

City & Society

COVID-19, 'dugnad' and social control in Bergen and beyond

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By now, more than seven months into the pandemic, we have grown accustomed to a range of bizarre phrases: 'Thank you for keeping distance,' 'one meter means a lot,' etc. Emblazoned on T-shirts worn by shop assistants in the major grocery store chains, and reinforced by signs and marks on the walls and floor, these ever-present reminders demonstrate that these businesses have joined the national *dugnad* to curb the corona virus. In Bergen, as elsewhere in Norway, some of us have grown tired of exhortations to join the national 'corona *dugnad*.' *Dugnad* is a form of collective, unpaid voluntary labor that is common in non-commercial groups and organizations in Norway. Whereas *dugnad* normally entails working together to carry out a specific activity, it now means staying apart. As *dugnad* is commonly associated with heightened sociality, it is quite a stretch to deploy this term to ensure that people are prepared to maintain physical distance for an indefinite period.



Flesland Airport, Bergen

And yet, could it be that most people in Bergen readily join the 'corona *dugnad*' - contributing to the common good, albeit each on his or her own - because we have less enthusiasm for being together? Perhaps many of us are primed to virtual, mediated sociability to the extent that this has become

more to our liking – more convenient, more predictable, more safe – than face-to-face encounters? *Dugnad* stems from an Old Norse word (*dugnaðr*) which connotes ‘help,’ ‘support’ as well as ‘virtue’ or ‘capacity.’ The term is related to the Old Norse verb *duga*, which means to be of use or avail. According to the [Great Norwegian Encyclopedia](#), by the 17th century this term designated collective work. Tellingly, *dugnad* also signified the party concluding the co-operative work, occasionally referring to other feasts. Until recently, the social element has remained at the heart of *dugnad*, which, of course, is never wholly voluntary but entails willingness to contribute to the common good. Hence, failure to participate, or opting to pay rather than contributing in person, entails some stigma. In short, *dugnad* is both about getting a job done and a positive social value.



WAIT HERE then you contribute to limit infection, Coop grocery store, Sandviken, November 7, 2020

In the context of the pandemic, or rather syndemic,¹ as maintained by Richard Horton (2020), participation in *dugnad* has become a codeword for being loyal, of being prepared to submit to gentle – and not so gentle – admonitions to follow directives from above. What remains of *dugnad* when participation is demanded by the state? In placing *dugnad* at the center of the government’s Covid-19 response, officials engage in a depoliticizing discourse that extends state power yet inhibits criticism of the government’s measures. By appealing to the spirit of *dugnad* as a national virtue to get us through the pandemic, politicians and leaders are, perhaps deliberately, inviting

¹ Developed by Merrill Singer in the 1990s, syndemics ‘are adversely interacting diseases and other health conditions that increase the illness burden of a population, commonly as a consequence of harmful social conditions that produce multiple disease clusters and vulnerable physical bodies. Rather than individual diseases being the primary drivers of poor health in populations, often it is syndemically interacting diseases that produce the greatest health disparities’ (Singer 2018). The term has been both endorsed and critized. Whatever the case, the use of the notion of syndemic is a way to alert about the reductionism of biomedical approaches, something anthropologists have argued for decades.

new forms of social control and moral policing from below.² Being a good citizen entails a kind of embodied vigilance, a habitus in which everyone is responsible for keeping distance, avoid physical contact, and follow given instructions. Nowadays, security guards in the major stores hang around the entrance where the dispensers for hand disinfectants are placed ('thanks for cleaning your hands'). Their colleagues at Vinmonopolet, the state-run wine and liquor monopoly, make sure that only a limited number of shoppers enter the store at any given time. With business being unusually brisk and just two stores in the centre of Norway's second largest city, the lines on Saturday mornings can go around the block.



Vinmonopolet Valkendorfgaten, November 7, 2020

There is no doubt that life in Bergen in the past few months has been easier than in places where harsh lockdowns have produced severe and long-lasting effects, including increasing poverty (while some rich are getting richer), mental health issues, lack of access to education, and domestic violence to mention but a few. And yet, despite the relatively low number of deaths and lighter restrictions, it is possible to observe notable changes in interpersonal behaviour in Bergen that are comparable to other cities most affected by Covid-19. Whilst physical proximity is certainly not typical of Norwegian habits, the ways in which the pandemic/syndemic generates increasing scepticism towards physical encounters is striking. As shaking hands and hugging now connote irresponsible behaviour, the space of others that must not be violated appears to be expanding (some say up to two meters). People changing directions in order to avoid 'close' contact or staring at someone who gets accidentally close are common reactions nowadays.

