

Biopolitical and Juridical Creations of the Quarantine Hotel: A Discourse Analysis of the Norwegian case

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Abstract

The quarantine hotel is one of several political instruments used to control the spread of Covid-19 in diverse countries, from Norway to China. I apply discourse analysis to map the discursive struggle to define the quarantine hotel in Norway. The government and other key political actors channel a biopolitical discourse constituting the quarantine hotel as necessary to protect the Norwegian population from imported contagion. This discourse's meaning is contested by a juridical counter-discourse articulated by lawyers and travellers, which constitutes the quarantine hotel as imprisonment/internment and a breach of rights. Travellers tend to combine this with a biopolitical counter-discourse, dismissing the quarantine hotel's biopolitical properties, strengthening the juridical critique. These discourses are important resources in a transnational, ongoing struggle, where the prize is the legitimacy of the politics of Covid-19, and the very ordering of the post-pandemic world.

Keywords

Antagonism, Biopolitics, Discourse Analysis, Quarantine Hotel, Covid-19

Introduction

Decades ago, Foucault (1990) defined biopolitics as a modern form of rule where the biological lives of populations and politics interweave, as entire populations and their health, fertility, genetics became objects of administration for political authorities, seeking to regulate, improve and alter populations biological characteristics. For decades, biopolitics has revolved around statistical and other scientific methods producing information about populations biological properties and the tools to implement generalized measures, with a focus upon personal responsibility (Rose, 2009). Covid-19, however, brings forth

interventionist methods, such as lockdowns, curfews, closed borders and the quarantining of entire cities and regions, measures not seen for centuries on such a large scale (Snowden 2020). Norway is no exception, as the strictest measures since WWII were implemented in March 2020 (Christensen and Lægreid, 2020a, 2020b). This entails implementing various authoritarian and voluntary measures (Gjerde, 2020, 2021).

One of these measures is the quarantine hotel, which is used in various other countries as well, such as China, Australia and the US (Teng et al., 2021). Strategies for quarantining were initially utilized to combat the plague in Italy during the Black Death (Snowden, 2020). Such places are traditionally used to confine the diagnosed and/or travellers. In Norway, it has almost exclusively served as a border control instrument for handling travellers entering Norway, implemented when infection rates soared in Norway and the world alike, in November 2020.

Initially, the quarantine hotel was imposed on travellers if they either lacked a residential address, such as international students, if they were renting rather than owning their homes, or for those whose homes lacked the right utensils, i.e., a separate kitchen and bathroom for the quarantined. Later, the government decided that those travelling for ‘unnecessary reasons’ had to stay at quarantine hotels, even if they had appropriate places to quarantine.

‘Necessary’ implied work-related journeys, or family tragedies. Shortly afterwards, the exemption for ‘necessary travels’ was removed, with almost everyone, including vaccinated individuals, confined within quarantine hotels. Travellers paid 50 euro for each night.

Moreover, they could have to stay confined in these rooms for up to 22h per day, depending on the rules at a given time. They would need the permission of a representative of the municipality to leave, which would happen after 10, 7 or 3 days, usually accompanied by a negative PCR-test.

We must in this regard remember that places of confinement related to disease are controversial (Snowden, 2020). This is somewhat forgotten with regards to the quarantine hotel. First, there are few reports so far covering quarantine hotels (Aquino et al., 2021; Ramirez-Cervantes et al., 2021). Second, researchers tend to take for granted that they are necessary for protecting public health. For the latter reason, quarantine hotels are usually defined as ‘community-based public health intervention[s] designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the community’ by confining potentially/actually infected (Teng et al., 2021; see also Aquino et al., 2021; Al-Busaidi and Martin, 2020; Jordan-Martin et al., 2020;

Ramirez-Cervantes et al., 2021). This implies that quarantine hotels exclusively mitigate the spread of infection within communities, by confining the potentially ill, thereby hindering the spread of Covid-19 within these communities, in addition to protecting the quarantined (Ramirez-Cervantes et al., 2021).

However, quarantine hotels also *deter* travellers by imposing sanctions, such as confinement and fines. The Director of the Directorate of Health, Bjørn Guldvog, one of the key figures in the Norwegian handling of Covid-19, himself stated that deterrence is *one* of the quarantine hotel's functions (NRK, 2020). Much of the literature on quarantine hotels simplifies it. In an era of globalization, reducing border crossings may be as important as controlling potentially infected people's activities during a pandemic. All in all, the quarantine hotel functions as a blunt political instrument, standardizing a specific form of confinement, for various purposes related to public health.

This blunt instrument, and similar measures to curb outbreaks, always lead to resistance. In some cases, populations fear lockdowns, curfews, plague hospitals (the original 'quarantine hotel') and similar measures more than the *plague* itself (Snowden, 2020). We must not forget that pandemics are questions of meaning, inseparable from questions of power. Hence, actors with different perspectives on the quarantine hotel struggle to define it.

