

The Corona Crisis as a Political Stage

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The Stage

The Corona crisis seems to spotlight the problems and opportunities of our representative democracy. It provides a scene on which the shortcomings of our democracy become visible, but also one on which different political discourses and visions of the future can be enacted. In addition to protests, economic, political and social projects enter this stage as well.

However, this stage is subject to particularly bright lighting. It is a glaring light that makes critical aspects of our representative democracy and capitalist society visible. The bright Corona light has, in particular, illuminated the problems in the health care system. Industrial nations such as Italy, Spain or the USA were facing a collapse of their medical supply. Structural deficits such as undersized capacities of hospitals, insufficient supply of medical materials such as masks, ventilators or medication as well as poorly paid and overwhelmed personnel were laid bare in the pandemic. In Spain and Northern Italy triage was applied, granting only the fittest patients the right to medical treatment. Older and already ill individuals could no longer be guaranteed a hospital bed or the use of a ventilator. The contradictions between biopolitics and democratic rights, which already exist, became exacerbated in the pandemic. In this context, the deadly consequences of an austerity policy caused by the state's withdrawal from critical infrastructure were also exposed. In nations such as the USA, where there is no universal or mandatory health insurance and inequalities are especially apparent in the health sector, a particular selection takes place. Those who cannot afford medical treatment face the choice of either putting themselves and their families in debt or not being treated. Yet, due to their living and working conditions, they are often risk patients and suffer from diabetes, heart problems or other diseases.¹ The savings potential in the health care sector and the privatization of primary health care do not pay off in times of a pandemic. Even worse, they increase the danger of Covid-19. Refrigerated trucks storing corpses in front of New York City hospitals, mass funerals in Brazil or dead bodies lying openly on the streets of Guayaquil provide the grim images of this crisis.

As a result of the pandemic, further vulnerabilities of politics and society are exposed. The shortage of supplies, on the one hand, and the obliteration of groceries, on the other, lay bare the problems of an agriculture that mainly services wholesale markets, focuses on monoculture and is entirely dependent on the transport and logistics sector. Due to the lockdown, considerable amounts of food perished in the field while the consumers, who partly already suffer economically from the Corona crisis, have to pay significantly more for the same products. In Germany alone, the price for vegetables has increased since the beginning of the crisis on average by 26%, in some cases such as zucchini even by 92%. In the US, farmers destroyed or gave away their potatoes, which are grown in huge monocultures, in some cases even 60% of the harvest. In the Netherlands, 13% of the potato production was disposed during the Corona crisis. Milk, eggs and other unprocessed foods were also destroyed. The focus on monocultures and long-distance transportation is not only problematic

¹ The report by Amanda Holpuch demonstrates this. Amanda Holpuch: Profit over people, cost over care: America's broken healthcare exposed by virus; in: The Guardian (online) Thu 16 Apr 2020, 07.00 BST. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/16/profit-over-people-cost-over-care-americas-broken-healthcare-exposed-by-virus>

ecologically, in the case of the pandemic, it is also a risk for the economy and for supplying the population.

A third problem made visible by Corona is the flexibilization of the labor market in an attempt to reduce labor costs and make businesses more competitive. According to Thomas Piketty, this is one of the most important sources for the increase of social inequalities in Europe. In Germany, the reforms of the Agenda 2010 led to precarious working conditions of many employees and enabled the boom of sub-contractors, a situation that is now at the core of the Corona outbreaks in the meat industry. When in mid-May 2020 twenty-nine Corona cases were discovered in a meat-packing plant in Lower Saxony, and shortly thereafter an even larger outbreak occurred in Rheda-Wiedenbrück near Gütersloh, the deplorable working and living conditions of the mainly Eastern European workers came to light: unpaid extra working hours and packed housing with mouldy walls are part of this exploitation system. Such conditions exist in the agricultural sector and cruise ship tourism as well. It was not as if nobody was aware of the precarious working and living conditions of these workers. They have been criticized for many years, but Corona makes the problem visible and the danger of infections for society imminent. Again, the pandemic illuminates how unequal our society is. Whether in Paris, Bangladesh, Rio de Janeiro or Gütersloh, the virus spreads especially in places where dense and unhealthy living conditions are predominant, thus among the poor. While for the upper middle class the lockdown provoked a deceleration of everyday life as well as stress relief, inhabitants of the banlieues, favelas and ghettos in large cities experienced a nightmare.

Crisis scenario and logic of prevention

Yet the crisis of the system was not the only issue that became visible on the Corona stage. Especially during the lockdown, and also later on, the state's logic of prevention – legitimated by medical and scientific expertise – stood at center stage. States have the minimal obligation to ensure safety and peace. According to Thomas Hobbes, the Leviathan must use all means necessary for this purpose. In modern times, this duty is extended to the preservation of the population's health. Michel Foucault pointed out this new paradigm when he spoke of biopolitics. In democracy, though, the state has another duty: it needs to guarantee the fundamental rights and liberties of each individual. Security (Hobbes) and administration of life (Foucault), on the one hand, and the democratic guarantee of fundamental rights and liberties, on the other, stand in tension to each other. A democratic state must not, like the Leviathan, make use of all means, and its biopolitical measures are counterbalanced by human rights and ethics. Checks and balances, mass media and citizens' fundamental rights limit the power of the state. Decisions have to pass parliamentary committees and are discussed in public. However, in an extreme situation there is no time for this. The state has to act quickly, and this action shifts the balance of power in favour of the Leviathan and biopolitics. The state now functions within the mode of prevention, which is legitimized by the imminent catastrophe made plausible by the crisis scenario.

