

Confinement as a Measure of Freedom in the ‘New Normal’

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In this short paper I will argue the ambiguities of 'freedom' and 'confinement' suggested by the dramatic context of the 2020 pandemic 'lockdown'. I'll examine terminology that became parlance at the time and refer to historical and broader contexts. Theories are drawn from a spectrum, referencing political existentialists (Fisher, Foucault, Camus) to economic (Asonye) and ecological contexts (Safina, Abram). I also consider contrary solitary confinement from a prisoner's point of view and reference my own empirical audiovisual research. I argue that the pandemic may be a 'moment of reckoning' in terms of how we measure freedom and that we might look towards a more sensory approach to living, as experienced by wild animals.

I researched social interactions during the first pandemic lockdown of 2020 through the production of a documentary film entitled, 'Neighbourhood of Infinity' (Aitken, 2021). I filmed Barcelona residents walking in circles on rooftops; sitting on balconies all day; staring at screens for hours together without speaking to one another and a daily ritual of communal clapping. I also filmed birds visiting in close quarters, nesting and having chicks. The research examined and drew parallels between relative states of confinement and freedoms experienced by people and birds over three months. Boundaries – physical, technological and social - came under scrutiny as well as notions of 'freedom' relating to 'confinement'. My intention was to produce a documentary, although I had no intended format, length or exhibition plan. As is the norm, I filmed a lot of material and edited this into a structured form. The film is entirely observational and develops a conceit of people attempting to fly and being fascinated by birds. Music was added to the soundtrack but there is no dialogue or narration. The film is entirely authored and in no representative of scientific data. As a film maker, the activity was a means towards exercising creative freedoms during confinement.

In his essay, 'Time-wars: Towards an alternative for the neo-capitalist era', Mark Fisher wryly remarked, 'Only prisoners have time to read, and if you want to engage in a twenty-year long research project funded by the state, you will have to kill someone' (Fisher, 2012). Paradoxically, confinement with extreme limitations may be liberating. The Black Panther, Albert Woodfox endured 15,000 days in solitary confinement – 44 years in Angola State

penitentiary in the United States for a crime he didn't commit. Released in 2016, he said,

In solitary, I had 24/7 to do what I wanted. I had structure, a program. In society there are so many more distractions, so many more demands made on you. In Angola, in the cell, I didn't have a choice (Woodfox, 2019).

Woodfox measured each day by imagining what he would do when he was free. Without distractions, he turned confinement inside out. Woodfox is politically conscious in his decision making and subscribes to Foucault's self-deterministic existentialism, '...there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself' (Ure, 2021). Developing an internal consciousness unfettered by and in opposition to external forces enabled Woodfox to feel free to 'do what he wanted' without distractions.

The potential for productivity while incarcerated in solitary confinement is Fisher's ideal sabbatical from distraction. Yet while this isolated state serves as a reminder of how distractions limit our freedom, it's not an option many would choose. Instead, we're prosaically faced with trying to negotiate infinite distractions every day. In this respect, the intensity of our online existence during the pandemic offered potential insight into the quality of these distractions and how they purportedly maintained social connections.

The physical practice of 'social distancing' as a trope of the 'new normal' was sublimated by the internet. And it was as if confinement was a sudden windfall for twitchy distractions. The 'new normal' embraced a more extreme version of social distancing enabled by online social media. Confinement appeared to automatically segue us into doing more of the same without having to leave the house. The internet had already refined 'social distancing' to the point where we are free to be anywhere (confined or not) and remain 'connected'. As Vaughan Pilikian says in his sustained diatribe against perceived cultural shifts during the so-called 'pandemic crisis', 'In a world where Silicon Valley ideology has been universally internalized, we have forgotten that a network must first separate before it can connect' (Pilikian, 2021). We were apart long before we were told to stay at home. A mortal state that Fisher described as being 'bored even as we are fascinated, and the limitless distraction allows us to

evade confronting death – even as death is closing in on us’ (Fisher, 2012). Within the frameworks of confinement I’ve described, the terms ‘confinement’ and ‘freedom’ are so ambiguous as to be interchangeable.

