

**STEFAN WEIDNER**

**Virus and Terror**

On the unspoken and uncanny similarities between the corona crisis and the war on terror

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*The virus and terrorism are a prism. They split our societies into their spectral colours and show us who we are, the elements we are made up of, how the hardware beneath our attractive yet deceptive user interfaces really works, and what our priorities are, once we get beyond rhetoric and wishful thinking. And while this spectrum analysis is going on we look at each other, scratch our heads and wonder what sort of a world we will wake up in tomorrow.*

## PART 1. SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY?

At the beginning of March this year, with the corona crisis fast becoming impossible to ignore, I found myself in Istanbul working on my new book. It deals with 9/11, the terror attacks in New York and Washington, the violent beginnings of the 21st century. In it, I argue that the impact of that era is still being felt today, and that Bin Laden and the terrorists have actually achieved many of their aims: the division and radicalisation of Western societies, their relapse into nationalism and authoritarian security policy, and the destabilisation of the Near East. By the end of February 2020, the USA had reached an agreement with the Taliban on a withdrawal from Afghanistan. The longest war in American history ended with the acknowledgement that the former sponsors of terrorism could not be defeated.

By that point, however, everyone had already lost interest in this news. Coronavirus ushered in a new era, blotting out the memory of what had gone before. Now all of a sudden it was virologists who were in demand, not experts on Islam. In my book I had wanted to look at the new terrorism of the far right, as well as global inequality, the refugee crisis and our inaction in the face of climate change. Now I might as well start looking for a new job.

Or then again, maybe not? A striking number of observers, particularly in the US, drew comparisons with the events of 9/11 to help put this new situation into historical context. It was an apt comparison, for the immediate impacts have been similar: the sharp fall in air traffic, the closure of borders, the global shock, the strong reaction of the markets, the limits on public life, the general uncertainty, the sense of living through a pivotal historical moment. The consequences of the corona crisis feel more drastic, it is true; but the after-effects of 9/11 are more far-reaching than most people realise.

We have to ask ourselves, therefore, whether there might not be a deeper connection between these two events, whether they might not share common causes and continuities, a 'long duration', a *longue durée*. We have to ask ourselves what lessons can be drawn from both events. And depending on how we answer that

question, it might be possible to make a convincing argument for a new, alternative politics.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves how our reaction to the virus crisis is shaped by patterns that have developed over the last twenty years, under the influence and during the era of terror. It would be very surprising if we had not been shaped by them. But are these patterns any use when it comes to coping with a global pandemic?

A surprising example of how deep the unspoken connection between 9/11 and the corona crisis runs was provided right at the beginning of the crisis by the popular Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. He published a pamphlet in Italy's communist daily newspaper *Il Manifesto*, in which he criticised Western governments for declaring a state of emergency. He accused them of doing this in order to appropriate extraordinary powers: 'With terrorism having been exhausted as a source of justification for the state of emergency, the invention of an epidemic serves as the ideal pretext for extending it infinitely.'<sup>1</sup> Coronavirus, he claimed, was 'an ordinary flu'.

This attitude shows the extent to which responses to the virus crisis – even those of the finest minds – have been shaped by the era of terror. The terror attacks were indeed used as a justification for suspending basic rights and establishing a kind of state of emergency, and the motives for the state of emergency triggered by the coronavirus are now felt to be no better. This illustrates how dangerous it can be when fears from past historical moments are automatically applied to society's current circumstances. It can lead to a complete misjudgement of the situation, costing many people their lives.

Agamben's assessment may be entirely wide of the mark, but he is certainly not the only one to have been led astray by outdated interpretative patterns. And the fact remains that Agamben is voicing a basically legitimate concern. He fears that the present emergency could be exploited by governments and states; that the authorities (especially state actors) might fall back on deceptive political patterns and use the situation as an opportunity to permanently remove basic rights, as seems to be happening in Hungary.

