

Dancing in Quarantine: The Spatial Refiguration of Society and the Interaction Orders

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Abstract

Brief position statements on the theme of quarantine

Keywords

space, quarantine, city, communication

In the current peak phase of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, quarantine and (self-)isolation have become the dominant forms of social life in numerous countries. We will use the term “quarantine” to indicate the spatial separation of people from each other in order to protect them from infection. Quarantine is thus a social spatial phenomenon in the most obvious sense. This spatial form of separating people consists of medical, material, and social demarcation of material spaces and legal, institutional or situational rules of what have come to be known as “social distancing” (Valdez et al., 2018). Social distancing may be enforced, imposed or recommended by legal regulations (Ding, 2014).

These regulations vary widely: on the one hand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan took the virus quite seriously from the start and kept public life going, but enforced selective quarantine confinement by tracking the chains of contact of infected persons. Populist regimes on the other hand, tended to ignore the risk as long as possible, pinning hopes on “herd immunity.” Many liberal governments, too, imposed harsh regulations concerning the peoples’ liberty of movement. A soft version of “recommended” quarantine is the ban on contact, first advised and later imposed, in most federal states in Germany: Direct interaction was restricted to household members only, but people were allowed to leave the house and use public space for jogging, cycling, and taking a walk, apart from shopping for essentials and other activities related to (legally and morally) legitimate movements in public space (e.g., commuting). In other countries curfews are imposed, allowing access to public spaces only for the most urgent needs (such as buying food and medicines, and seeing a doctor).

Despite these differences, it is obvious that the pandemic affects all aspect of social life, touching upon its spatial and material sides in serious ways and across all scales. Linking the biological and the social micro levels, containment measures center on human interactions and

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embodied communication situations (in which the virus might unintentionally be passed). Coronavirus has led to a radical transformation of urban and regional space, organizations, and public places, national policies, and transnational relations.

In light of these enormous consequences, it seems legitimate and necessary to ask not only what is happening to society during the corona crisis now but also what is going to happen after it is over. How can we make sense of the crisis in terms of social science and what can we expect, fear or hope to happen? Is the “state of quarantine” just a transient state, a kind of liminal anti-structure (Turner, 1969), a political emergency order for societies in crisis, after which we will return to the resilient social order and everyday life as we’ve known it? Or will it bring a version of the “enclave society” that has existed before but was widely ignored in the light of what seemed to be an unstoppable process of globalization, transnationalization, and spatial transgression, as Turner (2007) suggests?

Although we may assume that the “hammer” phase of confinement with the most severe bans and restrictions will soon yield to open more and liberal forms of political control, that is, the “dance”, as Pueyo (2020) puts it, we argue that the crisis reinforces a general spatial pattern we have identified as the refiguration of space (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020).

Basically, refiguration results from the tension between two spatial logics. On the one hand, we see territorial closure. Countries, residential areas, private homes, gated communities, and quarantine places (Turner, 2007) are seen as “containers” that have to be protected against the virus or contain it. On the other hand, we see the uncontained, global spread of the virus, the densification of digital networking processes and a massive opening up of communication channels fulfilling new functions in the crisis. The same tension between these two basic spatial logics is expressed in the figuration of the centralized territorial state on the one hand and globalization across all borders on the other. It resides in the contrast between sharp top-down hierarchies and logical-conceptual analyses versus flat network formations, “rhizomes”, and ontological metaphors. Territorial spaces follow a logic of placing and arranging, according to which clear boundaries are drawn outwardly, and a restriction of diversity is accepted within. They are generally perceived as static. In contrast, network spaces follow the logic of the relationalization of heterogeneous elements. In network spaces, distant elements are brought into relation with each other with difference between elements being characteristic.

The tension between territorial and network logics, between hierarchy and heterarchy, limitation and delimitation, and homogeneity and heterogeneity, is particularly acute in the corona crisis. For one thing, we are dealing with a spatially unbounded pandemic, although it is unclear how much difference there is (for most patients) to a common influenza infection. On the other hand, the virus poses a deadly risk, not just for those who die a miserable death by suffocation. It is this deadly scenario threatening to overwhelm the public health system that frightens so many of us calling for radical government action (with the exception of a few countries, such as Sweden).

The concept of refiguration helps to explain the simultaneity of tensions in the corona crisis, which is in fact a global risk. It is remarkable, therefore, that the global spread has not been met with a *global* response. In Europe, national states have overruled transnational cooperation and made unilateral decisions to close borders (even in areas and regions within national territories). Borders, for decades neither controlled nor fortified, were shut down without prior notice or consultation (for instance between France and Germany). Not only have national territories been sealed off but also stranded national citizens outside the country were rushed home in unprecedented “repatriation” actions.

However, we are not dealing here with the discourse of alt-right conservatives addressing the people (*Das Volk*). Apart from preventing contraction, neither ethnic origin nor other discriminating factors seemed important. The focus is clearly on the “population” in Foucault’s

(2009) sense of the term. Population is the reference point for a modern version of power that has emerged with the modern nation state, a power Foucault (2009) called “governmentality”. In contrast to monarchic power, government (as apparatus and set of social practices) centers on the knowledge-based regulation of the people that are controlled in historically unique ways. Using figures and statistics, the government pledges to take care of the security and safety of a country’s “population”. Security technologies and control strategies that regulate institutions such as law enforcement agencies (the police) lead to the formation of *security dispositifs* and “security societies” (Foucault, 2009). Populations are characterized by internal circulation processes involving people and goods, yet basically they are generated by the fact that space is (de-)limited to create various forms of territory—states, provinces, and cities. These implications of the notion of population, usually backgrounded when we reflect on the public sphere and its specialized institutions with highly differentiated functions, are currently re-surfacing. This was especially visible in the ban of “physical contacts” in public spaces during lockdowns, a form of direct contact that takes place between human bodies in co-presence of one another. Precisely this *material* aspect, the shared presence of human bodies in public space, has now become a security problem. The majority of modern society’s functional systems have abruptly been stalled and have switched to emergency state mode, in which only “systemically critical”, essential functions such as providing food, medical goods and health services, and, naturally, the proper functioning of police forces are maintained (with people providing and securing these services receiving special attention and honors these days—see “clap for our carers” and related events). The material aspect of public life, that is, co-present human beings in direct interaction with each other, is meanwhile limited to the smallest of social units—individuals, couples, and nuclear families sharing a household.

