

The threshold of democracy in José Saramago's *Seeing*¹

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Abstract

Seeing was written by José Saramago in 2004, and starts from the assumption that the population can start a silent backlash by casting blank votes in local elections, thus disrupting the normality of the democratic system. Between culpability and action, free choice and the decline of human rights, this book questions the authenticity of democracy as it stands in the present Western societies. Confronted with the dangers of a biopolitical manipulation, casting blank votes hints the potency of a state of exception, in which the population can exercise power based on conscience. This essay looks into the confronting positions of the ruling power and of the population that is governed by that very power.

Keywords: *Lucidity. Saramago. Democracy. State of exception. Elections. Blank votes.*

¹ Although I use the title *Seeing*, which is the translation of the original Portuguese title *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, all references and quotations concern the Portuguese edition. Footnotes include all the quotations I translated from the source languages of all the books used in this essay.

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Wouldn't you agree that an important act such as voting should deserve from every responsible voter a serious, solemn, introspective countenance, or is it that democracy makes you laugh, Maybe it makes me cry

Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, 2004, p. 49

The wise and the blind

Blank ballots as a metaphor for the state of exception; in other words, blank ballots as the starting point for a parable about the present condition of the Western democracies, in which there is always the possibility of declaring a state of exception, whenever some sort of danger seems to lie ahead. *Seeing* (thus entitled in English, although the literal translation would be *Essay on Lucidity*) is a José Saramago novel first published in 2004 that depicts a strange event in local elections, when the voters of the capital city of an unnamed country massively refuse to cast their votes in any of the eligible political parties. Hate of democracy, as Jacques Rancière (2006) has put it, indifference, or merely negation? Perhaps the answer lies in the supposition that there can actually be hope in the people's decisions, in spite of the lack of interest elections may raise. The fact of the matter, however, is that democracy as portrayed in *Seeing* is in crisis.

Slavoj Žižek reads this book as a violent statement to urge a change in the political *status quo*. According to this philosopher, "[t]he voters's abstention goes further than the intra-political negation, the vote of no confidence: it rejects the very frame of decision" (ŽIŽEK, 2009, p. 182). This statement is confirmed in the repetition of the polls: at first, more than 70 per cent of the ballots were blank; the following week, when the polls were repeated, it got even worse, as the number escalated up to 83 per cent, in spite of the huge turnout. The obvious conclusion regarding such impressive numbers is that there is a strong mistrust about the present politicians, to the point of questioning the whole frame of political decision, as Žižek (2009) has pointed out. However, the people's choice in these elections hint the possibility of a reversal in authority: it is the people that create a state of exception, not the authorities, who feel rather at a loss when confronted with this reality.

Thus, Saramago's parable ventures the possibility of letting the people actually choose a different political pathway.

Seeing exposes the fragility of a political system in which those in power and those who should benefit from the decisions of authority paradoxically cohabit in separate worlds. This double bind reality creates a zone of undecidability that is the core of *Seeing's* plot. Those in power try to reestablish order as they know it and rely on, whereas the voters stand for their beliefs of change, by denying any sort of confidence in those that rule them. The result of the people's choice, therefore, enables the hypothesis of establishing a new rule, a new norm, however utopian it may be.

It is inferred on thesis VIII of Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* that a new form of society can be achieved, one that diverges from the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat as to present a state of exception that will dethrone fascism and put an end to the history of the oppressed:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of exception" in which we live is the rule. We have to come to terms to a concept of history that matches this idea. Only then will it be possible to set as our task the need to accomplish the true state of exception; then, our position in the struggle against fascism will be improved. The chance it has had to make a stand relies mostly on the fact that its opponents see it as a historical norm, in the name of progress.¹ (BENJAMIN, 2010, p. 13)

The fact that this fragment was probably written before or at the beginning of the Second World War (it was published posthumously in 1944) is of no small importance, as it hints the possibility of overcoming fascism through the implementation of a state of exception. *Seeing* does not portray a fascist regime, not at least at the time of the election. However, the consequences of the event, including the implementation of governmental terrorist measures, suggest that democracy was just a simulacrum of a veiled frame of dictatorship that culminated in the blank ballots.