To investigate this, I will examine the discourses supporting and opposing the quarantine hotel, prioritizing the latter. Those resisting the biopolitical discourse on quarantine hotels and other measures remind us that there are alternative ways of defining the situations available to us. This makes these voices important resources in a discursive struggle to determine the legitimacy of a new configuration of political practices, where quarantine hotels are but a small part of a larger picture. The aim of my text is to denaturalize the biopolitical discourse of the government, as I argue that the unprecedented, authoritarian practices seen in democratic countries since March 2020, and the discourses underpinning them, should be heavily debated. The Norwegian government, playing upon the Norwegian cohesive culture and high levels of trust, has utilized a communication strategy to 'shap[e] a common understanding and broad consensus on what the crisis was about and what needed to be done' (Christensen and Lægveid, 2020a). This has largely been based around representing the crisis a health crisis which demand decisive action and strict measures (Gjerde, 2021a, 2021b). We must look beyond the consensus the government seeks to create by mapping

dissent, opening for debates about our anti-pandemic measures as well as about our pathway forwards.

For this purpose, I answer the following research question: by what discursive logic do the government justify the quarantine hotel, and by what logic do opposing groups resist it? To answer this, I will examine how the Norwegian government justifies its use of the quarantine hotel, and how travellers and lawyers combat the government's discourse.

I identify two radically different ways of viewing the quarantine hotel. Both seek to shape how we understand and thus act upon the quarantine hotel. Political authorities, basing itself largely on the same ideas articulated by various medical experts and institutes in Norway, articulate a biopolitical discourse justify it by constituting travellers as threats importing contagion. This turns Covid-19 into a foreign threat, and quarantine hotels become necessary to protect Norway from this imported danger. Here, the quarantine hotel serves medical purposes.

Alternatively, most lawyers as well as several travellers articulate a juridical counter-discourse. This entails dismissing the focus upon biopolitics and medicine, in order to articulate the quarantine hotel as, first and foremost, a breach of individual rights. This discourse is frequently coupled with a biopolitical counter-discourse, where travellers dismiss political authorities' claims about the quarantine hotel serving medical purposes, referring to their personal experiences.

As these views clash in the Norwegian public, a discursive struggle emerges. This is one of the many fronts in the struggle to determine the legitimacy of the politics of Covid-19, where actors seek to constitute what these political measures really are.

Discourse analysis: Theory

Combining insights from Foucault (1972) and Hansen (2006), I define discourses as socially organized ways of seeing and speaking about the world, regulated by specific logics that inform, enable and underpin actual perceptions/articulations.

Discourses represent and create reality, as phenomena get properties by the way we perceive/articulate and thus act upon them. A discourse analysis analyses texts by locating *singular* texts and their produced meaning within *larger* bodies of texts. A discourse is identified when a broader set of texts are found to be regulated by a similar logic, such as

when a set of texts describe quarantine hotels as devices protecting citizens from imported contagion, or when the same hotel is defined as breaking individuals' rights.

While discourses are filled with internal divisions, one can identify 'basic discourses' framing societal debates. Basic discourses create perspectives from which actors can legitimately look at, speak about and act upon phenomena (Hansen, 2006). The concept of basic discourse is, like a map, a simplifying tool. It identifies positions available on topics by bracketing internal conflicts and contradictions, enabling analyses of the different discursive logics of such positions.

The biopolitical discourse is 'basic' as it underpins the official pro-quarantine hotel position of those implementing it, whereas the juridical-counter discourse is 'basic' because it underpins legal resistance to the quarantine hotel from lawyers/travellers. These 'basic' discourses offer heterogenous yet coherent perspectives on what the quarantine hotel is.

The purpose of this endeavour is to remind readers that by representing objects, discourses grant them meaning and thus properties (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Here, I embrace the relativist epistemology associated with poststructuralist and other social constructivist perspectives on social reality (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 2010). This offers a pathway to denaturalization, i.e., calling conventions and truths into question. Discourses make political arrangement appear natural, concealing how they depend upon specific social conditions, like a pandemic, and discourses, like the biopolitical discourses justifying strict measures to be implemented during the pandemic. Therefore, analysing discourses allow us to denaturalize the meaning they create, opening debates (Fairclough, 2010). As the government's primary communication strategy has been obtaining legitimacy by justifying its approach through consensus and necessity (Christensen and Lægheid, 2020a), so identifying contestation moves us beyond such veils. My discourse analysis serves one singular purpose. To map two opposing perspectives on the nature of the quarantine hotel, both with potential to shape how we define it, in order to invite further debates.

