

## Terminology, Narration, Translation

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### Terms

The first step toward a thoughtful consideration of the current crisis is, in my opinion, a conversation about words, a look at the terminology that imposed itself during the weeks of the health crisis. The words *confinement*, *de-confinement*, *social distancing* [*distanciation sociale*], *defensive gestures* [*gestes-barrière*] ... have today become perfectly ordinary. If, on the one hand, this evolution testifies to the adaptive capacity of our linguistic practices, it suggests that the terms hark back, more or less obviously, to an imaginary that *is far* from novel.

Take for instance the verb *confine* [confiner]. It is mostly the past participle of this verb that imposed itself in discourse at the height of the crisis. The meaning of this verb, however, is not unequivocal. The verb *confine* [confiner] implicates two vastly different, if not opposed, possibilities: one can *confine oneself* [*se confiner*] or *be confined* [*être confiné*]. As we know, the difference between active and passive forms is grounded in our ability to freely dispose of ourselves. Thus, a part of the population, upon learning how dangerous the contagion was, decided to *confine itself*, to respect the choice of the government; another part of the population was *confined*, meaning it had to submit to governmental measures against its will. To

explore this divergence of reactions to confinement measures, we might pursue our interrogation by focusing on terms that, in the imaginary dominating the public sphere, are immediately related to the word confinement. Pointing out that this relationship is not immediate but, on the contrary, circulates via commonplaces, amounts to making a distinction between *confining oneself* [se confiner] and *confining* [confiner].

Confinement means staying in the house [à la maison], staying at home [chez soi], or staying home [au foyer]. “House” [maison], evokes “oneself” [soi-même] (our subjectivity), and “home” [foyer] the vibrant center of the affects of those who stay there). In both cases, “confinement” harks back to the distinction between interior and exterior, inside and outside, a distinction according to which the first of the two terms connotes security, protection, and stability. Yet, scholarship—medical, psychological, psychoanalytical—reminds us how confronting oneself, how being forced into a solitary confrontation with what is most personal within oneself, reveals depths that can reveal not intimacy but the most unsettling uncanniness. It reminds us how our interiority can be made recognizable to us through the encounter with the other, the world, the outside, as it inhabits and reassures us. It suffices to bring to mind the many people who have experienced domestic violence, whether verbal or physical, to understand just how fragile is the imaginary of the home as a place of protection. It depends on an array of values and on historically and socially determined traditions. We can therefore formulate a first objection to the distinction between interior and exterior: within the human experience of the self and of the world, the categories of the familiar and the strange are muddled, and their relationship is complex. This observation suggests a second objection to the imaginary of the home as a place in which interiority is safe: protection can be found outside, far from the self [soi] and from one’s home [chez soi].

Confinement determines a return to the “original” state of the home. To return home, this kind of *locus amoenus* that modern life and wage labor tear us from, means to restore oneself, to recover a “human” rhythm of life, to question our

priorities. But, if we accept that the opposition between interior and exterior, and its corollary, the idea of protection, should be put into question, we understand that the home, for some a source of energy, center and pulsating heart, is, for others, a decentering, a place of energy dispersal. Consequently, the home appears rather like a point of convergence (a more neutral term) of the complex relationships existing between interior and exterior, the familiar and the strange.

Two possibilities open from the home, as point of convergence, and they feed into two models of confinement, the two that circulate in public space. A model we call positive—to *confine oneself* [se confiner] —built around the series “returning home-regeneration-re-centering of life”; and a negative model—to *be confined* [être confiné]—which harks back to the idea of a paradoxical exile into interiority, dispersion, and decentering. These two models were circulated by different authorities.

Positive confinement was at once fed and exploited by the media (talk shows, commercials, ...) and by political communications (statements and speeches by politicians, the latter’s presence on traditional values, in particular those related to the family, which advertising has exploited from the beginning and in which political discourses are also often grounded. Similarly, the intellectual class saw in confinement the conditions for a sort of modern *otium*. Part of the workforce adopted and spread this model, in finance, marketing, in the world of start-ups... which have long since understood the effectiveness of the imaginary of the home. Indeed, the traditional representation of the home has been modernized and subjected to the injunction to optimize performance, to “acquire skills,” to increase productivity. In short, to work well, one must feel at home, comfortable in one’s skin, comfortable with others or, at least, be under that impression.

Negative confinement has been addressed by another group of intellectuals and their media supporters. That reality was summarized by the representation these institutions traditionally have of marginalized situations. It is above all about

advancing an inclusive narrative. Testimony takes on a central role: we are asked to recount our experience of the confinement, to express ourselves on this topic with intellectual and artistic tools. This kind of narration is not direct (understood as an autonomous and spontaneous expression by the concerned subjects), but indirect because guided. It shapes itself within the limits and parameters set by the authorities interrogating these realities—in a way, it is content filling up the imperative structures already at our disposal, coming to animate a pre-existing discourse and revive its rhetoric. This negative side of confinement is also nourished by available, consolidated representations—the public health crisis thus risks losing its specificity, it is merely yet another crisis impacting individuals who find themselves in precarious conditions. Yet, while it is certain that precarity renders a section of the population particularly vulnerable in the face of this public health crisis, the criteria commonly used to describe social malaise are not sufficient to grasp the current situation. Our representation of social malaise has been overcome by a phenomenon that exceeds it; we are called to renew it.