What Benjamin (2010) suggests is that a non-conformist alternative is possible within a state of exception frame. Only then redemption will be accomplished. This sort of messianic message is not distant from *Seeing*. The fact that the population of the unnamed capital does not react violently to the siege they

¹ "A tradição dos oprimidos ensinanos que o «estado de excepção» em que vivemos é a regra. Temos de chegar a um conceito de história que corresponda a esta ideia. Só então se perfilará diante dos nossos olhos, como nossa tarefa, a necessidade de provocar o verdadeiro estado de excepção; e assim a nossa posição na luta contra o fascismo melhorará. A hipótese de ele se afirmar reside em grande parte de os seus opositores o verem como uma norma histórica, em nome do progresso".

have to face as a retaliation for their misbehaviour when casting blank votes corroborates the idea of a peaceful understanding within a community, i.e., within a political organization, despite the hindrances they are or will soon be facing.

The contemporary Western civilizations have the conviction of living in a democratic society, and elections stand as the privileged moment to attest it. Yet, as Jacques Rancière puts it, there is a downside to it, when

the multitude, freed of the worry of governing, is left to its private and egotistical passions. Either the individuals composing it are uninterested in public matters and abstain from elections; or they approach them uniquely from the point of view of their interests and consumer whims. (RANCIÈRE, 2006, p. 75)

This could explain the mass blank ballots of *Seeing*. Nevertheless, the following events deny such blunt assumption, at least in what concerns the inhabitants of the capital. Their reactions to the government's severe impositions contradict both the idea of indifference towards public matters and the fulfilment of personal interests. On the contrary, their attitude is one of resistance, in spite of the threats. When the prime minister addresses the population, telling them the extreme measures the Government is forced to undertake so that the population can "make amends for the perverseness to which they were drawn, who knows by whom"² (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 38), the most impressive reactions were:

Some people also just turned off the TV when the prime minister ended and then, while waiting to go to bed, spent their time talking about their daily lives, and others spent the rest of the evening tearing and burning sheets of paper. They were not conjurers, they were just scared.³ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 40)

² "[P]ara que se corrijam da maldade a que se deixaram arrastar sabe-se lá por quem".

³ "Houve também pessoas que se limitaram a desligar o aparelho de televisão quando o primeiro-ministro terminou e depois, enquanto não iam para a cama, se entretiveram a falar das suas vidas, e outras houve que passaram o resto do serão a rasgar e a queimar papéis. Não eram conspiradores, simplesmente tinham medo".

Although this happens at the beginning of the state of exception decreed by the Government, the attitude of non-violence prevails: there are no riots, no aggressive demonstrations, no massive claims on the part of the population anywhere along the book. As such, there is a break of tradition, as though the oppressed – who in the modern concept of democracy, as suggested by Rancière (2006), can be understood as those that do not belong to any sort of oligarchy – have a growing feeling that progress cannot mean blind submission

to the forces in power. Theirs is definitely a different sort of state of exception, closer to the one Benjamin (2010) thought in the above-mentioned thesis on the concept of history.

The Government, on the other hand, progressively increases oppressive measures, and starts a veiled war against the unknown enemy who supposedly started the people's nonsubmissiveness. What looked like a democratic regime rapidly turns into a dictatorship; moreover, democracy becomes a farce, a mere word through which the Government imposes a state of siege in order to, as the minister of defence clearly states, make citizens understand that they are "untrustworthy and as such must be treated"⁴ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 62). It is therefore clear not only the severance between authority and the people, but also the condescending tone that clarifies the obedience citizens must observe. As Jacques Derrida (2008, p. 72) formulates, "'I protect you' means, to the State, I command you, you are my subject, I subjugate you"⁵. However, the people portrayed in *Seeing* have other ideas in mind, in spite of the fear they may feel. Their understanding of the games of power allows them to disregard authority, without committing a crime. In other words, they turn the Government into a supplement to be endured in their daily lives, but not necessarily to follow blindly.

