

Corona and coronization

In just a short few weeks, a virus initially downplayed by politicians has grinded the entire European continent to a halt. With all of Europe either on lockdown or on its way there, many Europeans face the very real threat of not just a public health crisis, but also an impending recession. Public institutions and healthcare systems able to dampen the shocks that the virus will cause to our lives are needed now more than ever. The reality is, however, that decades of budgetary cuts and proliferating market-based governance have hollowed out the response capacity of our healthcare systems. Meanwhile, a growing group of flexible workers is not covered by national welfare states and now faces an uncertain future. In a time when political elites are steamrolling emergency bailouts for corporations and banks, the structural deficits that planted the seeds for this crisis are rarely problematized.

Rather than problematizing the real causes, political and business elites have instead begun to ‘securitize’ the current crisis. Securitization is a term political scientists use to describe a process where political and social actors frame an issue such as the corona virus as an extremely dangerous situation where extraordinary measures are not just legitimate, but also protected from public debate (Buzan et al 1998; McInnes & Rushton 2013).

Such processes can currently be observed in Europe. Referring to “exceptional circumstances”, Ursula van der Leyen announced that the European Commission would not prevent member states from providing capital liquidity for corporations that are suffering from disrupted supply chains (Financial Times 2020). On the national level, corporate tax payments are suspended (Nu.nl 2020), and corporations can ask more easily for a compensation of salary payments by public unemployment insurers if their production and distribution chains are disrupted (Der Spiegel 2020). On the business side, meanwhile, CEOs such as Virgin Atlantic’s Richard Branson have asked government bailouts worth billions of Euros (The Guardian, 2020).

It seems quite ironical: In times of an economic boom, citizens are asked not to exaggerate wage claims and to accept public expenditure cuts, because corporations might otherwise relocate their activities to more investor-friendly regions. *Let the market be the market.* Now that the very same corporations are suffering from the vulnerabilities of global value chains, the tax payer is supposed to compensate them for financial losses. *Let the market be the market as long as it suits the market.*

Such a winner-take-all morale becomes even more problematic when we look at the public means that allow the supposedly free markets to function. Surely, these global value chains would not exist without free movement of capital and goods, lax and easy to dodge corporate taxation, restrictive intellectual property rights that allow companies to profit off of publicly funded innovations in pharmaceuticals, life sciences and technology, as well as education systems that deliver smart and productive workers at zero cost to corporations.

A broader public debate on the justification of these extraordinary measures – and the power structures they uphold – is hampered by the authorities’ recommendations to stay at home and to practice “social distancing”. Isolation is justified by the lack of sufficient coronavirus tests or the risk of a shortage in hospital beds (RIVM 2020). Travel restrictions and border closings effectively undermine transnational debates and impair the already weak solidarity among European citizens.

In the context of locked down societies, the ad hoc redistribution of public means to the benefit of already privileged classes (corporations, financial industry, skilled labor) can hardly be questioned. Those who are hit hardest by the corona crisis (freelancers, day laborers, low-income single parents, homeless persons, and migrants) are prevented from articulating their precarious situation. More generally, the shrinking space for public debates makes it difficult to problematize the scarcities in the

public healthcare systems resulting from the “retreat of the state” (Strange 1996) under the premises of ongoing neoliberal reform agendas.

A cosmopolitan vision, addressing the potentially even more disastrous consequences of the pandemic in the Global South, is virtually absent and prevented by the rise of panic-fueled “identity politics” (e.g., Hobsbawm 1996) in industrialized countries. The European Commission announced export restrictions for medical adds to non-EU countries (Tagesspiegel 2020). Solidarity, it seems, is shortest in supply when the need for it is most dire.

Let it be clear that it is not the goal of this essay to question the appropriateness of public health measures, nor do we necessarily reject all economic interventions. However, without reflection on the structural causes, we fear that public means will once again be mobilized for private gains. We should thus avoid a “coronization” of the corona crisis: The notion of an emergency must not be abused to reinforce those socio-economic and political inequalities which are at the roots of the current (European) crisis.

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