## **Narrations**

Positive and negative confinement outline two ways of seeing the public health crisis along with two ways of recounting it. They are two attempts at creating a narrative that allows us to deal with the traumatic event that is the crisis. They are partially faithful to the population's lived reality, but they do not exhaust it. Mainly, we must question their productivity. Narration can be understood as a reconstruction of the sequence of events that aims to make them more bearable. Narration is not the resolution of a critical situation but merely the sign that we are integrating the traumatic event in the series of events that preceded and will follow it, in the ordinary flux of life. To do that, narration mobilizes skills we already possess. It relies on the stability of tools that preexist. Narration is more an attempt at normalization than an act of creation. But the crisis as such creates a caesura. It is the irruption of a difference with which we distinguish a before and an after and, consequently, it is responsible for a lack of congruence between the world and our

consciousness. It demands the creation of new answers. Faced with the unprecedented, there appears, on the one hand, an ideological production that re-legitimizes authority, threatened by the critical event and, on the other hand, there appear thoughts of utopia that deploy a new social imaginary. Temporality is handled differently in each case. Dogma tends to deny it, while utopia embraces the becoming of communal life. Overcoming the crisis, without denying historical becoming, means opening utopia's horizon.

Narration, by detaching itself to some extent from the facts, can threaten utopian labor, favoring its exile to an atemporal region where its margin of action is significantly reduced. As a result the utopian dimension remains anchored in reality and yet prevailing over it. To remain pertinent in its movement, it must begin not from narration but from work—work on the ground. Utopia is discerned in events that can be verified and in strategies born from the emergency to answer them. To be more than a chimera it must find its source in the unthought of human capacity to face the crisis, to grapple with the crisis. It is the unexpected fruit of experience. Studying that experience facilitates its extraction, as opposed to a narration that suffocates reality in its complexity. The proliferation of narrations not only risks making utopia ephemeral, but also by occulting the possibilities that appear nebulously in our responses to the crisis. Consequently, during and after this crisis, we are called upon to read, interpret our strategies, our answers to find in them the first principles of utopian labor.

## **Translations**

We have defined the crisis as the arrival of an alterity that destabilizes our ways of apprehending the world. To discern this alterity, it is essential to take into consideration the strict relation it maintains with temporality. The crisis is among the marks of time because the alterity it imposes is always also a temporal alterity. The crisis becomes factual as we fail to assimilate a traumatic event that interrupts our experience of time (grief for instance). Or the traumatic event can manifest a

temporality that we refuse to accept (old age), or still, the crisis can force us to change in the face of a temporality that we deny (the crisis of an ideal, a value). The crisis forces us to recognize a new temporality. We are obligated to translate. This kind of translation can be compared to the translation of a written text (it encounters another context, another culture, another era and recreates itself in that confrontation): we translate our traumatic experience in a life that had to accommodate it, we translate ourselves into a new era of our lives, and we translate an ideal that can responded to the challenges of the present. The act of translating (whether it be a text, the life of an individual or that of ideas) is a productive encounter with alterity and its temporality. It is a confrontation between two different instances that always imposes their destructuring and their reorganization. As a result, it makes the encounter a productive one because the third term (the result of translation) incorporates and exceeds the other two. In addition, if translation points us toward an elsewhere (a third text, another way of living, a renewed ideal), it does so from the immanent practice of an urgently elaborated answer: translation is a “making do with,” a “facing off.” it takes shape in concrete strategies to manage the crisis. There is no theory of translation that does not emerge from practice and cannot be challenged by it at any time. All these elements push us, then, to think of translation as a model of utopian labor opposed to narration. Translation is distinguished from narration in that it admits alterity, so as to face the crisis, and to produce a creative response. It imposes, however, a prior critique of our interpretative tools. Translation imposes an interpretative labor that constitutes the first step in constructing a utopia.

While one of the narrations of the crisis we are living through denounces the limits placed on personal liberties through confinement, social distancing, and restrictions on our movements, or by the introduction of a system of control of the population based on the collection of personal data, the imperative and critical labor of translation pushes us to interrogate what we call personal freedom. Utopian labor forces us to deepen our conception of personal freedom, to see its limits, even

before denouncing the limitations we think are imposed upon it in the current moment. In our society, in the face of the public health crisis, utopian labor prevents us from falling into the trap of seeing in governmental measures the end of our freedom. It pushes us to go deeper, to glimpse within what we call our personal freedom the impositions of the logic of the market economy on our tastes and choices, and the extended and constant control by information technologies. Utopian labor forces us to reconsider the relationship between what we call personal freedom and globalization. It forces us to confront critically the viral nature of information, commerce, taste, as well as disease, as the consequence of the networks that bind the world together. We are challenged to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of that “virality.” It pushes us to consider everything that is in play in information—an essential feature of personal freedom especially in times of a public health crisis—and to see the perversions of what we are used to celebrating as information..

While one kind of narration denounces the excessive presence of the state, utopian labor pushes us to examine the role of institutions in our lives. It invites us to see the state as a system that should allow for the exercise of our civic duty, as the authority which must master and govern economic growth, and determine its shape. It pushes us to recognize the state as the organism that can prevent the centralization of resources and services and assure their availability inside the territory. The work that is essential for the construction of utopia forces us to reconsider the relation between our freedoms, our personal flourishing, and the requirements of a life in common.

While there are narratives that denounce the constraints imposed on member states by European institutions, utopian labor invites us to become conscious of the reality of an isolated nation. If in those same narratives, migratory phenomena are stigmatized, this work allows us to revert this vision, to become conscious of what the impossibility to cross borders can signify.. Utopian labor forces us, for all these reasons, to reconsider the concept of nation itself.

These are only a few examples of the critical procedure imposed by the translation model: to challenge our analytical tools, to translate them by confronting them to the temporality the crisis forces us to take into consideration, is the first step to elaborating a productive, utopian response to the crisis we are living through.