Such an attitude, however, is not compatible with the will of power rulers have. According to Derrida (2008, p. 345), what sovereigns demand is "the excess, the hyperbole, it is an insatiable excess that will overflow any determinable limit"⁶. Such hidden purposes become apparent at times of crises, such as the one depicted in *Seeing*. The first half of this novel provides an ironical glance over the techniques of power, which several dialogues among rulers, such as the following, well represent:

So you believe that the city will not resist much longer, So I do, besides there is another important detail, perhaps the most important of all, Which is, No matter how hard it has and will continue to be tried, never will people think the same way, It would seem otherwise this time, That would be too perfect to be true, mister president, What if there really is, at least you admitted it as probable, a secret organization, a mafia, a camorra, a cosa nostra, a cia or a kgb, Cia is not secret, mister president, and kgb no longer exists, The difference can't be that big, let us just picture something like that, or worse, if possible, something more Machiavellian,

⁴ "[N]ão são dignos de confiança e [...] como tal têm de ser tratados".

⁵ "«Je te protège» veut dire, pour l'État, je t'oblige, tu est mon sujet, je t'assujettis".

⁶ "[C]'est l'excès, c'est l'hyperbole, c'est un excès insatiable pour déborder toute limite déterminable".

made up to create this almost unanimity upon, truthfully speaking, I don't even know what, Blank ballots, mister president, blank ballots⁷ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 88).

Capital letters mark each intervenient's lines, as it is common in Saramago's books. In this specific long dialogue, of which this is just a small extract, the fluency of ideas expressed by either the president or the prime minister set the background for the reaction of the state in order to find the culprits for the blank ballots. Claiming there actually was a conspiracy against authority – which was never proven – is argument enough for a real conspiracy perpetrated by the rulers of the country. The fact that illegal and governmental organizations are indistinctly enumerated by the president furthermore stresses the fragility of the democratic regime. In other words, oligarchies that are used to keep the power for themselves, as they reach a position within the state that makes them the only eligible candidates in national, regional or municipal elections, neither admit the inexistence of a conspiracy, nor are willing to think of alternative ways of governance.

Rancière (2006, p. 73) sustains that “[t]he evils of which our ‘democracies’ suffer are primarily evils related to the insatiable appetite of oligarchs”. In *Seeing*, such an appetite turns into a sort of blindness that reveals itself when the leaders of the country flee from the sieged city. Then, both president and prime minister notice that the lights of the city do not fade away as they leave it. In fact, nobody turns them off. They will therefore continue to light those who remain. This metaphor calls upon the original title of the book (*Essay on Lucidity*), thus underlining the wisdom of the people as a contrast to the narrow-mindedness and dangerousness of rulers.

Biopolitical measures

Mister Kraus is one of the books of Gonçalo M. Tavares's series *The Neighbourhood*, and it is structured through a number of short texts portraying the life of a boss, i.e., a political leader, and his helpful and laudatory team. The council of ministers becomes a special moment of blindness: they all seat in a dark room, as if they were all in a theatre, and are ushered to their seats by an attendant who is the only person to hold a small light. Then,

⁷ “Crê então que a cidade não poderá resistir por muito tempo, Assim é, além disso há outro factor importante, talvez o mais importante de todos, Qual, Por muito que se tenha tentado e continue a tentar-se, nunca se há-de conseguir que as pessoas pensem todas da mesma maneira, Desta vez se dirá que sim, Seria demasiado perfeito para poder ser verdadeiro, senhor presidente, E se existe realmente por aí, pelo menos há pouco tinha-o admitido como hipótese, uma organização secreta, uma máfia, uma camorra, uma cosa nostra, uma cia ou um kgb, A cia não é secreta, senhor presidente, e o kgb já não existe, A diferença não será grande, mas imaginemos algo assim, ou ainda pior, se é possível, mais maquiavélico, inventado agora para criar esta quase unanimidade à volta de, se quer que lhe diga, nem sei bem de quê, Do voto em branco, senhor presidente, do voto em branco”.

As soon as the man of the flashlight left, the room was completely without light; it became a habit for the Boss to say, on the spot, calming down his mates with his voice:

– I'm here, I'm here!