Discourse Analysis: Analytical strategies

I utilize various analytical strategies for mapping these basic discourses' meaning. I depend upon Laclau's (2014) terms logics of difference and equivalence. Essentially, institutions, practices, ideas, processes, actors, handled as *signs* in discourses, can be constituted as equivalent, usually through simplifications or as different, either through antagonistic differentiation or through non-hierarchical differentiation. For instance, quarantine hotels can

be made equivalent with prisons, or with saving lives. As our ideas are made up of signs and how they are (dis)connected, so several discourse analysts posit that we should trace how discourses handle different and similar signs (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 2010). For instance, the juridical and biopolitical discourses handle the same quarantine hotel. Yet, they use different signs to grant it meaning. Identifying how particular positions on topics handle signs, and the roles signs have in these articulations, allow us to demarcate specific discourses.

Moreover, discourses position individuals/groups vis-à-vis one another, through subject positions, general positions from which individuals can act and think about themselves and others (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). How discourses position social groups affect the room these groups have for acting upon and articulating the situation. Seeing travellers in quarantine hotels as prisoners produce different potential for acting than seeing them as threats. Being told that one is a prisoner without having committed a crime motivates travellers to resist. Being told that one is a threat to the community motivates a traveller to comply. Mapping how discourses allocate different subject positions, or offer the same position different content, is useful to see how discourses enable/restrict actors' agency.

As different discourses position actors and constitute reality differently, all discourses exist in relationally. Often, they block other discourses' fixation of meaning, thereby becoming antagonistic. This is the case for the discourses analysed in this text. All discourses attempt to fixate the meaning of given phenomena. Such fixation occurs through nodal points. Nodal points are signs, from which other signs draw upon for meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112). Nodal points fixate discourses by relating singular signs to other signs, thereby having a constitutive role in signifying chains. I use the term counter-discourse for discourses articulated specifically to counter and de-fixate the meaning of other discourses, by explicitly contesting other discourses' meaning.

Discourse analysis: Methods and data

My analytical tools are utilized to map several sets of data. Most of the sources are articulated in Norwegian, translated by the author.

I start by analysing the government's discourse, as the counter-discourses of lawyers/travellers are articulated to answer this discourse. Regjeringen.no is my source as the government shares press conferences, governmental decrees, commentaries, and speeches by key ministers at this website. I searched for 'karantenehotell' (quarantine hotel), identifying

the centrality of the term ‘importsmitte’ (imported contagion) during my early investigations, which prompted me to search for it too, from February 2020 until July 2021. This produced 194 pages of text. I also refer to a few examples from the political opposition challenging the government to be stricter, revealing that degree of strictness rather than strictness versus leniency dominates the political debate on this issue. I coded texts based on how they represented the quarantine hotel, discovering the following intertextual themes; the quarantine hotel is underpinned by Covid-19 being constituted a foreign phenomenon which travellers import into Norway. The identification of a biopolitical discourse is justified by the way the sign of imported contagion fixates articulations around a strict public health perspective. This data illustrates the official narrative of the Norwegian state to the picture, thereby allowing us both to see the reasoning behind the quarantine hotel, as well as the logic lawyers/travellers oppose.

Thereafter, I analyse lawyers’ articulations. Lawyers constitute a major group opposing the strictest anti-pandemic measures. Opposition is openly articulated from the Bar’s Association’s (Advokatforeningen), which called for the abolishment of the quarantine hotel on legal grounds in November 2020. The Bar’s Association represents approximately 90% of Norwegian lawyers. Lawyers form an important group as their vocation revolves around the rule of law, essential in a democratic state.

Lawyers’ articulations are scattered throughout various leading national media outlets. Searching through these, with a focus upon commentaries written by lawyers, I identified 19 texts, referring to 9 of them. Coding the data, I found one central theme characterizing this body of texts; the quarantine hotel breaches individuals’ rights, because the stay at the quarantine hotel constitutes imprisonment/internment, which turns the quarantine hotel into a prison. This turns legal signs like the right to appeal, rule of law, privacy, property rights or freedom of movements into important signs, delegitimizing the quarantine hotel by trying to *make* it illegal. Law safeguards against unchecked political power, making it interesting that lawyers oppose the government’s policy, especially as lawyers seem to first have created the juridical counter-discourse. This data, from various legal sources, gives us access to the logic underpinning lawyers’ resistance to the quarantine hotel, especially as these texts reproduce the meaning seemingly originating in the Bar’s Association’s initial resistance.

Last, I analyse travellers’ discourse. This entailed recruiting my own informants. I published posts at different Facebook groups for individuals formerly staying at quarantine hotels, and

groups related to the pandemic or travel, and Twitter, inviting those staying of Norwegian quarantine hotels to participate, obtaining data from 29 informants. To protect informants' privacy, I refrain from naming these groups. I asked for consent, explained the scope of the research, and offered individuals the chance to withdraw at any time. I asked them to describe their thoughts, feelings and experiences in diary-format, which allows informants to write as much/little as they want about whatever experiences and thoughts they find useful, without imposing my own discourses on them. Geographically, they are scattered around Norway. They have different professions. Age-wise, they range from their late-teens to their 60s. However, there is a gender imbalance, as 19 of the 20 were female. Moreover, everyone but one was Norwegian residents. While skewed, this is unproblematic, the sample would remain unrepresentative in either case. In the analysis, I refer to the informants by aliases.

