Extract from Streifzüge at Context XXI

(http://contextxxi.org/the-corona-complex.html)

extracted on: 29 March 2024
Date of this contribution: October 2020

The Corona-Complex

MARIANNE GRONEMEYER

Several attempts to get myself to write – in the midst of the babble of voices that surrounded me from morning to night in ‚Corona times' — quickly came to a standstill. My project could not withstand the almost hourly fluctuations in my mood and the discouraging volatility of ‚valid' insights. So here is a new attempt to do what I promised Franz Schandl – perhaps a little prematurely – because the more information that flies around my ears every day, the less I know where my head is and what my heart is beating for. So all I can really do is document my confusion. In this situation, Ivan Illich would have exhorted us to take care of our eyes and ears, to guard the senses in order to resist the ‚disappearance of reality' that threatens us. So we should stop paying attention to the barrage of news and instead gather around the hospitable table for convivial conversation — to get to the bottom of things and find a ground on which we can stand and exist. But on the one hand, ‚gathering' has become punishable, and on the other hand, there has been the seductive, if deceptive, hope that in this great confusion of the news flood, there would emerge a redemptive message that would put an end to this spook.

But how does it work: stop habits whose harmfulness one has recognized or at least suspected? By just letting them go? It's not that easy. Quitting is a fine art. In order to be able to stop something – in the sense of breaking up, ending (finire), one has to listen to something, in the sense of listening carefully, ‚be all ears' (audire). So one should be trying to listen after all? Yes, but not to get answers, to raise questions. The sphere of the unknown must not be impoverished by the ever growing terrain of knowledge. wrote Elias Canetti. For each answer a question must sprout that previously slept unseen. And we really have no lack of ignorance. The medical experts want to prove the trustworthiness of their statements precisely by freely confessing to their ignorance, which lies in the nature of the matter, the unknown virus.

However, it's not the cheap, permitted questions that are at issue, but the well-kept secrets of our social functioning. This search for clues does not lead to the dark field of hidden masterminds with world power fantasies, but into the bright daylight of modern certainties. In the ‚hidden certainties' (Canetti), the secret driving forces are almost undetectable because nobody is looking for them. What we have taken for granted has been reliably removed from what is worth exploring, and that's what matters. Conspiracy theories are far too weak to point the way to the important questions of the present and to the hiding places of the modern certainties.

So let's prick up our ears and listen into the babble of voices! Then a few basic motifs gradually emerge from the cacophony, which – persistently repeated – set the tone. There is constant talk of a return to normality, which everyone longs for, like paradise lost. At the same time, however, there is a suspicion that after the crisis things will never be the way they were. Current analysis interprets what is happening as a three-stage process: there is a before – normality. Then an „invisible external enemy", the virus, broke into normality, wreaked havoc and caused a temporary state of emergency. And then the aftermath will come – the so-called 'new normality'. Now the split arrives, and not only from person to person, or between friend and enemy. The conflict runs right through my person: ‚two souls, alas, in my bosom, one of which wants to separate from the other'; the one which hopes it will be as comfortable as before, and the other which fears nothing so much as that everything will stay the same and a great opportunity for radical change will be wasted. Even worse is the fear that the state of emergency, with all its restrictions on freedom and its other excesses, could become a cherished habit, as long as the security promised along with it does not waver.

This inner conflict opens a door to a different reading of what is happening: the virus is not the *cause* of the crisis, but only lets the crisis *show itself*. In this reading, the normality of the before was no normality at all. For a long time there was already a crisis, the peculiar feature of which was that we were spared having to deal with it. For decades, the crisis in which we are deeply involved in our way of life has been prevented from becoming acute. Our social arrangements were all aimed specifically at extending the crisis to a permanent crisis and repeatedly postponing its outbreak through accommodation and supportive measures. It's not impossible that this will work again this time, but with what consequences?

The 'normality' has become dubious in this reading, therefore questionable. Which concept of normality do we actu-

ally use in our modern interpretations of the world? What is considered normal has changed fundamentally in the course of my life story. In the past, the notion of normality grew out of people's daily activities, the experiences they had, agreements on how to interpret these experiences, the recurring rhythms of nature and the festivals and rituals that symbolically structured the year. Things had their time. There was no normality. Normalities varied from place to place. Today, decree creates normality. A legitimated caste of experts has the power to set standards in their respective areas of responsibility; standards that determine what should be considered normal, what is merely a tolerable deviation, and which deviations go beyond the scope of the normal so that they have to be suppressed or treated. I call this power of the experts ‚diagnostic' and it is more profound than the power of the rich. Standards inevitably lead to the world of numbers, measurement outputs and calculations; what cannot be measured cannot be standardized.

