

Letter from isolation, text and drawing escaped from inside

- Bois d'Arcy - Summer 2021

For more than a month and a half now, I've had the urge to write again about solitary confinement, but I can't get started, I can't concentrate enough. Either my mind evaporates into nothingness like a little cloud, or it condenses into a kind of molasses so thick that it blocks everything in my brain and gives me a headache. Although the first one can be milder (like being drugged to the point of stupor and dazed), both situations bring a painful feeling. Indeed, to notice one's loss of intellectual capacity and to assist to one's own decrepitude are of a particular total violence. It is in this mental condition that I work on the elaboration of this text.

The will to make an update of the situation comes from the brutal observation of its aggravation. New symptoms appear while the old ones get worse and worse without being noticed. When you realize that you have completely forgotten that two of your friends (co-defendants) have been released (under judicial constraint), even though this was the only good news since you were locked up, it is a real shock. The brain starts seriously to derail. The problems of concentration, the difficulties in constructing one's thoughts, the daze, the loss of temporal reference points, the headaches, the dizziness, all these symptoms already stated previously, far from disappearing with time, have become amplified and generalized, they have become commonplace or normality. But to these we must add others. Before mentioning them, you have to understand something: every time a new symptom, a new pain appears, we tell ourselves that it is temporary, we wait for it to pass. But no! Each new ailment that appears is only a glimpse of what will become more and more present in the long term. These new "companions" are: The loss of memory, so out of it, without any exchange with people or any stimuli, things don't imprint anymore. The information from phone calls, visits, readings, goes in and out without leaving any trace or just a vague sensation of something impalpable. It's quite simple, if I don't immediately note down my sports and oppression schedules for the day, in the minute that follows, it's impossible to remember them...

In addition to this, there are visual problems: it is now impossible to see a straight, level floor. Floors tilt in all directions at the same time and never the same. One could have fun trying to guess which side a ball would go to if it was passed on the ground, none of the sides would be amazing. But then, they are forbidden, even the DIT... cunning!

Another most worrisome symptom is the strong chest pressure accompanied by a sharp pain in the heart, like a spike stuck in its core. The impression that the heart beats not faster, but stronger as if it wanted to leave the chest and a feeling of feverishness and this, even during the moments of relaxation, which are the tai-chi-chuan sessions or meditation. This pain lasted a whole month in a permanent way, non stop before it went away, to return from time to time to visit me unexpectedly.

But also, the problem of access to one's own brain. It has become common, when someone brings up a subject or another, to know that you have knowledge about it but not to have access to it, the link to get there is broken, it doesn't connect. 404 error some would say... And fear creeps in, what if it wasn't the path that you couldn't find, what if it was your knowledge that was fraying and disappearing?

To all these things are added, as said above, the observation of this situation which in itself induces its share of psychological suffering.

But then what do we do? To worry, to ask to see a doctor? Yes, but in isolation it is very complicated to go to the medical wing. One can retort that a doctor comes twice a week in C4 (isolation area of the Bois d'Arcy penitentiary center). Yes, but in super speed, in the corridor with the guards, with no possibility of guaranteeing any semblance of medical secrecy and with just enough time to take three notes and give us some Doliprane, saying that here (in solitary confinement) it's conducive to headaches. Getting an appointment is not always easy, but it is even harder when you are taken there.

Corridor poetry, for our cries in the wards

To write, to heal and reveal its evils,

don't forget to think so as not to end up in the dungeon.

Oh you prison, your heart of bricks leaves me marble,

I wait for your destruction to sit at the foot of a tree.

*Ulcer I am, bleeding in your iron and cement entrails,
dream of this day,*

that those you call cancer of the system will puke.

*Oh you freedom, I dream of you, sometimes I talk to you,
I write your name in a whisper or in the depths of my cells,
and I fantasize about approaching you, caressing you
and kissing you.*

*I look out the window and my view is squared,
horizon lost and badly framed.*

Blackboard and erased paint, in a spirit of a concrete envelope.

Manu from Fresnes, August 2021

NB: the footnotes were added by the support committee

(1) The situation is still the same in October 2021

(2) During the hearing of renewal of the isolation after 6 months it is asked to the doctor to provide a medical opinion, as well as to the SPIP to provide an opinion on the behavior.

(3) See letter of April 2021 published in l'envolée N°53 and on the blog soutien812.net

<https://soutienauxincolpeesdu8decembre.noblogs.org/files/2021/10/cellule-2-1024x392.jpg>

(4) From now on and following changes in the functioning of the prison, our friend must ask for authorizations for each book or CD that is deposited in the parcel and which must be inspected by the chief of the detention.

Drawing and small text escaped from inside the two other accused in detention...