<sup>1</sup> <https://ilmanifesto.it/lo-stato-deccezione-provocato-da-un'emergenza-immotivata/>

One very real danger, for example, relates to digital data protection, which was already in a patchy state (and has been ever since 9/11). Now it seems the plan is to relax it even further, on a voluntary basis. To this end a new magic word has been invented: 'data donation'. The idea is that people will hand over their data like a donation to a good cause. But how long will this donation remain truly voluntary? Those who choose not to donate could soon be seen as lacking in solidarity, and there is a danger that once-voluntary donations might, under the pretext of an emergency, become a legal requirement. It is also possible that the collected data might provide more and different information than that needed to combat the virus. Israel is already using insights gleaned by the intelligence services through counter-terrorism operations to trace the contacts of infected individuals.

This too, we might think, is a good thing. But suppose you just happened to walk past the wrong person yesterday – somebody who was infected with the virus. The next day, out of the blue, you get a text message from the intelligence services ordering you to quarantine yourself immediately for a period of two weeks. Even though it is not certain that you have the virus, and you have not been tested, you are threatened with a large fine if you do not comply.

Furthermore, you are forced to carry your mobile phone with you at all times and never turn it off. This means it is always possible to locate you. To check that you are obeying these rules, you receive messages at irregular intervals, which you have to reply to. You cannot give your phone to somebody else and secretly leave the house, because the app only works via fingerprint or facial recognition or by scanning your eyes. The mobile phone, which only yesterday was the source of our freedom and independence, thus becomes a telephonic shackle. In China this process is already underway. Turkey has recently made it mandatory for infected individuals to use a tracking app which traces their movements. Anyone who breaks the quarantine rules is sent a warning by text message.

The surprising thing about these developments, and one which gives grounds for scepticism, is the way in which health has suddenly taken priority over everything else. Until now it was the economy and entertainment that ruled our lives, and governments seized every opportunity to make spending cuts to health services. This begs the question: are the measures currently being adopted really all about protecting our health?

I think they are. The main aim is undoubtedly to make sure the health service does not collapse, which it would do if the virus was given free rein. Behind these serious concerns about public health, however, lies another agenda, another challenge for politics and society.

What we are seeing at the moment is the question of social control being thrashed out in the field of health. It is a question we do not ask ourselves when everything is running smoothly: how is society held together and managed, what are the minimum requirements for ensuring that anarchy does not break out, that a dictator does not come to power, that we do not have the army on our streets? In the past, this question was debated in connection with other areas which were seen as particularly important, as 'systemically relevant': the economy in 2008, when many banks were at risk of going bankrupt, and security after the terror attacks in September 2001 and the years that followed.

In the struggle to protect our social system in the face of the pandemic there are two particularly important players, who also happen to be in competition with each other. On the one hand there are the various nation states, and on the other the global internet giants like Google, Apple, Amazon, Instagram, Facebook and so on. Only they have access to the personal data needed in order to exert direct control over people; movement data, personal interests, contact with others and so on. The state, by contrast, has the necessary regulatory authority, the police powers.

Only when both these things – personal information and regulatory power – come together does it become possible to control society in such a way that public health can be reliably protected during a pandemic. Of course, for the purposes of counter-terrorism (or simply surveillance of the population) many states were already secretly monitoring internet traffic without the knowledge of the individuals concerned, or of the internet giants. So what is the difference? In the current situation, the difference is that the citizens under surveillance are being surveilled in an official and completely legal manner; they know, and are supposed to know, that they are being surveilled. This is no minor detail, but a crucial distinction. Because only when we know we are being surveilled does it affect our actions, causing us to change our behaviour in the way the authorities or the state want us to. Only then are we being not merely watched, but also influenced and controlled.

The fact that this state of affairs is dangerous and open to abuse goes without saying. It need not always be dangerous, however. This form of monitoring, surveillance and control is currently helping to curb the spread of the pandemic. Where it becomes truly dangerous is in the hands of authoritarian and undemocratic regimes – especially when these regimes cannot be voted out, as in China, Russia, Iran and many other countries.