After tracing their boss through the sound, the meeting would begin.⁸ (TAVARES, 2005, p. 83)

Darkness is not just a metaphor for the blindness of those who lead, but it also stresses the progressive distance between the authority and the people it represents. Moreover, clear-sightedness is not a trait of those in power, but of those who are commanded by them. Like the people of the city who still keep their lights turned on in *Seeing*, also in this small book by Gonçalo M. Tavares it is the usher who has the power of seeing. Besides the sarcasm, both books stress the distorted perception of the real that corrodes the exercise of power. As a consequence, authority and the common people experience a distance that puts democracy at risk, precisely because of the cleavage between the people and the governments, which rely on the help of assistants and high technicians to make their decisions.

The place of politics in such a model of democracy becomes frail and, above all, depending on the will of those who hold the highest positions within the state hierarchy. That is why, in the name of common good, the forces of power in *Seeing* decide to protect the population by declaring the state of siege and, little by little, remove some of the basic rights of citizenship in order to make people realise their mistake and confess the mischievous act committed when casting blank ballots. Cynicism blends with oppressive measures to attain full control of the population, thus reassuring the maintenance of power:

Actually, it seemed as though most inhabitants of the capital had made the decision to change their lives, their tastes, their style. Their biggest blunder, as it will become clearer and clearer from now on, was that they cast blank ballots. They wanted to clean things up, they would certainly get it.

That was the firm disposition of the Government and, more particularly, of the minister of the interior. The choice of agents, some coming from the intelligence services, others from public corporations, that would be surreptitiously planted among the masses, had been swift and effective.⁹ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 47)

⁸ “Mal o homem da lanterna saía, a sala ficava absolutamente sem luz; e transformara-se por isso num acto normal o Chefe dizer, de imediato, acalmando com a voz os seus companheiros:

“Estou aqui, estou aqui! Depois de, pelo som, localizarem o Chefe, a reunião começava”.

⁹ “Realmente, parecia que a maior parte dos habitantes da capital estavam decididos a mudar de vida, de gostos, de estilo. O grande equívoco deles, como a partir de agora se começará a ver melhor, foi terem votado em branco. Já que tinham querido limpeza, iriam tê-la.

Essa era a firme disposição do governo e, particularmente, do ministério do interior. A escolha dos agentes, uns vindos da secreta, outros de corporações públicas, que iriam infiltrar-se sub-repticiamente no seio das massas, havia sido rápida e eficaz”.

By adopting the point of view of the minister of the interior, through this extract, the third person narrator exposes the hidden will of this particular character, which is to gain control over the population. It is not merely a Machiavellian strategy of power; the contours developed in the process of repressing the citizens involve a biopolitical line of action, as the measures applied are based on the so-called well-being of the population, or on the preservation of their bodies. The aim, however, is the implementation of a state of siege, or, in other words, a state of exception.

According to Michel Foucault, the assumption of the biological condition of the body has changed the exercise of power, which becomes dependent on “a series of interventions and *regulatory controls*”¹⁰ (FOUCAULT, 1994, p. 141). The measures undertaken by the government in *Seeing* are triggered by that very perspective, which turn the implementation of the state of siege as a straightforward example of a biopolitical decision. Even the terminology used by the Government and the president show at what extent it is such: the wave of blank ballots is a disease that has to be stopped as a pandemic would. The next extract clarifies it:

the sole crime of these people was to cast blank ballots, it would be of little importance if only the usual ones had done it, but there were plenty, there were too much, almost all of them, what does it matter that it is your inalienable right if you are told that such a right has to be used in homeostatic doses, drop by drop, you cannot walk around with a full bowl overflowing with blank ballots¹¹ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 56).

Votes are therefore like a medicine to be entirely regulated by the machine of the state. Governments are there like doctors to save people’s lives, to safeguard them from diseases that may become a danger to the sovereigns themselves (Rancière would call them oligarchies). Blank votes are therefore considered as a “black death plague” by the president, or rather, as a “white death plague” (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 62), as the prime minister corrects him, which is the reason for the menace against the “stability of the democratic system, not simply, not merely in a country, in this country, but throughout the planet” (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 63), as the minister for foreign affairs redundantly puts it¹².

¹⁰ “[U]ma série de intervenções e de controlos reguladores”.

