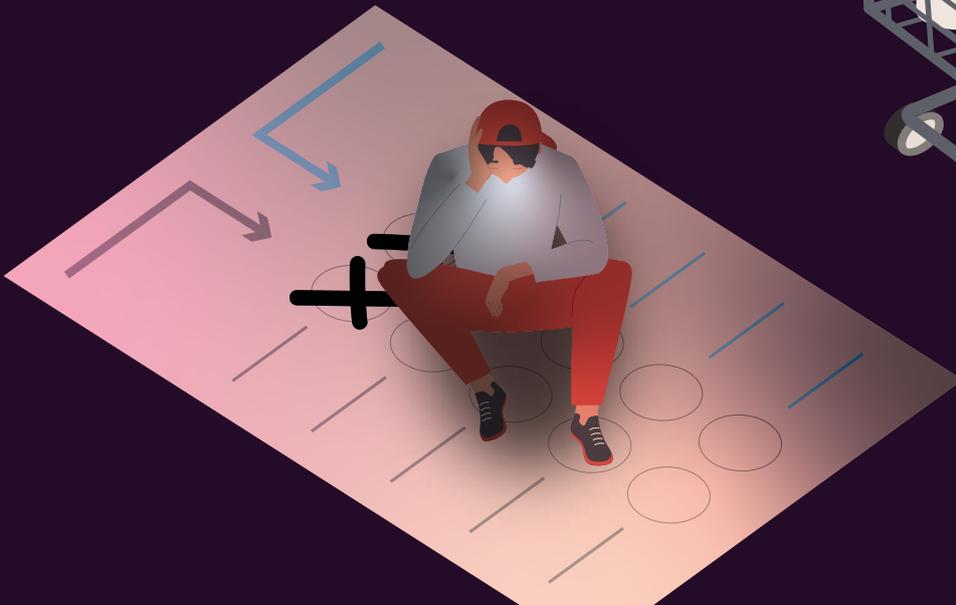


CORONAVIRUS AS MAGNIFIER



Lockdown of democracy

The pandemic
further afflicts an already
weakened patient

By *Stephan Lessenich*

It is no secret that democracy is not in the best shape, whether as a political form of government or as a social way of life. Particularly in Germany, acceptance of democratic processes and relationships depends on their output – i.e. “what comes out at the end”, as a former German Chancellor used to say in a memorably down-to-earth style. And it is precisely this output that shows signs of weakness. “Politics,” as people like to say, do not deliver, and have not for quite some time now. A socio-political system, however, that lives off its formal and material ability to perform, but which cannot reliably deliver the desired results, has a problem – possibly even an existential one.

The so-called “coronavirus crisis” – only the latest in a series of shocks to democracy over the past years – has mercilessly demonstrated the performance limits of democratic capitalism in its post-industrial guise. And even if Germany’s nimbus as the world champion in thoroughness, which it has diligently nurtured itself, has already been thoroughly shattered – when it comes to delegitimising democracy, the country is proving to be extremely effective.

This is quite obvious at the formal level of political procedures: The steering ability or rather inability of the German multi-level system of political decision-making is remarkable. The supposedly collective crisis management of the federal and state governments is an impressive indictment of the much-praised federalism – because it is not a collective system at all. Federalism has gone from being the constitutionally intended protective wall against hierarchical, authoritarian “rule from above” to an institutional guarantor of organised irresponsibility. This is not only due to the “joint-decision trap” well known to political scientists, i.e. the fact that the founding fathers wanted the executive powers at the various territorial levels to keep each other in check and ultimately let the smaller unit regulate what it can regulate most appropriately. What the designers of post-

war federalism had not reckoned with, however, was the executive particularism that has by now taken on almost identitarian features, even in the case of political artefacts such as (please forgive me!) “Rhineland-Palatinate” or “Saxony-Anhalt”. And they probably reckoned even less with the largely unrestrained competition for prestige that is not only driven by political structures but also by the unleashed personality

structures of politicians posing as state princes who command the immediate closure of DIY stores (flower shops, nail salons, etc.) in the truest sense of a fool’s decree, only to declare their reopening the very next day. And all the while, the parliaments remain silent.

The fact that the German federal-state system can be, and in fact is, a toxic concoction in times of the pandemic makes it seem inappropriate to adopt an ironic tone here. If we understand democracy not only as a system of politically mediated norm-setting but also as a political structure that enables the general and equal participation of citizens in society’s functional and benefit systems, it becomes all the clearer what is wrong with actually existing democracy. Because in this regard its output is nothing short of scandalous. COVID-19 also makes this more obvious than ever: The probability of infection, the risk of severe disease, the economic impact of the pandemic and of the political measures meant to contain it are all profoundly socially structured in our democratic society.