The term ‘new normal’ has been applied to crises post World War One to the September 11 attacks and the 2008 Financial crash. The ‘new’ connotes ‘things will never be the same as they were before’ (Asonye, 2020) yet ‘normal’ refers to conditions we’re familiar with. There’s repeated unresolved conflict resulting from the pairing of these two words. Both left and right political aspirations appear accommodated - as evidenced during the shocks and immediate aftermath of a crisis. Progressives state the need for radical change while vested powers quietly double-down on their interests. This cyclical process has become so routine as to be predictable – if not generic. Writing for the World Economic Forum in June 2020, Nigerian economist Chime Asonye challenges the monotonous status quo, saying that there was ‘nothing new about the ‘new normal’’ (Asonye. 2020). He deems ‘normal’ as a state of unacceptable economic inequality around the world where ‘stay-at-home orders cannot be observed by more than 100 million people homeless’ (Asonye, 2020). Asonye’s passionate advocacy for a ‘new paradigm’ (Asonye, 2020) attempts to escape the ‘normal’ yet at the time of writing, it’s clear that once again, a reset of inequalities hasn’t even begun to happen. Instead, we are either embroiled in or await the next crisis with dread. Or, on walking down a street of a north European capital, I’m confronted by a billboard welcoming me to buy into the ‘new normal’ by purchasing a new brand of milk (Gilbert, 2022). The glib emptiness of the term so easily co-opted for consumption.

The extraordinary context – in its most literal sense – of the early weeks of pandemic confinement confirms our limited understanding of the terms and conditions we found ourselves in. As post-pandemic ‘old normal’ eclipses the ‘new normal’ (or is it the other way around?) we’re faced with the option of re-subscribing to false dichotomies and desire for change that only serves to create further longing. But with similar passion to that of Asonye, I want to propose a different ‘new paradigm’ that isn’t advocating reform so much as a different awareness of ‘being’. And while doing so, I want to embrace the modest optimism of Camus’s popular maxim proposing that, ‘Freedom is nothing but a chance to be better...’ (Camus, 1956). The full quote is often omitted but worth

including as it qualifies what freedom might be better than, ‘...whereas enslavement is a certainty of the worst’. The pandemic threw our perceptions of freedom into sharp focus. My research unexpectedly led me towards considering these terms from an entirely different perspective that might be defined as, ‘a chance to be better’ (Camus, 1956). The pandemic lockdown brought a novel intensity to urban environments that suggested a different kind of existence. Streets and skies were emptied of traffic. The noise in cities evaporated. Animals and birds began to wander into our habitat and this was well reported in cities around the world. As with the Chernobyl fall-out zone, animals were ‘rewilding’ human territory as an apparent pre-cursor to the post-Anthropocene. These visitations were another reminder of the existential threat of our extinction and the depleted habitats of wild animals that caused the SARS virus to jump to humans. (Lytras, et al., 2021) The spectacle of wild animals ‘breaking out’ of their limited confines, being visible and heard, driven by hunger but with diminished fear of humans suggested a ‘new normal’ that referenced a normality of wildness so old as to be almost beyond our grasp.

The intimacy I shared with doves, seagulls and swallows during my research was far greater than neighbours I studied. I’d go so far as to say that I forged relationships with these animals not only through daily feeding but obsessively watching and filming them from close quarters. These wild animals are obsessively vigilant towards predators but their behaviour changed as they became accustomed to my presence. If they were people, I’d say they were relaxed in my company but I hesitate to describe the feelings of a wild animal. But there’s no doubt they became accustomed to me.

Wild animals embody similar contradictions of freedom and confinement that humans do. In the wild, animals are free to be eaten while when caged and safe from predators, they become inert or mentally ill. We can’t know if an incarcerated animal takes opportunity to imaginatively free themselves like Woodfox did. Any visit to a zoo will cast doubt on this possibility. But we can observe that wildness maintains a fear of death that affirms a will to live. For a wild and free animal, distractions are fatal. In the somnambulistic distractions of our pandemic confinement, the vitality of these avian visitors was inspiring.

In his book, ‘Beyond words – how animals think and feel’ Carl Safina laments,

...humans are not the measure of all things, a human race among other races. ...In our estrangement from nature we have lost touch with the experience of other animals (Safina, 2015).

I want to posit that we should prepare ourselves to accept what we don't know – what Safina describes as 'beyond words'. Or what is ineffable – as the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel described, 'To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words' (Heschel, 1976). What's ineffable is what these birds were thinking when they looked at me. If we agree that these animals think and feel, then we should go further than reducing a bird's stare to always weighing up if I'm a predator or not. We might consider different ways of thinking, as ecologist David Abram suggests, 'Other animals, in a constant and mostly unmediated relation with their sensory surroundings, think with the whole of their bodies' (Abram, 2011).

To spend time face to face with another species presents an opportunity to reignite our sensory perceptions to experience states of confinement, freedom and normality. As Laurie Anderson said in her recent Harvard lecture, 'Sometimes we look for things but don't know what to call them. The words just aren't there. Sometimes this is when you feel most alive' (Anderson, 2018). I'd argue that the essence of diversity recognises the gap between ourselves and the 'other'. This gap enriches us. A process that Édouard Glissant in his 'Poetics of Relation' posits as, 'every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other' (Glissant, 1990).

Link to film: <https://vimeo.com/556097248>

Password: golondrina

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