

Pixelated Truth: Covid-19 and the Battle for Reason

Article by Reinhard Olschanski

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The Coronavirus pandemic has been a battleground over reason, as evidenced by anti-lockdown protests and the worries around vaccines. While dominated by the far right, movements against government measures have brought together people from across the political spectrum, leading some conservative commentators to argue that ecological thinking, with its nuanced understanding of science and technology, might have even helped seed them. In this long read, philosopher Reinhard Olschanski rebuffs these claims, arguing that the same irrationality that is behind denial of Corona is driving the zombie industrialism pushing our planet to the brink. As part of the Enlightenment tradition, ecological thinking is about recognising crises and overcoming them.

Covid-19, or the Coronavirus, is a natural disaster. It reminds people that they are natural beings and remain bound to nature. It reminds them how much this relationship with nature has been suppressed and forgotten. Science and technology have considerably expanded our freedom within and from nature. But they have also ultimately resulted in an obliviousness to nature in how the world is perceived, not only by an obsolete industrialism but also by the political and social system. With the pandemic, however, people now see themselves forcibly returned to what might be called a Socratic state: dependent on nature and on a political system that takes this dependence into account, dependent also on the insights of science, and recognisant of the limits of our knowledge and capabilities.

The decisions that policymakers are taking at present are as far-reaching as they could possibly be. In the pandemic, they extend to massive restrictions on civil liberties and thus to the core values of democracy. They are precarious choices between uncomfortable alternatives: a strict lockdown? The Swedish model of voluntary self-imposed restrictions – which proved insufficient? Or flirting with herd immunity – which was how Boris Johnson gambled away crucial days in Britain? One thing is clear: deafness to the warnings of science leads straight to disaster. But even a purely technocratic or scientific approach to politics is not sufficient under conditions of limited predictability. The uncertain knowledge base is anything but a comfortable foundation upon which responsible politicians can take action.

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Researchers are already studying the results of the measures that were taken, paying particular attention to those countries that initially got off relatively lightly. The interim results show that the relative successes were not just

down to chance but were also the result of good interaction between politics and science – in spite or even because of the uncertain facts and knowledge base. It remains important to learn quickly from the experience of other countries and continually review and evaluate the situation – driving carefully with one’s eyes wide open, constantly adapting the protection guidelines to the changing conditions. And, of course, taking appropriate and consistent action – the opposite of too little, too late. However, the findings with regard to the measures taken also provide good grounds for humility in our ongoing handling of Corona as the lethal resurgence in infection rates in autumn and winter 2020 shows only too clearly.

“Corona critique”

In Germany, the measures were supported by the vast majority of citizens. Over 80 per cent were in agreement with what was happening, or would have liked to see even stricter measures. Only a little over 10 per cent of the population thought the measures went too far. One might think that this represents a remarkable degree of unanimity in a democracy, and that people just have to live with the fact that a few might see things differently. But is that a sufficient answer? That kind of answer is not far-fetched. After all, the right-wing populist

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) currently polls at around 10 per cent of the votes and was happy to join the camp of the “Corona critics”. To do so, it had to rein in its authoritarian reflex, always its first response, at least as far as appearances were concerned. This is because in the beginning it demanded even stricter Corona measures, but then quickly turned 180 degrees in order to project itself as the spearhead of a supposed battle for freedom against the Corona restrictions and the “enemies of liberty”.

Many right-wing extremists, a group well represented in the AfD, stuck to this line and cast themselves as the champions of liberal freedoms. However, they understood this to mean a refusal to wear masks, revealing a threadbare understanding of freedom. This “battle for freedom” was based on a purely self-referential idea of freedom, a freedom of the ego without regard to social costs. In many classics of liberal thought, such an understanding would have been defined as arbitrariness. The freedom to endanger others as one pleases is not a normatively responsible principle. It means a regression to might is right.

Among the Corona critics were the self-proclaimed *Reichsbürger* (“citizens of the Reich”). This group which does not recognise the existence of the Federal Republic and instead cultivates the myth of a continuing German Reich, untouched by the achievements of liberal democracy. Their attempt, during an anti-Corona demonstration at the end of August, to symbolically storm the Reichstag in Berlin, the seat of the German Bundestag, the democratically elected legislature, attracted much media attention. However, the idea that “Corona critique” is limited to the far right is contradicted by the experience of many people in Germany. Many people who consider themselves part of a social-liberal and cosmopolitan-ecological camp witnessed how people from their wider circle of acquaintances mentally checked out and joined in propounding more or less openly anti-scientific conspiracy theories. On social media and in personal conversations, people spread fantastical conspiracies started by YouTubers, by anti-vaxxers, or by some obscure vegan cook, pop musician or former radio announcer. At the demonstrations, they formed a colourful blue-brown motley crew with populists and neo-Nazis – a political colour combination not seen before.

