

Opening address

MATTERS OF CONTAINMENT

Material approaches to the handling of threats in the modern world

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Abstract. This paper consists of the text read by the author on 28 May 2020 to serve as inaugural speech for the 3rd International QSN conference “Matter of containment”. After briefly outlining the rationale behind the inception of this meeting, the author justifies the centrality of “containment” for the project of expanding “quarantine studies” from a medical history subject into a truly interdisciplinary area of research. The text ends with a short description of the conference topics and organization.

Dear colleagues and friends,

welcome to the 3rd International Conference of the Quarantine Studies Network (QSN) that will take place (in online format) in Lisbon on 28-29th May 2020. I hope all of you – members and associates of the network, participants in the conference and followers of our activities, with your families – have remained healthy and safe throughout the difficult period that has followed Covid-19’s global outbreak.

To be honest, when we planned this conference, about a year ago, even when we launched this network back in 2014, we could not possibly imagine that we would find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, more or less strictly confined at our homes and within our countries of residence. It is true that our network took its first steps and held its first conference during the Western Africa Ebola virus outbreak of 2014, which resulted in a handful of cases in Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and the US. However, and despite the warnings of earlier epidemics in this 21st century and the alerts of various international bodies about the risk of an air-borne disease spreading throughout the world, we could not seriously believe that a pandemic would strike Europe and the Western world and, even more, that we ourselves would be subject to a domestic quarantine.

In truth, one of the main concerns behind the creation of our network had only a second-hand relation to health: it was the sharp rise in the arrival of migrants to southern Europe from Islamic Mediterranean countries as a result of the cascade of so-called “Arab Spring” revolutions between 2010 and 2012 and of the various crises and civil wars they were followed by in countries like Syria and Libya. We perceived that the response of the European Union towards this massive displacement of people showed multiple resemblances to the old sanitary defense deployed by European states against epidemics of previous centuries. Not

only were Arab migrants generally regarded as a “threat” that was necessary to “check” – as once had Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca – but they were also confined in “detention camps” located in remote sites, including small islands, that called to mind the old lazarettos. That is why our first international conference held in Malta in October 2014 bore the title *Mediterranean under Quarantine*.

Naturally, as the founders of the network were either medical historians or social scientists having done substantial work related to confinement tools such as lazarettos and sanitary cordons, we had a keen interest in sanitary quarantines. However, one of our main goals as a network has been to move forward from “quarantine history” to “quarantine studies”, that is, to expand the concept of “quarantine” from its original sense restricted to health and disease to one that served to describe and understand processes in other spheres of society [1]. In other words, we aimed to release the analytic potential of the concept for expanding its application to other disciplinary fields. In this sense, the neo-quarantinist terminology deployed during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, far from just providing a purely technical description of public health measures, may be seen to convey larger social, economic, cultural and political meanings. The concept of “social distancing” is especially illustrative. Coined as a technical label for an epidemiological strategy aimed to reduce the spread of the SARS-COV-2, it nevertheless reveals ongoing trends towards political and social conflict worldwide, also towards a mounting economic gap between the winners and losers of globalization. [2] With regard to “lockdown”, it does not just designate the home confinement of people and the closure of land, sea and air borders of states for public health reasons, but also reflects the recent global rise of economic protectionism and political nationalism exemplified by the commercial war between the United States and China or by the Brexit crisis in the European Union. [3]

In this, our third QSN international conference, we propose to take “containment” as a potentially fertile theoretical expansion of the concept of “quarantine”. The term “containment” is present/used in many disciplines: from epidemiology (where it refers to a phase in the management of epidemics) [4] to sociology (within the theory of social control: internal and external checks that prevent people from breaking the rules) [5], from geography (a geographical logic, connecting territorial and spatial forms of enclosure, such as imprisonment, with broader psychological forms of restraint and limitation) [6] to history and political science (geopolitical containment of fascism in the 1930s; of communism during the Cold War; Obama’s “soft containment”) [7], from psychology (the safe and holding environment that enables patients or clients to actively project their feelings onto the therapist which are then detoxified and given back to the client in a more manageable form) [8] to environmental science (the physical retention of hazardous material to prevent it from leaking into the environment) [9]. We think there is a double common ground that enables the transdisciplinary reach of the term: on the one hand, that of containment as a social tool or technology for “handling threats”; on the other hand, the essentially transversal nature of all “threats” for societies.

Our conference title *Matters of containment. Material approaches to the handling of threats in the modern world* proposes an exploration of such common ground, while, additionally, putting the focus on the materiality of “containment”, rather than in the knowledge of or the discourses about it. We are interested, for example, in the parallels and intersections existing between legal and physical barriers set up to protect populations against epidemic disease, nuclear and chemical waste or natural disasters. We are also interested in exploring how the creation of laboratories in border customs may intend not just to protect the health of a country’s population against adulterated products, but also that country’s industry or agriculture against the “damage” caused by the “invasion” of another country’s cheaper or better products. Or how the detention and examination of migrants or refugees aims not just to provide sanitary protection against the introduction of bodily germs and

diseases, but also to prevent terrorist, ideological or economic harm to the population of the host state.

The program of our conference has gathered over 30 contributions from all over the world that will deal with these and similar topics. Papers have been grouped in five thematic sections: 1) Nuclear-chemical containment, exploring barriers against the hazards of nuclear-chemical plants, waste or war; 2) Epidemic containment, on the ways of checking the origin and spread of epidemic outbreaks; 3) Non-human objects, taking the (until recently) neglected “non-humans” as usual objects of containment measures; 4) Disturbing bodies, revolving around individuals or collectives perceived as “alien” and as a threat (health, political, social, cultural, security) to society; and 5) Health and politics, dealing with sanitary policies and their impact in state- and nation-building processes, and also in social policies addressing poverty, migration or work issues. As already said, the present situation has obliged us to renounce to the scheduled in-person meeting in Lisbon and transform it into a virtual conference consisting in recorded video presentations that we will gradually post in our website (<https://quarantinestudies.wordpress.com/>), Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/QuarantineStudiesNetwork>) and Youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCklZMPvVhtK2QvXK6SH-1tQ>) so that they become available for all participants, network followers and the general public. Regarding written texts, they will be uploaded to a site only accessible to conference participants, so that they can be read and commented by all of them. One or several publications will be prepared with them in the following months.

In the name of the local organizing committee – my QSN colleagues Celia Miralles, from the University of Lisbon; Laurinda Abreu, from the University of Évora; and myself – I would like to thank all participants for their effort to prepare their contributions in such a difficult professional and personal moment, for their commitment to do intellectual work of the best quality. We would also like to thank the financial, administrative, and technical support of the CIDEHUS of the University of Évora and CIUHCT of the University of Lisbon.

We have lived and learned a lot of things during these past two months, and I am sure not just our conference plan, but the very content of our presentations has been transformed as a result. I am sure you will agree with us that it is more necessary than ever to carry out our research on “quarantines” and to bring it closer to society, trying to shed some light on a world that, though always multi-faceted and confusing, seems to be so even more now. We hope you enjoy the conference and declare it opened.

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