Quarantine: Alienated Space by Expert Knowledge

Tihomir Viderman1

Abstract
Based on an ethnographic account of a transitory space of an aircraft under lockdown, this article reflects on quarantine as the product of expert technocratic knowledge, which blurs fine-grained social moments and relationships to create a homogenous functional space. It argues that space under lockdown is a form of a functional alienated space produced and conditioned by non-transparent management mechanisms that are legitimized by seemingly routinized protocols and abstract representations. While this argument is not optimistic as regards capacity building for political or social change, it identifies current spatial configurations as a unique opportunity for experiencing how representations of space prevail over (struggles in) everyday life.

Keywords
lockdown, lived space, everyday life, alienation, abstraction

Conceptualizing Space under Lockdown
When on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, it also institutionalized the representation of space under lockdown as a governing paradigm on a global scale. The commentary in media and scientific outposts was quick to relate the construction of space under lockdown to broader matters of concern about capitalist urbanization, interpreting this process as both a catalyst of social emancipation and a capitalist dystopia of atomized human relations (D’Eramo, 2020). From a more optimistic perspective, they have been pointing to gestures of solidarity or capacity building around ethical notions of care for the elderly or the ill, while more pessimistic positions were worried about the proliferation of restrictions in public space, which entailed an institutionalized surveillance by state and private entities whose selectiveness contributed to a growing invisibility of intimate daily struggles. The sudden requirements for sweeping and resolute change of choreographies of everyday life have prompted a variety of coping strategies in the range from acceptance to denial, demonstrating an extent to which people’s experiences depend on caring relations (Preciado, 2020). Depending on different lived experiences, space under lockdown might be intimidating for some, but inspires (albeit awkward) conviviality in others. Public disquiet thus appears to have extended from anxiety

1FG Stadtmanagement/Chair of Urban Management, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, Cottbus, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Tihomir Viderman, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, FG Stadtmanagement, Konrad-Wachsmann-Allee 2, 03046, Cottbus, Germany.
Email: tihomir.viderman@daad-alumni.de
about COVID-19 to daily challenges of attuning to the imperatives of infection prevention and control. These imperatives have been largely seen as moments of urgency and exception. Yet by emphasizing technocratic operation, while negating its political dimensions and lived experience they also resonate with Lefebvre’s concern with abstraction (Shields, 1999; Wilson 2013).

Abstraction is central to Lefebvre’s conceptualization of hierarchically produced space under capitalism (Lefebvre, 1946/2014; 1974/1991). In his view, abstraction is a process intertwined with everyday life, in which an ever-growing portion of the materiality of social practices and lived experiences is translated into representations of (abstractly conceived) space. As part of the same reductive rationality, the “technocratic representations of space are concretized in lived material reality”, they are embedded and materialized in everyday life as “concrete abstractions” (Wilson 2013, p. 374, referring to Lefebvre’s oeuvre). An increasing abstraction of lived space thus unfolds in a tension between technocratic rationale seeking to produce manageable, hence seemingly coherent and homogenous, space and the multiplicity of struggles in everyday life resulting from and contesting the alienating lived experience of such an abstract space. This means that technocratic abstractions aiming to homogenize societies increasingly dominate the materiality of everyday life under capitalism, simultaneously concealing and perpetuating socio-spatial hierarchies and fragmentation. Yet the richness of caring relations afford individuals and groups the agency to improvise and invent, and therefore daily challenge these alienating patterns of abstraction (Shields, 1999; Wilson, 2013). Expert knowledge plays a crucial role in the material abstraction of lived space by producing and concretizing representations. Yet it also may destabilize this process by determining how and to what extent we have been submitting to organizing principles of technocratic rationale (Viderman & Knierbein, 2018).

The reconfiguration of space under COVID-19 prevention measures displays in an almost honest manner the representation of space under lockdown as being structured around boundaries, limitations, and a strictly functionalist view of care, while being accompanied by the requirements for its swift and visible concretizing in everyday life. Broadly applied, COVID-19 prevention measures thus amplify the extent to which our daily lives have been choreographed through a set of physical determinants, rules, possibilities, personal experiences, and (given) capacities of each person to negotiate own position as regards institutionalized boundaries and hierarchies in an “inherently (…) conflictual process” (Dikeç, 2001, p. 1788). Expert knowledge, while making isolation measures and quarantines possible, displays a tendency towards amplifying systemic configurations that underplay the concerns about social equity and equality. The measures to isolate the danger, therefore, extend beyond immediate disruption of everyday life, and its routines and practices, to encompass broader political and ethical domains concerning space for disagreement and new possibilities. In an ethnographic account, this article describes a design of spatial choreographies, lack of transparency, and tendencies towards alienated social relations in spaces under lockdown, whose sediment of abstractions of past and present exceptions and urgencies renders struggles for political possibilities increasingly difficult.

