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Lockdown, Social Control of Space and Religious Freedom

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Abstract. Political thought, from Aristotle to Lefebvre, has placed importance on the control of space as an activity of political power. Extraordinary measures taken by global policy-makers since the early 2020s as part of efforts to to combat the pandemic have included mass lock-downs, closed borders, social distancing and other forms of spatial control. Importantly, spaces dedicated to religious worship (churches, etc.) were subjected to extraordinary regulation. In the exercise of this new control of space, social control has played an important role (obligation to declare one's health condition, incitement to denounce offenders…) fostered by the authorities through various means of new social education, generating new social habits in terms of the management of space. Religious freedom and the autonomy of the Church thus faced new challenges as a result of the extraordinary control of religious space by civil power and the pressure of social control. The new forms of control incorporated into our habits deserve to be critically reviewed in our search for true spaces of freedom that are not sacrificed in the name of supposed science.

Keywords: social control, space, social distancing, pandemic, new social ways, religious freedom.

Introduction

In the famous dystopia *Nineteen Eighty Four* (Orwell, 1949), the protagonist Winston Smith uses a blind spot outside the reach of the telescreen of the dingy flat in which he lives to secretly write a diary. Orwell intuited one of the totalitarian tendencies of the modern state: the urge to police everything that happens not only in the public sphere, but also in the private sphere. Freedom, represented by Winston Smith's diary, was thus identified with the preservation of a space that escaped the gaze of totalitarian control. But where the State's technological ultra-surveillance does not reach, social control arrives in the form of the protagonist's own neighbours, co-workers, etc. In this article, we show how the management of the pandemic emergency meant a qualitative leap in the political and social control of space through new forms of social education that generated new social habits that are now incorporated to a greater or lesser extent into everyday life. The extraordinary nature of the situation manifested itself in the invasion even of places of worship in which the exercise of religious freedom was severely restricted. Civil authorities often established which activities were essential and which were dispensable based on supposedly scientific criteria. At such a juncture, the defence of religious freedom was often relegated to the background (Roszak & Horvat, 2022).

1. Control of space: pre-pandemic precedents

Classical political philosophy, which is largely reflection aimed at unmasking tyranny (Strauss, 1959), contains passages in Aristotle's *Politics* in which it becomes clear how the tyrant tries to control space. For example, it is a vice common to oligarchy and tyranny to want to disperse "[the mob] in scattered places" (Aristotle 1944, 232, 1311a13) and among the "measures [...] to secure the safety of a tyranny" he highlights "the prohibition of common meals and club-fellowship" (Aristotle 1944, 238, 1313a41). Even if only as a distant precedent, these words of the Stagirite

are a warning against any political power that oversteps its functions to the point of alienating people from contact with each other. It is a way of controlling people by controlling the space between them. Forcing diaspora, separation, the absence of contact, especially of that kind of union that favours fraternisation, trust and the exchange of ideas. But the tyrant is not alone. In his effort to control everything, he requires the collaboration of those among the controlled who enthusiastically put themselves at the service of power, always ready to denounce the neighbour who breaks the policy of dispersion: the tyrant must see to it that "the people in the city to be always visible [...] and to try not to be uninformed about any chance utterances or actions of any of the subjects, but to have spies [...] and to set men at variance with one another and cause quarrels between friend and friend". (Aristotle 1944, 239, 1313b6).

Another classic thinker on the excesses of power, Alexis de Tocqueville, warned about the unthinkable consequences in terms of thoughts and actions that will be produced in citizens devoid of personality in the face of absolute power: "when the individual disappears in the throng, and is easily lost in the midst of a common obscurity [...] who shall say at what point the exigencies of power and the servility of weakness will stop?" (Tocqueville 2002, 360)

A century and a half later, Henri Lefebvre's approach seeks to decipher the spatial aspects of a control that is primarily social and political: "*spatial practice* consists of a projection 'on the ground' of all aspects, elements and moments of *social practice*, separating them and without abandoning global control for a single instant: that is to say, realising the subjection of society as a whole to *political practice*, to the power of the state" (Lefebvre 2013, 69). Here we see a foreboding that goes beyond an apocalyptic announcement of dreaded globalisation. What Lefebvre highlights is the connection between technological overdevelopment and the ideological-scientific control of space as a new extension of political power: "the desired 'science of space' (a) amounts to the political use of *knowledge* [...] (b) implies an ideology that masks such use [...] (c) contains a *technological utopia*, a kind of simulation or programming of the future" (Lefebvre 2013, 70). In his 1985 foreword to *The Production of Space*, Hen-

ri Lefebvre wrote: "A new space *tends* to form on a global scale, integrating and disintegrating the local and national scale" (Lefebvre 2013, 60).