In systems like these, instead of monitoring people's health using apps, the same technology can be used to control all kinds of movement. With the help of tracking apps, despotic regimes can force any individual to stay at home or within a certain radius of their home. They do not even need prisons, nor do they need to use violence – unless people fail to stick to the rules. But there cannot be many people who would not rather be locked up in their own home than in a prison cell.

We, citizens, people all over the world, are thus faced with two major challenges at the same time. And these challenges are effectively incompatible: on the one hand we have to do our best to keep the actual, biological virus at bay – especially where we think it is being used as a pretext to implement a certain kind of authoritarian politics. At the same time, however, we must protect ourselves against the virus of the 'surveillance society', that political virus which is taking root in the wake and slipstream of the biological virus, and which many people are failing to notice. Some, in fact, are even welcoming it. The more quickly we can curb the spread of the virus by natural means – i.e. through sensible, considerate behaviour – the less of a risk there is that technology and surveillance will take on this role. And the less of a risk there is that governments will use the crisis and the virus as an excuse to restrict our freedom and experiment with new surveillance techniques.

Our much-vaunted freedom, our individualism, 'our' lifestyle as such: all these nice things are clearly not 'systemically relevant' after all, and that is not surprising; they are, by definition and by nature, the opposite of surveillance and security and state control over society. During the current crisis, politics and the state have been stripped back to their most basic functions – monitoring and security – and the very real shock which many people are now experiencing stems from the sudden realisation that everything else was never really that important; it was all just for show, just pretty words.

This has become most apparent in precisely those areas which, in normal times, commanded a great deal of attention and symbolic significance: sports and culture. They were the first sectors to be prevented from functioning normally; they were the easiest to scale back and suspend, and they will probably never be resurrected in their former dazzling glory. Now, in fact, we are asking ourselves: how much sport do we really need? What does it mean not to be able to go to concerts, cinemas and museums anymore? What do we lose by no longer hearing authors read, no longer attending talks or going to the theatre? And surely governments will have no trouble cutting public funding for culture and the arts if it turns out that we can in fact do without them? But can we do without them?

The virus and terrorism are a prism. They split our societies into their spectral colours and show us who we are, the elements we are made up of, how the hardware beneath our attractive yet deceptive user interfaces really works, and what our priorities are, once we get beyond rhetoric and wishful thinking. And while this spectrum analysis is going on we look at each other, scratch our heads and wonder what sort of a world we will wake up in tomorrow.

## PART 2. THE RHETORIC OF WAR

One striking similarity between the corona crisis and the aftermath of the 2001 terror attacks in the USA is rhetoric. People are using the language of war to emphasise the gravity of the current situation. As with the terrorists in 2001, now it is the virus that must be defeated. “We are at war,” say the leaders of many cities, both in the US and elsewhere. Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York, sent a tweet referring to ventilators as the ‘weapons’ in this war. Equating ventilators with weapons belies the crucial difference between them, which is that ventilators save lives, whilst weapons destroy them.

The comparison not only downplays the destructive nature of weapons; it also testifies to a severe paucity of language. And behind this paucity of language lies a lack of ideas, a lack of alternatives. This same lack of ideas was at the root of the helpless responses to the terrorist threat: the only available solutions seemed to be ones involving the police and the military. Nothing else seemed to occur to anyone. In Afghanistan and Iraq, this led to devastating and ultimately failed wars.

Current governments, by talking about a ‘war’ against coronavirus, evoke the possibility of introducing wartime-style measures. This is exactly what happened nineteen years ago during the ‘war on terror’, when extensive surveillance measures and the suspension of basic rights were enforced. At that time, only a small number of people were affected (where certain methods of torture were approved, for example). Now, however, the measures affect everybody. And without the rhetoric of war it would be difficult to persuade people that their homes should be turned into self-catered prison cells and their mobile phones into electronic tags, whilst at the same time large numbers of inmates are being released from prison early due to the risk of infection. What an inverted world!

