

CONFINEMENT AS A MEASURE OF FREEDOM IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'

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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'.

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.

Our experiences during the initial weeks and months of pandemic confinement around the world varied greatly through cultural, economic, social and mental health differentials. However, perhaps the most common novel experience was that of having much more time at home - unless you were homeless - and wondering how to occupy ourselves. The familiar 'old normal' defined 'time' as what we might 'spend' or something we may 'run out of' – as if every breathing moment was commodified and may become scarce. The science fiction

film, 'In Time' (2011) offered up a world where after the age of twenty-five, people could use the amount of 'free time' they had to extend their lives. Rich people had a lot of time to spare whereas poorer workers or the unemployed were pre-occupied with struggles to survive. For the latter, life was literally 'timed-out'. The allegory fails to predict that within a decade after its release, most or at least a significant amount of our time would be devoted to 'continuous partial attention' (Stone, 1998) determined by the ubiquitous 24/7 distractions available from the internet (in Europe where my research was conducted). This level of distraction doesn't discriminate between rich or poor and is symbolically associated with our 'freedoms' of information and choice as citizens of wealthy democracies. In stark contrast, internet access is inaccessible or severely restricted in all prisons. I'd argue that the plethora of distractions stemming from this single portal would not only have curtailed Woodfox's ability to imagine freedom but it would have assisted the forces that incarcerated him by intercepting his self-determination.

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. One person's confinement is another's freedom and vice versa. However, I'd argue that any kind of isolation not only has potential to encourage reflection on how we relate to ourselves – as Foucault suggested - but also to the world around us. In 2020 there was much talk of a reset by progressive thinkers – less air travel and reliance on fossil fuels; less economic inequality; more socially responsible state intervention and more constrained 'free market' capitalism - to name a few. The 'Centre for Optimism' quoted Nobel Economics Laureate Joseph Steiglitz's neat definition of our pivotal moment, 'There can be no return to normality after the pandemic, because normality has long been the problem' (Maylam, 2019). It's hard to argue against his logic but as ever, it's a question of how change might be achieved.

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 Asongye challenges the monotonous status quo, saying that there was 'nothing new about the 'new normal'' (Asongye, 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' (Asongye, 2020). Asongye's passionate advocacy for a 'new paradigm' (Asongye, 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.

Despite the lack of radical progressive change, we might at least use the pandemic experience to challenge the connotation of 'normal' being socially homogenous. Even from the narrow frame of reference of a camera fixed to a single terrace on the top floor of a Barcelona

apartment block, what was ‘normal’ varied greatly. I observed and documented a single mother with young children; heroin addicts prowling the streets; an office worker employed remotely; a musician unable to perform to his audience and an elderly frail woman who couldn’t receive visits from her family. Widening the context beyond my location extends diversity and potential inequalities with half of the world’s population offline (Bogdan-Martin, 2019) and millions living a hand-to-mouth existence unable to stay at home all day. The generalisation of ‘normal’ appears insensitive to context and ignores diversity. Perhaps our lack of progress when responding to crises is occurring due to the ambiguities of ‘normality’. How can we change the status quo if we’re unsure what it is? We’re constantly told what ‘normal’ is but try and ask yourself how normal you are and the answers are unlikely to be straightforward. It’s easy to apply ‘new’ to a condition that isn’t clearly defined in the first place. The ambiguity obfuscates progressive change and ensures continuity of ‘normal’, i.e.: business as usual.

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. The most evolved of these relationships grew through the slow documentation of a male and female swallow building a nest, laying eggs, feeding their chicks and teaching them to fly. For every second I watched them from within a one to three metre distance, they returned my gaze. We made constant eye-contact. 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.

'Neighbourhood of Infinity' begins with a thunderstorm. We see a sequence of a male and female swallow sheltering from the downpour. They perch on a clothesline outside a kitchen window. The female looks up at a plastic roof as rain hammers it. She looks at her companion and edges closer to him along the wire. He remains stationary and appears to ignore her. The female looks up again and edges closer. Eventually the rain ceases and the female squawks at her mate and flies away. The differences in behaviour of these swallows is a display of individual character and inter-relationships expressing feelings. To reduce this understanding as 'anthropomorphical' misses the point of animals having feelings and means to express them on their own accord. The fact that we might recognise these feelings means that to certain degrees we share these attributes. Scientists at the University of Copenhagen recently monitored farmed pigs and discovered that they

made high pitched squeals when distressed. The study concluded that farmers need to consider emotional welfare as well as physical when keeping animals (Briefer, et al., 2022). This research also confirms just how slow we have been in recognising how and why animals think and feel. If you've ever heard a pig squeal in distress, you'll know how its emotions communicate just like ours.

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).

Pre and post-pandemic, our urban environments offer little opportunity to encounter wild animals but it's possible to establish new relationships if we choose to. Safina's proposition of empathising with animal experiences recognises that we have much in common while also being very different. On analysis, our differences are often full of mystery yet we persist with objectively naming and categorizing animals. Since the Old Testament we've been led to believe that naming, owning and killing animals gives us dominion over them. It's not difficult to see parallels with enslavement but all this is lost on wild animals – why would a bird be concerned with the name we give it?

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).

There was a time when our sensory perceptions were necessarily much more attuned to the world around us. Perhaps an opportunity to do better – as Camus's interpretation of freedom states, lies in limiting distractions and sharpening our senses to everything around us – especially living things. Sensual engagement as opposed to social distancing. 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).

If we do work towards using words for what's ineffable then we might consider what's at stake. Are we part of the sensual animal world when defining it? Or do our words distance and detach ourselves from engaging the consciousness of other lives? 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). My research in 'Neighbourhood of Infinity' evidenced the sensual emotions of wild animals and interactions with myself. The birds made sounds but I didn't add commentary. Omitting the use of words to tell the viewer what the birds were doing allowed possibility for us to experience the vitality of their feelings without

explanation or sentimental attachment. A way towards activating our senses ahead of conscious understanding. Or as Francis Bacon described when considering our parity with animals – ‘man and beast’, ‘to unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently’ (Bacon, 1953).

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