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## **The elite that wash their hands and the virus of individualism**

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In 1944 the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a play translated into Portuguese as *Entre quatro paredes* [*Between four walls*]<sup>1</sup>. It involves three characters – a man and two women, one of whom is homosexual – who are dead and who are confined for the whole eternity between four walls with no mirrors. As the plot evolves, we get to know the life and sins of each of them, reflected in the look of the other, at the same time as disputes, rivalries, jealousy and aggressiveness come to occupy the stage, up to the final conclusion: ‘Hell is the others’. In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, in a critical dialogue with the philosopher, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote a text on time. This text is constructed around a kind of puzzle or challenge: there are three prisoners (as in Sartre’s play), but they do not have personal features like gender or any other characteristic. The only thing we know is that they are imprisoned, and that the prison warden offers the possibility that one of them be freed. He presents five discs to the prisoners: three white and two black. He fastens a disc to the back of each of them and says: ‘The first one to find out the colour of his own disc must report himself to be released; he would have to provide a convincing explanation for his response (that is to say, guessing is not valid), and he will be freed. It is obvious that each of the prisoners is able to see the disc on the backs of the other two, and that reciprocally the others can see the disc on his back. From then on a series of hypotheses follows that lead, let us believe so, to the three prisoners exiting simultaneously.

I am not going to give a demonstration of how one arrives at that solution. Whoever is reading this text will probably be in quarantine and will have enough time to solve the puzzle. He or she could even make a simulation of the situation, so as to facilitate the understanding that the haste to exit and the way in which the other prisoners react are fundamental factors for the finding of the exit. At the same time, the game only functions if there is absolute reciprocity between the prisoners, and the final conclusion is that there is no exit from hell unless it is collective. Lacan concludes his beautiful text by saying that the very small group of three is a kind of minimal formula for a collectivity, which in the last analysis touches on the fundamental question of what we call humanity: how do we recognize ourselves as being human, but through the other?

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<sup>1</sup> [*Huis clos* in the original French. It has been performed in English under different titles: *No Exit*; *In Camera*; *No Way Out*; *Vicious Circle*; *Behind Closed Doors*, and *Dead End*. (T.)]

This is, then, the paradox that imprisons us: the others are hell, but we need the others in order to leave hell. We are living a historical moment in which once more humanity faces that reality in a dramatic way. Here, in Brazil, that reality appears to us almost as an ironic joke: we can no longer shake hands, at a moment when nobody should release the hands of anyone else. While China experienced a dramatic situation for months and Europe started to realize that COVID-19 was not a little cold, many young Brazilians maintained, without any shame, that it was an illness of the elderly. As I gained familiarity with the charts on the transmission of this new form of coronavirus, I became increasingly perplexed by the observation that a great number of people, including many knowledgeable and educated persons, insisted on discussing the matter as if it were only a question of individual health, of medical opinions or of statistics relevant to the rates of mortality. They had arguments along the lines of ‘There are other illnesses that kill more people’, or ‘H1N1 is much more lethal’, or ‘There is a lot of collective hysteria’.

My perplexity derived from two factors. The first one was the premise that the measures of caution would be excessive, since if it were the case that subject A contracted the virus, the ‘flu’ would not be so severe. In other words, subject A had not yet understood that the question was not so much getting infected by the virus, but rather not transmitting it to others. As subject A was only concerned with his own situation and that of his close ones, he could not understand that he might not present any symptom or only a mild cold if he had contracted the virus – thanks to his age, the excellent condition of his health and his health insurance plan – but might nevertheless be a vector of contamination in geometrical progression, given the facility with which the infection is transmitted, quickly hitting vulnerable people and not allowing enough time to assist all of them as necessary. In brief: the health system collapses! This is a fact in China, Italy, Paris, the United Arab Emirates and Brazil. Yet for Brazil there are aggravating variables that were not taken into account for subject A. It is at this point that a second, terrifying factor emerges. Subject A, a native of the Brazilian elite, who travels frequently to Europe or lives close to others who do so, continued normally with his life and with his schedule of commitments after disembarking, having arrived from regions where the epidemic was already spread. After all, because of his young age and of enjoying good health, the rate of mortality is only 2%. Subject A came out exhaling that argument to the four winds, and at the same time transmitting the virus through his saliva, his pure breath and his operations of clean hands. He simply washed his hands. In the first place, he spoke as if two per cent of deaths were a small number – but I leave this observation without comments. The fundamental error in this case is the supposition of an absolute percentage, as if this were intrinsic exclusively to the virus itself and not dependent upon the social, sanitary, economic, cultural, political and other characteristics of the populations affected by the virus. As this is a new disease, we only know the statistics of China and European countries, which are regions with characteristics that are completely different from those of Brazil.