This overcoming of the traditional difference between the local and global scales produces what George Ritzer, in response to the new forms of consumption, considered at the end of the 20th century to be an implosion of time and space. Ritzer warned of the danger to the citizen of breaking down well-defined spatio-temporal boundaries. On the one hand, the blurring of the distinction between work time and rest and leisure time; on the other hand, the elimination of boundaries between work spaces, consumption spaces and intimate or domestic spaces. His famous metaphor of the 'new cathedrals of consumption' (cruise ships, shopping malls, theme parks, etc.) also implodes in the domestic space thanks to new technologies: "It is one thing to be trapped at the mall, but quite another thing to be trapped at home. No matter how trapped one is at the mall, one must eventually leave. However, most people do not have the option of leaving a home that has become commercialised" (Ritzer 2005, 131). Ritzer warned of the danger of turning our own home into a stage for permanent propaganda and consumption. Similarly, he saw the threat of the home becoming a place and an occasion to continue the working day: "the same computer that is allowing us to shop at home is permitting us to work there" (Ritzer 2005, 131).

2. Control of space in pandemic times

Twenty years on, Ritzer's analysis can easily be applied to the mass commodification of the domestic environment in the context of the great pandemic confinements of 2020. Through various pseudo-legal methods, the vast majority of the world's states declared a general obligation to stay at home, to consume from home through digital applications, to produce from home through teleworking. The increase in hours of television consumption was exponential (Silva-Torres et al. 2022). The mass media forced on the viewer a new ultra-rapid social education through which to instruct in new routines, new schedules, new forms of intra-domestic personal relationships, new uses of digital technologies... Even a multi-

tude of religious acts were transformed into digital events. Of particular note was the Eucharistic adoration and the urbi et orbi blessing of Pope Francis in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican, which was broadcast live around the world on March 27, 2020.

However, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the great pandemic confinements produced a kind of lazed sedentarisation or an increase in domestic rest. Often, total mobility moved into the virtual realm. The linking of jobs to projects had already been denounced as a characteristic of a new social class called the *precariat* (Standing 2013) in the aftermath of the great financial crisis of 2008. An apparent creative class (Florida 2010), within the 'knowledge economy', made up of young middle-class people, architects, programmers, etc., becomes not just an involuntary gentrifying agent but the real precariat, dependent on projects so that they are attracted to a way of "living from day to day and being tied by weak links due to their constant mobility" (Sequera 2020, 42). The extreme mobility and precariousness of work during lockdown was not only visible in the irreplaceable deliverymen (one of the activities considered essential by the authorities) but also in the virtual total mobility of the apparent creative class, with liberal professions, who had to turn their bedroom into an office or their kitchen into a meeting place for months at a time. Worst of all, the new social education demanded that we live the new situation with enthusiasm: "Positivity is an imperative for the exhausted worker. He is not allowed to show his disillusionment or weariness on pain of becoming an obsolete machine" (Abbate 2021, 80).

One of the ways of reinforcing the collective enthusiasm for new forms of spatial control was the use of euphemisms such as social distancing. These terms actually mean the opposite of what they say. Distancing as a means of reducing the possibility of contagion prevents, at least secondarily, social relations. If two people cannot legally be within a certain distance of each other (a distance that varies according to the health authorities in different countries) then communication between people is radically disrupted. For example, conversations tend to require a higher volume of voice and therefore less intimacy, so that the content of conversations is modified by the social pressure of being heard by more lis-