- In the prison cell of Fleury Mérogis

In order to leave the C4, the entire detention area must be blocked off, which hinders the functioning of the prison. When moving, everything must be closed and inaccessible, even to the sight, it must be a certainty to be able neither to see nor to be seen by another prisoner. The fact that they have to be accompanied by an officer and a supervisor during the whole journey and the time of the appointment complicates the logistics of their day and requires more staff. It is therefore simply easier to leave the inmate to his or her hope, which runs out to the rhythm of the minutes on his or her watch, until the moment when he or she realizes that he or she will not be going to the long-awaited appointment.

For my part, twice my dental appointment was postponed because I was not taken there while the dentist and myself were both waiting. Since the beginning of February I asked to be followed by a psychologist, but at the end of June ⁽¹⁾, still nothing on the horizon. My appointment with a general practitioner took place after a month of repeated requests, but mostly thanks to the intervention of my lawyers.

The doctor told me orally that what I was complaining about was caused by the condition of isolation, that it was normal in this situation and that it would pass when I got out, without giving me a medical certificate to that effect ⁽²⁾. It's as if they don't take into account the serious physical and mental damages, as if they were saying to me "you suffer, we don't care, it's not serious". Well, if it's serious and even if it would pass when I get out, no, it's not normal to undergo that. Not to make a medical certificate is to participate in the existence of these facts, to become an accomplice of the torture undergone. What is interesting to see is that being in isolation creates psychological and physical disorders that cannot be properly monitored because of the fact that one is in isolation. It's the snake that bites its own tail, the infernal spiral. It is such a nonsense that it is difficult to believe that it is an accident.

Now a “system” has been put in place that is supposed to ensure that I can get to my appointments, it remains to be seen how this will work out as the opportunity has not yet presented itself to put it into practice.

This is a luxury obtained from the fact that I am no slacker about my rights, or as the management would say: “demanding about my detention conditions”. But here the respect of the rights of the detainees is to be scratched, it does not apply automatically and appealing to common sense with courtesy so that it exists, is like urinating in a violin. The vegetarian diet, more or less effective, was only effective after I quoted the articles of the law and threatened to call in my lawyers. The problem of the hi-fi and the medical appointments, likewise: “lawyers”! So there you have it, for the “what do you say?” that we tell our kids, here it’s not “thank you” or “please” but “lawyer! Although not surprising, it is distressing to see that the prison administration (PA) imposes an antagonistic relationship, that everything must be managed from the perspective of a power struggle.

I know that I am privileged in this respect, I have two lawyers who are determined to see that my rights are respected. An enormous luxury that I suppose few here can boast of. I am also privileged to have some command of the French language and its reading and writing in order to be able to clearly express my claims and to be able to justify their legitimacy. Because although one can make claims to the supervisors for certain things, the official and only recognized protocol is the written word. I don’t dare to imagine the ordeal for those who don’t speak the language or who have difficulties with its written practice and who obviously cannot, in isolation, ask for a helping hand from a fellow inmate. The PA being, as its name implies, an administration with all that that implies, patience acquired over time is not the least of the qualities, just like the capacity to adapt to this protocol system. I wonder how a person who is not supported by a lawyer, who does not master the language well, can make his rights heard and not lose patience.

Notes:

This text is not intended to explain how prisons work, nor does it claim to be representative of what life is like in solitary confinement. It does not pretend to theorize the official and unofficial mechanisms, the repressive “tools” used to break or reduce the determination of the prisoners, some have already done so with great brilliance. This text has value only for what it is: a testimony of a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular place, no more and no less.

I hope that the part about mastering the French language, reading, and writing doesn't sound pretentious, like “I can talk too well”; that's not the point. The idea is that if you don't speak French or if you have trouble reading and writing, then you're in trouble when it comes to claiming your rights! Is that clear or did I screw up? Do I have to do it again?

Yesterday my mother was refused to drop off books and CDs, supposedly because she didn't have the authorization. a beginner's mistake? Indirect punishment? a lot of problems with the parcels during the whole summer, which I hope will be solved soon. ⁽⁴⁾

Today, on September 6th and after several requests, a medical certificate with only memory loss and chest pain written on it was delivered and still no psychologist.

Libre Flot

Staying on my situation and my isolation, it is “amusing” to note the non-compliance of the PA with their laws. The circular of April 14, 2011 stipulates, in short, that one cannot be placed in isolation for the facts that one is accused of (or for which someone has been convicted). The reason must be a so-called “inappropriate” or “dangerous” behavior. In spite of this, the management of the prison imposed on me for six months and obtained the extension of the isolation by saying very clearly that it was based only on the reproached facts and that it recognized that my behavior did not pose any problem. So, without any embarrassment, a person’s rights are violated and the so-called “white torture” is applied to him... Quiet!

Hold on because there is no choice, hold on because of respect for oneself and for one’s family, hold on thanks to the support of one’s relatives: family, friends, comrades. Thank you to them for this unfailing support. Thank you also to the ones I don’t know and who honored me with theirs.

And if there is a loss of patience, in case of violation of rights, how does it end? What drifts and what consequences? Don't we already know?

