

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

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.

Is the epidemic intensifying the struggle between the supporters of democratic and authoritarian forms of rule?

At the same time, there are increasing signs of a new, usually authoritarian state, [which claims to be better able to deal with the growing crisis phenomena than liberal-democratic ones](#).

Around the globe a new type of rule is emerging which, in the claim of a new state dominance, is prepared to sacrifice essential democratic achievements in order to promise strength and security at (almost) any price. It is not without reason that the Chinese government has tried to position itself worldwide in the claim to cope with the epidemic much better, because more determined. The diplomatic successes not only in Russia and in a number of African countries but also in parts of Central and Eastern Europe in particular were assured to the new superpower.

The Serbian-DU American economist Branko Milanovic published the article „[The Clash of Capitalisms](#)“ even before the crisis in foreign affairs broke out. In it he suspects a growing clash of the two remaining political concepts in order to effectively counter the growing contradictions facing national societies. In view of the radicalized competitive conditions in globalized financial capitalism, this amounts to a choice between liberal-democratic and authoritarian conflict management strategies. The effects of state measures on the state of national economies give little reason to postpone the election again. On the contrary, far-reaching government powers, together with measures for comprehensive social surveillance of the population, which are legitimised as means of crisis management, indicate the direction in which the pendulum could swing in Europe too.

Could it be that Europeans no longer know who they are?

At present, all assessments of the future of the European integration process prove to be quite contradictory. On the one hand, it is evident that the crisis is playing into the hands of nationalists in Europe. Even in the absence of a pan-European competence, the European states have developed their own health policy strategy. Moreover, it is obvious that the need to distance themselves from each other has increased dramatically in recent months; the national governments, above all the Hungarian government, have had special powers – albeit limited in time – issued past Parliament, which do not even pretend to be in line with European regulations.

Parliamentary legitimised decision-making processes have all too easily turned into a farce. This was all the more so as a voice had already been strengthened in recent years, even in countries with long democratic traditions; laboriously reached democratic compromises would be less and less able to bring about the necessary political decisions in view of the current challenges. These tendencies have been taken up only too readily by political currents with authoritarian tendencies, in order to suggest to their populations once again national strengthening, either in the fight against migration or in not complying with Community rules from Brussels, which have been reinterpreted as paternalism.

With the outbreak of the epidemic at the latest, the contradictory relationship between communitization and renationalization became apparent in all its drasticness. Correspondingly, on the one hand, there are those who, in view of the many special national paths in conjunction with the structural weaknesses of the EU, [predict a speedy end to this transnational political project](#). Already battered by the Brexit, the economic weakness of the southern member states or the rampant scepticism towards democracy in the Central and Eastern European countries, the boiling up of national egoisms is leading the European unification project to its inevitable end.

„Sometimes your weakness can hold you together more than your strength“ (Ivan Krastev)

But there are others, such as the Bulgarian sociologist Ivan Krastev, [who suspects little efficiency behind this further national upsurge](#). Behind this, despite all the rhetorical noise, the specific weaknesses of a nation state in reacting adequately not only to this global phenomenon could be less and less concealed. His conclusion: With the outbreak of the epidemic at the latest, the European Union mutated from an electoral community to a community of destiny that seems to depend on one another for better or worse: „We have to stand together, but we don't like each other“.

To the extent that the individual national states, despite the considerable resources they have invested, do not succeed in convincingly regulating and stabilizing an unleashed dynamism, they will – according to Krastev – have no choice but to give more competences to Brussels. And not in order to relinquish power, but on the contrary, to secure the power they retain.

With the intention of setting up a comprehensive reconstruction fund at European level, the new Commission is attempting to respond to these needs in order to give a special sign of life in these days of an unbroken will to communitise. At the same time, it is showing intentions to emancipate itself from contradictory national claims to influence, at least by means of a Europe-wide tax regime. The tactical considerations of the „Economical Four“ (including the Austrian federal government) will change little in this respect, even if they try to keep the latent conflict between the economies of the northern and southern member states at bay.

