The renunciation of a happy life in the name of health is complete and permanent. The perfection of civic duty in the name of solidarity, an opaque secularisation of evangelical perfection, has demanded a sacrifice that has been executed at the cost of renouncing the totality of life. The duty of piety towards parents has also been sacrificed in the name of health, not to mention the sacrifice of human relationships and economic activities.

Agamben (2000, 121) reminds us how the concentration camp was the exemplification of the tragic destiny of political modernity: “the camp truly is the inaugural site of modernity: it is the first space in which public and private events, political life and biological life, become rigorously indistinguishable”. Being stripped of everything and being seen by power only as an accidental concretion of the body (in this case testing positive for the virus and the capacity for contagion) exposes a vital precarity that can be sacrificed at any moment. It is political terror at its most realised when everyone is under suspicion and there is no way to excuse oneself. When “the politicization of bare life” (Agamben, 1998, 4) has been fulfilled, we are back in the logic of the camp and the execution of the sentence is a simple bureaucratic formality that will be fulfilled sooner or later. The problem of freedom is therefore solved: the full precarity and predictability of human acts is a *fait accompli*. Reduced to bare life and having sacrificed everything that is properly human, the new subject has completed the process of uprooting in the total precarity of his being. Power can dispose of him without encountering resistance of any kind: for this purpose it has a media machine that perpetuates the sacrificial duty and can regulate the degree of emergence and shocks in order to maintain this situation (Klein, 2007).

In this sense, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this process of uprooting intrinsic to post-modernity (Pochamara 2022). The process of losing the natural symbolic axes of socialisation undermines personal identity and directly exposes one to being reduced

to a bare life. In describing the dynamics of capitalism, Bell (1978, 146) points out that the loss of meaning in the realm of religion, culture and work exposes a disorientation in the understanding of reality that pushes the search for new meanings with a pressing urgency in order not to fall into a sense of nihilism or emptiness. As Rosa (2005, 285–6) has pointed out, there is a link between social acceleration and the experience of “up-rootedness and alienation” and in this sense the COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for a phenomenon that was already underway. The three symbolic axes mentioned above have suffered further erosion. As far as culture is concerned, the most significant element has been the hiding of the face and the loss of social relations. If post-modern culture had the character of individuality and solitude beforehand, the concealment of the face has desensitised the understanding of the suffering of others, thus facilitating its virtualised transmission through the media and social networks. The loss of the face in the public space, together with the virtualisation of pain through the digital screen, has meant a debasement of the genuine capacity to feel the other as an equal and has further depersonalised community experiences.

In the labour sphere the pre-pandemic situation already pointed to a system of absolute slavery by the self-exploitation of the “entrepreneur of its own self” (Han 2017, 2) and the consideration of the worker as a productive machine that “has a lifespan, a length of time in which it can be used, an obsolescence, and an ageing” (Foucault 2004, 224–25). Pandemic-related changes in the work environment continue along these lines. On the one hand, collective redundancies resulting from the halt to production have made former workers poorer and more dependent on state aid. On the other hand, the system of remote working has exacerbated the system of self-exploitation and competition with a greater number of workers now atomised as self-employed. It is not surprising that the so-called Great Resignation phenomenon has occurred at the end of the pandemic emergency, as the working environment has become a reproduction of the pattern of the *bare life*.

Finally, the symbolic axis of religion and more generally of the sacred was already suffering the consequences of unrestrained secularisa-

tion. The loss of the sacred leads to the consideration of life as mere immanence and functionality. The existence of something as unavailable and out of productivity is the first consequence of the existence of a sacred space as opposed to a profane one. In this context, the pandemic has also phagocytised the space of the sacred and its explanation of events. In particular, Catholicism has witnessed a unique phenomenon, to say the least. The logic of the *bare life* has triumphed over any other explanation of the pandemic. Beyond an appeal to civic solidarity, there has been a lack of a transcendent explanation of what happened in the sense of considering historical events in the light of divine providence. The detailed chronicles of the plague in Tuscany in the 17th century (Cipolla 1984) show how time and again the ecclesiastical authority and the political authority had major disagreements about how to manage public health; in particular measures that could affect worship, religious life and in general the life of the citizens. On the other hand, the almost uncritical acceptance of pandemic prevention measures by large sections of the church is unique. The closure of churches, the suspension of public worship, the acceptance of isolation protocols for the sick and dying together with the absence of public demonstrations to demand the end of the pandemic, among other things, show the assumption of the pandemic paradigm from the perspective of faith. In fact, it is impossible to explain the providential meaning of the pandemic or of any relevant event in history through the prism of *bare life*. Whether as a possible punishment or as an apocalyptic sign, facts lose their relevance and enter the monotony of history where nothing new can happen because *pathos* has been buried by management and biopolitical regulations. Perhaps this is a true apocalyptic sign, more than the pandemic itself: the inability to offer people a logic of events *sub specie aeternitatis*, from a place that opens up the hope that the logic of the *bare life* is not the end point of history.

## Conclusion

The political management of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that political power, especially in the West, has entered a new phase of its de-

ployment. The desire to control bodies and minds, which was intrinsic to the genesis of the modern state, has found in the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic a way to turn emergency into routine. This implies the acceleration of the process of uprooting inherent to post-modernity, which leads to greater precarity and ultimately to the obedience of a population reduced to the status of *a bare life*. The consideration of life in the only aspect relating to the body *resolves* the problem of freedom which was at the heart of the concerns of the modern state. The price of freedom is the sacrifice of the good life, i.e. the potential renunciation of all properly human dimensions in exchange for the guarantee of biological preservation. In order to guarantee this subsistence, the law has played a fundamental role, normativising and limiting practically all aspects of human life through the exceptionality of the emergency. The result of this situation has been the loss of shelter, which has thrown man into a new chaos in his relationship with reality, because *living* in pandemic times means illness and death, and power ends up revealing itself fully as *libido dominandi*, reducing man to *bare life*. As such, the processes of uprooting that have been underway since modernity have been reinforced and accelerated, pushing man to experience an even more distressing precarity, having lost all defense against *exceptional* power. The way to reverse this process according to Agamben (2000, 113–14) would be an “absolute profane ‘sufficient life’ that has reached the perfection of its own power and of its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold”. Beyond the difficulty of a sufficiently profane life, perhaps the best way is not to be seduced by the voice of indoctrination and propaganda. Preserving the truth and dignity of human life, which escapes all biopolitical control, as well as preserving its character of gratuitousness and oblation, evokes once again the function of *katekhon* in the midst of the disorder of lies and *libido dominandi*. Solzhenitsyn (1974) said in the face of the Soviet dictatorship that living not by lies makes it possible to break the circle of lies, because when people renounce them, they die “like a virus” because “they can survive only in a living organism”. The lie is that a political order founded on the *bare life* can be preserved as if it were a good life and that freedom is some-

thing that can be exchanged for a vain safety offered by political power. The hope is that the hypnosis that the lie performs on the collective can still be broken by dissenting voices (Desmet 2022, 101), by the voice that cries out in the desert, that reminds people of the destiny that exists beyond life reduced to *zoé*.

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