The closure of territorial space corresponds to the opposite principle of opening mediated spaces through teleworking. Unable to meet face to face, people go on Skype or Zoom. If we can’t work in the office, we are working from home. And if restaurants and cafes are shut down, we order food via digital services, praying that the delivery is as germ-free as surfing on the internet. In the current emergency order, hyper-compressed in terms of space, shared public presence is compensated by digital communication in the virtual space, where people meet, exercise, play music and so on. Other social functions are also transferred to the digital realm: university seminars are converted to online teaching and public administration goes online. Working from home allows the majority of organizations to operate on digital communication technologies. Internet, email, and video conferences keep us connected to international circles, allow us to start collective initiatives, remain in our bubbles, or develop new rituals from a distance.

With many aspects of society going “digital,” thereby transgressing bounded territories just like the virus, the nation state becomes “governmental” in Foucault’s sense of the term, in that it is directed at *the population*—not conceived as “mass,” but as a multitude of small, individual units. The focus of governmental action is thus not on “the people” claiming rights, nor on a democratic civil or open society; it lies on the *population*, which must be protected, informed, treated medically, and policed.

“Policing” takes a specific form in the current corona crisis. In order to capture the particularity of this crisis, a fresh look at Ulrich Beck’s concept of “risk society” seems worthwhile. The corona epidemic is a risk that, in obvious ways, requires *scientific* expertise to be able to contain the virus, but also to properly *define* the disease. Distinguishing COVID-19 (*SARS-CoV-2*) from an “ordinary” flu takes, as we’ve become painfully aware, a great deal of technical and scientific effort. Also, the hazardous nature of the virus is itself largely defined by scientific aspects and methods. Empirical surveys are carried out to measure the spread of coronavirus and the law of exponential growth serves as model in defining the spread rate, tallies, numbers, and figures rule.

Coronavirus can be understood as a *risk production* in Beck's sense of the term. But while Beck sees "danger" as a distinct phenomenon, accessible to the senses and mostly (territorially) delimited, coronavirus represents a ubiquitous, invisible, and omnipresent risk. This risk is, however, not directly caused by human action in the sense that it is the result or consequence of industrialization or rationalization processes. China, where it originated, is not part of the global periphery but a major center. Despite being a global challenge, coronavirus will not lead us to what Beck (1999) called a "world risk society," where all of us suffer the consequences of modernization. These consequences are, of course, highly problematic (epitomized in the climate change), yet the corona pandemic is not just a product of the *first* modernity. It is also a consequence of the *second* modernity characteristic of China and its compressed modernization development (Chang, 2010), including the high degree of digitalization, global mass tourism, and economies networked via global supply chains. The key institution controlling the neoliberal, late-modern era is no longer economy; it is state politics with the government firmly holding the reins. If anything, it is this what the corona crisis clearly shows.

Although many states have imposed various forms of confinement and quarantine by locking down the public sphere, these spatial restrictions and separations will for the most part remain a transient feature of the rather "liminal" order in a state of official crisis. Nevertheless, it is striking to see the extraordinary powers national states and their subdivisions have seized in order to manage the global challenge, a power-grabbing authorized by the legislative and people alike—as long as the measures seem (are made to seem) legitimate and proportional. Even more striking is the fact that political decisions are currently overruling the interests of capitalist economies dominant in "late" modernity. These are just a few indicators for the refiguration of space. Thus, although international trade relations will continue, the recent announcement of the German government to repatriate "systemic relevant" industries outsourced to other countries in the past, permits the prediction of an increase in "economic nationalism" in the near future, even among the ranks of globalist, (neo)liberal and transnational European actors.

Refiguration will certainly not result in one-sided deglobalization developments. It will, however, most probably imply the re-affirmation of "the nation" and national interests, and the economic contingencies of the current crisis may accelerate the relocation and reshifting of global economic and political centers, sub-centers, and peripheries in favor of those countries who were better able to tackle the pandemic, and therefore have a better start in the aftermath of the crisis. Although the liminal phase of quarantine will soon be followed by a step-by-step reopening of shared public space, characterized by co-presence, embodied interaction, and collective events, it can be assumed that the explosive progress of digitalization will not be reversed. The norms of social distancing may be eased in the long run, yet the longer the virus presents a hazardous risk, the more likely we will also witness a refiguration of the established "interaction order" (Goffman, 1981), particularly in the western world, introducing new politeness rituals, new forms of "face management", the (re-)formalization of social relations, the production of new technologies of the self, body techniques, and more digital surveillance.

In the present state of disorientation, the concept of refiguration helps, we believe, to look at the potential paths societies may take in the future, by analyzing tendencies we can perceive in social space. We would like to stress, however, that deploying the concept of refiguration is not a deterministic approach. Since spatial refiguration is grounded in human action, it offers the opportunity to reflect and act in various ways, and anticipate, oppose or thwart tendencies that prevent us from joint action and reflection, or threaten what we call open societies.

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