Days passed, the virus also passed, and the arguments of the leaders of our government were shown to be frighteningly incongruous. We were told that drastic measures of social isolation were still premature, as the epidemic was here only at the beginning. It was as if the epidemic – to put it this way – possessed a will of its own, as if it had an inherent speed, and as if the stage of the epidemic were indifferent to the behaviour of its potential transmitters. This is almost as if we promoted the nursery of *aedes egypti* in the middle of an epidemic of dengue

fever, instead of attempting to eradicate their breeding. On the occasion, we were the mosquitoes, and this is why we should stay at home.

Then we had the responses of subject B: ‘And what about those who do not have a home...?’ Now, subject B: precisely because you have a home, you should remain at home, and promote the same behaviour among your colleagues, public servants and friends, so as not to contaminate those who do not have a home. Since in a country like Brazil, if you, subject B, are not going to die, or if in your social class at a first glance the mortality rate is ‘only’ 2%, you can be sure that it will be much higher among the disadvantaged classes and the vulnerable populations, as for instance among the indigenous people.

As days went by, and as the epidemiologists constantly raised the alarm, as well as the aggravation of the situation in Europe, a few cards began to fall very slowly, much more slowly than what would have been reasonable, as we had the chance, or would I even say the good luck of preparing ourselves with anticipation, but we did nothing. What happened as from that moment was the revelation of the other side of the coin. From the inconsequential and irresponsible position of the elite to which subject A belongs, we moved almost automatically to the consumerist fury of subject B, of the middle class, who fought for his right to alcoholic gel and toilet paper. I was reminded of the day, in 2006, when I spent four hours with my little children in the car, in the traffic of São Paulo, as the result of the threat of an attack by the PCC [*Primeiro Comando da Capital*]. Some people entered the footpaths with their cars, without respecting the traffic signs, and literally moved on top of others. In our current situation, it would not be irrelevant to wonder why the toilet paper. The question may be taken up by other psychoanalytic colleagues who may want to study the relation between meanness and the anal phase, which Freud already addressed. Incidentally, the fact that the coronavirus arrived in Brazil by aeroplane is not an insignificant detail, but a fateful metaphor for the logic of extermination that orients our elites, as if there existed two types of human beings – and we return to Lacan: those who serve, and those who enjoy their possessions. The death of the domestic worker who was serving her infected employers is also rather emblematic.

The fact remains that in the individualist, consumers’ society in which we are imprisoned, we live as if everything happened by magic. Subject B eats hamburgers at MacDonald’s as if that delicious taste – taste is not open to discussion – were not the product of a chain of production that involves deforestation, the torture of animals, the exploitation of workers, the industry of ultra-processed foods, poisons, etc. Subject A approaches the automatic gate of his garage and *Open sesame* – he hits the road at a comfortably conditioned temperature. We do not know where and how the caretakers of our buildings live. We do not know either, and we do not want to know, how the rubbish disappears from our garbage bins. We do not know the means of transportation or the conditions under which our domestic workers arrive at our places. But now the virus has arrived, and the ‘*aedes*’ A and B take it to subject C who, contrary to what a minister said, did not spend his holidays in Miami or in Europe. We still do not know how he is going to react, but certainly he is not going to say that it is only a cold, and he will not be able to store alcoholic gel or toilet paper. But we know of the consequences in terms of public health, the supply of goods, the economy, employment, education, social bonds. I am sorry to inform you, subjects A and B, but you will not be able to flee to Miami or Lisbon, because this time the virus is everywhere and flights have been cancelled!

The COVID-19 has brought into the open the absolute bankruptcy of a way of life that can only be sustained by this new form of slavery of the servants of the Market God, without rights, without public health, without the State, without social welfare, in such a state of acceleration that it can produce only while leaving as a remainder segregation, industrial waste and the death of many. We have been waiting for a natural catastrophe for some time. It has arrived. A cut has taken place: a before and an after of this Plague. We are not going to be the same when the vaccine and the miraculous drug get tested by science and commercialized by the pharmaceutical companies. The construction of a new, more dignified future for our children, where A, B and C be able to recognize themselves as human and realize that there is a solution only through a collective effort, is in our hands. Until then, this is not the time 'to wash one's hands' – unless that it so be that one hand washes the other!

*Translated by Leonardo Rodríguez*