In other words: They are distributed unequally. One year of “coronavirus crisis” brings the iron laws of the democratic-capitalist welfare state, particularly in its German version, into consciousness: Those who are poor live shorter lives, have a demonstrably lower “healthy life expectancy”, fewer educational opportunities and a high risk of “bequeathing” their social position to the next family generation, which, for its part, is not just economically disadvantaged from birth, but socially and in fact vitally

What is the pandemic doing to our society? How is the coronavirus affecting democracy? Affecting the relationship between the generations and degradation of the environment? The articles in this chapter get to the bottom of these and other questions.

Can democracy still be saved?
For that to happen, the lockdown on democratic practices and utopian ideas would have to be lifted as soon as possible, says Stephan Lessenich.



deprived as well. However, this is not merely a socio-statistical fact that could possibly be blamed, as behavioural economics is eager to do, on those affected. No: It is a systemic problem of the systematically unequal guarantee of life chances (in the literal sense) and thus truly a political-democratic scandal.

Faced with the social constellation of an output crisis in democratic welfare capitalism, it is not only confused minds or fascist manipulators but possibly also segments of the “middle classes” so often invoked as an anchor of social stability who are turning their backs on “politics” – which ultimately means nothing else than that they are turning their backs on the democratic idea of a self-governing society. The intentionally or unintentionally anti-democratic practices that are rampant in this process of turning away from politics range from apathy and distancing to aggression and destructive impulses. While some think that those in power have nothing more to say to them and do not want to hear anything from them, others are in a position to simply carry on with their individual, family or milieu-exclusive thing. For some, this might mean protesting at demonstrations against the coronavirus, for others flying abroad at the first opportunity, for others yet home-schooling their already privileged offspring, and finally there are those who just keep trying to make ends meet. And they are all united in their inner farewell to democracy as both a political system and a form of social life.

What could be done to counter this? Venture more output? The traditional means of material and economic stabilisation from the supposedly “golden age” of democracy back in the 1970s (or was it the 1960s?) will not be available in the future, or at least only at the price of devastating socio-ecological effects here and – for the time being – especially elsewhere. If the traditional ideology of “a lot helps a lot” of democratic output is out of the question today, then what is needed from now on is not *more* but a *different* output: a truly fundamental reform of political institutions on the formal side, a massive redistribution of socioeconomic resources in favour of the classes with few opportunities on the material side.

Above all, however, what is needed, and what is in fact a structural prerequisite for a different *output* of democracy, is firstly more and secondly a changed democratic *input*. This is by no means just a matter of increasing the voter turnout of the “lower classes,” i.e. about shaking, or even better breaking, the electoral and thus also discursive dominance of the (upper) middle classes – although this is also important. But it is also about other forms of political participation and co-determination, about demo-

cratising democracy. The idea of institutionalising a “consultative body” as a fourth or fifth power (depending on how it is counted) points in this direction, as does the idea of social transformation councils that think globally and act locally and that, for example, address the question of how the risk of a permanent pandemic state can be reduced by radically changing our ways of interacting with nature.

Whatever name you may want to give to the new organisational forms of a democratised democracy, the political search for them sends a message to society that things cannot go on as they are now. To borrow from Erich Kästner (1932), there is no way this can keep going if it keeps going like this. Ending the curfew for democratic practices and utopian ideas: This is the most urgent political issue in the times of the pandemic. ●



The author

Stephan Lessenich, born in 1965, studied political science, sociology and history in Marburg. He earned his doctoral degree in Bremen in 1993 and in 2002 received the *venia legendi* (authorisation to teach) in sociology at the University of Göttingen. His first professorship took him to the University of Jena, where together with Klaus Dörre and Hartmut Rosa he was responsible for initiating the Centre for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities of the German Research Foundation entitled “Post-Growth Societies”. In 2014, Lessenich was called to the Chair for Social Developments and Structures at the Department of Sociology of LMU Munich, as successor to Ulrich Beck. Lessenich also plays a proactive role in social processes: He is, for example, a member of the scientific advisory board of the Basic Income Network (*Netzwerk Grundeinkommen*) and was co-founder of the “mut” party in Bavaria. He has been professor of sociology and director of the Institute for Social Research since 1 July 2021.

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