



Confinement: a matrix for innovation

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As Emmanuel Macron prepares to address the French nation at 8 pm tonight and announce new measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus epidemic, Thomas Flichy de La Neuville reflects on how confinement can be an exceptional opportunity for living and creative elites. Read on for his analysis.

The anxiety caused by the general confinement of the population cannot make us forget one fundamental fact: plant life, human life and the life of civilisations are all founded on respiration, on a notion of inhalation and exhalation that we call 'retreat-return'. Without confinement, creativity collapses. For plants, the dormancy of winter is a precursor to their blossoming; for great spiritual leaders, such as Saint Benedict or the Buddha, complete withdrawal precedes a return to active preaching; for civilisations, any renaissance comes after a cultural winter characterised by absolute confinement. From the fall of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in the mid-13th century to the French invasion at the end of the 15th century, Italy lived through a period of isolated retreat, protected from the tumultuous semi-barbaric feudalism of transalpine Europe.

"The great achievements of Italian genius during these two and a half centuries of immunity were intensive rather than extensive, spiritual rather than material. In architecture, painting and literature, and in almost every other field of general and aesthetic culture, Italians produced works that withstand comparison to those of the Greeks in the 5th and 6th centuries BC." [1]

The Italian withdrawal of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries bears strong similarities to the Athenian confinement of the 8th, 7th and 6th centuries.

"In both cases, political abstention was total and prolonged. In both cases, the voluntarily separated minority channelled all their energy into finding a solution to the problem shared by society as a whole. And in both cases, the creative minority

returned in due course – once their mission had been accomplished – to the society that it had temporarily abandoned, leaving its mark on the entire social body.” [2]

In light of these historical evolutions, what can we expect from the quarantine to come? From December 2020, the birth rate will rise sharply in countries that have gone into lockdown. This surge will prove advantageous for demographically weakened powers like China and Iran. The collapse of the automotive and leisure industries will be offset by a meteoric acceleration of the digital economy. Let’s not forget that Chinese cloud computing company Alibaba rose to prominence during an epidemic. Its founder, Jack Ma, can now afford the luxury of offering medical equipment to Korea and Japan: the coronavirus will hugely enhance the influence of his company.

“Confinement will thus prove to be an exceptional opportunity for reforming organisations.”

In higher education, the gap will widen between the institutions that have the intelligence to fundamentally reform their teaching by asking students to read the classics as a priority, and the inert world that tries to compel students to work remotely on a plethora of insignificant mechanical and sterile exercises. If mediocrity is exported, it will, without doubt, be swept away by irony or entertainment. With confinement, the great force that is inertia will be defeated. This is an exceptional opportunity for living and creative elites.

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[1] A. Toynbee, *L’histoire* (Paris: 1954), p. 257.

[2] A. Toynbee, *L’histoire* (Paris: 1954), p. 259.

A. Toynbee, *L’histoire* (Paris: 1954), p. 257. □

A. Toynbee, *L’histoire* (Paris: 1954), p. 259. □