Home is not what you think.

The Corona pandemics is more easily classified as a natural disaster than a man-made evil (although this is easily questionable given that it is the result of man-made zoonotic spillovers and given that China's totalitarian regime postponed by many precious weeks the divulgation of the virus). Yet, everything in its management was so spectacularly interwoven with politics and the media, that it became impossible to view it simply as an inevitable natural scourge. It exposed and undid the stitches with which most spheres of society were sewn: those seamless stitches have come undone. The Corona crisis was properly *stunning* and it is the state of stupor I want to reflect on. Stupor is, on the whole, a very rare state. It is a state that overwhelms us but for which we have no prior routine or category to cope with.

Let me thus start with a book that dealt with man-made evil, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* because Arendt also tried to make sense of an event which produced a sense of stupor, the pan-European massacre of the Jews. To account for that sense of stupor she used a method of analysis which can be characterized as anti-historical in that she refused analogies from the past. The past cannot shed light on the present or the future because as Tocqueville put it, in times of crisis the "mind errs in obscurity." Epidemics and even pandemics have always accompanied humankind. Yet, the Corona pandemic will be a milestone, not for the scale of the deaths it caused (it is, at the time of this writing, much smaller than many other plagues and diseases), but because of the ways in which we organized it socially, economically, politically and symbolically.

More than four billion people throughout the world have stopped their mobility, work, and ordinary socializing, willingly, without much protest. People were confined to their homes, assuming they had one, without the possibility of using streets, shops, or public transportations. That people would renounce their freedom willingly to defend their health is not, in itself, terribly surprising. After all, as Thomas Hobbes (and others) put it, we will always be willing to sacrifice a great deal of our freedom for our security. Fear of death is so powerful that people willingly accept the authority of a state which can save them, including surveillance measures which suspend their basic civil rights and confinement which verges on house arrest. Netanyahu's or Orban's delegitimization of the parliament or the supreme court are the normal fodder of anti-democratic authoritarian leaders.

What is properly unprecedented here is the form taken by this lack of freedom: quasi house-arrest on a planetary scale. The fear that accompanied this quasi house-arrest also has no exact precedent. In time of war, the fear of death exists but we usually and normally confront it with other people, we know who the enemy is, and we can draw on the large symbolic repertoire of heroism to fight or hide. Yet, in the current case of fear of Corona virus, we are reduced to very small units, and sometimes entirely isolated from the rest of the world, there is no action to take, and we have very few known symbolic repertoires to draw from. The deadly bomb may not be what the enemy shells at us, but what *we*, unknowingly, carry inside ourselves and cause to someone else. This is why we have all become agglutinated in and around the home, in fear of something invisible which has suspended in the air our relationships to others. (This virus is unique in comparison to Ebola or the first SARS in that 25% of the people who carry it are asymptomatic, which means that anyone and everyone, including oneself, becomes a priori a source of danger). It is not only invisibility but also the unknowability of the danger that has curtailed so much of our freedom, even inside the home, as people have different degrees of isolation from the world. It is thus the home that has done much of the work of providing the symbolic resources to keep people safe and overcome the crisis. Can home do so much?

Home: Sweet or Bitter?

Home, famously sweet, became the main place to manage a crisis of an unprecedented planetary scale.

As we understand this notion, home, is a private space where men and women interact as equals, and such notion is a fairly recent cultural category. Medieval castles were less lived in than camped in, as many people could gather in the great halls to eat, sleep, and entertain themselves. Neither privacy nor of course sanitation could be found in them. Some view the birth of the home in Dutch 17th century, where domesticity occurred in more intimate spaces and in settings supposed to provide comfort (the image of domesticity became known through the paintings of Vermeer or Franz Hals). Later on, in the 18th but mostly 19th century, the home became the privileged site for women, for the expression of sentiments, it became what the historian John Demos called a 'hothouse of emotions," a place where warmth and emotional expressivity would nurture children and the spouses. Of course, the separation between private and public spheres was not new. In the classical world, the female private and the male public spheres were both fundamentally distinct and in a relationship of hierarchy with each other. But what was new to the 19th and 20th century was that home became invested with moral meanings. Women were in charge of the home and this space was not only opposed to work, to the market, to male selfishness, competitiveness and self-interest: it was also above them. The home had a morally elevated status. The home became domestic, female, presumably withdrawn from the public sphere, the realm of the authentic self and morally superior to the falsity of the outward world.

This is why the modern home became the place where consumer ideals of comfort and intimacy could be formulated. Decoration magazines were witnesses of the capital importance which the home came to have in life's projects. The idea of Domestic comfort, as it is now understood, was part and parcel of the making of consumer society. *Style at Home, Decor, House and Garden, Schöner Wohnen, Style at Home, Kitchen and Baths, Maison Decoration* are only a few of myriad examples of the ways in which the home has become for ordinary middle and working classes the place to express their identity, their relationships, their social status, their family bonds and all this through practices which aimed at beautifying the home and making it the repository of feelings and intimacy.

