

Sketches of a Critique of Lockdown

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Autumn 2020

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Lockdown: Being confined, locked up within narrow limits. Maintaining a living being in a small and closed environment. French: *confinement*.

An Ubiquitous Picture

A generalized lockdown was decreed overnight. An unknown word, a strange practice a few days earlier, the lockdown has established itself as evident, without any bodily or theoretical questioning. Since then, obedience has been general.

The rhetoric of war. This is the form that power chooses to appeal to the national effort. It makes nursing staff its new soldiers, applauded every evening by those who are not at the front. The state seems to be discovering the appalling conditions in which these suddenly glorified nurses are required to work. It begs the hospital to hold hands with the police to save the Nation. The *Nation*, that old idea that we hoped was dead and buried. The feat is remarkable; in the great national play, each play their part.

The state is orchestrating the medical discourses to legitimize its administration. Until further notice, we will no longer obey politicians but instead medical prescriptions issued by the authorities. In the face of the health alert and the dispossession of scientific knowledge, we have no choice but to rely on government instructions. With fear in our hearts, we demonstrate at our windows to ask that the medical staff is as well armed as the police; we are outraged at the liberal policies of dislocation of public hospitals; we are calling for a stronger state, a state which finally takes its responsibilities; we would like to replace the bad politicians with good doctors... These are the only demands which manage to emerge in this situation of tense pacification. Destitute, it is as if the arrival of the coronavirus has deprived us of all *critical* reasoning in the face of absolute state domination. The order of confinement is well guarded.

However, a state-run lockdown does not meet the recommended medical requirement. Others have shown it clearly. The injunctions that structure the lockdown make no practical sense. Absurdity and inconsistency, these are the feelings that take hold of us when we know that we have to go to work at the Amazon centre but that it is forbidden to walk on the beach, or when we see supermarkets operating at full speed and open-air markets prohibited. The list of contradictions is long ...

Ultimately, this nonsense only makes sense if we understand that the imperative that motivates these rules of conduct is the maintenance of a liberal *social contract*, which has to juggle between sanitary logic and economic interests. It is a question of leaving the time and the possibility for capitalism to adapt and allowing a relative freedom to the citizens to consume as they please; and at the same time to preserve the appearance of a “welfare state” which does not let its subjects die in the streets, as we have seen elsewhere.

The globalization of lockdowns and its identical execution on half of the Earth’s population further reinforces the absurdity of this tool. A lockdown is a product intended for societies completely rationalized by the economy and already prepared for the separation of individuals. The application of lockdowns in cities or territories where the economy has not normalized all spaces and all interactions is impossible without resorting to ultra-violence. Thus on 20th of April in Nigeria, Covid-19 killed 12 people in the hospitals and the police killed 18 in the streets for not respecting the lockdown. All proportions taken into consideration, the violence of confinement

is nevertheless everywhere and the police went berserk in the neighbourhoods of the big cities of France.

Along with the violence and the fear of repression come the disarray in which everyone is plunged, both individually and collectively. The space is completely reduced, completely empty. A lockdown opens up time to us, the nothingness it produces deprives us of it. Our days are futile and we have no control. Time passes and escapes us at the same time. Apathy, boredom, inflated egocentrism, fear of being poisoned by others, loss of points of references, deepening of loneliness ... it is an entire emotional and sensitive environment that is dissolved by the injunction to stay at home.

Appropriate the Danger

It is not about forgetting the countless deaths from Covid, nor about denying the hellish conditions in which the sick are being treated, nor about saying that nothing should be done about the disease and its spread, of course. However, a lockdown is akin to mistakenly prescribing a high dose of broad-spectrum antibiotics. The antibiotic indeed kills the harmful bacteria but also devastates everything else. It may be necessary in some cases, but everyone knows that it is no longer routine, and that the recovery following such treatments can sometimes be long and difficult. The question is thus: how to respond to the disease without killing the living?

If the biological danger is real, the challenge is not to be overwhelmed by fear of the virus and its spread. But for that, we still need to be able to understand the disease, to identify the conditions of its transmission and its lethal capacities. Appropriating the information transmitted through the media and produced by the part of medical and scientific institutions subservient to power seems the only way - certainly unsatisfactory - to build our own practices to face the risk of epidemics. Because Covid-19 is not the plague, and it seems possible to find ways to live - not survive - with the epidemic.

It is therefore up to us to produce our own health rules to protect ourselves and others. Starting with vulnerable people, find our own "barrier gestures" and take them serious. See each other, discuss, reflect together. Determine the activities to reduce, stop, continue ... The beginning of a list of concerns to be understood and methods to be implemented. All this, at the level of collectives or singular groups, depending on their forms, their limits and the issues that animate them.

