

Simplification of social life

The world society is facing an unprecedented situation due to the corona pandemic: What happens when all of society's function systems temporarily follow one imperative only? ¹

Prof. Dr. Rudolf Stichweh, 'Forum Internationale Wissenschaft' and 'Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies', University of Bonn, Heussallee 18-24, D-53113 Bonn, rstichweh@yahoo.de

Sociologists describe society by the forms of differentiation that occur within it. Differentiation means the distribution of societal activities and of participants of society among sub-systems (of which society consists). Up until the 18th century, and to some degree even beyond, premodern Europe understood estates or strata as its main sub-systems. There was the nobility, the clergy, different groups of commoners as well as peasants. The social order was the order of these groups and of the usually lifelong membership of individuals in one of these groups or strata.

Modern society, as we have known it for 250 years, is based on a complete replacement of this form of order. Hierarchically structured estates are replaced by communication systems that are ordered by thematic issues and societal functions. All of these communication systems are world systems: the polity, the economy, religion, science, education, law, art, sports, mass media, the healthcare or illness system as well as the system of intimate relationships and families. No one's daily life takes place in only one of these function systems. Instead of belonging to them, one selectively participates in them (sociologists refer to this as inclusion), and the persons that participate in the function systems are individuals that become individualized through the extreme diversity of their participations. The individual exists outside of these function systems and is only connected to them in occasional events. Aside from the order of function systems itself, the individual is the other revolutionary invention of modern society.

¹ Published in German in 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung', April 7, 2020, p. 9. English version by Marc Weingart, Werther, and Virginia Stichweh, York.

Regarding the corona crisis, an essential sociological question is whether and how it temporarily puts modern social order into question and what this means for the development of society in the long term. First of all, the fundamental event of the corona crisis, the infection of an organism with the virus, is also the infection and potential illness of an individual, and there are two questions resulting from that. Firstly, how can it be prevented that an infected individual transmits the infection and disease to other individuals? This results in social distancing of an individual from other individuals as the new form of social life in the corona crisis. Secondly, how can the survival of an individual be ensured in case of serious illness?

It is striking that the second question is predominant. We dictate to the individual to practice social distancing (which is difficult to endure) in order to keep the reproduction rate of infections at a level that makes survival of as many individuals as possible more likely. It is impressive how much this latter aspect has priority. Each individual counts. Each death of an individual is one death too many. The incredible significance of the individual in modern society is illustrated in the corona crisis, too, by the fact that no other value can compete with the highest valuation for saving as many individuals as possible. In this perspective, the socio-political shaping of the corona crisis appears to be – across all nations - structurally conservative in relation to one of the most fundamental structural decisions of modern society.

Even more dramatic, then, is the temporary break of the corona crisis with the other structural decision of modern society: the emergence of functional differentiation as the horizontal interplay of numerous global communication systems among which no order of primacy or differences regarding societal significance can exist anymore. This order is, in fact, not only in principle a horizontal order of equal significance of each system. It is also an extremely dynamic order in which each function system is incessantly put into motion and challenged by rapid and surprising developments in other function systems. Both descriptions are no longer appropriate in the current situation. Instead, a peculiar order of function systems emerges to which there is no historical precedent.

Among the function systems of society, the healthcare system, which currently is again becoming a system completely focused on dealing with illness, is a noteworthy “latecomer”. Up until 1900, there was no healthcare system, only individual clinics or doctors, if at all. In the United States, there reigned until the late 19th century a ‘therapeutic nihilism’ that often motivated considerate

physicians to warn other physicians against medical interventions because those interventions might be harmful to patients. The German situation around 1900 can be illustrated in a first approximation by looking at two of the most famous novels of those years. In Fontane's "Stechlin" (1899), Dubslav, the main protagonist and alter ego of the author, no longer consults his physicians in the weeks before his death because he primarily perceives them as protagonists of ideas – social democracy and illiberal Protestantism – that Dubslav rejects as being somehow extreme. But, in the first instance, his physicians are useless as helpers, uttering only vague statements and prescribing dubious general treatments ("green droplets"). In Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" published two years later (1901), the doctor is presented as an irrelevant supporting actor – invariably prescribing "a little pigeon, a little French bread" - in an otherwise dramatic theatre of dying that all family members have to participate in as observers and are not allowed to escape. Witnessing the death of others is in Buddenbrooks a harsh school of the "condition humaine". This is not alleviated by the intervention of doctors.