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This in turn prompted the right-wing conservative media to diagnose the emergence of a strain of “irrationalism”

supposedly sown by naïve do-gooders, multiculturalists, and ecologists. Disregarding for a moment the fact that the media putting forward this argument have not always shown themselves the most reliable friends of the Enlightenment knowledge and reason, what is to be made of such a thesis? Is this accusation of irrationalism anything more than just a rehash of the old, anti-liberal and anti-ecological diatribes of the 1980s and 1990s? Is there a spark of truth in it? Does the “Corona critique” reveal the flipside of an originally progressive and emancipatory body of thought – a slumbering reactionary subsoil? Are these the sparks that could set off an irrationalist conflagration in the centre of society? Or are the flames of irrationalism emanating from the right wing now moving closer to the liberal-ecological mainstream?

Ecology and the Enlightenment

The vast majority of people in the political centre ground in Germany – and also those in the centre-left, including ecologists and the Green Party – are fundamentally committed to the modern understanding of science. It is an understanding which, in contrast to that of the medieval period, does not recognise statements that cannot be contested. All claims to scientific validity must be subject to review by a scientific community. Claims to validity in modern science are not hard currency that can be immediately banked. They are only verified or falsified via processes of criticism and counter-criticism. Even then, subsequent corrections are always possible, as are paradigm shifts, which involve extensive specifications and limitations of the applicability of scientific statements initially regarded as valid. Indeed, the Greens and the ecology movement are particularly aware of the possibility of such paradigm shifts because the ecological paradigm they promulgate was itself initially only a minority opinion. The knowledge that science can be wrong and that technology can cause significant harm has been absorbed by the vast majority of ecologically-minded people, together with a scepticism towards technocratic politics that places a blind faith in science.

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The ecological perspective implies a deeper insight into the manifold and by no means exclusively positive and reasonable consequences of the Enlightenment process of rationalisation and disenchantment of the world. In their influential text *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno saw that the rule of an instrumentally truncated rationality contains within itself new varieties of irrationalism and undreamt-of potential for destruction. And also new forms of manipulation, mystification, suppression and technocratic rule, and even the possibility of fascism. Only with ecological understanding does this observation reaches its conclusion. For unbridled instrumental rationality not only creates weapons with the potential to destroy the world. Nor is its pollution of the environment merely an incidental side-effect. No, the ecological crises of today, the unbridled CO₂ emissions and the deforestation of the rainforests that are among the causes of the climate crisis, or the use of pesticides and the homogenisation and sealing over of landscapes leading to the extinction of species, show how instrumental rationality, in the form of an industrial system that destroys nature, undermines the ecological foundations of human life, driven as it is by an internal logic which is oblivious to nature. This is the core message of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. With the pandemic, reality has exceeded its authors’ worst fears.

The potential for destruction visible in climate change and species extinction is so massive that an ecological critique of instrumental reason cannot be limited to the sending of intellectual messages in a bottle to future generations – as Adorno and Horkheimer still thought. Rather, it is first and foremost a matter of securing the

essential foundations for life for future generations. The need to act is so urgent that we cannot allow ourselves to be satisfied with a heightened sensitivity to what is wrong with instrumentally rationalised modernity and its cultural-industrial delusions. A common enterprise is needed, action on a global scale. This is exactly the kind of politics that the ecological critique seeks to put into action today. Such a critique must make clear that nature is not a block of dead matter that can be handed over unconditionally for industrial exploitation. A deeper engagement with the dialectic of the history of the modern Enlightenment reveals ecologism itself as an extension and practical-critical updating of Enlightenment.

Because ecologism is an agent of such an expanded Enlightenment, it also entails an awareness that the irrationality of our times does not originate in its critique of the old industrialism – as is still claimed – but that this irrationality is to be found where man-made climate change is still denied and the unchecked use of pesticides, the progressive landscapes and crazy programmes of deforestation and slash-and-burn agriculture are causing the greatest extinction of species since the end of the dinosaurs.

