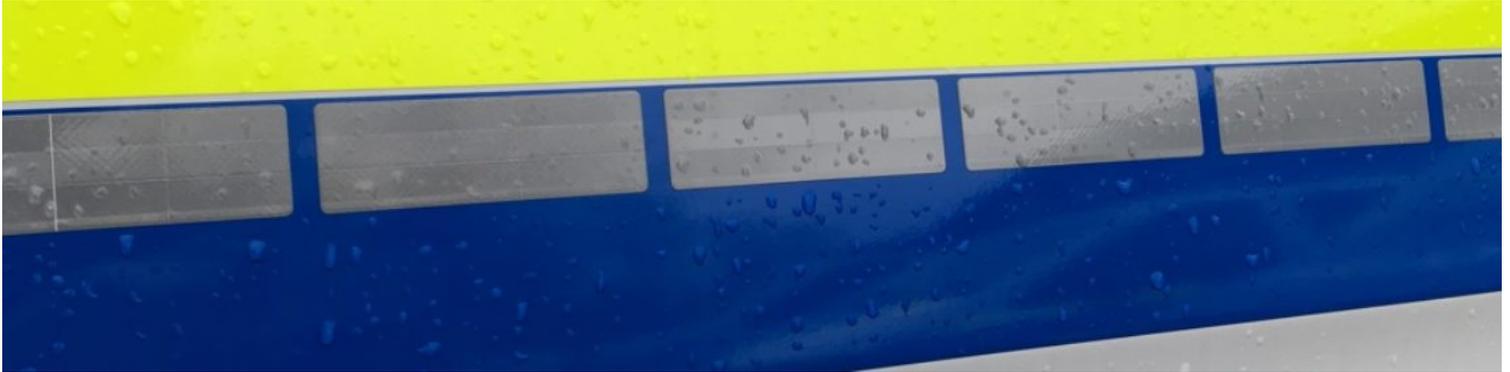


# **Demokratie im Ausnahmezustand**

Democracy and the State of Exception – La démocratie dans l'état d'exception



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Essay

**Arnd Bauerkämper & Panikos  
Panayi**

**Corona – Thoughts of  
Historians Working in  
Offices at Home in  
Germany and Britain**

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# Corona – Thoughts of Historians working in Offices at Home in Germany and Britain

Arnd Bauerkämper and Panikos Panayi<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1914 it would have seemed impossible that, within a few months, civilization as it existed would have come to an end as the entire world geared up for a war, which should have finished by Christmas, but which would not end until 1918. While the war against germs fought on a global scale today does not directly mirror the events of 1914, there seem striking parallels. Both conflicts came at the end of a period of extraordinary economic growth, suddenly abandoned for the sake of a greater struggle against an enemy. In 1914 the process involved a mobilization for what historians have described as total war, repeated in 1939-45, and it seems that this type of reorientation of the entire economy and society has now repeated itself.

This has become most obvious today in the virtual shutdown which has taken place all over the world on a level which did not happen in either of the Two World Wars, except in the very darkest days of, for example, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union or the last days of the Allied bombing of Germany. Today public life, social interaction and economic growth are severely affected. Individuals live in an undeclared state of emergency in a war-like situation, as the militarist vocabulary of head of states such as French President Emmanuel Macron demonstrates (“nous sommes en guerre”). President Trump has recently even decided to reactivate the Defense Production Act of 8 September 1950 in order to force General Motors to produce desperately needed medical equipment. In contrast, rather like in the First World War, while Britain has introduced legislation similar to the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914. Boris Johnson’s government has partly relied on the voluntary principle: the millions of volunteers who joined battalions from 1914-16 have become the hundreds of thousands of people signing up to help the National Health Service. But, throughout the world, constitutional freedoms that are at the heart of parliamentary democracies have been suspended: the right of assembly, free economic activity and religious practice. For obvious reasons, these measures are indispensable for the time being. We are not proposing to risk lives by prematurely

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lifting the restrictions imposed by governments. Even in a medium-term perspective, however, suspending basic rights and severely restricting freedom is a dangerous path that is prone to undermining the very foundations of our democracies. It is therefore urgent to assess the range of consequences of the present shutdown. The repercussions for health need to be considered, as well.

## **Politics**

Urgent calls for ever more restrictions are understandable, but potentially dangerous. Populist and authoritarian rulers can exploit these demands to present themselves as strong leaders who purportedly guarantee order and stability. Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán now rules by emergency decrees and has therefore suspended parliament. Similarly, Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are clearly trying to exploit the coronavirus crisis for self-aggrandisement. They present themselves as strongmen who are more capable to contain the virus than democracies. For instance, China's Ambassador to France claimed that individualism, hedonism and selfishness has prevented liberal western states from effectively fighting the pandemic. Similarly, advocates of authoritarian rule have espoused a strong central state while belittling federal systems. These propaganda efforts cannot cover up the weaknesses of central rule that clearly failed to tackle the problem of the rapidly spreading virus in China in late 2019 and early 2020. Suppressing early warnings is surely not a commendable policy vis-à-vis emerging security threats.