Only 120 years later, in the corona crisis, the system dealing with illness is for the first time in history society in its entirety; and it is the health system in its most extreme form as a total institution, thus as intensive care, which controls the individual in all life processes and in this form takes the ultimate significance of the individual into account. All that society consists of beyond the healthcare system is, at the moment, being subjected to the concern expressed in the peculiar formula "flatten the curve". The dynamics of infections resulting from the immense amount of social relations need to be adjusted to the capacity of the health system and especially to that of intensive care.

What happens to the other function systems of society? It is obvious that two other leading roles are available. One falls to the political system, which has the ability to bring forth decisions that are collectively binding for the entire political community. The current situation requires behavioural directives that are binding for everybody, and there is no other system that can provide this service beside the political system. As time is running out, it is natural that the responsibility of decision-making should fall to the territorial state and the nation state as the most established unit for making collectively binding decisions in a reliable way.

However, this does not change the fact that all nation states and territorial states produce very similar decisions. There are two reasons for this. Political

decision-makers do not make their decisions based on their own knowledge resources. They rely on advisors who provide them with the stocks of knowledge available in the health system and in the system of science. This vast amount of knowledge is in the case of the pandemic of even more significance as the politicians involved cannot draw on any comparable decisions made in the past. Thus, in this case there is no tradition of decision-making in the political system. The advisors, however, whom the actors of the political system call upon – virologists, epidemiologists etc. – do not rely on a national knowledge base but on knowledge dynamics in global scientific communities. As a result, the advice they are able to give is inevitably determined by the knowledge in the global research system.

In addition, politicians tend to imitate decisions made by their counterparts in other countries. In all decisions of the political system, however, one aspect should be emphasized: This is now a radically simplified political system making decisions, a system which is aware of an extremely sharpened hierarchy of issues calling for decisions, about which it believes it cannot decide on its own and therefore does not make that hierarchy subject to democratic discourse. This hierarchy is dictated by the imperative of not overwhelming the healthcare system, which in turn is dictated by the significance of equal treatment and life support for every individual. The political system can fail to realize this imperative but in no way this imperative is at its disposal.

The third leading role that remains available in the corona crisis is taken by the system of science. This system, too, is extremely simplified by the pandemic. A large part of the operations of the system no longer take place or take place only in private, insofar as science can be conducted in the home office without libraries or laboratories. At the same time, extraordinary hopes and expectations are directed towards scientific research on the virus and the epidemic as well as the quest for a vaccine and drugs that are more urgent than any expectations for any other activities. Therefore, the political system is also involved as a decision-maker regarding research contracts and funding alternatives. But again, in this context the political system makes decisions that, in its own view, are determined by external imperatives.

It is this triad of extremely narrowly conceived functional references that has, in the past few weeks, almost completely dominated our daily lives and the way we deal with information. Never before has our life been so simple and never again, after these few weeks are over, will it be this simple. The metaphor of a war, which we often hear and read in these days, seems hardly

appropriate because war rather entails an intensification of the productions in several function systems. Instead, in this crisis, a large part of social life is simply shut down.

What does this mean and what about the other function systems? First of all, it seems natural to include the mass media in the list of essential function systems as there needs to be reporting on which rules are in place, how successful these have been so far, and how the crisis is developing in different places. This role can only be assumed by the mass media. Only the mass media are able to turn this crisis into the most concentrated world event the world has ever seen, since in 1755 the earthquake of Lisbon produced, for the first time in history, one macro system of observers (linked by channels of communications) empathetically looking at the same event. The mass media take up this task with the same fierce determination and exclusive focus that can also be observed in other function systems. In the case of the mass media, however, the digitalization of communication is an especially important enabling condition for their influence.