teners than desired. A combination of political control of space (as individuals are forced to occupy certain places with a minimum distance from the places occupied by others) and social control of what happens in that space (as third parties become controllers not only of the maintenance of the safe distance, but also involuntary listeners of the conversations between the two people) is produced. These controls are accompanied by new pandemic signage: signs indicating the direction of pedestrian traffic, painted pavements with the route to follow, information icons with diagrams reminding people of the minimum social distancing: "Devices such as architecture, urban planning, public facilities or public space interact with each other, weaving a web of power that shapes the meaning of a place in which the subject is exposed" (Sequera 2020, 61). A clear example of the combination of arbitrary imposition, new social education and social control are the loudspeaker announcements on public transport such as buses or trains warning that it is forbidden to eat, drink or even talk! This ban on talking on public transport often comes in the guise of improving conditions for passengers. For example, the FGC railways of the Generalitat de Catalunya present their trains as "trains of silence", implying that the journey will be more pleasant and peaceful for all passengers. Regarding the life of faith, the control of sacred places manifested itself in such strange ways as the prohibition of touching images, the suppression of holy water or the obligation of members of the same family to sit at a distance from each other once inside the temple (Huzarek, 2021).

3. Trends in new uses in the social control of space

The control of space is inseparable from the control of daily routines and affective life experiences. The apparently pre-political in everyday life, the ordinary, that which *does not* appear to us at first glance as a space of political power, also becomes political. What the fight against terrorism did by turning everyday spaces (supermarkets, subways, etc.) into spaces in need of ultra-security (Amoore 2009) has been taken to its fullest development with the pandemic control of space: anyone who breaks the

rules on social distance or confinement becomes a terrorist threat and can be denounced by their neighbour turned *balcony cop*. In public transport, too, it is often the users themselves who reproach those who fail to comply with safety measures. It is true that the new dynamics are integrated by society through a tendency towards self-regulation in the management of spaces aimed at conflict avoidance. We tend to incorporate routines in the use of everyday spaces – be they private or common – that give us security to the same extent that they suppress, or at least postpone, conflict. Such practices often involve the omission of the rule itself as a conflict generator (Nyman 2021). It is therefore not surprising that the same country that introduced the most drastic space control measures in the past in the form of massive mandatory quarantines was also singled out at the time (You 2016) for the growing weight of paranoid public spending on internal security: in 2011 China's budget for internal security already exceeded that for external defence (Guo 2012). The use of checkpoints and other mobility restriction mechanisms had already been in use in Beijing since at least 2018: "security checkpoints around the city have multiplied and restrictions on movement and behaviour have tightened. Increasing numbers of security personnel patrol the streets" (Nyman 2021, 325).

3.1. Under the cover of exceptional pandemic circumstances

Not just in 2020, but already since 2005, the WHO has included a new understanding of space in its guidelines for combating epidemics:

> the notion regarding the control of diseases was adjusted in order to cope with the social dynamics that bring different locations closer, different risks and different demands, in short period of times [...] Space must be understood as continuous, interconnected by the constant movements of people, products, animals and microorganisms (Darsie & Weber 2020, 48)

The new conception of space implies an intense awareness of the possibilities of infection multiplied by the growth of interconnections of all kinds and between all kinds of beings, whose individual behaviour no

longer has an impact only on the individual or their immediate environment, but on the entire health ecosystem:

> the individual behaviours can significantly impact collective security on a global scale [...] it is necessary to comprehend space as a 'dispersion' area, characterised by the flow of different people who share risks associated to the microorganisms they transport. Such a situation allows us to understand that it is through space control, or social isolation, that we can decelerate the dissemination of diseases in relation to time (Darsie & Weber 2020, 48)

Since the beginning of 2020, the WHO has taken on a prominence never before achieved in the concert of international organisations. The need for greater control of space and physical interconnections, in the name of health requirements, spread massively and was quickly taken up by all levels of public administrations. Just like a contagion itself, within a few days all kinds of states, which usually take a long time to agree, agreed on the urgency of extraordinary measures. Such behaviour on the part of the authorities has been justified by recalling that this is not the first time in history that political power has restricted individual freedoms and controlled movements on a massive scale for biopolitical purposes: "there is no doubt that restricting individual or collective freedom to pursue broader biopolitical ends has played an important role in mass population control throughout history" (Ryan et al. 2022, 130). However, there are also numerous examples of disproportionate repression or the extension of unjustified isolation. Hence "the need for greater governmental accountability for such emergency conduct, and structural reforms that prevent reliance on the exceptional policing of usual suspects who serve as scapegoats for the broader biopolitical goals of pandemic disease control" (Ryan et al. 2022, 143).