Morale evolves in a seesaw fashion with moments of quasi-euphoria (which is not necessarily reassuring) until demoralization and total demotivation, and this without anything having happened and without anything justifying these mood swings. The psychological situation is unstable, I rejoice when everything goes "well", while dreading the low point that relentlessly looms. In addition to the relatives who are struggling to offer me a weekly visit, my best support is the sun (although it is beginning to transform the prison into a furnace). I'm still in awe of how much the weather affects my mental state (weather: low along the coast but hot inland...)

To hold on I don't look to the future, I don't imagine anything positive for the fear of being disappointed and suffering an emotional elevator. No hope, no disappointment. So I don't project myself and live from day to day, tirelessly repeating my routine. a rigorous routine between physical maintenance, intellectual development and psychological appeasement giving me a framework, a grip on myself. Self-discipline is the only thing that remains when nothing else does. Another technique to keep smiling is to lie shamelessly about your situation. a slight difference in the new cell? Wow! It's so great. Industrial food? Cool! If you add turmeric, salt, ras-el-hanout, curry, herbes de Provence, cumin and harissa, it's my favorite meal! Is the water in the shower hot? It is relaxing! Is it cold? It is invigorating. Don't see the glass as half empty but as two-thirds full...

Then I miss (or not) the confettis and the spangles when the close relations deposit a CD, a too interesting book, a manual of tai-chi-chuan or of language well chiadé... Pîroz be!

By changing cell, we realize how much we have to relearn the sounds. Unconsciously, we integrate all the sounds of the corridor.

Following the resonance of footsteps, the echoes of voices, the rolling of carts, the sliding of eyelets, the jingling of keys, the beeps of the security gate, the opening and closing of doors, you can guess what is going on. It is then possible to anticipate the moment when the guards arrive at the door. This may seem trivial, but in my opinion, it is very important not to be surprised. Not to be surprised means to anticipate the ultra-sharp and brutal sound of the latches and locks. To be surprised by this sound makes you jump, gives a jolt to your heart, a rise of stress and this without reason, it is biological, animal I would say. I have the image in my mind of the doe or the gazelle on the lookout, ears attentive so as not to fall victim to predation. Although I am aware that nothing justifies such a feeling and that, personally, I have no aggressive behavior or abuse to deplore from the supervisors. I can't help it, as a vital duty, a survival instinct, to be always ready, to be always on the alert. Like a way to take possession of one's territory, to control one's space! This is surely due to the fact that although our relations are courteous, they will never be friendly and the supervisors will always be only links in the chain of my oppression.

Last time ⁽³⁾, I didn't mention the eyelets that allow you to look at the inmates through the door. In the meantime, they have added grilles here too... As if there weren't enough of them already... This doesn't allow us to be observed without our knowing it, because as we hear, it only serves to isolate human beings even more. Where once there was an eye (a rather disturbing and even cosmic image, by the way) there is nothing left. No more visual link between oneself and the "eye", only sound (soon nothing), another small step towards the dehumanization of the prison environment. These controls are carried out every two hours, day and night. During the day, it is necessary to give a sign of life, otherwise it knocks at the door, therefore to wake up if it is the moment of siesta. At night, the control is inevitably accompanied by the switching on of the lights (of a longer duration according to its author.ice). On nights when I sleep very well, I am only woken up once, otherwise...

The most pernicious thing about isolation is that it makes the real unreal. Since one is permanently alone with oneself, with one's own thoughts as the only interaction, the real world does not materialize, the relatives relate a world that seems imaginary (the one outside) during moments that, once finished, seem to have been only a dream (the visiting rooms). The only (pathetic) reality is this cell, these books, these spore rooms (hihi), this shower, this individual "pseudo-walk". Even the other inmates in the (real) walks that we see through the gates of his cage seem to be in another universe. We learn what is happening outside, we are informed of what affects us without actually living it, feeling it.

Learning about the death of a friend affects us in such a perplexing way that it is impossible to define it clearly. So many feelings arise at the same time, the normal ones, a deep sadness, shock, incomprehension, but this is mixed with a feeling of unreality. Although we know the cruel truth of this terrible loss, it seems to be only a distant nightmare. Not participating in the funeral, there is no sharing at that moment with the other people who loved him/her. Added to this is the need to keep going. a permanent fight not to sink, which does not leave us the "leisure" to let ourselves go completely to our pain, to our grief. The visits being the only and very short bowls of fresh air, they are rather focused on what brings joy and the painful subjects are voluntarily limited or omitted. Once again, feelings and emotions are, by a sort of survival mechanism, blocked, relegated to later, to the exit... How much of this has been amassed since the beginning of the isolation? What emotional baggage are we carrying around? How do we deal with it when we get out? What happens if that "baggage" cracks early? Oops... question(s) to put back in the bag.

This reality is limited to a space so small that it becomes egocentric. I remember thinking about cutting short an interesting story that a relative was telling me because I needed to share things of extreme futility (but which make up my daily life). Futility that is often very (pathetically) material.