The way science and technology are understood in political ecology is not irrational, but different from the old, ecology-oblivious industrialism, and different in its adherence to reason. It stands for an ecologically responsible relationship between humans and nature. However, it is also different from the old industrialism in that it has left the path of unilateral technological determinism, according to which the development of science and technology would always follow a linear and more or less unalterable path – a path that everyone would have to follow. Instead, an alternative, ecological way of thinking leads to the development of alternative technologies, such as the alternative energy system, based on renewable energy sources, which is currently conquering the world. It puts on the agenda the project of a comprehensive transformation of the economy on the basis of ecologically responsible technologies.

Zombie industrialism and the re-enchantment of the world

Ecological thinking reflects science and technology from a critical angle. It does so from the perspective of ecological Enlightenment, which is a dual one. Its critique of technology is directed against an unscientific, almost religious veneration of science and technology as “the saviours of humankind” that suppresses all the dangers that can lie within them. On the other hand, its critique does not lead to a fundamental hostility towards science and technology or even to a reinterpretation of Corona as a man-made conspiracy rather than a natural catastrophe. This is where it differs profoundly from the kind of irrationalism that is visible in the “Corona critique”. And when the ecological critical perspective reveals that the natural context and processes that form the basis of human life are infinitely more complex than the image of nature that underlies the industrial system, then it neither sinks into melancholy because of the aporias of modernity, nor sets out on the path towards a re-enchantment of the world. It has no need to conjure up evil wizards or a universal conspiracy of the political and economic elites to pursue its practical objectives.

At the same time, it has to acknowledge that a further and even more acute loss of rationality can currently be observed on the part of the old instrumental reason, which has long since been disavowed by its own logic. This loss of rationality no longer consists of a mere passive blindness to the consequences of one’s own actions. It is turning instead into active repression and the formation of a large-scale anti-ecological ideology. The Trumps and Bolsonaros of this world can only maintain the old system at the price of obvious untruths and a veritable zombie industrialism, an industrialism which has to disregard not just some marginal collateral damage but facts and evidence attested by science and visible to all. It has long since adopted the stance of erratic and argumentation-free denial with which Trump, for example, rejects the scientifically proven connections between climate change and the devastating forest fires in California: “I don’t think science knows.”

Zombie industrialism is in league with other anti-scientific tendencies. For example, with religious right-wingers

and evangelicals who reject modern science and Enlightenment by having recourse to medieval forms of thought. They want to wind back the scientific knowledge of modernity using a revival of creationism and a biblical apocalypticism. They believe the crisis of our times is based not on man-made facts such as climate change, but on an Armageddon long since decided upon by God's decree and now expected very soon. Religious fundamentalisms have as their goal a magical-religious re-enchantment of the world.

But we are also seeing secular forms of magical-mythical thinking. Including in the blame games of a supposed Corona conspiracy. Conspiracy myths of various forms are making the rounds today. For example, governments are supposedly using chemtrails to sedate and poison their populations. And Corona is said to be a trick being used by Bill Gates to implant the entire world population with microchips. Paranoid thinking is not only being used to identify enemies, but to weave complex stories intended to provide a coherent, underlying narrative for a diffuse course of global events perceived as threatening. In QAnon, this even takes the form of a digital paper chase. The followers of Q, supposedly a high-ranking official from the departing US President's entourage, receive messages in cryptic Internet posts about the superhero Trump and his battle against the Deep State and a cabal of child molesters and US Democrats. Q encourages his followers to decipher and elaborate the messages like detectives so that they can contribute to the screenplay of the mythical battle between good and evil allegedly underway. A third of Trump's followers are said to believe in this story, which follows the pattern of superhero comics.

Pixelating truth

The breeding ground for this kind of paper chase is not just an overflowing paranoid imagination. In many countries, elites have contributed to the erosion of trust through lobbying, divisive politics and some degree of political arrogance. There are many other reasons, not least the erosion of the governability of nation states through the processes of globalisation. But deep upheavals in the media landscape and political communication also play a role. This can be seen in a pixelation of truth that is increasingly becoming a defining feature of the epoch. Reality appears here as if on a low-resolution screen when you are sitting too close and have to create a coherent picture out of scattered pixels. In contrast to science or detective work, which also deduce larger connections from individual clues, the search for evidence here does not proceed in all directions and does not focus equally on the verification or falsification of assumptions, but seeks only the confirmation of a pre-existing and usually unfounded and unsubstantiated suspicion. Since the links between the individual traces and clues are missing, "proof" for the Q-detectives follows the pattern of magical analogies familiar from archaic thinking: like causes like. And opposites – i.e. the pre-existing poles of good and evil in the world – are in conflict. The tracking instincts of the conspiracy mystagogues are not guided by thought processes that are rational-critical, but magical-intuitive. Exculpatory evidence that conflicts with magical intuition is only allowed for the sake of appearance. It serves at best as a fig leaf to conceal the underlying pre-judgement. And even those under suspicion can do no more than implicate themselves ever further. So Hillary Clinton and the performer Marina Abramović look like witches in a show trial – battered by a profound hatred and malice that reveals itself more and more with every word and gesture. However, where "evidence" can subsequently be subjected to fact-checking – as in the case of the supposed miracle drug adenoChrome, which Trump's opponents are supposed to siphon off from the children they have kidnapped – it quickly collapses.

