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Bleakness

Home confinement prescribed as a prophylactic measure against coronavirus exposes us to an extreme social experience. Staying isolated at home, or being exposed to an intense and continuous family coexistence, are situations that involve inconvenience and sacrifice. At first, they are carried out with patience and resignation, but little by little these conditions undermine the encouragement of those who suffer them, imposing on us the task of facing them creatively. Without a doubt, it is a very difficult and problematic situation, especially for those who have additional difficulties, limited space, or scarce material resources.

In this situation it would be supposed that going out into public spaces would provide some relief. For some people, those counting on short outings to walk the dog, throw out the garbage or buy food and drinks in the supermarket, can provide a relaxation from the hardness of confinement or an outlet for pent-up tension. But this is not always the case, or it's not so for all people. When we go out, we do not find our street, the street that we are used to and that is part of our daily routine, but instead an altered public space. The streets are almost empty, and you only come across someone from time to time. With people you come across, you maintain an unusually safe personal distance, almost an instinctive repudiation. You hardly ever meet anyone you know, and if you do meet someone, you avoid them because you can't stop; you cannot share anything with anyone; you cannot occupy the street but only pass through it urgently. There is hardly any activity, the shops and premises are all closed, you perceive the seriousness and concern reflected in the faces of the people you come across...

In short, you experience a disturbing and surreal anomaly, in those places that until now had been the unnoticed scenes of your everyday life. Going out into the street exposes us to the experience of a closed and threatening social space.

But the most anomalous and unusual thing is the silence, an oppressive and deafening silence. What surprises one most in these occasional forays into the city is an almost absolute silence that envelops everything. Hearing the barking of dogs in the distance or the trill of birds is something that hits us and transports us to the nightmare of the absence of many others. Silence is the product of the lack of activity, but also, or above all, it is the product of the lack of conversation, the verbal exchange absent between people. The discipline of physical and personal distancing brings with it in a parallel way a discipline of linguistic silencing. It seems as if a lack of contact leads us not to speak to each other either, automatically and unconsciously. It seems we are instinctively extending prescribed prophylaxis to verbal exchanges. Social distancing is not only an absence of physical contact, but a drastic reduction of communication between people too.

When I go into a supermarket, ‘normality’ is somewhat restored. Silence ‘relaxes’ a bit, there is more activity, more movement, less restraint... Although there are few people and a certain ‘social distance’ is maintained, of at least half a metre, there is a greater predisposition to communication: we ask permission and we say thanks. Furthermore, there is a more intense use of non-verbal language: people let others pass when there is little space, we look each other more in the eye, we smile more... No one has a conversation with anyone, but it seems that the need for communication breaks the fear and forms of prevention, finding new ways and new practices.

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At the point of going through the checkout, communication intensifies even more. We have to ask where the queue is, who is the last in the queue... We were uncomfortable without communication in a situation of forced co-presence, since we remain motionless in the queue. So, we dare to ask ‘What’s up?’, to encourage ourselves, even to make a joke. The communication with the cashier is strangely relaxed and cordial. We retrieve good manners, and we thank and encourage each other.

Back on the street we are assailed by bleakness again, but we are no longer so surprised. You encounter the homeless, who are the only ones who remain on the street because they have nowhere to seclude themselves. We pay attention to them due to the absence of the usual scenario, and that warns us of their previous (relative) invisibility. Until solutions are created for their difficult situation, they will be much more exposed in every way.

Impact

Home confinement minimises social life, the everyday social interactions in public spaces. But it not only reduces them. Home confinement affects also the few social interactions that do take place, decisively conditioning, limiting and undermining them. On the one hand, the very exceptionality of the few interactions that are maintained produces a discomfort that leads to a tendency for urgency, a more or less unconscious impulse to leave them as soon as possible, reducing interactions not only in number but also in duration and intensity. It is not due to the fear of contagion, or it is not only that. Also, or above all, it is the impossibility of maintaining a ‘normal’ social interaction. This involves the perception of a social sanction in the prolongation of the interaction beyond the essential minimum. On the other hand, the social distance prescribed as a prophylactic measure against contagion imposes conditions on the interaction that increase discomfort and urgency. Avoiding physical contact leads us to avoid face-to-face interactions themselves. The duty towards staying away mutually leads us to experience social interactions as unpleasant and potentially uncomfortable, which not only must be avoided to prevent contagion but which also are not pleasant at all.

