

Climate Crisis and Corona

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Currently, the corona virus is often compared and connected with climate change.

Both crises could make us aware of the dependence from which we cannot escape: dependence on each other, global dependence on supply chains, production processes, currencies. But corona does make us aware much faster than the climate catastrophe. It makes us feel the acceleration we are in, because the shutdown has led to a perceived standstill: the hustle and bustle is no longer palpable, there are more opportunities for reflection and for dealing with the question: 'What am I in the world for?' Stories spread about the now-clean lagoon in Venice, to which fish are returning, and about the increasing number of songbirds in Europe. This gives hope in a world where resignation reigns otherwise. At the same time, the pandemic-induced increase in unemployment and poverty shows us that a romantic ideal without new concepts leads to destruction and setbacks and probably to a return of old methods and goals when the lockdown is over. So new concepts would mean 'greener' and sustainable solutions cutting down the waste of resources.

This is not the business of psychoanalysis? One could argue that we are on the threshold of a catastrophe that we ourselves will live to experience, something that was not thinkable a decade ago: permafrost melting, causing methane emissions which make an exponential rise to global heating; bushfires caused by the heat to an unknown extent; heatwaves now summer after summer and millions of dying trees.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that we are very good in turning a blind eye. In corona and climate change we can blame others (politicians; economic players; our neighbours who fly / party more than us). It is a stable mechanism because it contains some truth that we can hide behind. But it is becoming less stable because corona teaches us that what seemed to be fixed forever, engraved in stone; our economy, our lifestyle, our secure beliefs in the future, can be shattered within weeks.

This is causing anxiety, which is a normal reaction.

Psychoanalysis can help us to keep a balance between realistic anxiety and non-illusionary hopes for the future:

We know that if anxiety becomes too great to handle we turn to fundamentalist thinking, which we can observe as a rise in many countries now.

Klein (1946) has described how splitting is a vital mechanism that helps the baby to separate good from evil so that evil cannot destroy good. Stokoe (2019) sees in this normal survival mode of the baby a state of division to which we all regress in case of danger. Here we no longer want to 'know' anything in the sense of mature thinking. It is the fundamentalist state of mind, in which curiosity is extinguished and which is dominated by the two poles of love and hate. Stokoe describes this state of mind as primitive and not adult, determined by an intolerance for wanting to know and by the urge for quick certainty.

Consumption whether for economic or bodily survival, helps us escape from the pain and anxiety that come closer with the spreading pandemic, with every forest fire, every summer that causes the

groundwater to sink further, with every further dying coral reef, with every dying species. The deforestation of rainforests leads to a convergence of species; the eating of animals that were not considered edible in the past leads to a crossing of species barriers and to the pandemics that we have to fear from experience will be part of our future: mad cow disease was caused by the cannibalistic feeding of calves to cattle. Financial interests skip all boundaries that once made sense, but which are not respected when the crossing of all boundaries and the realization of everything possible is the guiding ideal of a society.

Quick availability fits in here, too: Fromm's questionings of 'having' instead of 'being' have a disturbing topicality. In a constitution of 'having', freedom is omnipotently equated with boundlessness and entitlement which is idealized.

This increasing penetration of human activities into commodities, becomes so pervasive, so naturalised, that we cease to see it – and where ideology coincides with what we take to be 'just the way the world is' we have ideology in its purest and deadliest form. There is a well-known story of two small fish swimming in the water on a pleasant July day. As they go along another larger fish comes towards them swimming in the opposite direction. 'Lovely day to be in the water, boys!' he says as he swims by. A few yards further on one of the little fish turns to the other and says, 'What the hell is water?' (Bell, 2019, p.8ff)

When we experience the world as so naturally divided into rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old, and ourselves so naturally reduced to our function as consumers, who are dependent on fossil fuels, it is difficult to break up familiar thought structures.

But corona teaches us reparation: to renounce what was thought necessary in the past suddenly became possible as an option for the future, e.g. to hold Zoom conferences, and thus avoid air travel and car journeys. The solidarity experienced in corona times within the own country and partly also between the countries that sent aid deliveries has brought up a new way of thinking about becoming politically involved.

Psychoanalysis can do a lot here: we can work scientifically within our own institutes on splitting and the dangers for democracy; understand how group processes work, and publish our findings. We can contribute our expertise to politicians and journalists. We can ourselves rethink what we can contribute to society and culture. Maybe it is more than we think.

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References

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