Infodemic

Yet we are not only confronted with the magical-intuitive construction of the world from a pixelated picture surface, but also with a more profound dereliction of reason preceding it. This arises not least through a splitting and disintegration of shared public discourse. And it concludes in a kind of pandemic of the mind – an "infodemic" created not least by flooding the public sphere with bullshit. Bullshit requires – as Harry G. Frankfurt demonstrated – less skill than lying, because unlike lying it does not seek to plant itself quietly into a shared horizon of truth on a

permanent basis. The “bullshitter” bends the facts and contexts fairly crudely and according to immediate needs and then quickly forgets what was said and claimed. The point is for the trickster to opportunistically bullshit his or her way through on a wave of hot air. Likewise the twittering away of truth through countless tweets, filling the air of evanescent public attention like colourful balloons, only to disappear quickly into nowhere leaving no time for fact-checking, deeper investigation, or debate.

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The all-powerful network of delusion that Horkheimer and Adorno thought to discern in a 1940s US entertainment industry dominated by Hollywood and radio shows, and even in the jazz music of their day, now seems quite harmless in comparison. In fact, it is only today, in the pixelated and mis-tweeted public sphere of our days, that such a concerted delusion can be found – in a mediated reality in which everything dissolves into scattered pixels, which in turn are then handed over to a magical-intuitive constructivism that reassembles it as it pleases. Here, too, Horkheimer and Adorno – as with the ecological question – only described the initial conditions and symptoms of something that would eventually grow much larger and more serious than the original diagnosis.

For a new Enlightenment

There is good reason to fear that even today we cannot yet see the final stages of this development. What we are seeing in many Western countries is the destruction of a common, a shared public sphere, wherein debate functions as a rational, structural element of liberal-democratic self-governance. Instead, politician-clowns like Trump and Johnson – and before them Berlusconi and Sarkozy – occupy the stage. They are the manifestation of a process which they are themselves simultaneously intensifying. Each in their own way, they are using the opportunities for power that arise during the current upheavals – regardless of the fact that they are destroying not only rationality and norms of truth, but also parts of the political system and of the fourth estate, the independent media. In consequence, media quality standards which focus on the critical examination of factual statements and arguments, and thereby also counteract the formation of media bubbles and the tribalisation of the public sphere, are pushed into the background.

It was Hannah Arendt who pointed out that the real enemies of democracy are not those who simply tell lies, but those who simultaneously destroy the factual basis and the collectively acknowledged reality – that is, the reality in which we can talk about problems in a common language. Roger Berkowitz of New York’s Hannah Arendt Centre is right when he describes the long-term danger posed by politics of the kind pursued by Trump: “The danger we face is Trump’s total indifference to reality and the meaning of words. He may say something today and then say something completely different tomorrow, while at the same time denying what he said yesterday. This creates the risk of a cynical attitude towards public discourse and a shared public sphere. It is quite possible that after Trump someone much worse than Trump will appear.”

After Sarkozy and Berlusconi, the centre-right in France and Italy is either in serious decline or has disappeared from the picture altogether. Right-wing extremists and fascists have taken over the space previously occupied by the bourgeois right. And the Conservatives in Great Britain and the USA are no longer recognisable either. The remaining liberal public is not paying enough attention to this epochal crisis of the traditional centre-right of the spectrum, even though – in terms of democratic politics – it is this part of the spectrum which ought to serve as a crucial bulwark against anti-democratic right-wing populism and extremism.

The two-fold dereliction of reason with which we are confronted today, namely the deliberate erosion of the norms of communicative rationality and the refusal and rejection of ecological reason in our dealings with nature, holds the potential for a new totalitarianism that would replace the bullshit and multiple untruths of the politician-clowns with one single great and overpowering untruth. What is needed is a new Enlightenment that recognises these dangers and counters them effectively – not least with a well-developed sense of where the democratically important borderline runs between the centre-right and right-wing extremism.



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