**Constructing Transitory Space under Lockdown**

As the aircraft of a large European low cost airline was rolling towards the terminal building of Barcelona Airport, a member of the cabin crew delightedly announced in three languages that the flight was on time and therefore counted towards already stunning punctuality statistics of the airline. The passengers eager to make use of the sunny afternoon in Barcelona had already largely unfastened their seatbelts, while the voice from loudspeakers reminded repeatedly of the rule to remain seated. They were putting on their jackets; murmur at moments rose to a clamor. After the aircraft reached its parking position, the usual rush towards the luggage in the overhead compartments and exits was interrupted with a new announcement. A member of the cabin crew informed the passengers that air traffic control at Barcelona Airport had suspected that a person infected
with SARS-CoV-2 virus was on board, therefore not allowing disembarking, and asked passengers to remain seated until further notice.

The fully booked flight on the route from Berlin to Barcelona took off on time, shortly after noon, on a fairly dry winter day of February 28. The passengers settled into their seats, following torturous boarding procedure of a low-budget flight, which included cramming people into an enclosed, poorly-ventilated waiting area for an expeditious luggage and person check, ground transportation by as few as possible crowded buses, and a somewhat chaotic choreography of boarding through the front and rear entrance. This seemingly improvised choreography could also evoke Jane Jacobs’s metaphor of sidewalk ballets being put on steroids. The vibrancy of the stage was further reinforced by an outstanding variety of passengers, in the range from young individuals and groups expressing their individualistic consumption preferences to multi-generational families.

Berlin Schönefeld Airport is a steady contender for the title of the worst airport in the world (Berliner Morgenpost, 2017), its hangars stripped off any aesthetical dimensions or ambitions to associate waiting with positive experience. The terminal building consists of a series of narrow corridors and innumerable flights of stairs connecting randomly arranged small hangars with limited seating possibilities. Transitory space in its perpetuated improvisation made permanent. This airport is just the opposite of the contemporary understanding of an airport terminal as a comfortable mall of commodified experiences where people also happen to wait for their flights. Berlin Schönefeld Airport is clearly organized around efficiency of functional movement and security measures. Undisguised by complex layers of the experience economy, the rhythm of everyday life overtly manifests as shaped by functionalist paradigm of modernity (Lefebvre, 1946/2014). The extent to which space is organized according to the technocratic principles of functionality and security is clearly communicated here. Layers of past exceptions and urgencies have been made a visible part of passengers’ movement routines, which are choreographed by a series of regulations, warnings, and clearly displayed rigid control. With clearly displayed spatial hierarchies and control, the passenger is continuously confronted with the perception of his or her own vulnerability. This is naturally not a single set of affective relations to space as it is highly dependent on the perception of own rights and entitlements that stem from and are reflected in the categories of social difference. Yet, regardless of emotional reaction, the system functions on the assumption that everyone must be conditioned to obey sets of different rules, which are legitimized by expert knowledge.

The three-hour long flight itself was uneventful. All the different profiles that could be expected on board of a flight connecting two major economic and cultural hubs, which also carefully cultivate their fame for civil liberties and fabulous partying, were present on board. Languages spoken were predominantly Spanish, German, and English. After the cabin crew provided usual safety instructions, the quiet and relaxed atmosphere was periodically interrupted with the sale of refreshments and duty free products from trolleys. The magazine on board was a charmingly curated series of articles on gastronomy, culture, active leisure, and similar contents that were believed to be an inseparable part of daily experience tightly intertwined with European (urban) economies. The captain’s announcement was rather a generic welcome note, which by no means hinted to troubles that the areas we were flying over experienced, with parts of Northern Italy under lockdown, and Austrians frantically closing the border.

It matters how passengers on board were informed about the possible contagion threat. The communicated information had a clearly personal note. It was not that SARS-CoV-2 virus was suspected to be present on board, but ONE PERSON was suspected to be carrying the virus. The information pointing to a person among passengers and not only to a contagion threat made sure that an uncanny atmosphere was created. This communication approach was intended not only to fuel a fear of illness but also to create distrust among fellow passengers as any person on board including the one on the seat next to you posed a threat to your health, as if the creators of the
emergency protocol took into account temporary bonds that can be created in transitory spaces (Kathiravelu, 2015). While these bonds might be weak and intangible, they might incrementally develop into new enchanting political configurations (Watson, 2006). Technocratic operation here clearly cut the possibility of caring relations and a sense of collectivity.

As Airbus A319 was put under lockdown, the information was communicated through loudspeakers. The cabin crew was not entering the aisle, yet the movement within the cabin increased—not necessarily only because of the use of the toilets. The passengers were growing noticeably anxious. Many passengers were worried about the immediate threat of health hazard, improvising masks using scarves and pieces of clothing or pulling their tops over their noses. Others were growing upset because of the absence of any precise information, unsure about how this unplanned course of events might eventually develop. After all, a few days earlier Spain had hit the headlines for its strict response over fears of the spread of SARS-CoV-2, putting an entire resort under lockdown (The New York Times, 2020). Attention was predominantly given to smartphones and other electronic gadgets. Neither the spatial organization of rows of seats nor the threat in the form of a contagious person provided much motivation for social encounters.

