

THE DISCREET CHARM OF IMPRISONMENT

Sergio Benvenuto

I.

“Imprisonment returns us to an awful innocence, to irresponsibility... The fact we are here is not our responsibility; we are here because we cannot leave. What rest for the mind!”

This is what Sartre wrote to Simone de Beauvoir on the 26th of October 1939 (*Oeuvres romanesques*) as a prisoner during the war. He confesses the unspeakable for someone like him, the philosopher of absolute responsibility: the sweet idleness of irresponsibility during confinement. Sartre, the coryphaeus of human freedom without limits, actually admitted that he did not find the Stalag too bad, that not being forced to choose or decide makes life easier and more peaceful.

Sartre’s experience often comes to my mind when I find myself speaking with analysands, friends or relatives, or even with myself, about the coronavirus lockdown. Many now reminisce nostalgically about that period of house arrest, that interval from the underlying widespread distress that accompanies the routine of a life of freedom. This even if for many, all those who continued to work online, that period of confinement was one of intense work, sometimes even more intense than usual (as in my case).

Forced to always eat at home, we were freed from the need to choose between “shall we eat in or out tonight?” and in the case of the former choice, between going “to P’s favourite Chinese or to the Sicilian place T really likes?”. Not to mention having to choose which film to see and where, or between going to the movies or the theatre, or between the theatre and the café in the piazza... Because during the lockdown get-togethers with family or friends were all online; hunting out parking spaces, waiting for buses or the often frustrating search for a taxi were all over. During confinement, some quite broken-down couples found a new breath of life in the feeling they were “sharing an extraordinary experience”, like being brothers in arms during a war or behind the same barricades during a revolution.

When the time came to choose *with whom* to spend a quarantine that had no defined time limits and could have lasted several months, in most cases people made – thanks to a miraculous wisdom of their unconscious – the right choice: the quarantine was the moment of truth. And the truth unveiled by the lockdown suspended any confusion with regard to difficult controversial choices between two men or two women, between one’s children or between one’s mother and father or brother.... Those who chose to spend the lockdown alone also chose the right company, themselves.

A friend of mine had split up years earlier from her husband with whom she has an adult daughter who lives abroad. For years her husband has had a younger girlfriend, whereas she is now single and has never ceased to mourn the loss of her marital union. But for the lockdown her husband chose to be with her, his former wife, and they were joined by their daughter, who preferred to spend three months with her parents rather than with her boyfriend in London... A landmark revelation for my friend: she was made to understand that her husband and her daughter had always remained the Holy Family, despite appearances. But alas, this Holy Family fell apart with the end of the lockdown: her ex has since returned to his young girlfriend and her daughter to London.

Like for Sartre, the drastic limitation of choices imposed by the quarantine affords us immense mental relief and the opportunity to finally dedicate ourselves to “the essential”, even in the field of work. As we feel to some extent in a time of war, and as we also run the risk of being infected to a certain extent, we give full rein to our forbidden desires: with the excuse of comforting ourselves during house arrest we abandon strict diets, indulge in forbidden alcoholic drinks or films and TV series we “had never had the time to watch” (which we were actually ashamed to watch), and we have a great excuse to avoid seeing friends or relatives who actually bore us. Reclusion gives us *l’incroyable frivolité des mourants*, the amazing frivolity of the dying, who indulge in their “last wills” and we settle accounts that the illusion of an indefinite time had left annoyingly unsettled. Those who have a house in the country or by the sea they hardly ever went to because commitments in town always came first, may have chosen to spend the lockdown there. And in so doing finally discovered the pleasures of a place that was supposed to be a digression – because the digression had become the heart of life – dedicating themselves to the kitchen garden they’d promised themselves to grow for years or too the 500-page book they kept saying “I must read before I die...”, and to the idleness, finally no longer blameful, of taking care of their own lair.

2.

So, after the end of the lockdown, back to the usual routine, many fell prey to depression. Certain analysts are now coming to me with suicidal fantasies. Thrown back in the secular time of choice, many realize how costly such a freedom can be. Relationship issues too, which had suddenly disappeared during domestic confinement, return, often in exacerbated forms compared to the “before”. Like Sartre, many miss an imprisonment that had remarkably simplified life.