Moreover, I supplemented these informants' stories by analysing national newspapers' commentaries, from Aftenposten, NRK and VG. I supplemented my examination of national newspapers' commentaries with a search through Google, with key terms such as quarantine hotel experiences in Norway (karantenehotell opplevelser), quarantine hotel stay Norway (opphold på karantenehotell). While Google is no ideal place to locate data, it gave me access to diverse sources, like regional/local newspapers/magazines. These texts are, like in the example of lawyers, not exhaustive. Yet, they are useful supplements to my informants' articulations. I discovered 17 texts with articulations from travellers, 9 of which I refer to.

Combining these two forms of data makes travellers' experiences more transparent, especially as it implies that the public articulations and criticisms are shared by a broad number of travellers. This lets us examine the logic of travellers' opposition to the quarantine hotel. My examination found no difference between my informants' narratives and the various texts shared through different media-platforms by travellers, implying that this understanding is quite common among those which experienced the quarantine hotel.

While coding, I discovered that most travellers articulate their stay from the arrival at the Norwegian border. The quarantine hotel is not just lived through within its spatial boundaries, but from the moment the Norwegian state handles travellers at checkpoints, like airports. Moreover, most travellers perceive quarantine hotels as: a) breaching their rights and to b) failing to provide infection control. Point a) entails channelling the juridical counter-discourse. Point b) goes beyond this, serving as a biopolitical counter-discourse directly engaging with the government's narrative. The juridical counter-discourse usually dismisses

the government's articulations implicitly, while the biopolitical counter-discourse explicitly dismisses them, thereby supporting the juridical narrative.

There are different degrees of compliance and resistance to the different basic discourses, and there are many internal ruptures. For instance, there are tensions between lawyers loyal to the Bar's Association versus lawyers loyal to the government, with the former openly dismissing government's narrative and the latter supporting it. Similarly, the Directorate of Health favour a stricter approach than the Institute of Public Health (IPH), with the government usually supporting the former (Gjerde, 2021a, 2021b). While the IPH criticized both the speed by which quarantine hotels were implemented as well as potential side-effects of this instrument, opposition was moderate. The IPH stated that the quarantine hotel is both legal and potentially a useful instrument (Regjeringen 2020a), while the Directorate of Health fully supports it (NRK 2020). Importantly, both experts and politicians articulate the situation based on a common biopolitical discourse, even if there are divisions internally with regards to what measures seem the most appropriate at specific points in time. Moreover, while the government is informed by experts, especially the Directorate (Gjerde, 2021a), it is in charge of articulating the situation to the public, meaning that political actors take priority over experts with regards to the discursive struggle at hand.

Similarly, some travellers utilize descriptive discourses which refrain from entering the discursive struggle, covering the quality of the food, their day-to-day activities etc. This offers important insights into how the quarantine hotel is constituted and experienced. It also reveals a middle position which refrains from entering the struggle.

Seeking to denaturalize the biopolitical discourse of the government, my text has bracketed such *internal* complexity. As mentioned above, the purpose of analysing basic discourses is identifying positions on topics, like pro- and anti-quarantine hotel positions, and how their creative use of signs contradict one another. Bracketing some internal complexity allows us to better understand how these positions are created relationally, in the contestation to determine the properties of the quarantine hotel. It can be compared to prioritizing a struggle between ideologies, like communism versus liberalism, or countries, like Japan versus China, while ignoring internal divisions. Such simplifications are necessary to map external struggle.

Imported contagion: The biopolitical discourse

The biopolitical discourse is channelled by the government and the opposition. It has dominated the political debate since the start of the pandemic, and the debate at hand relates

to the biopolitical debate dominating state discourse during the pandemic since March 2020, which underpins the politics of Covid-19 in Norway (Gjerde, 2021a, 2021b). The biopolitical discourse on quarantine hotels revolves around the sign ‘imported contagion’, which justifies and enables the emergence of the quarantine hotel, constituting the coronavirus as foreign and travellers as importers of this foreign entity.

The focus upon the importation of contagion is articulated when it is expressed that Norway ‘received a lot of imported contagion in February, March and April [2020], when people returned from vacations in Austria and Italy. Later, this spread throughout Norway’ (regjeringen.no, 2020b). Travellers import not just the ‘original’ virus, but also new variants/mutants, which the government fears may be more dangerous (regjeringen.no, 2021a). The government therefore finds that:

imported contagion from abroad creates huge challenges. Stricter measures are therefore needed. Experience shows that it is not enough that travellers undergo quarantine at private homes (regjeringen.no, 2020c)

While the diagnosed or for other reasons quarantined which have not travelled can quarantine at home, travellers cannot undergo quarantine at ‘private homes’, as this constitutes too large a risk due to their import of contagion. Experience reveals that they cannot be trusted, because they break their quarantine duty, and in other ways spread ‘imported contagion’ throughout Norway. Therefore, ‘the quarantine hotel has revealed itself as a necessary tool to limit imported contagion as much as possible’ (regjeringen.no, 2020a). Moreover, it was pronounced in January 2021 that while ‘Norway already has one of the strictest systems for entering and testing in Europe’, further restrictions to reduce imported contagion were needed, as the government decided to implement further restrictions (regjeringen.no, 2021b). Essentially, quarantine hotels are needed to reduce contagion, thereby protecting the polity’s vitality while allowing more liberal policies to be implemented within Norway (regjeringen.no, 2020d).