¹¹ “[O] único crime desta gente foi votar em branco, não teria importância de maior se tivessem sido só os do costume, mas foram muitos, foram demasiados, foram quase todos, que mais dá que seja um direito teu inalienável se te dizem que esse direito é para usar em doses homeopáticas, gota a gota, não podes vir por aí com um cântaro cheio a transbordar de votos brancos”.

¹² Respectively, “peste negra”, “peste branca” and “a estabilidade do sistema democrático, não simplesmente, não meramente, num país, neste país, mas em todo o planeta”.

In the process, it is the body that becomes a menace, it is the body that must suffer the consequences of the people's so-called bad deeds. In the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau had to spend a night in prison because he refused to pay a tax that would serve a government that supported slavery. For him, it was a matter of conscience, which the Government tried to bend by the use of extreme measures. Moreover, according to Thoreau (2004, p. 90), it could only do that because it is "physically the strongest". Therefore, his body could be taken to prison; however, his conscience kept its integrity. He added that "[t]he State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses" (THOREAU, 2004, p. 103).

What Thoreau perceived in the nineteenth century was that the only way power had to control citizens was to address the body, such as putting people in jail, rather than making decisions based on ethics. Such thought is not far distant from the measures carried out during a state of exception, be it in a dictatorial regime or not. Prohibition in the name of the preservation of life turns into a rule that can potentially contradict democracy. *Seeing* goes further on the subject, by implying the possibility of State manipulation of the masses allegedly in order to preserve their well-being as citizens of a democratic country.

The above-mentioned "white death plague" alludes to another Saramago book, *Blindness* (the literal translation would be *Essay on Blindness*), published in 1995. *Seeing* can be considered its sequel, as some of the characters are the same, and the references to the unexplained pandemic that affected the population of the city then are constant. Both books are even structured in a paralleled way: they are atopic and achronic, characters have no names, in short, as Isabel Pires de Lima (1999, p. 416) points out, there is a sort of "ontological unsettling condition"¹³. This comment on *Blindness* can be extended to *Seeing*. The effects of the regulatory governmental measures in the two books imply not only the suppression of the citizens' rights, but they also expose the limitless of the authority action, even though claiming to act on behalf of the population.

Paradoxically, while arguing that they are taking precautionary measures to sustain a pandemic, the Governments of both books are in fact exposing the population

¹³ "[D]esnorte ontológico".

to a condition of bare life. In *Blindness*, while confining the citizens that inexplicably become blind to a deactivated madhouse in which they are confronted with a new form of chaotic order, the Government actually deprive citizens from every right, subject them to the utmost undignified existence, one in which even the worthiest must kill in order to survive. That is what happens to the wife of the doctor, who becomes an important character in the second half of *Seeing*. She was the one that helped a group of blind people to survive during the pandemic in *Blindness*; she is the most suitable person to put the blame on as the instigator of the rebellious blank votes in *Seeing*. The dialogue between this woman and a commissioner assigned to investigate the blank ballots is clear enough:

And I am to blame for what happened, That is what I'm trying to ascertain, And how did I get the capital's majority of the population to cast blank ballots, putting flyers under their doors, by midnight prayers and witchcraft, by spreading a chemical product in the water supply network, by promising each person the first prize in the lottery, or by spending what my husband earns in his office to buy votes, You kept your vision when everybody else was blind and you haven't been able till now, or maybe you don't want to, explain me why, And that makes me the culprit of a conspiracy against the world's democracy, That is what I am trying to find out¹⁴ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 237).

The irony of the woman confronts the unrelenting expertise of the commissioner who, at this point of the story, is still a lawful officer working for the state. By means of a hyperbolic enumeration, the woman denounces the imbalance between what happened in the election day and the measures undertaken by the government, which will now be directed straight to her: she is the alleged head of a conspiracy that never existed, and she will be duly punished because of that.