The current European initiative may also gain popularity through the insight that Europe has never been so alone as it is today. It is quite obvious that the current global competitive situation is tending to undermine existing alliances even further, thereby abandoning the last false hopes of a final victory for Western capitalism after 1989. The global power shifts that are becoming more and more apparent, which have, among other things, caused the once leading world power, the USA, to be thrown back on itself in the wake of the epidemic, could so unexpectedly renew the EU as an act of sheer survivalism more than any previous crisis. But things could also turn out differently if, for example, Germany, as a central political actor in Europe, were to attempt its salvation in national salvation in the further course of the

expected long-lasting economic crisis. Then the parallels with Harper's sketch of the course of events at the end of this large and complex political entity would not be far off.

Solidarity as a central European resource

Krastev summarises his great concern regarding the further process of European unification in the sentence: „We no longer know who we are“. He is not referring to narrowly defined ideas of a common European cultural identity of any kind, which a cultural enterprise would provide if it were only allowed to do so. In my opinion, it rather refers to a specific form of coexistence that has long made a European way of life distinguishable from others. It seems to me to be a good way of describing the claim to a „social market economy“, and is in any case one that knows how to give the social dimension an equal status to the economic dimension. In a recent article „[This could be the salvation of Europe](#)“, the liberal author and historian Timothy Garton Ash regrets the undifferentiated implementation of the neoliberal paradigm on the European continent as well: Especially after 1989, he says, there was a fatal overestimation of self in Europe, which allowed the model of European liberalism to degenerate into a sheer economic liberalism for the comprehensive liberation of the markets. In this phase we must also restore the other parts of liberalism, the cultural and social parts.

Thus, in answering the question of who the Europeans are (or want to be in the future), a central key lies in reassessing the importance of mutual respect and solidarity. So far, all attempts to strengthen the social dimension of the European Union have failed [because of the primacy of national responsibility for social policy](#). The crisis has shown that social and health problems do not stop at national borders and that there are therefore no longer any satisfactory national responses to them (even if Trump, Johnson or Bolsonaro decree this in a way that is disastrous for their populations).

On the basis of such a collective insight, the outlines of a „community of destiny“ so apostrophized by Krastev can easily be seen, which is not exhausted in economic success but solidarity can become a central guideline for political action in Europe. [The latest results of surveys of young Europeans](#), 71% of whom are in favour of an unconditional basic income, point in a similar direction, as do the thanks and respect for the workers who, in many places, were prepared to keep the system running in the crisis, with considerable health risks.

The cultural industry as a symptom of the crisis or as a signpost out of the crisis?

Finally, a few words about the culture industry. It hasn't much to laugh about these days.

Closed due to the lockdown, it is cut off from essential resources and dependent on state support. And in this sector, too, it can be seen that as a result of the neoliberal pull, its orientation towards the requirements of a cultural market that is as unregulated as possible has not only brought advantages. The widespread collapse of the international tourism industry makes this dependence painfully clear. But the partly disastrous effects of its current state on the climate can no longer be glossed over these days. In this sector, [the European Union is unfortunately still showing little willingness to rethink art and culture and thus increase their relevance for the further development of society](#) .

Cultural policy was once seen as a „continuation of social policy“. Today more than ever, it is far removed from this. And yet, in its original orientation, it would offer a better starting point for answering the question „Who we as Europeans want to be“ than a sub-sector of a leisure industry that is largely isolated from social changes and, in addition, thoroughly commercialised and interchangeable.

The systemic irrelevance of art as the epitome of the European

In their existential need, many representatives claim that art and culture must be supported by the state in a special way these days; after all, they are relevant to the system. Reinhard J. Brembeck recently contradicted this vehemently in an article „[Warum Kunst systemfeindlich ist](#)“ (“Why art is hostile to the system”) in the Süddeutsche Zeitung. Instead, he insisted on the subversive potential of a European concept of art that is not limited in affirming existing conditions but – with specifically aesthetic means – opens up new, unexpected spaces of possibility that point beyond what we can expect.

Even if the discussion of art, with a few exceptions, has so far tended to be limited to a few islands in the everyday lives of Europeans, there is much to suggest that art is the most European thing we have. And it could once again be shown that the confrontation with art – precisely because of its subversiveness – is predestined in an outstanding way to deal with the question of who we are, we Europeans, who will have to deal with the economic, social and cultural consequences of the epidemic for some time to come. Art would be a medium that refuses simple answers and instead invites us to endure uncertainty and engage with it in a productive way. To learn in the process that despite all adversity there are futures worth striving for

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](#)