Now, as we’ve seen, those political leaders who declared a state of exception because of the pandemic – like Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – saw a dramatic rise in popularity, whilst those who basically said “carry on as you like! Don’t shield at home, don’t bother wearing face coverings!”, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, fell in popularity. People basically wanted others to decide for them, they wanted a Leader to force them to stay home. And, to the extreme surprise of many, those most enthusiastic about an enforced quarantine were left-wing voters, while those who usually vote for the extreme right (which in many countries coincides with the mainstream right) became impatient and in many cases rose up against the new regulations. Those who crave for a Führer that will give them indisputable orders took the enforced quarantine badly, whilst those in favour of civil rights, LGBT freedom, freedom of movement for migrants, accepted the enforced confinement with a smile. I fear the traditional notions of “left” and “right” probably need to be reviewed.

Erich Fromm wrote *Escape from Freedom* to deprecate such an escape, of course. But with the lockdown we witnessed, to our surprise, that even if we are Frommians, there’s something sweet about restricting certain freedoms. And that therefore what centuries ago Etienne de la Boétie called *servitude volontaire* is not a pathology from which only “others” suffer, it is not an incomprehensible reaction typical of our political enemies. Dictatorship, i.e. being forced to do certain things imposed by the Party or the State, frees us from the nagging burden of making choices. And we know that choices are often impossible in life: we have to choose between six of one and half a dozen of the other, or worse, between the plague and cholera.

3.

And indeed, many live quite pleasantly under dictatorships.

I have personally been well-acquainted with people who lived under the fascist regime in Italy, who were fascists at the time and remained fascists after 1945. During my childhood I had the opportunity of listening to their version of the fascist era. I also met several Francoists who lived during the Spanish dictatorship and former Soviet or Albanian citizens who sympathized for the old regime and still regret its demise.

From my most tender age I received a rigorously anti-fascist education, because my father, a socialist and a Catholic, had always been an anti-fascist. But he would say that by the time of the proclamation of the Empire, around 1935-1936, “us anti-fascists in Naples [the city in which he lived] could be counted on the fingers of two hands”. For my father, his children, starting from me, the eldest, were scions of the Republic and of Democracy; we were to live our youth in freedom, something he had been denied, because fascism had taken hold when he was only seven. But several uncles and aunts and dear friends of the family, often people with a heart of gold who wouldn’t have hurt a fly and whom we all loved, had been fascists and still loved the “Duce”. They still admired him, even though they would often admit that “in the end, with the war, he made a mistake!” (but it wasn’t clear whether this mistake was his alliance with someone like Hitler or simply the fact he chose the losing side). The fact that thanks to democracy they could now vote for whatever party they wanted – even for the neo-fascist MSI party in many cases – failed to impress them too much. For them things were better when He, the Duce, would choose for them. During the regime they had evidently felt a little like us during the coronavirus lockdown: free from the burden of choice.

Contrary to what anti-communist propaganda tried to make us believe, life under Stalinism was not all that bad -- this is what many amiable elderly former Soviet citizens have often repeated to me. Unless, of course, you were an outspoken dissident or happened to end up in the Gulag for whatever reason. If you were Jewish, you would naturally start feeling the burden sooner or later: it was a well-known fact that Jews weren’t admitted to specific university courses in fields that Stalin considered “strategic” (there was no official rule to establish it, it was just the way it was). But if you were fortunate enough to be a scientist, you enjoyed privileges scientists in the West can only dream of: men and women of science were treated with the same respect as priests in Italy, and in the same way as the needs of priest are taken care of by the Church, the needs of scientists were taken care of by the State. The Academy of Sciences was a powerful corporation, independent from Party and State.

Life there lacked the vertiginous competition, the financial and motorial agitation of the capitalist world; it ran on predictable tracks, slower than in capitalist countries, with no particular highs or lows, let's say in a lower key, cosy and boring. Dissenters were few, just like Italian opponents of the regime were rare during fascism: and they were frowned upon, considered eccentrics, misfits. The media never compared opinions; there was only one Opinion, the official one. So, there was no need to rack your brain to try and figure out who was right and who was wrong, which side to take...