As her words well express, this woman is aware of the dangers; she sees the scope of the investigation; she understands the consequences that may befall upon her because the Government cannot seem to cope with the will of the people. After all, the state of siege is decreed by the Government with the allegation that the democratic regime must be protected. However, if the citizens' inalienable rights are denied, and the authority of power forcefully imposed,

¹⁴ "E eu sou a culpada do sucedido, É o que estou tratando de averiguar, E como foi que consegui levar a maioria da população da capital a votar em branco, metendo panfletos debaixo da porta, por meio de rezas e esconjuros à meia-noite, lançando um produto químico no abastecimento de água, prometendo o primeiro prêmio da lotaria a cada pessoa, ou gastando a comprar votos o que o meu marido ganha no consultório, A senhora conservou a visão quando toda a gente estava cega e ainda não foi capaz ou recusa-se a explicar-me porquê, E isso torna-me agora culpada de conspiração contra a democracia mundial, É o que trato de averiguar".

democracy becomes suspended, which actually happened in the capital city where *Seeing* is set.

According to Giorgio Agamben, one of the dangers faced by today's democracies is precisely the possibility of declaring the state of exception, which may turn into an aporetic condition of denegation of democracy, a condition paradoxically provided for in the juridical systems of the Western countries. He refers to the present "unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 14), which in *Seeing* justifies the interrogation of five hundred citizens, who are locked up for an undetermined period of time, "increasing when, how, and how much necessary the physical and psychological pressure they were submitted to"¹⁵ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 52). They are also submitted to lie detectors, and undercover missions are carried out. Even panic is tried, when agents perpetrate a terrorist attack that causes the death of more than twenty people. Thus, the state of exception becomes an actual moment of anomy, in which the rule of the state is suspended in order to keep the population as frightened as to wish for the return of the sovereigns they had rejected when casting blank votes.

Derrida (2008, p. 71) argues that the law is nothing more than a contract, a convention; in short, laws are "prostheses"¹⁶. As such, the implementation of the state of siege in Saramago's *Seeing* depends on the decisions of the government, i.e., a part of the country's population, one that, however, has the power to change any prosthesis they like because they feel intitled to do so. Therefore, governments can impose and suspend law, and still claim to be exercising democracy, as they were elected by the people. It is in fact so, since the blank ballots at stake happened during local elections, not national ones. Nevertheless, that does not straightforwardly mean that the state of siege is a democratic decision. Giorgio Agamben points out the complexity of what it means to decree any state of exception:

Far from being a response to a normative lacuna, the state of exception appears as the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation. The lacuna is not within the law [*la legge*], but concerns its relation to reality, the very possibility of its application. It is as if the juridical order [*il diritto*] contained an essential fracture between the position of the norm and its application, which,

¹⁵ "[A]umentando quando, como e quanto fosse necessário a pressão física e psicológica a que estavam submetidas" (Saramago, 2005, p. 52).

¹⁶ Full quotation, in the course of Derrida's close reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan*: "Cette humanité, ce propre le l'homme signifie ici que la souveraineté, les lois, la loi, et donc l'État ne sont rien de naturel et sont posé(e)s par contrat et convention. Ce sont des prothèses. S'il Y a une structure prothétique du *Leviathan* comme animal ou monstre politique, cela tient à sa structure conventionnelle, thétique, contractuelle".

in extreme situations, can be filled only by means of the state of exception, that is, by creating a zone in which application is suspended, but the law [*la legge*], as such, remains in force. (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 31)

Therefore, the state of exception exposes the fracture between reality and the law, which becomes clearer whenever there is a situation of crisis. Then, apart from a normal moment of bewilderment, when decisions have to be made, it is for the safeguarding of the norm that arguments can be found to decree a grey zone in which the state of exception turns into a possibility. The puzzled government of *Seeing* after the elections are an example of such a fracture, and their reaction implies the application of extreme measures. As a result, the state of siege is implemented, accompanied by a number of additional measures comparable to those undertaken by dictatorial regimes.

The “fictitious lacuna” Agamben refers to in the above quotation is exposed by the Government claiming to be acting under the rule of a democratic regime, while imposing restrictions that deny the free exercise of citizenship. In the words of this philosopher, “[t]he state of exception is an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 37). When the ministers decide to arrest citizens almost at random to interrogate, when they keep these citizens in prison for an indeterminate period of time, when they manipulate public opinion and control the news, as it happens in *Seeing* after the second election, then people live clearly in a state of exception. At this point, democracy lies in a grey zone of undecidability; moreover, democracy is suspended, while the decision to go back to a condition of normality depends on the sovereigns alone, regardless of the people’s decisions. The limits of democracy are consequently trespassed by a government that was supposedly elected in the course of democratic procedures.