Despite implementing ‘one of the strictest’ border control regimes in Europe, leading members of the opposition, like Raymond Johansen, leader of the Labour Party in Oslo, and the Head of the City Council of Oslo, criticized the Norwegian government for failing to control imported contagion (Lillo-Stenberg, 2021). Sylvi Listhaug, the leader of the Right-Wing Progress Party, an ally of the government, made similar remarks (NTB, 2021a). The Progress Party and the Left-Wing coalition, meaning the majority of the Norwegian

parliament, demanded that the government implemented harsher border control policies against contagion importers in January, a few days *after* the government had tightened restrictions, as they wanted to protect the polity from imported contagion, with the government seen as too lenient (Kristiansen and Grinde, 2021).

These articulations reveal that the sign of imported contagion, functioning as a nodal point, fixates meaning into a signifying chain, turning Covid-19 into a *foreign* pathogen. As the virus is constituted as life-threatening, reducing its impact through controlling its import into Norway becomes a question of saving lives. Travellers are constituted as potential threats. Through the logic of difference, two phenomena not essentially different (domestic versus imported contagion) are differentiated, allocating the implicit subject position of threat to travellers/importers. This enables different solutions (quarantine at home versus quarantine hotels). Simultaneously, the logic of equivalence combines the signs of ‘danger’ with ‘travel’, through the problematization of Covid-19 mainly being *imported* into Norway.

This subject position restricts rather than enables travellers’ agency. It enables the government to implement strict measures against travellers, with the goal that travellers, by self-identifying as threats, accept these measures, or alternatively that would-be travellers refrain from travelling. At times, travellers escaped this subject position, for instance if they had ‘valid reasons’ for travelling, while at other times, travellers were allocated this subject position regardless of reasons for travel, vaccination-status, or even the statistical infection rates from the country they arrive from. That those coming from countries with less contagion than Norway were treated in the same manner as those arriving from countries where the pandemic is viewed to be out of control, imply an othering of non-Norwegian lands going beyond statistical infection trends, where even vaccinated status fails to exempt travellers from being threats. Strict measures are constituted as just and necessary because they protect public health from an *imported* threat. This way of problematizing travels is further likely to play into the communitarian discourse of the government, which emphasises personal responsibility (see Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020a). The ‘good citizen’ – an implicit subject position allocated those complying with government policies and recommendations, cannot travel during the pandemic.

Constituting border-crossing a problem and Covid-19 as a foreign threat entering Norway when it is imported has policy-implications. It makes limiting entries and controlling those entering’s movements a key part of curbing the pandemic. Interestingly, this made the

Progress Party ask the government to *forbid* foreign travels. The government dismissed this proposal as breaching the Norwegian constitution (Haakonsen, 2021). Moreover, the government legitimizes the quarantine hotel by referring to its legal basis in the infection control law (regjeringen.no, 2020a; see also Svaar, 2021). The government's communication strategy is biopolitical, but it is supplemented by legal resources. It is also from a legal position that opposition to the quarantine hotel is organized.

Rights and freedoms: The juridical counter-discourse

The juridical counter-discourse is publicly articulated by lawyers and others opposed to the quarantine hotel. It contradicts the biopolitical discourse by dismissing the government's focus upon the biopolitical properties of quarantine hotels and the pandemic more generally. Utilizing a legalistic framework, this discourse dismisses the government's legal claims by constituting the quarantine hotel as illegal. We can trace its 'birth' to the Norwegian Bar's Association's call to abolish quarantine hotels in November 2020:

the quarantine hotel is a very intrusive measure against travellers, as it entails internment of people when they arrive in Norway, breaking basic rights such as the freedom of movement, privacy, and family life (Advokatforeningen, 2020).