Half an hour into the lockdown, a new brief message was communicated through loudspeakers. All the passengers on board would be tested for SARS-CoV-2. Patience was asked as we waited for a ground team to come on board. The message did not include any specific information as to how the tests would be conducted or what would follow while waiting for the results. It would be an impossible guess to what extent passengers were aware that at the end of February there was no quick test for SARS-CoV-2 available and samples would have to be sent to a laboratory. While some passengers displayed a greater degree of anxiety, and others reacted in annoyance and resignation, there were no eruptions of emotion. Passengers were clearly protecting their personal domain even under the circumstances that were growing increasingly unpredictable, displaying blasé attitude as the notion of urban experience that has long ago been assigned to capitalist urbanization (Simmel, 1903). As Simmel remarked, mental distancing is a conditioned response to a dense, narrow, and rapidly changing space. During the next half an hour, the front door would open, and on several occasions a person from outside would enter the aircraft and speak with the cabin crew, but no further information was communicated.

After more than an hour into the lockdown, a message was communicated first in Spanish, followed by English, and repeated again in Spanish: passengers in the rows from 15 to 24, including mine, would not be tested and were allowed to disembark using the front exit. Passengers in the rows 1–14 and 25–26 were asked to remain seated. The bus was waiting at the apron; the ground team was not wearing masks. While waiting for the crowded bus to depart for the terminal, we were given another twist in the protocol. A member of the ground team commanded that passengers in the rows 15 and 16 were to return on board. As they were hesitant in their reaction, we were all warned that the bus would not leave until these passengers leave the bus. Once we reached the terminal, we were given flyers with information on COVID-19 symptoms in Spanish and English, and were allowed to leave.

What Space? Whose Space?

The pandemic of COVID-19 is an unprecedented moment in which technocratic mechanisms and protocols have tangibly reconfigured space of everyday life at the stroke of a pen. Rarely before was it possible to experience, at such a scale, the extent to which physical and social space are intertwined in shaping alienated conditions of our lives. While the technocratic protocols supposedly isolate danger, they also amplify the nontransparent and homogenizing dimensions of the process of abstraction concerning accessibility, entitlements, and privileges. As in an aircraft under lockdown, space choreographed to function efficiently in line with firm technocratic protocols is being deliberately fragmented, and is held together by abstract concepts of coherence.
and unity. Such space is shaped by divides, bias towards the other, tangible power, and hierarchies. Social relations are cut rather than encouraged. When Yuval Noah Harari (2020) in Financial Times referred to “we” in his plea for global solidarity, any collective subject appears to be impossible against the global tendencies towards atomizing societies, in the form of closing borders, policing everyday life, reducing access to general health care services, or closing educational institutions.

Quarantine as a space under lockdown is a product of technocratic rationale. It is produced from merely a functionalist view and legitimized through firmly defined protocols, consensual procedures, and vague choreographies. As a precondition for quarantine, space for political dissensus, agonism, or discontent (Mouffe, 2000; Rancière, 2010; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015) is shut by non-transparent management configurations that cut at caring relations, while holding atomized societies together by concrete abstractions. In the name of isolating the danger, the protocols concretize representations of space that potentiate daily struggles and divides, thus rendering space under lockdown a continuation of the modernist reproduction of alienated social relations. The blurred relation between concrete abstraction and lived space is part of this process. While daily applauding for health and care workers convey acknowledgement for the relevance of their work, do these acts also acknowledge the social order in which underpaid migrant care workers leave their elderly and children behind to care for others in more well-off countries (Mackie, 2014)? Faced with the paradigm that the crisis needs to be overcome by all means and at all cost, from my rather safe position of enjoying the privilege of a multi-year contract at one of Germany’s public universities, I might agree on the costs of economic contraction; yet, through the experience of having had a canine companion for 12 years, I certainly disapprove of proliferation of scientific production based on animal testing in the name of fighting the crisis.

Alienated space disguises intimate daily struggles, cuts at human relations, and curbs capacity building for emancipatory moments across categories of difference (Lefebvre, 1946/2014). However, spatial configurations of space under lockdown present themselves as a unique opportunity for experiencing how representations of space prevail over (struggles in) everyday life. Learning from this might nurture a greater sensibility for a plurality of needs and experiences in lived space, especially those that go unperceived by the majority.

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ORCID iD
Tihomir Viderman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3639-7009

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**Author Biography**

**Tihomir Viderman** is a lecturer and research assistant at the Chair of Urban Management of Brandenburgische Technische Universität (Germany) and a doctoral candidate at Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space at TU Wien (Austria). For a number of years he has been engaged in interdisciplinary research and teaching, focusing on culturally inclusive and locally embedded approaches.