## **Economy**

How much decrease in gross domestic product can democracies afford and survive? 10, 20 or 30 per cent? Needless to say, all advanced economies have quickly passed extraordinary legislation to support both large companies, owners of small businesses and those who have lost their jobs, at least temporarily. Millions have lost their assets on the plummeting stock market. While the transformation of democracies into authoritarian or even fascist states as a consequence of the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s is not likely to simply repeat, economic discontent may fuel political unrest. The current crisis seems destined to knock out Trump in the November Presidential election, as he has looked out of his depth. Mature wealthy western economies and democracies will see out the storm, albeit with a significant economic cost, but not as great as that consequent upon the Two World Wars. On the other hand, how will less prosperous societies such as India and Brazil cope with lockdown?

## **Society**

Keeping couples and families at home has a considerable price. Women's refugees have noticed an increasing number of inmates. There is evidence of increasing domestic violence, and children, too, need to exercise instead of sitting in front of computers in their rooms all the time. Not least, the elderly (at home or in care homes) are essentially isolated due to their liability to infection. Interchange between generations is gravely restricted, especially as some of the elderly do not have expertise in the use of social media. Social distancing may prove possible for middle class families and individuals in the West but proves more difficult for migrants such as Mexicans who worked in the US restaurant sector or European migrants employed in all manner of service jobs in London, in both cases, living in lower quality accommodation in close proximity to neighbours and now spending all their time at home. Outside the West, especially in cities, social distancing proves even more difficult as families sometimes live in one room as the example of Delhi demonstrates.

## **Migration**

Perhaps no era has witnessed the scale of migration of the twenty first century, especially if we include everyone from tourists to those moving in search of employment. This has come to an almost complete halt with millions of people left stranded away from their home countries, desperate to return, mirroring the outbreak of the First World War (although today on a much larger scale). On the other hand, millions of Indians are streaming out of big cities towards their villages, conjuring up images of the population displacement which took place as a result of the 1947 partition. Even in Russia, thousands of inhabitants of Moscow have recently taken the chance to spend exceptional holidays granted by Putin to go to the countryside, thereby spreading the virus.

## **Health**

During the two World Wars all sides incarcerated their real or imagined enemies, but confinement on the scale currently underway has never been imposed on a global scale, even during previous times of quarantine, which tended to take place locally. Studies of camp life in the two world wars have demonstrated that confining people to limited spaces can lead to violent outbursts, despair and in some cases even psychic illness. Within most camps some semblance of normality survived as prisoners could play sport and music because they could interact with each other. The concentration on conquering coronavirus has meant that routine medicine has suffered: will the lives lost in consequence exceed those who die from coronavirus?

## **The Future?**

What are our conclusions from these deliberations in our offices at home? First, we all need hope and a clearer perspective of a return to ‘normal’ conditions. Our life will be different after the coronavirus, but we as free citizens cannot accept restrictions for an indefinite period of time, although it seems inevitable that surveillance of our health will increase, as has happened in China. Second, the emergency legislation has to be temporary – a provision that has not universally been enshrined in the new laws. Even though they have been tied to clearly defined aims, the balance between means and ends need to be continuously assessed by responsible leaders who were not involved in enacting the law – another crucial precaution that American political scientist Clinton Rossiter emphasised with regard to states of exception in democracies as early as 1948. Third, we need a multi-perspectival approach to the coronavirus crisis. Politicians have hitherto almost exclusively followed the advice of medical experts (or even more narrowly) virologists. This has not been completely unjustified, but we need to broaden the perspectives. Virologists, like all academics, tend to obsessively focus upon their own subject without looking at the broader picture. Boards of closely cooperating experts (in particular doctors and medical experts, anthropologists, sociologists, ethicists and historians) are urgently needed.

We will overcome the coronavirus crisis, even though the world will be different in many respects (for instance with regard to digitalisation). Will we fly as much? Will we need to eat out to the same extent? Will the western middle classes grow to love their immediate environment rather than desire to travel to exotic locations? How long will it take before economic growth returns to normal? Years or decades? Perhaps we will forget about our obsession with annual economic growth and the need to buy expendable commodities which drives western economies forward. But we need to make sure that we do not leave lasting damage and deformations as an unintended legacy, especially in terms of the nature of hard-earned freedoms.