This resists the biopolitical discourse's attempt to fixate the meaning of quarantine hotels as necessary and lifesaving, as well as the government's discursive link between the infection control law and the quarantine hotel. From this position, 'the state has gone too far, keeping people confined without a legal basis, breaching human rights' (Svaar, 2021; see also Woxholth, 2021a). That travellers cannot appeal, and the lack of laws and courts, are perceived as contradicting the rule of law (NTB, 2021b; Smorr and Dirdal, 2021). Moreover, it is asserted that it is illegal to confine vaccinated individuals (Woxholth, 2021b). Quarantine hotels deter and punish travellers, making them 'unconditionally deprived of liberty for up to 10 days – interned at places whose standards do not lie far away from some departments in Norwegian prisons' (Graasvold, 2021). By being prisons,

quarantine hotels make travellers into prisoners. Hotel staff becomes prison guards... [while] the authorities claim that quarantine hotels are infection control measures, it has the characteristics of punishment (Brettbauer et al., 2021)

These articulations are fixated by the sign of imprisonment/internment, with prisoner/prison taking important fixating roles too. While these signs all function as nodal points,

imprisonment/internment, through its mediating role which constitutes the practices at hand, opens for the constitution of quarantine hotels and travellers as prisons and prisoners. By being imprisoned/interned, travellers become treated as criminals/prisoners and the quarantine hotel becomes a prison. This gives this sign analytical priority.

Importantly, the quarantine hotel hurts travellers' rights when its confinement is constituted as imprisonment/internment. By constituting the quarantine hotel's deprivation of liberty as imprisonment/internment rather than infection control, quarantine hotels become prisons. By establishing a chain of equivalence between justice and social/political/legal rights, a tendency likely characterizing every juridical discourse, the quarantine hotel, desynchronized with Norwegian law, becomes unjust. This is accomplished by combining signs representing human rights, such as the freedom of movement or innocence until proven guilty, constituting a signifying chain where the quarantine hotel is breaking these various rights, due to the fixation of the nodal point of imprisonment/internment.

Hence, lawyers shift the focus by constituting the quarantine hotel as a legal rather than biopolitical problem. This constitutes subject positions enabling resistance to the government. Travellers become prisoners, hotel staff become prison guards, and the government is *implicitly* interpellated as an illiberal/authoritarian/criminal entity, which discards or at best misunderstands the rule of law. Just like 'threats' in the biopolitical discourse, 'prison guard' or 'illiberal/authoritarian/criminal entity' are subject positions restricting rather than enabling agency, by delegitimizing the practices these subjects undertake. The subject position 'prisoner' is however enabling resistance by turning travellers into victims. It is 'suspect[ed] that [the quarantine hotel] is illegal, and that it should be taken to court' (Løkken, 2021). This discourse has successfully participated in constituting antagonism, as around 1000 individuals affected by the quarantine hotel, including Norwegian residents/citizens and EEA seasonal workers, are suing the Norwegian state over its usage of quarantine hotels, finding it an illegal instrument of repression (Kingsrød, 2021).

Travellers' perceptions

Imprisonment/internment

Travellers usually (re)articulate the juridical counter-discourse, constituting quarantine hotels as prisons. This discourse paints the arrival in Norway as part of the quarantine hotel experience. The first meeting with border police, and the 'rounding up', waiting, lines,

monitoring etc are given meaning through the frame of imprisoning/interning. After finishing the passport control:

I was sent to sit and wait until we became 8. When we became 8, a security guard started walking in front of us, and another one behind us. We walked in line through the corridors [of the airport]. I felt like a criminal... we were treated like criminals by the security guards (Rebecca)

We stand in a fenced area, waiting to get past an automatic door. We stand there for a while. Probably half an hour. Nobody tells us what we're waiting for. When it's finally my turn to enter the door, a security guards waits for me, so that I may pick up my luggage. It is approximately 15 meters to walk. I feel like a criminal. (BT, 2021)

These practices are given meaning through the discourse of imprisonment/internment, as travellers find themselves treated like criminals. The sign 'criminal' fixates these experiences as imprisonment, a tendency also characterizing the transport to the quarantine hotel:

After we picked up the luggage, we got tested. Thereafter, it was lots of waiting in an enclosed area, until a group of 20 was ready to walk to the bus. I counted more than 20 security guards monitoring us. The bus ride felt like a prisoner transport, where we again sat too close to one another. Only after the bus started driving did we receive information about our destination (Maria)

When the Covid-test was completed, we had to wait for answers, until they had gathered enough people to fill the bus, which took us to the hotel. Many people were sad and frustrated. We received little information, and we felt like criminals (Tanja)

These various practices, and the lack of control created by the micromanagement travellers experience, are allocated meaning like in the above examples. The ride to the quarantine hotel becomes a 'prisoner transport' where travellers are transported from the implicit 'court' of the passport control to the explicit 'prison' of the quarantine hotel. The sign criminal/prisoner fixates these practices meaning, as practices of imprisoning/interning.

Similarly, the quarantine hotel tends to be framed as a prison, as travellers' experiences continue being interpreted with the same discursive repertoire. The practices of the arrival – being rounded up, marched in lines, monitored, transported – are combined with the stay at the quarantine hotel, as imprisonment.

Everyday life at the quarantine hotel is like imprisonment... it is a huge loss of energy. After [staying at] quarantine [hotels] one is very tired and it feels like one has undergone imprisonment, with few possibilities to get fresh air or interact with others (Safe.no, 2021)

I've just been in Russia for a month, where I sat by my mother's sickbed day and night... [now] I sit confined 22 hours per day [at the quarantine hotel]. Food is delivered at the door. I can only leave the hotel for two hours per day – not that different from Norway's strictest prisons (Khudyakova, 2021).