A higher stage for democracy

Writing “Civil Disobedience” was to Thoreau a means to make a stand against the objectification of mankind, as in his opinion people are mostly ruled by laws that are not always beneficial to the condition of the individual. On the

contrary, people become dependent on a blind mechanism that hinders their free will. He claims not to be “responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society” (THOREAU, 2004, p. 103), while imagining a state that “would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State” (THOREAU, 2004, p. 110). In *Seeing*, the growing awareness the commissioner has of the state of exception decreed by the Government stands as the liberation of the body into a higher state of freedom of thought, in other words, of free will. Yet, his downfall, or rather, his assassination, proves how immature democracy still is to accept that condition, and how vulnerable it still is to suspend itself in order to aporetically prevail.

In a dialogue between the president and the prime minister, they both express the likeness between the blank votes and the white blindness that had occurred in the capital four years before, as portrayed in *Blindness*. The Government's fight against these two unexplained epidemics evince how deceitful the exercise of power within a democracy can be: “Let us be confident, mister president, confidence is crucial, In what, in whom, tell me, In the democratic institutions, My dear, keep that speech to television, only the secretaries can hear us in here, we can speak bluntly.”¹⁷ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 89)

The hypocritical comment of the president shows how power can be authoritarian even in a so-called democratic regime. In the name of everybody's well-being, the suspension of rights becomes an unstoppable machine, involving means and a whole team of officers and bureaucrats working for the maintenance of the *status quo*. All the undercover missions of terrorism that are carried out by the Government's agents are a consequence of this mechanism. On the other hand, they submit the sieged city to a state of suspension, in which population has to observe restrictions beyond the legitimate right of a democratic system. In *Seeing*, the scope of the Government's action reaches the blurry zone of finding a scapegoat: the woman who inexplicably had not gone blind four years before. As the commissioner tells her, “what cannot be understood might be despised, but that will never happen if somehow it can be used as a pretext”¹⁸ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 256), which in this case paradoxically means the imposition of the established power democratically elected.

¹⁷ “Tenhamos confiança, senhor presidente, a confiança é fundamental, Em quê, em quem, digame, Nas instituições democráticas, Meu caro, reserve esse discurso para a televisão, aqui só nos ouvem os secretários, podemos falar com clareza”.

¹⁸ “[O] incompreensível pode ser desprezado, mas nunca o será se houver maneira de o usarem como pretexto”.

In order to explain the meaning of the state of exception in modern democracies, Giorgio Agamben (2005) goes back to the Roman law. He argues that *iustitium* is the equivalent term, as it stands for a period of time when all laws are suspended, even though not necessarily replaced. In other words, at those times, sovereigns enjoyed limitless power. Therefore, “we might say that he who acts during the *iustitium* neither executes nor transgresses the law, but *inexecutes* [*inesegue*] it” (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 50). There is no transgression nor imposition of new laws; there is only a condition of indeterminacy.

According to Agamben (2005), in the present, the state of exception is included in the juridical order. Consequently, whenever it occurs, there is a coincidence of fact and law. As such, the terrorist acts perpetrated by the government in *Seeing* are not illegal, although they cannot be publicly admitted; they are merely the result of the suspension of the law. Nevertheless, they deny the free exercise of human rights, which proves the aporia of such a democratic regime. The fact that the Government is aware of it spurs their will of power: the people will be subdued at no matter what cost. After all, “the unbridled use of blank votes would turn democracy into an ungovernable system”¹⁹ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 110).

Despite the clear scepticism over the exercise of democracy, it is not anomy that *Seeing* advocates. As a matter of fact, under strict restrictions of freedom, there are no relevant riots in the sieged city. All demonstrations and protests are nonviolent; whenever difficulties are at sight, the population acts in solidarity, while neglecting the Government’s determinations as a sign of indifference in what authority is concerned. Therefore, no sign of anarchy can be found, as there is no sign of will of power. Perhaps the utopia is the transcendence of democracy, by imagining a regime that will be able to relinquish juridical legitimacy, as the communities themselves will find self-regulatory means of organisation which will enable citizens to know how to live better together.

