

South Africa under Lockdown

APRIL 21, 2020: CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has been subject to the Disaster Management Act since March 27, and I write this on April 21. The act is the legislative vehicle for one of the earliest and most stringent lockdowns yet implemented. We can't buy anything other than "essential goods," and because our ministers are sometimes more interested in public attention and displays of authority, what counts as "essential" can change from day to day.

Alcohol and cigarettes are not considered essential, and if our minister of police could have his way, alcohol would never be on sale again. The prohibition on alcohol sales has had a positive effect, in that hospital wards are freed from the usual (large, in South Africa) number of people arriving in various states of disrepair following car accidents that occurred while drivers or pedestrians were intoxicated. It was also suggested that domestic violence would decrease in the absence of the disinhibiting effects of alcohol.

Any observed decline in domestic violence should, however, be understood in the South African context. We comprise two nations, one of which is very poor, and the other (relatively) very rich. Yes, perhaps those who are poor are now too hungry to fight, and are instead focused on survival. But then there are those of us who could afford to stockpile enough alcohol to see us through (or so some of us thought). Some members of the latter group are now no doubt trapped in a locked-down house with people who have a substantial supply of both alcohol and the rage they carried in with them.

The Disaster Management Act has also provided the nation with an opportunity to reflect on various philosophical concerns. "If I can take a walk without socializing, why should I not break the law and do so?" ask some. To which part of the answer is that you're only free to do so because of the others who stay at home, and also because the police, who would normally stop you from doing so, are in the townships policing people who live cheek-by-jowl, share a public toilet with a dozen others, and who don't enjoy the luxury

of choosing what to have for dinner, or sometimes, choosing to have dinner at all.

A question raised yesterday (twenty-four days into the lockdown) was of particular interest with regard to food. The minister of cooperative governance clarified in a regulatory amendment that while food is an essential good, "cooked hot food" would no longer be considered as such. So you cannot sell a roast chicken, for example, unless it is no longer hot. We have not been told the temperature at which a chicken ceases to be hot, so vendors are now suffering the added moral burden of having to become potential lawbreakers anytime they make this determination for themselves. As trivial as this instance of philosophy in lockdown might seem, I cannot help but also think of how nontrivial this issue is to those who are performing the essential services that keep our country somewhat operational, and for whom instantly available hot food is more important than ever.

In crisis, there is often innovation too. At a branch of the Spar supermarket, one can find a cheeky display that collates all the ingredients someone would need to make pineapple beer. It's a small example of the sort of gallows humor that helps us cope with our uncertainty regarding what happens next. While I might end up drinking pineapple beer, or the grape juice we've been fermenting at home for the last five days, I do not need to fear running out of food, thanks to a well-stocked kitchen and a companion who cooks better meals than most that we ate when we (used to) go out.

We've been in lockdown for a month now. Yesterday, a restaurateur (and a friend) sent each of his employees R500—\$27 at today's rates—and received messages of thanks that express a level of desperation nobody should have to endure. "Now we can buy electricity, food, and nappies," read one of them.

Among the many things that I would like to not forget when this is over are the pleasures of the home-cooked meal. And, while I do miss going to restaurants, I know that I will never again see many of the waiters and waitresses whom I've known for years, and I wonder if I can ever enjoy going out for a meal as much as I used to. 🍷