As everyone had to work and had to have a job, ten people would be employed to carry out tasks one or two people at most could easily have dealt with; the reason why the Soviets went about work in an extremely relaxed way, was because no one had too much to do. Often, when a company hired you, the first thing your new colleagues would say to you, threateningly, was: "Most importantly, make damn sure you don't work!" I personally experienced how a Soviet hotel was run: you were surrounded by masses of employees and it wasn't quite clear what their job was. There was a *dezhurnaya*, a supervisor, always an aged woman, sitting at a desk on every floor and it was hard to understand the reason why; I think she just spent her time doing crosswords. In the breakfast room there wasn't just a waiter or two, but around fifteen members of staff who would watch us eat, apparently ready to respond to all our desiderata, in a sort of oral voyeurism. Besides this mellow working life, people could comfortably dedicate themselves to excursions, fishing, parties with plenty of vodka, to playing music and romancing... Quite an undramatic life – apart from the war, which disrupted the cushiness of the daily routine; a war Stalin never chose, but endured – and above all a life with no great Choices to make. Glory was of course reserved only to the few – but this is the case more or less everywhere –, to career politicians, actors, singers and a few "Heroes of Socialist Labour" such as Alexey Stakhanov. This is the discreet charm of dictatorship, the comfy cradle of no responsibilities, in which nothing serious can happen because the media constantly repeats "all is well", and the vast majority believes it, because things usually take place without particularly *explicit* rifts (life and death struggles took place in the high spheres of the communist regime, but normal people couldn't see them). Except for the persecuted minorities of course, like the exterminated kulaks... But minorities are indeed only minorities and the majorities see things from afar, in the same way as those who lived near some Nazi concentration camp in Poland only saw its prisoners from afar. Anything can be ignored, even a genocide, if it's hidden from our sight. So, it's always better to exterminate a minority completely, without leaving any survivors who may remember the massacred, to make sure that no inherited memory will awaken the memory of the dead. Massacring a minority in its

totality also means completely erasing its historical trace. The problem, however, is that someone always does survive in the end...

4.

In other words, it's delusional to think that the majority of our fellow citizens really care about freedom. To have specific political ideas, a certain education and a certain interest for the *res publica*, for the *commonwealth*, is required, and the masses have neither. Whether it's a dictator or a democratically elected party running the country from some palace of power is of little consequence. For most, politics amounts to whether they will have to pay more or less taxes, whether their salaries will be increased, or whether the local administration will install a set of traffic lights in that specific intersection... The political only amounts to what's extremely close to my personal interests. For most people the only really interesting form of politics is competitive sport. Elections are unpopular because they oblige everyone – even those who take absolutely no interest in politics – to think and choose who to vote for. Many feel they're forced to make a choice that makes no sense to them, because they have no idea what's really at play in the political conflict.

It is commonly said that in a democracy people can finally express themselves. But even under dictatorships those who had something to express could do so, in the bars, pubs, bistros, Bierhäuser or at home with friends. Even during fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism there were jokes against the powerful and people would sneer at party bosses and leaders. One of the most famous jokes invented by the Soviets at the time was: “What's capitalism?” Reply: ‘Man oppressing man’. ‘And what's socialism?’ Reply: ‘The opposite’”.

Plus, today we have the social networks, which anyone can use to let off steam, followed by thousands of people, usually as stupid as they are. And there's no need for dictatorships to shrink freedom of expression on the social networks. In democracies too this increasingly coarse and obscene freedom of thought is kept in check by the principles of political correctness: racist, homophobic or sexist discourse is forbidden, as is any form of hate speech, incitement to commit crimes, insults and slander against individuals and the use of obscene language in general.... Even Coca Cola now boycotts Facebook for not censoring its platform effectively. If there's no tyrant or Party to limit our freedom of expression, magistrates will do so, or in any case the “good part” of society, which will condemn such behaviour in disgust. But for a vast amount of people freedom of expression means precisely engaging in racist,

homophobic, sexist, anti-Semitic, anti-Chinese speech, or insulting the footballer or government minister they hate... Freedom of expression brings out the best of a community, but also the worst, the fascist side of any community. And often, as we can see, the worst prevails. The masses do not only demand freedom of expression, they often demand pogroms too.

In short, this is why most of us had a comfortable time during the lockdown. It was a dress rehearsal for a cushy imprisonment.