People construe the arrival at the quarantine hotel as arriving in prison, actively referring to and contradicting the biopolitical discourse, finding that 'captivity is captivity even if it is claimed not to be captivity' (Lunde, 2021a).

Importantly, such interpretations are compatible with the stay as such being pleasant. As Alice says, 'the situation was quite horrible, of course, despite the stay at the hotel being pleasant. Because we were prisoners.' The signs of imprisonment/internment, and of prisoner/prison, taking the roles as nodal points, fixate experiences and grant them meaning. While some, like Alice, finds the stay to have been acceptable despite the imprisonment lens, many articulate it as inappropriate, saying that it 'gives a feeling of being imprisoned. They recommend refraining from travelling, but it has not been criminalized' (Lunde, 2021b). This makes travellers 'feel suspected, sentenced and punished, without having broken any laws' (Ragnar). This even prompts some to ask if 'this really is legal according to human rights?' (Safe.no, 2021), as travellers openly question the legality of their confinement.

This constitutes a signifying chain through the logic of equivalence. The practices travellers experience, from waiting in confined areas, to walking in lines with security guards at the front and rear, to the up to 22 hours daily isolation, are combined into a signifying chain. While there is nothing *essentially* equivalent about being denied using toilets without an escort, walking in lines with guards at front and rear, or between being made to wait in confined areas, the experiences discursively made equivalents. The signs criminal/prisoner, prison and imprisonment/internment fixate these various signs, keeping them in place by arresting the flow of meaning. For the same reason as mentioned above, imprisonment/internment, by way of its mediating key role, holds analytical priority, but it is this trio of signs that fixate the meaning of the various practices travellers experience.

Like in lawyers' articulations, travellers are allocated the subject position of prisoners. This creates a narrative of victimhood enabling resistance, whereas the state and staff are

allocated the same restrictive subject positions as lawyers' articulations. The relationship between travellers and the state is constituted as antagonistic, with the former wronged by the latter. We can conclude that these articulations belong to the same discourses as that of lawyers, even if travellers expand this discourse by including both lawyers' abstract discourses of rights *and* their own lived experiences.

Punishment and infection control

Travellers frequently go beyond the juridical counter-discourse, dismissing the biopolitical discourse by denying that quarantine hotels control the spread of Covid-19. Lacking infection control is identified at multiple settings, from the lines at the airport and the quarantine hotel to the cramped bus, the usage of the same pen when checking in/out, the way food is delivered, the way one must walk through the same narrow hallways as others in quarantine etc. Just like how travellers' juridical counter-discourse consists of both juridical theory and lived experience, so this counter-discourse is largely based upon travellers' lived experience.

Victoria asks 'where is the infection control [at the airport]?', lamenting an apparent lack of social distancing. It was 'impossible to keep safe distance' because 'the bus was full' (Tove). Moreover, 'nobody ensures that people keep their distance' (Sigrid). This experience, from the airport and the 'convict transport', continues into the quarantine hotel. The stay at the quarantine hotel is branded 'a very scary experience. We haven't been interacting with so many people for more than a year. It's impossible to avoid' (Glomdalen, 2021). This apparent 'lack of infection control measures' makes the stay appear as 'punishment' (OA, 2021). As Anette expresses:

much of the frustration comes from it being difficult to perceive this measure as infection control. Everybody understands that it would be safer to quarantine at home, than to be forced tightly together with lots of strangers. Many find this to appear more like punishment than infection control.

The time between arriving at the airport and arriving at the quarantine hotel, at one's room, is described as 'if keeping one's distance is the most important measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19, then what I've participated in [these last five hours] is the opposite of infection control' (Holen, 2021). It is 'uncomfortable that we're standing so close to one another', and 'that infection control is not the purpose [of the quarantine hotel], that's clear' (Stegrud and Reigstad, 2021). Angelica likewise expresses that 'I want to make clear that I am

EXCLUSIVELY “complaining about” failed infection control and a lack of information provided to the us, the interned’, because

it was quite a lot of people at the bus and no system to ensure social distancing... we arrived at the hotel and was allowed entry through a backdoor, where we checked in. Here, too, it was chaotic, and no proper system for ensuring social distancing.

The conclusion is that ‘it becomes clear that sending us to quarantine hotels, has nothing to do with infection control. It is punishment for having travelled abroad’ (BT, 2021).