Admittedly, all of this is happening in a good cause – to save lives. But isn’t that always the case in such crisis situations? Even the Americans’ ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ were, according to the US government, used only in order to save lives and prevent further terror attacks. Unsettling though these similarities may be, it is important to stress that there are also crucial differences: in all likelihood, the torturing of suspects did not save any lives or prevent any terror attacks. Household quarantine, in all likelihood, is saving lives.



One might also argue that the current warlike rhetoric is not designed to evoke a real war, but is to be understood metaphorically, and helps to underline the urgency of the situation. But all the talk of a 'war on terror' was just a metaphor at first too. And metaphors generate a momentum of their own. They are like a self-fulfilling prophecy: all at once, a figure of speech becomes a reality. There is a danger that the metaphor of a 'war against the virus' might generate just such momentum, might become just such a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This danger exists partly because the virus is just as invisible, intangible and pervasive as terrorism seemed to be after 9/11. A figure who became symbolic of this was the so-called 'sleeper', a terrorist living unobtrusively among us, ready to carry out a surprise attack at any time. Because it was mainly Muslims who were suspected of playing this role, all the talk of 'sleepers' fuelled anti-Muslim racism. In the years from 2001 to 2020, this resulted in the growth of a global, white, far-right terrorism, which came to a tragic head in Germany with the deadly attack in Hanau not long before the corona crisis began. Clearly terrorism was never just a 'Muslim problem', but was as contagious as the virus itself – which is not just a Chinese problem.

Terrorism and the virus are similarly contagious; but there is one interesting difference between them. While the terrorist threat was long perceived as a danger posed by others, by foreigners, never by 'ourselves' (whoever that might be), and never by 'oneself' – for we think we know ourselves, and know that we would never commit such acts – the real virus can turn anybody (including 'us') into a threat, and it can do this against our will, outside of our control and without our knowledge.

In the current situation every one of us is a potential sleeper, a potential threat, against whom the war on the terror of the virus is being fought. Now we all serve as examples of what Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, said of the ego: that he is not master in his own house. Narcissistic and megalomaniac personalities find this particularly hard to accept. They do not want to believe that they themselves could be sleepers, so to speak, and that they could infect other people, whether with the virus or with their own megalomania and narcissism. When people like this hold positions of power, they pose just as great a danger to their societies as terrorism. During the current crisis, politicians like Trump in the USA, Johnson in Britain and Bolsonaro in Brazil are illustrating this on a weekly basis.

Unsurprisingly, it is not only self-confident politicians who are guilty of this mindset. Members of the general public, too, are starting to reject the ‘insulting’ blanket suspicion that they might be a carrier of the virus. They think of themselves as blameless and harmless. This represents another striking analogy with the post-9/11 era: it resembles the sense many Muslims had, following the terror attacks, that they were suspected of being sympathisers, supporters or sleepers simply because they were Muslim. Now, however, we are all in the position of the Muslims who were subjected to that blanket suspicion, and we want to signal that we are harmless, that we are ‘normal’. But we still come under general suspicion; we are detained in a kind of preventative collective custody, and treated as potential threats – not Islamist ones, but virological ones. This is an interesting experience for every one of us.

Looking back on the era of terror also teaches us that it would be reckless to think the virus will soon be defeated. It is already becoming clear that there might be several waves of the disease, with ‘virus clusters’ continuing to flare up here and there like forest fires. Even if a vaccine does become available within the next year, we should not be too quick to let our guard down. In 2002 the Taliban appeared to be defeated. They came back stronger, and forced the Americans into peace talks. Bin Laden was killed, and his terrorist organisation Al-Qaida became irrelevant. In its place, however, we saw the emergence of IS, the so-called Islamic State, a terror organisation with methods even more brutal than Al-Qaida’s. And in the end, terrorism jumped the supposed cultural barrier between Islam and the West, just as the virus jumped the biological barrier between animals and humans.

