

The 'Corona Crisis' as a Take-Off Point for Transformations towards a Solidary Mode of Living?

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"When choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive — but we will inhabit a different world."

Yuval Noah Harari, March 20, 2020

Hi everyone, this is Anton Brokow-Loga speaking from Weimar, Germany. I am part of the ILA collective, whose aim is to examine the concept of imperial and solidary modes of living and production and to make it accessible to a broad public. We admit ourselves to transformative science and are organized in various social movements and political struggles, for instance for Climate Justice or Degrowth.

I am working at Bauhaus University Weimar as a research associate in the field of Urban Sociology at the Faculty of Planning. My focus is on Urban Transformation and Degrowth Cities.

I want to present four theses that arose from discussions in our collective and may guide our discussions in this online conference. First of all, we need to understand the crisis: The crisis itself and the response to it is rooted in neoliberal capitalism and the Imperial Mode of Living. Secondly, especially in the situation of crisis, solidary alternatives show, how a just and resilient society could look like. Thirdly, transformative politics in the face of the crisis must aim at redirecting aid programmes and reclaiming solidarity. Finally, building a counter-hegemonic project implies finding common ground in solidary, emancipatory responses.

We see the current so-called corona crisis as a situation in which already existing crises are coming to a head: crisis-ridden care and health systems, an economy without prospects and fixed on growth, misguided housing policy, a de-democratized society... Primarily, the pandemic poses major challenges for an ailing, privatized health care sector in many countries. It does not take much imagination to see, that this is mainly caused by austerity politics, caused by a "lean state" and neoliberal understanding of health and care sectors. Sectors that are now finally recognized for what they are: Systemically relevant.

Moreover, **the current management of the crisis is deepening structures of imperial mode of living and production.** How exactly? The imperial mode of living is imperial because it grants certain groups a disproportional share of other people's labour and the biosphere at a global level and outsources the impacts.

Our imperial mode of living is based on the fact that health workers are not only poorly paid, "care chains" have long stood for "outsourcing" the costs for our health to migrant, often female workers. The gaps were created elsewhere.

The response to this crisis is labelled as human-centered. But, to the contrary, the main solving strategies are at the expense of others.

The imperial mode of crisis response shows its face in authoritarian regressions: in border closures, state (digital) surveillance, military operations at home, suspension of fundamental rights, extension of power.

European and international solidarity is failing to a large extent; a return to the national territory is en vogue. The public debate is at the same time totally taken over by Corona, other crises are lost sight of. While people in the Mediterranean are left to their certain deaths, thousands are flown in because they are Germans – or because Germans want them to exploit themselves for their asparagus.

As the gaps in the system become increasingly visible, more criticism and radical ideas are also being discussed in mainstream media. And so I come from the first thesis – the crisis itself and the response to it is rooted in the Imperial Mode of Living – to the second thesis.

Solidary alternatives show, how a just and resilient society could look like.

Indeed, the virus-induced situation, including the political restrictions and foreclosures, cast a different light on solidary alternatives and their resilience.

Personally speaking...

- The Community Supported Agriculture I am part of does not rely on inhumane working conditions in isolated camps. If support is needed, we organize ourselves.
- The newspaper cooperative publishing the news I am reading has no payment defaults due to fewer advertisers. Therefore they do not have to lay people off.
- People in my neighbourhood are prepared to accept major restrictions in order to protect the nursing home next door. Solidarity at close range is increasing and neighbours support each other and vulnerable groups.

Especially in the everyday life, solidary alternatives show how a just and resilient society could look like. A society of care.

But these small-scale examples, regional or nation-state solutions quickly disregard larger contexts - a solidarity-based mode of living and production is a global one.

So I come to thesis 3: **Transformative politics in the face of the crisis must aim at redirecting aid programmes and reclaiming solidarity.**

How to build up momentum for a deep and long-term transformation?

At the very moment, negotiations for the post-corona recovery are taking place. I am not sure, whether we all would be happy with the negotiators around the table. It's fundamentally important to redirect state aid programmes and tackling false solutions for real problems (e.g. bailing out huge polluters, airlines, etc.). While doing so, securing alternatives must be our goal, e.g. towards support package for social, democratic and ecological companies.

At the same time, we need to reclaim solidarity from below. This means „scaling up solidarity“ (globally, for example with the global south) AND „broadening solidarity“ (for marginalized groups, i.e. refugees, homeless, etc.) We must clarify, that nation-centred “solidarity” is a lot, but not actual solidarity. We must ask: From what position is solidarity demanded, whose interests are taken into account? And whose interests are ignored?

Our last thesis claims: **Building a counter-hegemonic project implies finding common ground in solidary, emancipatory responses.**

What we experience at the moment, is an open window of opportunity. It's just a little open, but it's open. We as people in social movements, in transformative sciences, in positions of political or economic power must wed justice with ecology and sharpen our visions for a counter-hegemonic project.

This counter-hegemonic project must include:

- care and basic provision at the centre of politics;
- radical democratization and socialisation of the economy (which is not nationalization of losses);
- rescaling the economy: solidary deglobalization and relocalization.

Counter-hegemony begins with the questioning of ideas of "the normal way things are managed" (which is working quite well in a global lockdown), goes hand in hand with the conversion of mental and material infrastructures. Thus, for a solidary degrowth society we must „build links between our demands“ and „build broad and diverse coalitions“.

I want to end this short input with some utopian thoughts.

In times of Corona ...

...ZARA produces protective masks, Volkswagen makes respirators and L'Oréal produces disinfectants.

What if ...

...companies would always produce for the common good, instead of producing senseless products in order to generate high profits?

In times of Corona ...

...the public sector in Spain is taking control of all private hospitals.

What if ...

...the entire health sector would always be in public hands and companies would stop making economic profit from people's health?

In times of Corona ...

...hotels open their doors to give sick and homeless people a roof over their heads.

What if ...

...all people in the city would always have access to housing?

These scenarios are taken from our new campaign (#Whatif/#WaswäreWenn) on the crisis that we will launch on next Wednesday, 22nd of April 2020. Check out: dasgutelebenfüralle.de

If you are interested in our Books and our educational material: It's all available Open Access in German Language. And, wonderful news: "At the Expense of others" is also available in English language. Check out: ilawerkstatt.org

Preview: tomorrow – I am going to offer a workshop on "Degrowth Cities as a Point of Leverage for Solidary Localism?" and will take up some thoughts from this talk.

I am glad for having the chance to connect with you and I thank the organizers for their quick response and you for your attention.