Standards are an unbeatable instrument of equivalence/homogeneity, making it possible to for everything to be comparable and thus ‚equally valid' in the double sense. They teach us to systematically refrain from uniqueness and to degrade human beings as being merely carriers of features. What happens to us in ‚corona times' is an unprecedented lesson in the terms of standardization: incarnate people are assembled into the characteristics by which they are defined. For example, I must learn that because of my 79 years I am a member of a „risk group". And that's the only relevant thing about me in the public debate. My 79 years of experience? Irrelevant. My story, my desires, aspirations, dreams, failures, my preferences, the driving forces, fears, hopes, what I think, suffer, learn to say, what I seek, what I stand for, what I insist on, my talents, my failures and weaknesses? All irrelevant. Only my membership in the "risk category between 70 and 79 years old" is relevant and makes me suitable as a statistic. I did not choose this ‚group', which I am stuffed into without being asked, I did not join it, did not found it, do not know anyone from it – because it is foreign for me to consider my peers as a risk group. I experience this attribution in its barbaric reductionism as an outrageous imposition and emphatically resign my membership. Because, according to the logic of the corona ethics, I am automatically identified as a defective being in need of care, one unable to defend itself from the protection that is now aggressively prescribed as an act of caring. And I should learn to appreciate that as a win-win situation, from which the risk of infecting and the risk of infection benefit equally.

We can observe a new „certainty in statu nascendi" with the corona proceedings. The notion is that physical – that is, real – reality can be reproduced infinitely more precisely by dizzying number constructions, mathematical examples and statistics, by column diagrams and curves — than our senses can take it in, than our looking and astonishment and our experience can ever grasp. It's not about human destinies, it's about "flattening" a curve that supposedly determines being or not being. The measured world, not the created one, is considered real. The measurement of the world leads to the presumptuousness of the scientific world-interpreter. The belief in the world represented by numbers has gradually taken hold of us in the digital age and is about to petrify into becoming a totalitarian, unquestionable matter of course. Perhaps the conflict that we can still experience at this moment is one of the few remaining chances to oppose this indoctrination, by thinking and feeling.

My fundamental concern is this loss of reality in the paid-up world; the world of limit-determinants hatched by circles of experts who cannot tell us anything about the good life, but teach us what is still allowable before our livelihoods collapse. In all policy areas, limit-determinants set what should or should not be allowed. And politics has long since degenerated into haggling and trade-offs, in school, where it is about the allocation of career opportunities, as well as in health care, and at climate conferences and now in the corona crisis, where it is all about survival.

My *confusion* and irritation arises, however, from the nature and quality of the figures that are given to us in the official statements to justify the restrictions on freedom imposed on us. I am admittedly a dyslexic in statistical matters, but the numbers with which we are ‚informed' on a daily basis are so lacking in seriousness that they make unreasonable demands on even ordinary people. I feel I'm being sold a bill of goods. We are bombarded with naked numbers that are not related to anything and are therefore completely meaningless, although they are assumed to be of existential importance. The deaths are counted worldwide every day, but in such a way that, for example, the absolute death rates of China and Austria are presented to me in ranking lists, as if it were irrelevant to my judgment that they are related to a 9 million population in one case and a billion population in the other case. Let alone that I might learn something about how many people normally die in Austria and China in the corresponding period. Or: The new infections are meticulously numbered down to the individual person (e.g. today May 16, 2020 for Germany: 174,478) although we are assured that we do not know anything about the actual number of infections. Why is accuracy insinuated when there is nothing but fog? I simply cannot imagine that such blatant violations of the simplest basic statistical rules will be overlooked by the decision-makers. But why are we (those affected by decisions) being fed such outrageous nonsense? In fact, these meaningless numbers have a remarkable effect: the thousand contextless dead teach people fear, and they should. There was talk of shock therapy, shamelessly. It aimed to quickly and reliably induce people to make profound changes in their behavior while maintaining the appearance of voluntariness. It is the opposite of education. I call it manipulation, and I don't even say that there cannot be dangerous situations where manipulation is the last resort to averting the danger. But I see my hypothesis confirmed in that the virus does not create an unprecedented new situation, but only brings to light what we have long been accustomed to, below the threshold of our perception, caught in the delusion of freedom.

How much conditioning did we already get, to adapt ourselves to "alternative" system requirements, so we could be educated so drastically to the ways of the

pandemic? We had already come a long way in self-education and self-monitoring, even before the crisis. We live in a thoroughly educated society in which, in times of crisis, the tools of black pedagogy, which spread fear and terror with threatening gestures, can be used for the purpose of improving people. Dark pedagogy is currently outstripping the much friendlier light pedagogy, which dominates in consumerist times and focuses on seduction, temptation and the stimulation of needs. Overall, however, we are very well positioned for this double strategy.

Today's human being tries "to create the world in his own image, to create a completely human-made environment. He then discovers that he can only do this under one condition: by constantly redesigning himself to adapt. We now have to realize that (at the same time) the person is at stake," wrote Ivan Illich back in 1971. Modern educational institutions are increasingly serving this program of adaptation, which is mistaken for education. Homo educandus, the deficient being in need of shaping, who believed himself to be sovereign, is now being freed from his pseudo-autonomy. And like any crisis and every bad awakening, it can turn out for better and for worse.