Relationships become ephemeral, almost instantaneous. Along with distancing, or precisely due to it, a discomfort is instilled in social interactions that prevents or avoids its prolongation in time, making social interactions extremely fleeting, accelerated, momentary. Thereby relations are limited in a double sense: on the one hand they are drastically reduced in quantity; on the other hand, they deteriorate decisively in quality.

Confinement requires us to give up social life to preserve physical life. Without a doubt, physical life is more important: without physical life, no social life is possible. Furthermore, the deterioration of social life would be transitory, while personal life losses are (and will be) permanent. However, we have to begin to ask ourselves if this loss and deterioration of social life is going to be as transitory as it seems; if, once the health threat is overcome, everything could be as it was before.

In our ‘everyday’ normality, we don’t realise the importance of physical contact for interactions with others. The proscription of the handshake was one of the first ‘prophylactic measures’ applied to avoid contagion. Leaving out such an apparently trivial practice showed us the importance of bodily rituals and bodily contacts for social life. The total absence, or even the limitation, of contacts, hugs, caresses, kisses, can undoubtedly mark our social life from now on. But also, more imperceptibly, a social distance that won’t be so easy to get out of from our habits and our minds once the pandemic is over.

Reconstruction



Daily applause at 8 in the afternoon from my neighbours across the street, picture taken from my balcony.

In Córdoba, just like in many other cities in Europe, almost at the beginning of compulsory house confinement, the practice of simultaneous and daily applause from the balconies arose. It is an acknowledgement of, and a tribute to, the doctors and other health personnel who are fighting against the disease ‘on the front line’. Every day at eight o’clock in the evening, the streets break into a massive and emotive round of applause and cheers, which lasts for several minutes. This tribute of gratitude has gradually been extended to other professional groups that are also maintaining their necessary activities despite the risk of contagion: cleaners, supermarket cashiers, transport workers... even the police.

Pandemic as a Cosmopolitan Moment

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It's easy to see in this applause something more than a public recognition of who are most directly sacrificing themselves. It is also a ritual and a strategy of recovery, at least minimally, of the suppressed social life. The applause has thus become, imperceptibly and not explicitly, a reciprocal applause. To some extent it is a ritual of mutual recognition, a place of 'meeting', a 'we reconstruction, a way of recovering social space and social life, that the presence and persistence of this virus also threatens. The coronavirus has shaken us, it has been a blow that along with other such disasters has devastated our spaces of sociability. Their reconstruction will be a lengthy and complicated task, in which we must put into play all our creative capacities.

Final Note

These reflections were made a few days after the state of emergency was declared in Spain and the subsequent confinement at home of the population. Specifically, they were based on a 'street outing' to buy food and other things for basic necessities on Tuesday, March 17th. In a more recent outing for the same reason two weeks later, on Monday March 30th, some worrying changes were noted. The people's reaction to the situation is no longer characterised by astonishment and concern, but rather by deep sadness and heartache. The prolonged confinement and the uncertainty of the time of its ending are beginning to take their toll on people's spirits. This shows the extremely 'mutant' nature of citizens' reactions to the extreme situations this crisis has subjected us to. At the end of March, news of serious difficulties caused by confinement began to arrive: material and spatial shortages in the humblest homes; difficulties in co-living with problematic people, especially alcoholics, other types of drug addicts, and people with mental disorders; even conflicts between citizens due to the exceptional use of public space (dog walks, outings of accompanied autistic minors...). Journalistic information is also reporting increasing tensions and attempted revolts in southern Italy, where the population has been confined for a longer time than in Spain. Definitely the harshness of a measure like home confinement could have much more serious and enduring social consequences if it is prolonged excessively, especially if the period of confinement remains indefinite.

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