Apparently, they already can do so in the sieged city. When part of the population is forbidden to leave, they have to turn round and come back to their houses. Then, contrarily to what reporters and the Government expected, those who remain leave their houses and stand on the sidewalks waiting for the others to help them put their things back in their houses. The cries of

¹⁹ “[U]m uso sem freio do voto em branco tornaria ingovernável o sistema democrático”.

a reporter watching the scene from a helicopter could not be clearer: "It's now, it's now, let's wait for the worse, the reporter cried with hoarse excitement"²⁰ (SARAMAGO, 2004, p. 167). At the same time, the prime minister punches the table. Ridicule and rage are the answers each of them has to the population's higher understanding of what it means to live together.

The verisimilitude of such an attitude has to be contextualized. As mentioned above, *Seeing* is a sequel of *Blindness*. At the end of this latter book, characters recover their vision, without ever knowing why they had lost it in the first place. Then, the woman who sees and her husband wonder about what had happened to them. It is the woman that starts the following dialogue:

Why did we go blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll get to know the reason why, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Say it, I think we have never gone blind, but we are blind, Blind people that see, Blind people who, seeing, do not see.²¹ (SARAMAGO, 1995, p. 310)

The past experience, however, provides people with understanding enough to try alternatives for their living in society. Democracy as they have experienced so far is not the answer, as all the manoeuvres of power portrayed in both books show. In "Civil disobedience", Henry David Thoreau refers to the supremacy of conscience over the law. According to him, "we should be men first, and subjects afterward" (THOREAU, 2004, p. 90). On the other hand, Walter Benjamin (2010, p. 60) writes, on "Critique of violence", first published in 1921, that "[the] non-violent understanding is to be found wherever the culture of the heart has provided people with the pure means to understand each other"²². Thus, both authors advocate a sort of social commitment and mutual understanding that transcends the established law, while pointing out the need of a revolution that will open new - messianic - horizons to mankind.

Saramago's interpretation of democracy adopts a similar point of view. It is not a matter of doubting democracy, but rather an utter disbelief in those that take power and use it to keep the machine working, i.e., to maintain a *status quo* that perpetuates power in the hands of oligarchies, as Rancière (2006) would put it. The sheer act of casting blank votes suggests the need of going beyond the established rule.

²⁰ "É agora, é agora, preparemo-nos para o pior, berrou o repórter, rouco de excitação".

²¹ "Por que foi que cegámos, Não sei, talvez um dia se chegue a conhecer a razão, Queres que te diga o que penso, Diz, Penso que não cegámos, penso que estamos cegos, Cegos que vêem, Cegos que, vendo, não vêem".

²² "O entendimento sem violência encontra-se por toda a parte onde a cultura do coração ofereceu às pessoas meios puros para se entenderem".

Confined to the circumstance of voting continuously in the same parties, people choose to think otherwise. More than a political act, it is a state of exception that is implemented, one in which the power of the *authoritas* is put on the verge of collapse. The two main characters the Government chose as the main and most dangerous opponents to the traditional mode of governance are assassinated. By doing so, it is not democracy that triumphs, but deception. As a consequence, the higher stage for democracy, one that puts people at the core of political decisions, one that can even dismiss the law and, therefore, dismiss power, is yet to be accomplished.

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Resumo

O limiar da democracia em *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, de José Saramago

Ensaio sobre a Lucidez é uma obra de José Saramago publicada em 2004 que aponta como hipótese uma revolta silenciosa por parte da população ao votar em branco nas eleições autárquicas e assim desestruturar a normalidade do sistema democrático. Entre a culpabilidade e a ação, entre a livre escolha e a sonegação dos direitos humanos, esta obra questiona a autenticidade da democracia tal como é exercida atualmente nas sociedades ocidentais. Face aos perigos de uma manipulação biopolítica, votar em branco indicia a potência de um estado de exceção, em que a população possa exercer um poder baseado na consciência. Este ensaio indaga os meandros do confronto de posições entre as forças do poder instituído e a população que é governada por essas forças.

Palavras-chave: *Lucidez. Saramago. Democracia. Estado de exceção. Eleições. Voto em branco.*