Of course, the modern form of terrorism as later adopted by Islamic fundamentalists has its roots in nineteenth-century Europe. It was originally conceived of by anarchist and nationalist liberation movements as a way of drawing attention to their causes and demonstrating the fragility of the established order. This in turn inspired the campaigns of anticolonial resistance movements such as that of the Algerian liberation movement the FLN against the French, that of the Jewish organisation Haganah against the British Mandate for Palestine, and later that of the Palestinians against the Israelis, and so on. In its turn, like a re-imported virus, the terrorism bred by these conflicts went on to infect and inspire Western movements, including the terrorists of the white supremacy movement, who practise a kind of ‘vigilante’ terrorism. They believe they have to protect their societies against supposedly foreign elements or despotic governments, as the

perpetrators of the attacks in Hanau in 2020 and in Utøya in 2011 tried to argue in their rabid manifestos.

The implications of this for the current situation are as follows: there will be other viruses, and coronavirus itself will recur in several waves. It may mutate, so that vaccinations are no longer effective against it, and it will flare up again in various places at a local level, meaning that many measures which have recently been adopted for the first time will become entrenched. After 9/11 governments had the threat of terrorism permanently on their radars, and felt as though they had to be constantly adopting some counter-terrorism measure or other (whether or not these measures were actually useful) so as to signal their concern and ability to act. In the same way, the corona crisis will keep the viral vulnerability of our societies at the forefront of people's minds, and some politicians will use it as a pretext for populist grandstanding, introducing authoritarian measures just for show (closing borders, for example, halting immigration or imposing strict lockdowns). Some, on the other hand, will stake their political futures on arguing for liberation from corona measures – so-called 'opening up' – and making out that things are really not all that bad. We are already seeing this happen today. These two inherently contradictory political responses may also be embodied in one and the same politician, as seems to be the case with Trump. He is attempting to play on both forms of populism at once – health populism and 'opening up' populism ('opening up America') – with the common denominator being, on the one hand, Trump himself, and on the other hand populism per se; for, as we know from experience, populism does not care whether statements are consistent or not.

From these examples we can see that the parallels between terrorism and the virus do not result merely from the fact of their existence, but just as much from our ways of dealing with them: gathering intelligence, using regulatory or police powers, and resorting to militarised rhetoric, populism and grand gestures. In democracies especially, the parallels lie in the way both the prevention of terrorism and the curbing of the virus are conceptualised as a form of war, of combat, of antagonism, in order to whip up emotions and political sentiments and win votes, instead of looking at events in an objective and factual way, finding out their causes, taking them seriously and learning lessons from them. As far as the 'war on terror' goes, we know now that it has failed, and has set in motion a series of catastrophic developments. It would have been more helpful to listen to the lessons of terrorism,

however unorthodox this would have been, however uncomfortable the message and the political consequences.

There are messages to be drawn from such crises, and if we want to be able to hear these messages and react to them in a more intelligent way, we need concepts other than just confrontation, war and antagonism. But what other concepts are there? We are faced with the same dilemma as the mayor of New York: we lack language, we lack alternatives. Once we have understood, however, that simple combat and open warfare cannot be the solution, it becomes clear that the right answer is exactly the opposite of war and confrontation: conversation, negotiation, compromise, coordination, solidarity, empathy.

In this light, the talk of a war against the virus seems all the more misguided. A war which serves merely to reduce the number of victims is an unheroic war, based on the principle of 'loving thy neighbour', and thus the polar opposite of war. An unheroic war is an absurdity. It lacks an enemy in the form of another person who can be blamed, who inspires anger, who serves as an object of hatred; this was the role the terrorists (and, for many people, Islam as a whole) fulfilled so perfectly. The war against the virus is purely rhetorical, and for this reason it is desperate and weak, a kind of 'shadow boxing'. The material sacrifices demanded of the population in this war help to reduce the number of human victims. Those who are saved, however, remain anonymous: they are just a statistic, whereas the restrictions placed upon individuals' daily lives are very concrete. For this reason, people can only identify with the cause they are 'fighting for' in a rather abstract way, and the emotional impact is lessened. However eagerly the war metaphor is bandied about, it fails to get people fired up.