These articulations are connected and regulated by the nodal point of *lacking* infection control. Lacking infection control constitutes not a social phenomenon per se, but the lack thereof, chaining multiple experiences together as part of this void. The logic of difference differentiates quarantine hotels from infection control, making the quarantine hotel equivalent with other nonbiopolitical places of confinement, like prisons. There are exceptions, as some travellers find infection control to be practised (Lunde, 2021a). Nonetheless, travellers frequently problematize the quarantine hotel as counterproductive. Moreover, some, but few, lawyers articulate this biopolitical counter-discourse by dismissing its potential for infection control (e.g., Graasvold, 2021). We must remember that discursive appropriation goes in all directions, and travellers’ articulations too influence how the quarantine hotel is perceived by would-be and non-travellers. This discourse makes the quarantine hotel’s lack of infection control a problem, constituting it exclusively as an instrument of punishment. Therefore, the biopolitical counter-discourse serves as a supplementary discursive resource in the struggle between the government and travellers/lawyers, as its meaning strengthens the juridical perspective by fixating the quarantine hotel’s meaning as a prison and of travellers as prisoners.

Struggles for ‘truth’: Discussion and conclusion

As seen in this text, quarantine hotels are objects of discursive contestation. How the quarantine hotel is perceived depends upon processes of equivalating/differentiating/fixating signs. In Norway, the government and its various supporters refer to imported contagion to justify quarantine hotels through a biopolitical logic, referring to the dangers of importing a foreign pathogen into Norway. This is close to the meaning reproduced within much of the literature covering quarantine hotels, which largely neglect nonbiopolitical discourses by seeing this instrument as needed to limit imported contagion. Governments across the world generally appear to have been quite successful in establishing their legitimizing narratives for

their politics of Covid-19, which are likely to have similarities with the Norwegian approach, where the government seeks to protect society from a new threat.

Yet, all narratives are contested. In Norway, lawyers refer to abstract moral principles, delegitimizing the existence of quarantine hotels due to their perceived desynchronization with Norwegian law. Travellers, on the other hand, utilizing these abstract discourses to analyse their lived experiences, offer harsh criticism of the government. The quarantine hotel is in this regard shaped by the discourses actors lean upon. Does it protect society against importing a dangerous pathogen, or does it punish travellers for travelling? Does it protect travellers from infection, or put them at risk? This is determined by the creative use of signs which actors engage in as they articulate their understandings and experiences.

Lawyers and travellers unite as they try shifting the focus from biopolitics and medicine to laws and rights. Travellers combine the former discursive resources with overt dismissals of the quarantine hotel's biopolitical properties. This way, travellers open a two-front war on the government's narrative. The government's discourse is attacked on its own terms as a failed biopolitical instrument, and on legal terms, as an illegal device. This produces resistance to the government's narrative, offering an alternative understanding of the quarantine hotel. Most of all, it shifts the debate from a biopolitical to a legal logic. As the quarantine hotel becomes illegal if it has no infection control value, so such a discursive strategy is an attempt to delegitimize it. However, as of today, the government appears to have been successful in naturalizing its perception through a successful communication campaign.

Yet, we ought to look beyond these naturalized truths. The importance of this can hardly be overstated. Our social world has been radically altered within a short period of time, both by the pathogen's capabilities and by our interpretation of these. The discourses politicians articulate are key to understand how the limits of what governments can and cannot do have been pushed. When scholars take for granted measures like quarantine hotels, and their semantic content, as allocated by authorities, the strangeness of this new world is naturalized. As Christensen and Lægreid (2020a) write, the measures are often taken for granted, justified with reference to the situation rather than to what the measures themselves accomplish. We have lived through two years of a 'state of exception'. This means that the pandemic has been seen as an exceptional crisis where extreme measures are needed. Sometimes, such crises may call for the circumvention of laws (Agamben, 2000). This establishes new conventions,

naturalizing new truths. Such exceptional periods may allow authoritarian measures to normalize. If so, we may sleepwalk into a more authoritarian world.

Scholars should beware naturalizing these changes. Taking the official narratives for granted may naturalize not just their appropriateness, but the new conventions emerging as we get used to a new political regime. Therefore, scholars should pay attention to the process of world-making which governments, allied with health experts, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, have undertaken. Discourse analysis calls into question the necessity and perceived naturalness of the path our leaders chose by tracing how signs are articulated, (dis)connected and fixated in series of articulations. Using discourse analytical tools, we see how specific discourses (dis)connect signs in structured ways, enabling us to identify specific positions on issues, like the quarantine hotel. We see how singular signs, like the idea of imprisonment or imported contagion, lead to complex signifying chains where the entire quarantine hotel's meaning is determined. We remember that our political technologies are contestable, and that their particular meaning is determined as much by their actual properties as by our understanding of these.

This struggle revolves around two main questions. Is the quarantine hotel primarily a biopolitical or legal issue? Does it protect from or spread contagion? The answers to these questions determine the legitimacy of the quarantine hotel. While we should beware too enthusiastically embracing radical agendas of subversion, we should critically engage with the official narratives. This reminds us that quarantine hotels, like all parts of the politics of Covid-19, are complex. To move beyond the naturalization created by successful communication strategies, we must map contestation, thereby inviting debates about and examinations of the recent state of exception, which will help us learn lessons from the hardships of the last two years.

Biographical note

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