

„We don't know where to go, but we'll get there faster“ (Helmut Qualtinger)

About the effects of a worldwide spreading epidemic, which makes us aware that it cannot go on like this as before and yet allows us to do (almost) everything to continue as before.

[Michael Wimmer](#)

PD Dr. Michael Wimmer is the founder and was Managing Director of EDUCULT in Vienna until the end of 2017. Since 2018 he has been director of the research institute and since then he has held the position of chairman of the board. On the international stage, Michael Wimmer is an experienced advisor to the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission on cultural and educational policy issues.

In 2017, the US-American antiquity researcher Kyle Harper published his study [„The Fate of Rome, Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire,,](#). In it he outlines the serious effects that climatic changes or the outbreak of epidemics have had on the political constitution of the Roman community. In spite of various crisis phenomena, the mood in Europe in recent years has been one of having nature under control; natural disasters have been televised. Climate change has done little to change this basic attitude. It was only felt very gradually on one's own body. But now nature is apparently showing its stubborn side once again. It has brought a virus among the people worldwide, which directly affects all people and is about to question many self-evident aspects of living together.

And so, from one day to the next, the security-loving European societies have to acknowledge that nature is still capable of putting them in a state that they cannot control. Harper provides impressive evidence of how political decisions of this early empire, based on the free movement of people and goods, contributed to the outbreak of epidemics themselves; but he also makes it clear that the unbridled forces of nature set free as a result were crucial to the collapse.

Back to a normality that we never were

Admittedly, we are still a long way from achieving that here in Europe these days. No one sees European civilisation as being in danger. On the contrary, just when the sometimes draconian measures to restrict personal freedoms are being successively relaxed in large parts of Europe, everything is pressing for the pre-crisis situation to be restored as quickly as possible in order to resume a business as usual, which is being negotiated for broad majorities as normality without any alternatives.

In this article I would like to address the question of whether this epidemic was really a one-off industrial accident that can be easily remedied with the necessary clean-up work, so that the old routines can be returned to as soon as possible. Or whether Covid-19 heralds an [„epoch break,,](#) the impact of which will change our way of life forever. Yes, and then there are those observers who think that the outbreak of the epidemic does not indicate a change of direction, but rather the radicalization of dynamics that go back some time. As if through a magnifying glass, social contradictions, which have been determining social coexistence since before yesterday, became more apparent during the crisis.

The plague that distorts our reality to recognizability

One of them is the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz. In his most recent article in Die Zeit [„Verblendet vom Augenblick“](#) („Blinded by the instant“), he concludes that the current

reactions to the epidemic can only be understood in the context of socio-political developments that would have started in the 1980s. With the domination of neo-liberal concepts for overcoming the crisis phenomena inherent in capitalism, the Western European success story of the „social market economy“ has come under increasing pressure. The political effort to create a „levelled middle class society“ was gradually abandoned. As a result, progress in cultural liberalization and individual self-development increasingly contradicted claims for solidarity and social equality. In short, the welfare state of the 1970s and 1980s has developed into a competitive state that drives people into isolation. In almost all political camps, the withdrawal of the state and the associated deregulation and dissolution of boundaries was sold as a political strategy without alternatives. Success instead of performance mutated into the ultimate decisive measure of value, on the basis of which people found themselves divided into a few winners and many losers (stigmatised as self-inflicted).

For the latter, the consequences of the crisis are proving particularly severe today. Here is just one example: In Austria, nine tenths of the people who became unemployed due to the governmental measures of restriction are simple workers, who were already before largely helplessly exposed to the adversities not only of the labour market. While large parts of the remaining middle class managed to save themselves into models of short-time work and/or home office, it was the „simple hard workers“ who on the one hand kept the national societies going even in the difficult time of the lock-down and on the other hand were exposed to particular health risks precisely because of this.

In the near future, some [60 million additional unemployed are expected in Europe](#), for whom the labour market has largely collapsed. With the political refusal to provide these disadvantaged groups with special assistance, we are currently witnessing a rapid increase in a diffuse collective movement of dissatisfaction and despair, of which nobody can say today whether, and if so in what form, it will be possible to take political action again by democratic means.

The state returns, but which one?

For the longest time, the von Reckwitz scenario was based on a narrative about a structurally dysfunctional state whose only remaining task would have been to withdraw. There was a broad consensus among political decision-makers that as many decisions as possible should be left to market forces. With the appearance of the virus everything seemed to change: in almost all countries the state returned to the political stage in a powerful way, paralyzing large parts of the economy (without their leaders significantly opposing it) and once again, with the slogan „Whatever the cost!“ To this end, national borders were once again drawn up, unbreakable civil rights were suspended and social distancing measures were taken to intervene deeply in the private sphere of all of us.

As if it were giving the lie to its own political rhetoric, we are currently witnessing an impressive return of the state, which – largely without contradiction – is once again recommending itself as a powerful guarantor when it comes to mastering the crisis. The course may already have been set beforehand for the broad acceptance of this claim. After all, the distortions of unbridled market forces in the form of social inequality, cultural disintegration, the neglect of public goods or ecological hazards had already become clearly evident before the virus appeared. That is why, of course, only right-wing populist forces had

so far taken up the cause, hoping to be able to steer the existential insecurity and associated lack of prospects of more and more people onto their political mills. With their assumption of government in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which previously had little experience of democratic conflict resolution, but increasingly also in other European countries with a longer democratic tradition, premonitions of a revival of the state were already emerging before the crisis, which Reckwitz attempts to interpret as a transitional phenomenon from an open-experimental phase of a global digital late modernism to a more strongly regulated second phase (the fact that the illiberal and anti-democratic forces driving this attempt to secure their power through alliances with pirate economic actors is often ignored).

If one observes the current renaissance of the nation state, then it is precisely this ability, as the last remaining stable actor, that arrogates to itself the ability to once again get a grip on the awakening contradictory relationships that a global economy that has gone out of control has created. The fact that the major economic players (even if they do not earn as much from the crisis as amazon, google, etc.) are conspicuously quiet in their dealings with this new state directorate may make one wonder. The great approval of large parts of the national population, including their willingness to follow his instructions without grumbling, proves him right (however, wherever the state or its leading representatives have tried to play down the epidemic and its effects, they pay for it with weakening approval data).

In [Part 2](#) Michel Wimmer reflects on the intensifying struggle between the supporters of democratic authoritarian regimes and on solidarity in Europe, and takes a look at the cultural sector as an example.

This is a contribution to the blog project „Together or alone out of the crisis? The European Union at a crossroads in the face of the challenges posed by the corona virus“. Learn more about the project [here](#)