² The notion of moral policing has largely negative connotations in Norway. In recent years, mainstream media has almost exclusively attributed such practices to certain immigrant Muslim communities, notably in relation to efforts to control the dress, comportment and sexual behaviour of young Muslim women.

Today 'being responsible' largely implies keeping the right distance. Although this might be regarded exclusively as an individual attitude, there are strong collective narratives (such as *dugnad*), technological surveillance tools (such as the [Smittestopp app](#)), and forms of social control in place to make sure this happens. During the first lockdown in Italy two main features characterized territorial control and social behaviour to guarantee that nobody would violate the norm of social distance and the imperative of staying home. First, top-down policing, including the use of drones and helicopters. Second, policing from below, with neighbours controlling each other, people scouring the streets from their windows, and in some cases episodes of violence where runners were beaten because they had left home without a serious reason (notice the paradox of beating someone because they violated a 'stay home' order as beating implies physical proximity). In Bergen top-down policing has not been implemented to this extent, but social control morphs into moral policing: alternative behaviour is depicted as irresponsible, underestimating the loss of life or exposing everyone to potentially lethal consequences. This narrative is shaping a new habitus, a notion of civic responsibility in which being apart is the highest form of solidarity and concrete forms of everyday interaction (such as helping someone carry a heavy load, assisting a person in the street, etc.) tend to disappear. It is no wonder that criticism of Covid-19 policies is becoming a no-go zone, especially since Bergen municipality imposed stricter measures from October 29, and yet stricter ones from November 7.³



³ Between November 7-23, shops must ensure that it is possible to keep a 2 meters distance on their premises. If necessary security guards will ensure that the requirement is complied with. Pubs and restaurants must a keep a guest list and persons who do not wish to identify themselves are not admitted. They must close no later than 22.00 and it is forbidden to sell alcohol after 21.30. The sound levels must be regulated so that guests can hold a conversation from at least 1meter distance. Public events without a fixed seat are prohibited. Events (both public and private) in public places must have fixed seats and a maximum of 20 participants. Only funerals are exempt from this rule (max 50). Gyms, fitness centers, libraries and museums are closed. The maximum number of people one is allowed to have in one's home is 5 people (including one's own household), with an exception for families with more than 5 members. See the full list of 'infection prevention' [measures](#).

Welcome! Maintain 2 meter distance to each other. Disinfect your hands before shopping. Face mask recommended! Thank you for your consideration while shopping. Lerøy Galleriet, November 7, 2020.

The relative success in handling Covid-19 in Norway reinforces some Scandinavian myths. There is a certain smugness in how the relatively low numbers of Covid-19 in Bergen and Norway are portrayed in mainstream media: besides the celebrated *dugnad*, we are often told that Norwegians score high on trust (*tillit*) both towards each other and towards the authorities. But what are, in Bergen as elsewhere, the new forms of sociality and control that will remain with us beyond the pandemic/syndemic? The management of the pandemic, in Bergen like in other places, has largely taken place at the nexus of individual action (isolate yourself, change social behaviour) and social control from below (monitor others, use the app). Will these directives inform a new, enduring habitus in the way we are among others?

Modalities of greeting interestingly express a progression toward more social distance as recommendations moved from avoiding hand shaking, using elbow bumps, and finally to bring your hand on your heart, as suggested by WHO Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. While it is realistic to imagine that *kunik*, or the Eskimo kiss (pressing the tip of one's nose against another's nose), which is used as a form of greeting in different cultures, will increasingly be stigmatized in the wake of this and future pandemics/syndemics, it is less clear what new bodily and social habits will persist. As we witness these processes unfolding, we should train our attention on the resilience of democratic social infrastructures. Indeed, social control from below has historically been a key component of autocratic regimes. When linking this aspect to the growing prevalence of executive powers over legislative ones, and the prominence of 'technical' committees in ordinary governance, it is clear that Covid-19 may represent a difficult test for democracy and freedom.

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