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Corona crisis not yet overcome

>> After two years, the small 'Monitor' series on 'Corona and politics: the role of science' is coming to an end. Over two years, 24 articles have been published that have illuminated the topic from all sides: our sincere thanks go to all the authors.

The focus was deliberately not (only) on the sui generis scientific aspects raised by the corona epidemic, but on the relationship between the scientific system on the one hand and the political system on the other. In conclusion, this short article discusses two questions that have become considerably more acute and concise over the course of these two years, but which still await a satisfactory solution or interpretation.

Failed social integration of the crisis

The first question concerns the central function of politics in reflecting and integrating social conditions and conflicts. Unfortunately, there is no doubt that the findings cannot be denied: the crisis has not been dealt with, the crisis remains an open wound. In contrast to historical examples, e.g. HIV 40 years ago, politics and thus society have not been able to integrate the different positions and subjective experiences that have emerged during the coronavirus period. What remains is dogmatism and irreconcilability, and no common learning steps can be recognised even at a distance.

This situation must give all those acting responsibly pause for thought. Not only because it represents an unfavourable imbalance that is costly to maintain, but also because it blocks social learning. While the HIV crisis led to the acceptance of same-sex lifestyles, bisexuality and even intravenous drug use, all we hear now are phrases like 'we've done a great job'. On the one hand, there is a deceptive conformity, political systems are once again thought of hierarchically, democratic decisions are 'without alternative' and are removed from democratic dispute, and the understanding of illness has been turned back to a purely biological 'war on the virus' - social and even host factors (age, pre-existing conditions) are suppressed. At least 50 years of development towards a holistic understanding of disease have been lost.

On the other hand, there is something that is perhaps not properly understood in some circles: Anger and disappointment. Many citizens who were previously integrated into the social process with a promise of autonomy feel excluded. Patient autonomy had been preached for decades, and now not even the grandchildren were allowed to visit the dying.

The question remains: how did this come about and what is preventing the productive integration of the contradictions that have erupted during the coronavirus crisis, which can be clearly seen in the current election results?

What is certain is that the simultaneous existence of internal conformity and disintegration of the camps is an extremely stressful situation that is costing society a great deal of energy that could certainly be put to much better use elsewhere. Identity politics, that much is certain, has largely taken the political left out of the game through its fixation on group interests and its rejection of universalism (Susan Neiman); concepts such as autonomy, freedom and discourse have moved to the right-wing political spectrum. Yasha Mounk has compiled eloquent sources on how even medical treatments (including corona vaccines) in the US are distributed under diversity policies according to group affiliation rather than need.

The left (in previous terms) accepted the pharmaceutical industry's exclusion of liability for vaccines, accepted state control of drug administration (while restricting patients' rights, e.g. also Paxlovid) and even agreed to evidence-based considerations being undermined (as is now the case with the 'Healthy Heart Act' of the 'Corona Minister') - back to eminence-based medicine. But other elements of identitarian policy-making are also in vogue, hypermoralisation is used for internal stabilisation (otherwise you are a lateral thinker) and, above all, it is opportune to work with induced fear again. There is agreement that the primary level must be addressed, too much reflection, even intellectuality, is dangerous - fear is even ennobled as a virtue (Harry Lehmann, Bernd Stegemann), being afraid shows how mature you are. Mark Lilla rightly points out the parallels with evangelical self-incrimination: you have to speak your non-conformist deviations out loud in order to purify yourself.

Moreover, there is no crisis without the media (which also played a huge role in HIV). However, they are currently in a deep crisis - 'calculating (from expected clicks) instead of telling stories' is the current survival motto. They are being squeezed, on the one hand by free social media services, and on the other by the Communication Decency Act Section 230 (1996 Bill Clinton), which categorises algorithms as free speech and exempts tech companies in the USA from the obligation - unlike the press and television - to influence content in any way. The EU can therefore also only argue in terms of economic policy and issue threats of local fines, but this is precisely why scandalisation is reaching new heights.

Once scientism and back

During the coronavirus crisis, 'science' played a central role, at times appearing to replace political action: follow, listen to, unite behind science was the message from all sides. Although it was unclear who was supposed to represent 'science', numerous institutions (e.g. Leopoldina) and disciplines (e.g. virology) vigorously applied. Even though internationally renowned scientists such as Wolfgang Streeck warned: "Follow the science' was once the slogan when it came to climate change. But which 'science'? 'Facts are facts!

Zitationshinweis

Schrappe, M.: „Corona-Krise noch nicht bewältigt“, in „Monitor Versorgungsforschung“ (02/25), S. 28–29.
http://doi.org/10.24945/MVF.02.25.1866-0533.2704

As a scientist, I can only ask: Since when? What epistemological courses can someone have attended who writes something like that on a poster and even has their picture taken with it?', the legitimisation gained by science was irresistible to politicians. Even if 'the figures' were incorrectly collected, the reference to their neutral objectivity made all enquiries unnecessary, even when it came to serious restrictions on fundamental rights. When it came to the issue of vaccination and the legislation on de facto compulsory vaccination, the Alliance's scientific policy was questioned even more drastically, because the terms 'pandemic of the unvaccinated' and the alleged lack of side effects of vaccination were used to exaggerate vaccination as a social obligation - by scientists and those who used science for their arguments.