In order to get the virus under control, we need to abandon the logic of war. When we have a problem, we need to abandon the logic of confrontation and enter into a dialogue with our opponent. Negotiating with the virus is in some ways easier than negotiating with terror, and in some ways more difficult. It is easier because it is not as offensive as negotiating with someone who hates us and attacks us. It is more difficult because the virus cannot tell us what it wants; it does not even have a will of its own.

Nevertheless, the virus does hold a lesson for us. It is the same lesson we could have learned from terrorism. The lesson is that we cannot control globalisation, and

that it creates many victims, both in terms of human life and in terms of nature and the environment. The lesson that terrorism and the virus can teach us is that we need to make globalisation work in a different, better, gentler way – a more considerate way, based on dialogue – or else it will devour us all.

### PART 3. GLOBALISATION

There are links and commonalities between 9/11 and the coronavirus crisis which go deeper than rhetoric and talk of war. Both the global spread of the virus and international terrorism are negative consequences of globalisation. They are its product and at the same time its nemesis. In other words, globalisation – the total interdependence of our societies on an international level – unleashes forces which work against its own progress. Terrorism and the virus turn globalisation against itself and call it into question, illustrating its risks and dangers, which cannot be reliably managed and controlled.

It already seems likely that after the corona crisis, the debate around globalisation will be reignited. Not voluntarily, of course, but in light of the political and global economic crises which will lie ahead of us. The interesting thing about this is that it will mean a return to the kind of debates that were taking place pre-9/11, such as the environmental policy agenda of the Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore in 2000, and the 1999 anti-globalisation protests surrounding the meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle. This time, however, the stakes will be even higher. With the terror attacks on 11 September 2001, these debates were interrupted: the climate debate, already long overdue, was delayed for over fifteen years. The economy, meanwhile, profited from the political focus on terrorism and, regardless of the consequences for the environment, ploughed on with globalisation until it was both complete and seemingly irreversible.

The aforementioned lack of concepts to help us deal with the challenges we currently face is closely linked to the interruption of alternative debates as a result of 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’. President Bush’s motto at that time – ‘You’re either with us or against us’ – leaves no room for flexible responses, neither to terrorism nor coronavirus nor economic globalisation. But whilst before coronavirus a distinction was drawn between ‘us’ and supposed ‘others’, now everyone is trying to fight the virus; in other words, everyone is on ‘our’ side. Many see this a positive thing (because the virus is uniting humanity and does not draw distinctions between people), but it could in fact be bad news.

Would it really be a good thing if there were no bridge between the absolute 'us' of humanity and the absolute 'other' of the virus – if there were no common ground at all? If all of humankind represents 'us', then what is the thing which is *against* us and thus which we, logically, have to be against? The danger is that this 'other' could become the whole non-human rest of the planet: nature, the environment, biodiversity. Given the way in which human beings have ravaged the natural world over the last few decades, this theory feels entirely plausible.

So we might think it is no wonder nature is hitting back, no wonder she too has adopted the motto that those who are not with her must be against her. She would probably be right. But since she is not an agent with human characteristics, we cannot enter into negotiations with her, cannot work out a compromise or conclude a peace treaty. The only options left to us, therefore, are to increasingly start taking our cue from nature, or to persist in the vain hope that we can, with the help of technology and science, win the war against her.

The idea of an 'us' which only includes humankind – pure anthropocentric humanism – is doomed to failure, however, as we now understand. This is a conclusion we could easily have drawn before 9/11, and which we might already have come to if 9/11 had not happened. Terrorism, and the aggressive politics that followed it, are partly to blame for the fact that nature is now demanding hard sacrifices of us, both in material and in human terms. She has 'defeated' us before we had the chance to cooperate with her, before we had the opportunity to do, of our own volition and in small steps, what we are now having to do hurriedly, without preparation and in dramatic circumstances. In order to successfully defend ourselves against the new 'enemy', we have been forced to make concessions – we have stopped flying, for example, and we are consuming less.