Ultimately questioning confinement is perhaps the most serious way to consider the severity of the outbreak and to think about ways to deal with it. It is by confronting the virus that one develops an awareness of the situation. It's as if respecting lockdown without questioning it makes you stupid in the face of danger.

It is essential to appropriate ways of dealing with an epidemic. In view of the environmental situation and capitalist forms of life, corona viruses are very likely to come and visit us every year. We will have to live with them and not barricade ourselves at home at the slightest alarm. The risk of fear of contagion is fear of life itself. Let's be unconfined!

An Instrument of Power

A generalized house arrest, lockdown responds more to a logic of power than to a philanthropic logic of public health. It becomes the privileged tool of the *political dream* of the state in the situation of a coronavirus epidemic. We should be able to describe this dream precisely. But its contours are still hazy, and its borders can be redrawn at any time. It is nevertheless possible to say that control and discipline are the two main characters.

The current period does not mark a strict break with some fantasy *before world*, it rather accelerates processes already underway. Lockdown, as a tool of power, deepens the separation between individuals, strengthens the primacy of health and medicine, confirms the depoliticization of public spaces and the primacy of private spaces, provides a great opportunity for the legislator to reduce public freedoms, continues the entanglement of cybernetic and police methods, allows the economy to reconfigure itself once again.

Routine law enforcement practices are not enough to explain the success of the lockdown. Rather we stay at home because the rule is assimilated and self-control is general. The phenomenon of a deadly epidemic can only generate obedience. The widespread fear of losing one's life makes the only proposed solution into the only conceivable solution.

If the epidemic is a crisis, the means imposed to deal with it seem calibrated to be long term. As long as the viruses return, confinement will be put back in place at the slightest opportunity. There is no reason why the state should not reuse the tool as it has made it easy to unconditionally rule our lives. And that, even power had to doubt it before this year. But maybe we won't need to wait for a new virus for the logic of confinement, whatever form it takes, to become part of our daily lives.

Let us remember the emergence of the yellow vests, this "profound and sudden movement of *deconfinement* of French society, a historic moment when inside worlds which had not emerged, had not crossed for years, suddenly decided to come together in a new common space, *outside* the frameworks and norms that normally regulated their confined social interactions". The tendency then was to break through the established order of separation and confinement. A year has passed, and it's as though we're now taking the opposite route, back home.

Stay at home. To taste the desired comfort. To find something there to make the situation liveable ... Staying at home is always to realize - even without knowing it - the absolute paradigm of the economy; the *administration of the house*. *Oikos*, the house; and *nomos*, management, this is how the economy sees its base. Comfortably confined, we are inviting more than ever the economy, its rationalization, its controls, into our interiors. Teleworking as the future standard is the stereotype of life at home. And the liberal economy, with its flows of goods and capital, will be quite satisfied with the consumers and managers of their homes. At the most, the economy will find the opportunity for a small reconfiguration: fewer restaurants, more delivery people.

Finally, with confinement, the gap widens between two dimensions, yet inseparable, of what constitutes life. On the one hand, our biological life - *naked*; on the other, our collective life - *shared*. But here it is clear that the authorities have chosen to limit our existence to what is biological, to prepare our bodies for an increasingly pacified and patrolled configuration of society. It is our survival that is at stake, and it is for our well being that the confinement cancels the collective. It doesn't matter what one thinks about it, it doesn't matter that our political existence becomes secondary. This process, again, is not new. Lockdown only accelerates it, it is in the ultimate interest of power - its controls, its disciplines - to maintain it.

To Take a Breath

We all thought the lockdown would have a beginning and an end. We now know it was a deceit. Confinement will continue, in other forms. Deconfinement as it seems intended by the state will not be the end of the lockdown but its continuity. “Nothing will be like before, and for a long time,” even said one of its senior lieutenants. We are therefore only at the beginning of a long period of transformation of the administration of authority. Of which the larva is known, but we can for the moment only sense the forms and the extent of what it will become.

So how do we find out what will change in a lasting way? How to *understand* that this situation will impact all political activity and in what ways?

Imagining answers will require figuring out how to get out of the house, and fast. It is about not waiting for either the end of confinement or the end of the epidemic risk decreed by the state. Rather, it is about finding ways to resist it now, collectively and individually. Individually, first to ward off the possibility of getting used to the logic of confinement, or even of developing a taste for it; collectively then to thwart the mechanisms of separation and isolation by having political perspectives in a world that keeps them increasingly restricted.

No *end* in sight, lots of loneliness to be warded off by the enthusiasm of the collective, so many pacified and confined spaces to ignite ... and a thousand other things to reactivate or invent to stop this mechanism that without a break makes us apathetic and overwhelmed.

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Autumn 2020

Translated for The Local Kids, Issue 6
Previously appeared as *Esquisses pour une critique du confinement*, as a pamphlet, April 2020

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