There is a certain irony in the fact that, while the ‚de-schooling' of schoolchildren and university students is put in place everywhere, and the formal school reveals its dispensability in a way which that was not considered possible, the whole of society experiences its own disenfranchisement. Although I am still wondering how calmly and without grumbling the rapid transition from democratic 'normal state' to the prescribed state of emergency took place, I understand how well we were prepared for it long ago. It was the good sound of two sentences to which initially got almost everyone concerned to readily consent to this imposition. One reads „health has priority" and the other second: „it is about saving lives".

But what kind of ‚health' is it that is given priority over everything else in the current crisis? The religious philosopher Raimundo Pannikkar distinguishes the eastern concept of health from that of the western culture (he was at home in both cultures because he had a Spanish mother and an Indian father). In the western culture health is defined as the ability to work, in the eastern culture, one is considered healthy who can be happy. I am afraid that ‚health', which is now a priority, has nothing to do with joy and not even work. It has hardly any relation to the state of mind which actual people have to endure or to bear well. It is assessed through objective findings that are measured and, depending on the measurement or test result, declared to be significant or insignificant by those whose profession it is to understand something about it. For example, someone can feel healthy and is still declared ill, without symptoms. And so it could happen that in December 2017, 30 million Americans went to bed healthy and – still in the same condition – woke up sick, because the normal blood pressure levels had been lowered overnight. (Incidentally, this sudden mass disease was not considered an epidemic.)

And the lifesaving? What kind of a life is this top priority to save? „Lifesaving", I think first of all of the SOS calls from people who are in distress at sea, the knocking signals of people who have been buried alive, accident and catastrophe victims who need help. I think with shame, admiration and gratitude of people who in extreme cases, risk their own lives to save the lives of others. In fact, I can hardly believe that there are always some who do that. There have been hundreds of such people in the regions particularly affected by Corona disease and many have died, others worked to the point of exhaustion to help, often without being able to help and often under miserable conditions. But when the sentence surfaces almost fanfare-like in the confusion of voices in the crisis, it has a completely different meaning. It is a programmatic declaration of war against death, the most threatening adversary of life. „There is only one good death, the defeated one," states Jean Baudrillard. „It should be possible for everyone to reach the limit of their biological capital and enjoy their life" to the end „without violence. As if everyone had their little scheme of a formal life, their 'normal life expectancy' and a ‚life contract' in their pocket."

The conquest of death is the credo of the world improvers, who are working feverishly to create the 'second' man--made 'nature', which will be superior to the ‚first' in every respect and in which, ultimately, there should be nothing that cannot be done that is not done by humans, neither life nor death. But: there is no life around which everything revolves. There are only living beings, be they plants, humans or animals. Life is a social construct, a phantom (I. Illich), but one that "we now take so for granted that we don't dare to seriously question it." Despite its unreality, life has a peculiar dual nature. It is said to be precious, endangered, scarce but of extreme importance, therefore worth protecting and in need of protection, a sparse something that must be taken care of, checked and constantly monitored by concerned experts, insofar as it is an object, a matter of concern. On the other hand, it is presented as a powerful subject, as the ultimate instance, which decides with great authority about right and wrong, superior and subordinate, being or not being, even about good and evil. This subject-object hermaphrodite is the ideal artificial figure to justify the transformation of our living environment into a „technogenic milieu", as Ivan Illich aptly called this second nature. The idolized life is enthroned as a suffering and almighty substitute for God, then followed by the technical production of human replacement by the robot. So we have to grasp that under the regime of life, life and death are at stake, the art of living (ars vivendi) and the art of dying (ars moriendi).

Death and life belong together like day and night, one condition requires the other and vice versa. The fight against death to save life puts them in an irreconcilable contrast. However: „If you split being in the middle, if you want to grab one without the other, if you stick to the good and not also the bad … then the dissociated evil impulse (evil now in a double sense) returns. .. to penetrate the good … and to make it what it is itself. The defeated death makes the victorious life atrophy into a single death avoidance procedure."

Facit: The driving forces of modernity are enormously strengthened by this crisis in their respective monopoly claim: only scientific knowledge is trusted to

correctly interpret the situation. Everything that is not certified by science is referred to the realm of superstition. Only technical remedies were considered to deal with the crisis; everything else that could have been healing was defamed as superstitious nonsense. Only bureaucratic procedures seemed to be suitable for regulating unregulated conditions. But the economy with its world monopoly of distribution is pretty ragged. It was considered the primus inter pares in the quartet of science, technology, bureaucracy, and economics. Now we see its supremacy waver in favor of the science-and-technology complex. That is entirely in the logic of a man-made second nature, which ultimately also abolishes man himself.

But the crisis would not be a crisis if everything could not turn out surprisingly different.

Marianne Gronemeyer: Geboren 1941. Lehrerin, bis 2006 Professorin für Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften an der FH Wiesbaden. Zuletzt u.a.: *Genug ist genug. Über die Kunst des Aufhörens* (2008).

License of this contribution
Gemeinfrei
Gemeinfrei