3.2. From tourist nomadism to the threat of the wild

Pandemic exceptionality produced extraordinary images of public space that can be categorised into two main types. On the one hand, images of historic city centres, traditionally linked to mass tourism, completely

empty. On the other hand, images of diverse urban spaces suddenly occupied by wild animals. In the first case, the mass media launched iconic images of the empty centres of the big cities of world tourism, while life in the neighbourhoods continued to demand a certain mobility and presence on streets of neighbours going to and from the supermarket. In the end, what those images showed was the fruit of touristification, which created urban spaces without neighbours, inhabited only by nomadic tourists, who disappeared during the initial large-scale lockdowns. The historic centres of large cities are something like non-places, in the sense of Marc Augé (1992), since they have become uninhabitable places. However, the most immediate superficial reading by the average spectator was that of a kind of 'horror vacui', a sense of horror at the images of the empty Piazza San Marco or Times Square without people taking selfies. Such images were accompanied by a sense that such iconic spaces of world tourism had become inhospitable places only accessible to criminals or homeless beggars. The horror of empty space is also expressed, to a certain extent, in what Adela Cortina (2020) refers to as *aporophobia*. Cortina refers to the hatred of the poor, typical of a Western society spiritually drowned in its own opulence and blind to the needs of the marginalized. The disgust towards empty spaces is mixed with the disgust towards beggars, who continued to live poorly in the empty streets.

In the latter case, the images of wild animals in the urban space had an undeniable effect on the loss of a sense of security. Here again, the news programmes showed images from various cities around the world where pictures or videos of animals were taken in the most unlikely places: wild boars in Barcelona or Haifa, pumas in Santiago de Chile or wild goats in Wales... Lockdown in this case translated into 'abandonment' of a space that was being 'reclaimed' by its former irrational inhabitants. One of the effects was the identification of 'nature' with something to be feared, so that the active intervention of the state to come to our 'leviathan' defence became more necessary than ever. Faced with empty historic centres and wild animals in the streets, Lefebvre's words sound prophetic: "history is lived as nostalgia and nature as regret" (Lefebvre 2013, 109).

3.3. Lockdowns, restricted mobility and curfews

Control of space includes control of mobility in spaces. The large-scale lockdowns were accompanied by strict regulation of authorised mobility and repression of unauthorised mobility. In various countries, the civil authorities established different lists of professions considered essential (healthcare workers, transport workers, food retailers, etc.). The state thus established itself as the body that determines the people whose mobility is essential. It regulates the movement of people as workers. It is not limited to authorising the mobility of certain professionals, but obliges a large number of workers to organise their domestic space to suit productive needs. In this way, it also regulates the family space not only by the measures of forced intra-household isolation, but also by the obligation of teleworking. This entailed a rearrangement of domestic spaces and routines in which the weakest were often the most disadvantaged (McCallum & Rose 2021). Forced confinement exacerbated economic hardship, job insecurity and a sense of loss of life control (Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer 2020).

One of the star measures of political control of time and space under the umbrella of the health emergency was undoubtedly the curfew. For the majority of Western citizens such a measure was completely unknown, typical of ancient times or dictatorial regimes. In various phases of de-escalation of the general lockdown, night-time curfews varied, but in any case generated dynamics hitherto unknown. Beyond the control of the mobility of people based on their condition as a worker and beyond the conversion of the home into a productive setting, the variable night-time curfew elevates the state to regulator and organiser of festive, leisure or entertainment time as well. This control reached its paroxysm with the intervention of the political authorities in regulating the places, duration and even modes of religious worship. With varying degrees of intensity, worship was restricted and changes in religious practice were forced: prohibition of kissing images, obligation to keep the faithful away from each other, imposition of communion in the hand, limitation of occupancy (Mazurkiewicz 2021). The use of new technologies to mitigate the effects of restrictions on religious practice increased markedly dur-

ing the pandemic (Stańdo et al. 2022). Religious authorities themselves were often called upon to contribute, as those with greater credibility and closeness to the most marginalised sectors of society, to the management of hygiene and social distancing measures: "Religious leaders should be engaged to create alternatives to mass gatherings, and to safely provide spiritual assistance, in order to ensure religious needs are also cared for, e. g., over radio or social media" (Wilkinson 2020, 513). Such requirements could respond to a certain concern about the inefficacy of such measures in territories where knowledge of the terrain and the real control of the space by the political power are lower. Hence the need to integrate local elites into the control of space, even if it means relying on drug gangs in Brazilian favelas (Jung 2021) or neighbourhood committees in Wuhan:

> In China's unprecedented quarantine of Wuhan, for instance, neighbourhood groups were involved in ensuring movement control: community-led initiatives are spreading accross the world. Partnerships with local authorities and support for local action will be essential (Wilkinson 2020, 511)

3.4. The new post-pandemic social uses: hygienism and "sporadicism"

The abrupt introduction of many new forms of individual and collective behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically transformed personal and social life. A gesture as banal as handwashing became so important during the first months of the pandemic that millions of people changed the way they washed their hands, following the incessant instructions in the media and the informative diagrams in public toilets. If changes of this kind were consolidated over time, this is an example of new social uses. As Ortega y Gasset (2010) explains, uses consist of a certain mechanisation of a process that originally had a rational sense that has now been forgotten. In this sense, when they are rational, they are not yet uses. And when they are uses, their rationality is no longer perceived. If instead of shaking hands, kissing or hugging, we make a gesture of greeting that avoids physical contact, we are introducing new social

uses. If instead of approaching our interlocutor in a casual encounter, we stop, stand two metres away and carry on a conversation without crossing that distance, we are also introducing new social uses. These are mechanisms that were put in place in the name of preserving health, i.e. for hygiene reasons, but which, once in place, are perpetuated without our associating the actions with that purpose. If, when entering a liturgical act in a small church, we try to position ourselves in such a way that the space between the attendees is as large as possible, we have introduced new social uses. Moreover, the case of the introduction of these new ritualised uses in places of worship may be even stronger than in profane places because of a certain predominant ritualistic attitude among the regular participants of the cult. The use of hydroalcoholic gel during liturgical celebrations, the suppression of physical contact in the sign of peace, the 'sporadic' criterion in the distribution of assistants, the use of masks when they are no longer obligatory, are some of the practices that have been introduced in worship in many dioceses. It should be up to ecclesiastical authorities, not to political or external social pressure, to regulate such uses properly as they influence the process of worship. This 'sporadicism', easily spotted in places of worship, is also reproduced in other settings, such as work meetings, school activities, museums, etc. However, crowds at large concerts, popular festivals and the like will continue to be part of the modernity in which we live. Although the social gaze and judgement of the collective unconscious towards various modes of mass gatherings has probably changed forever, a certain compulsion for proximity remains a feature of postmodern social interaction (Boden & Molotch, 1994). Hence the need, for those that aim to further advance 'sporadicism', to continue to resort to coercive measures, since the inclination to physical proximity, to face-to-face social exchange, is as strong as the natural inclination to social life in general. This is precisely why it is necessary to take a close look at the ways in which the various authorities as well as the mechanisms of social control themselves continue to expand in their irrepressible inclination towards total control of space. The suppression of religious freedom, carried out in the name of the health authorities, represents a red line, the crossing of which leads to

the destruction of Western values and the degeneration of political power into totalitarian oppression (Blicharz et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The exceptional measures to restrict mobility during the 2020 major lockdowns marked an acceleration in the post-modern public authorities' inclination towards unfettered control of space. This meant the inclusion of control of 'in-between' space, the space between citizens as 'distance' necessarily policed in the name of collective safety itself. From there, they move on to control citizens understood as individuals, as atoms that not only occupy points in that physical space, but are also carriers of all kinds of dangerous viruses and micro-organisms. The sudden introduction of comprehensive regulation affecting every corner of everyday conduct, be it domestic, professional or religious, came hand in hand with a new social education. This new social education, through traditional mass media as well as through social networks and new technologies, although born out of the modern political authority par excellence, the sovereign state, quickly integrated all other alternative social authorities, from religious authorities to organised mafias. As such, a process of spatial control could be accelerated that is not merely political or administrative, but quietly extends to more extreme forms of social control. This article is also a call for the preservation of spaces of freedom, such as the blind spot in which Winston Smith took refuge in his flat in London, Oceania.

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