Fifth, there is the economy. It, too, is to some degree “relevant for the system” (in the terminology arising in these days) since the economy produces masks, ventilators and other medical supplies and provides the individuals of world society with foodstuff. But besides this, it is even more striking that the economy, unlike ever before in the history of mankind, has largely been shut down. The ongoing reproduction of the economy by payments motivated by and occurring within the economic system is replaced by the reproduction of solvency of those involved in the economy by the public purse. The extent is inconceivable, and it is clear that this cannot be continued for more than a few weeks.

Education is shut down or has – in a way that has not been seen for centuries – been transferred to the responsibility of the families. Child care centres and schools are closed, as are higher education institutions. The latter, however, plan a transition to completely digitalized learning for the immediate future, something the child care centres and schools are not able to do. In the institutions of higher education there is even a kind of enthusiasm to be observed regarding this new situation. It is seen as a promising experiment that starts in these days and it will be interesting to see how it plays out.

Sports could turn out to be the function system that could experience the most complete shutdown. In times of social distancing, it still exists in the form of

individual jogging as one of the few activities that remain allowed and is in this sense even accepted as “being relevant to the system”. But the entire spectrum of professional competitive sports, as well as non-individual training in that context, is being shut down across the globe. The system of sport is clearly a system of human bodily activities. And bodily activities are highly in danger of resulting in infections. They rely on physical presence and cannot, in principle, be substituted digitally. These times will teach us that e-sports are in fact not sports but an entirely different type of system. In parallel, the mass media already achieve something remarkable every day. Mass media usually depend on reporting about sports events to a large degree. Even after several weeks without sports, the newspapers are still able to produce two-to-three pages on sports daily, reporting in fact only about the complexity of non-events.

The system of art is also suspended with regard to “performances” and “visits” to museums. In a number of cases, there are digital alternatives or a complementarity of live performances and digital streaming. For the arts, however, one determining factor could be that they are – to a much stronger degree than is the case with science – produced in private spaces, workshops and studios. Thus, a retreat to the actual process of producing works of art – which is shielded from the ongoing infection dynamics – seems to be a logical reaction. We will hopefully be able to study the results in the near future.

The system of religion could turn out to be the actual loser of the corona crisis. The high social density of believers living near to one another, combined with the close physical proximity of many persons in religious rituals, has in several cases already turned out to be a hotspot for the virus. What may even be more significant, however, is the fact that significant religious interpretations of the crisis seem nowhere to be available. Insofar as our reactions to the corona crisis are determined by the specifically modern “cult of individuality”, this then is a form of quasi-religiosity which a traditional transcendence-oriented religiosity has difficulties to be opposed to. And no religious belief system will be able to play the conventional game of interpreting the actual events as punishment for wrongdoing. This traditional point of view was already outdated when the earthquake of Lisbon occurred in 1755 and the Jesuit order then paid a steep price for making use of the argument.

In the situation of social distancing, everything seems to point to intimate relationships and families as a function system that remains. This is the system that nobody wants to shut down or dissolve. However, even family connections are disrupted by the ban of visiting elderly family members in nursing homes or

corona patients in hospitals. All in all, however, family relationships are viewed as a basic layer of social life which is to be hold constant – one riskily assumes the stability of family relationships - but must not be suspended. In this case, the system is not dissolved but is considered unrealistically stable, and this is a premise that will become ever more problematic after a few weeks.

The image of society that we have sketched provisionally in only a few points demonstrates the extraordinary character and the riskiness of the social experiment going on in these days. Society will not keep still for more than a few weeks. As soon as the function systems return to their dynamics, society will not simply continue where it left off, like a temporarily halted machine that resumes its normal operations. It is also a new beginning: Are the scientific problems one was looking at still relevant? Do the same premises still count for trade agreements that were in place before the crisis? Will planned film projects still evoke the same fascination as was the case only a few weeks ago? Everything could be different as well – and this is both opportunity and risk for everybody involved. Such a new beginning of all function systems has never before taken place in the history of modernity (with the possible exception of the two world wars). There will be structural discontinuities, but we do not yet know what they will look like.