The initial news from Wuhan around Christmas 2019 seemed like a distant disaster movie. But one after another, different countries started to experience the pandemic. Most governments reacted with the logic of prevention against an unpredictable aggressor, as one is familiar with "the fight against terrorism." Viruses and terrorists have something in common: they operate in obscurity and one never knows when they will strike. Both are met with prevention. The interesting thing about the logic of prevention is that, no matter how it all turns out in the end, prevention is always legitimized

but can also be contested. If the worst does not occur, one can say that the prevention was successful. At the same time, however, one could argue that prevention was unnecessary because no danger was visible. If the catastrophe does occur, even more means to fight the enemy – be it a virus or terrorist – are needed, since it becomes apparent that the original measures were insufficient. The point is: in both cases, a clear causality cannot be established. Now, precisely this lack of proven causality between government action and the prevention of a catastrophe is the leverage by which the state can legitimize further restrictive measures. Since there cannot be any proof for the effectiveness of the prevention, such measures are always subject to suspicions of manipulation.² A concordance between logic of prevention and democracy is impossible. As a result, a struggle between the justification of the preventive measures and the revindication of democratic standards is inevitable.

Although the logic of prevention cannot be upheld indefinitely in a democracy, the effects of restricting democratic rights in an extreme situation are highly dangerous. Even if temporally limited, these restrictions cause a dynamic that cannot always be controlled. In his article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on April 25, 2020, the German legal scholar and journalist, Heribert Prantl, described how restrictions of democratic rights due to supposed security threats eventually tend to remain in place longer than originally planned. This was the case in the “fight against terrorist threats” in the 1970s (RAF) and against Islamic terrorism since 9/11. Prantl shows that these restrictions then either become part of normalcy or they set the standard for implementing similar measures in new law proposals, albeit in a weakened form. Applying the logic of prevention and the restrictive measures it entails is thus always problematic for democracy.

The hour of the protests

However, in order to be accepted, the logic of prevention needs the fear of the catastrophe. The citizens have to be convinced that the crisis is worse than the desire for freedom and the validity of fundamental rights. Whenever the scenario of a catastrophe is no longer felt emotionally, or overshadowed by greater collective or individual catastrophes – for example, loss of one’s own material existence – suspicion and critique emerge. This explains the protests against the lockdown in countries that have lower death rates due to Covid-19, such as Germany, as well as in countries where the welfare state is weak, such as the USA and Brazil.

In this situation, the Corona crisis opens the stage for a great variety of protests. Conspiracy theories that already circulate within the fragmented world of the internet emerge. Tin foil hats offer one of the most curious pictures of these protests, but they are not the only ones. Vaccine opponents join the field, while right-wing extremists articulate reactionary anti-capitalism critique with anti-Semitic discourse and imagine Jewish control over the world market. But there are also protesters that are less shrill. They are concerned about the restrictions of civil rights and the expansion of the state’s control. These protesters form an important corrective in the hour of the executive power. The potpourri of protests is also joined by those who suffer from the economic consequences of the lockdown and worry about their material existence.

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Only the comparison with similar cases offers some degree of plausability.

Unblocking the political imaginary

Aside from protests and discussions, the crisis also seems to create an opening of the political imaginary for new social and political visions. While the *status quo* of our society is not radically questioned, new practices and projects for the future become apparent. The renaissance of political-economic measures that give up economic austerity is one indication of this. In his essay on the malaise of democracy, Pierre Rosanvallon argues that there are moments of a blockade in which the imagination of new conceptions and alternative scenarios are no longer possible. The political imaginary is then no longer able to produce visions of the future. This is the hour of TINA: "There is no alternative." Some political scientists consider this to be an anti-political moment in which rejecting the discussion of collective decisions and projects becomes a dominant attitude. What makes democracy so special, namely, the creation of a space in which political visions are discussed and common conceptions of society are produced, shrinks. The preventive logic during the first lockdown promoted and legitimized precisely such a TINA attitude.

Paradoxically, the initially widespread approval of the state's measures for fighting Corona created the stage for protests and alternative scenarios – democratic and anti-democratic – that question the *status quo* not only of dealing with Covid-19 but also with respect to our democratic, economic and socio-cultural way of life. Aside from political protests, protagonists of new visions of the future take advantage of the situation as well. Whether it concerns Corona Apps, the increase of individual tracing, ecological demands as condition for governmental support of the economy, basic income, critique of liberalism or anti-capitalist positions, reactionary and right-wing projects: dealing with the Corona pandemic lifts the blockade of the political imaginary and opens up new ideas and discourses. It seems as if society would be able to reflect upon and question itself only after Corona restrictions are lifted.

But what is the decisive factor for this liberating effect? Perhaps it was the confrontation with the Corona crisis scenarios and the experience of the logic of prevention as a standard for politics that made the political imaginary become fluid. The crisis is a situation in which orientation is lost, and it requires new standards for ideas and action. After the pandemic has exposed the critical issues of democratic society and unblocked the political imaginary, the moment arrives to discuss not only corrections but also new pathways of democracy. One only has to take advantage of that moment.

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