Hannah Arendt opposed the romantic view of the home as a haven from a heartless world. Building on Aristotle, she viewed private matters as pertaining to the material necessities of the household. For Ancient Greeks, the home was where one accomplished the physical labor of sustaining the human body and of reproducing the human species, and thus the home was the place for women, children, and slaves. Similarly, Arendt viewed the private sphere as entirely deprived of freedom, it was not the site where one could deliberate, exercise reason and be free. Only citizens of the polis were free: they owned land, could participate in public affairs, and were released from the low labor of households[1]. Household was synonymous with the status of non-citizen. Arendt was not a feminist and could think of power only as belonging to the public sphere but her views of the home were not that far from the feminists who would later denounce home as a place of oppression and raw power, as a place which was becoming increasingly meaningless for women.

If anything, the planetary Corona confinement is a huge experiment without equivalent in history to test Arendt's and feminists' theory of the home. For those of us who are not born with the temperament of Emily Dickinson (the greatest American poet who lived as a recluse for the last 15 years of her life), what does the home mean when it becomes our only space to live? If we had been the subjects of a huge experiment run by a giant and mad scientist, she would have discovered that the public sp here of sociability, of leisure, of the street, of the cafes, is fundamental to the

[1] McKeon, Michael. The Secret History of Domesticity : Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge. Vol. John Hopkins pbk. ed, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

constitution of our identity in a way that was unknown or invisible to us because we had assumed all along that the home was the site for the expression of our authentic self.

First of all, and perhaps most obviously, many homes --urban crowding and speculation aiding— are too small and unequipped to give each member of the family the capacity to act and live as the highly individuated individuals which modern societies have turned us into (bathrooms are shared with others; sleeping spaces very close to each other). Very few homes have windows or balconies or terraces large enough to maintain contact with the street, thus de facto creating structures that are totally isolated from the outside world. The full spectrum of cultural meanings associated with the sweetness of the home is not reserved to those who live in large apartment complexes, in slums, in suburban prefabricated and cheap housing. Second, families and home rest on the massive work of schools which sustain and assist the work of socialization and reproduction. Many homes, even comfortable ones, cannot really be a substitute for schools: parents around the world expressed their powerlessness and profound fatigue at the sustained and daily interactions with their children. The school is such a powerful structure sustaining homes that no serious renewal of the economy is possible without jump-starting schools and preschools. Three: the home is implicitly structured by the possibility for men and women of holding separate lives, that is, on the possibility to have and follow different paths during the day. Add to this the fact that men who have lost their job lose an important part of their sense of value and can become threatening, to themselves and to the women in their household. The record amount of violence against women during the epidemics is a reminder, if we needed one, that the home is livable for many only if it relies on the presence of an outside world in which the two sexes can lead separate lives and from which they can derive a sense of value. After the lockdown in Hubei was removed, record numbers of people registered for divorces: they discovered home was not the place to have marriages – at least leisurenot the exclusive one. For them (and many others) the home was not so sweet, after all. The architecture of most modern homes today is heavily predicated on the assumption that people spend most of their times outside the home, at work or engaged in leisure.

The public world is also the world of work and production. In fact this is the world that dominates contemporary societies. The world of work was aptly (and rightly) described by many as alienating personhood and exploiting labor. But that world of work structures and builds the self in many invisible ways: it gives a temporal structure to the day and to the week; it is a site of sociability with colleagues and strangers; it is a place where we care to be fashionable and elegant; for many members of the middle classes, it is also the place where to exercise a sense of competence and skill. In other words, it has become, for men and women, the main sense for the production of symbolic value. In that sense, feminism has won: it has made the home and the activity of home-making devoid of symbolic (and economic) value and has effectively transposed value to the outside world.

Home cannot repair the absence of a public world because production and consumption have become the main ways in which contemporaries create value, socialize, and even forge intimacy (deploring it does not change the fact). Work is where we exercise our skills and derive a sense of purpose. Leisure is where we experience pleasure, play, and the possibility of seeing and being seen by others. Confinement has thus meant that we have lost not only a public world, but the world itself. If anything, confinement shows how much Rousseau was wrong: an intense intimacy and state of perfect transparency with others is in the long run intolerable.

The experience of confinement is not only the experience of losing freedom, but the experience of losing the world itself. For Arendt modernity at large is characterized by the *loss of the world*: losing the world means to restrict or eliminate the public sphere of action and speech, to privilege or focus only on the private world of introspection and the private pursuit of economic interests. Modernity is the age of mass society and of the victory of *animal laborans* over *homo faber*. What we experienced

was an intensely constricted sense of homeness, which was bearable for some, *only* because they could work or watch movies or interact with their friends through technology, that is, transport the public world of work and leisure within the home. Many around me smugly claimed that they were having a blast at home, or at the very least that their routine was not interrupted: they did not realize that the sweetness of their homes was made possible by technology which provides ever increasing public structures inside the home and/or by an activity which resembles that of the public world of work and leisure. The home then can assume its proper function only when it is a part of the 'world.' In the corona crisis it is the world which we had lost, both as a space to inhabit in safety and as a space to live in with other human beings. With the reopening of the world, it is the mythology of home we should dispose of.