However, and this is remarkable, the development did not stop here. Of course, numerous scientists (Richard Münch, Peter Strohschneider, Wolfgang Merkel, Michael Rüther, Caspar Hirschi, Klaus Ferdinand Gärditz and others) had protested and emphasised the epistemological process character of science (formulating questions, creating uncertainty, formulating new questions), but the real 'bang' only came when Paul Schreyer from 'Magazin Multipolar' was able to get the so-called RKI protocols published. Here a completely different picture emerged, Follow the Science had suddenly become Science, please follow the politics. Politicians had made numerous decisions even against professional/scientific advice, the scientistic reference was only a pretence.

The big question that always comes at the end

As already mentioned above, the political-economic theory of the coronavirus pandemic has not yet been written - although some elements may already be recognisable. Graz-based sociologist Klaus Kraemer sees coronavirus as a first singular crisis that overrides all rules and overwhelms institutions. The thesis paper group focused on the parallelisation of several social antagonisms that neutralise each other under normal conditions. The biological concept of illness ('defeating the virus') triumphed over the social one, the basic sciences (laboratory virology) over the clinical ones, the hierarchical understanding of politics over complex concepts. The failure of left-wing discourse as a corrective and the paralysis of the media have already been mentioned above. The transition from a socio-economically based social analysis (the ostracised word of 'interests') to a discourse form of misunderstood cultural hegemony ('values') is certainly an important factor, as can be seen in the escalating cultural dispute in the USA and increasingly also in Europe - Corona was an occasion to show 'attitude'.

It is easy to forget that Antonio Gramsci, as a Marxist, had a basic socio-economic concept a century ago when he described the importance of cultural hegemony. For many institutions, corona was also an opportunity to promote the desired internationalisation of decision-making ('One Health'), which led to opposition in some electorally oriented democracies. And of course, perhaps historically comparable to the introduction of identity cards during the plague epidemics in the Middle Ages, digitalisation as a technological option for the formation of social structures. Even though we know that technological interventions are only of a supportive nature and take a back seat to social, organisational and cultural interventions, there was a great temptation to use vaccination passports, digital access regulations, etc. to achieve comprehensive control of population mobility.

A cybernetic model of society analogue to Singapore or China appeared on the horizon. If you want to follow Joseph Vogl's 'Capital and Resentment', the convergence of financial and data capitalism has been over-optimised by the population's movement and health data.

It is always said that epidemics are times of social change, drivers of new political and cultural developments. It remains to be seen what will be said about the social role of the coronavirus epidemic in the future. Hopefully we can remain optimistic. <<

Die einzelnen Folgen der Serie (Teil 1: 02/23 bis Teil 25: 02/25 im Überblick:

1: **Schrappe/Roski:** Corona und Politik: Zur Rolle der Wissenschaft
2: **Schrappe:** Zur Rolle der Klinischen Infektiologie
3: **Antes:** Wissen aus Daten – wie es sein sollte und könnte
4: **Müller:** Komplexität in epidemiologischen Date
5: **Manow:** Die Profession war in der Pandemie stumm
6: **Kraemer:** Rätselhafte Datenpolitik
7: **Sprenger:** Ein gesamtgesellschaftliches und soziales Ereignis
8: **Kowall/Stang:** Unsicheres Wissen: Beispiel Übersterblichkeit
9: **Tretter, C:** Übersehene Nebenwirkungen der Corona-Pandemie
10: **Skala:** Kinder in der Corona-Pandemie
11: **Tretter, F.:** Die Pandemie systemisch betrachtet
12: **Exner/Walger:** Lehren aus hygienisch-medizinischer Sicht
13: **Stöhr:** Was könnten Virologen künftig besser machen?
14: **Voshaar:** Vorbei ist nicht erledigt
15: **Stronegger:** Interventionswirksamkeit ist noch keine Indikation
16: **Püschel:** Tote schweigen nicht: der Hamburger Weg
17: **Francois-Kettner:** Schutz vulnerabler Menschen bei Pflegebedürftigkeit
18: **Pantel:** Risikogruppen schützen – aber wie?
19: **Lindner:** Grundrechte und Verhältnismäßigkeit: Kritik und Desiderate
20: **Radbruch:** Immun durch die Pandemie
21: **Scheuch:** Aerosole: das ignorierte Problem
22: **Rothenberger:** Recht auf Infektionsschutz vs. Pflicht zum Infektionsschutz
23: **Weckwerth:** Denkstil und Denkkollektiv
24: **Pürner:** Notwendigkeit und Stand der Aufarbeitung
25: **Schrappe:** Corona-Krise noch nicht bewältigt

All comments in this commentary series, which ended with episode 25 and was curated by Prof Schrappe and Prof Roski, can be found under this link:
https://www.monitor-versorgungsforschung.de/cooperations/serie-kr/
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Prof Schrappe deserves special thanks for his tireless and voluntary work.