Interestingly, things were not all that different in the wake of 9/11. Despite all the rhetoric about freedom, the new counter-terror measures basically amounted to restrictions on the freedoms that had once been considered essential for the imagined Western 'us'. And the more intelligent players in politics and society began to engage with Muslims, taking an interest in them and seeking dialogue.

However reluctant we might be to acknowledge these positive effects and their connection to 9/11, many of us *are* prepared to admit that coronavirus could change our habits in a positive way in the long term, or that the crisis has had other

beneficial effects such as significant reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, a surprising new solidarity between people, changes to our priorities, and so on.

If, thanks to environmentally conscious policies, we had grown accustomed to a less expansive lifestyle ten or twenty years ago (however utopian this idea might sound), then we would not be experiencing the current restrictions as so drastic, and they would not need to be so intensive. This is so obvious that one hesitates to say it out loud. But it is important to say it out loud. Because by doing so, we are saying what will need to be done once the crisis is over.

Post-9/11 politics has had a direct impact on the political reaction to coronavirus in another quite different respect, too. The rise of right-wing populism in Western democracies cannot be understood without reference to 9/11. The populists' xenophobic discourse was fuelled first by terrorism, then by increased migration. The refugee crises in their turn were a direct consequence of the destabilisation of the Near and Middle East by the wars on terror. In light of the corona crisis, however, populism – with its propensity for exaggeration and conspiracy theories, its contempt for science, its political overreactions and knee-jerk responses – has proven itself to be a danger to life and health.

The names of the politicians who illustrate this are well-known. They all underestimate and downplay the virus, they have all argued for radical countermeasures too late or not at all (or advocated the wrong ones), and they all have a problematic relationship with the truth. The ways in which different countries are handling the corona crisis, therefore, and the politicians who are making life-and-death decisions, are largely a consequence of the rift in our politics which emerged following 9/11. The connection is there for anyone who wants to see it.

Islamist terrorism was itself a specific reaction to the new wave of globalisation which set in after 1989. At a deeper historical level, therefore, there are links to colonial globalisation and the anticolonial counter-reaction. Colonialism played a leading role in advancing viral globalisation, and profited from it; it made globalisation work in its favour. The almost complete annihilation of the indigenous peoples of both Americas was, statistically speaking, less a consequence of direct colonial violence than of American populations becoming infected with viruses and bacteria to which they had no resistance.



Just as colonial violence was a catalyst for terrorism, which in some cases drew on entirely legitimate anticolonial liberation discourses, we are now seeing a *viral nemesis* which is also experienced as terror and is compared with it. The countries of the northern hemisphere have developed no political and economic resistance to this viral nemesis, and the people who live there no psychological resistance. They are no longer used to such conditions – unlike the people of the southern hemisphere, unlike the victims of colonialism and globalisation, unlike people in China, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan or the Gaza strip, who have long been faced with repression, curfews and a lack of freedom.

Virality in and of itself – which can be understood in the non-biological sense as mediality, communication, the transfer of ideas, propaganda, proselytising, framing – is a symptom of the modernity which was introduced into the world during the colonial age. It is worth examining the theory that this modernity is best described not as a political or an economic one but as a viral one, in the metaphorical sense (in relation to ideas and concepts). This would explain why it goes hand-in-hand with ever-accelerating developments in communications technology, and why it drives forward this technology above all others, from the telegraph to the radio to visual media to the internet, which now enables the individualised exchange of data in real time. This virtual high-speed virality now puts us in the fortunate position of being able to thwart real, parasitic, biological virality. But the more successfully we thwart this biological virality, the more quickly we surrender ourselves to the data-hungry medial virality whose consequences will be even more disastrous and uncontrollable than those of the biological virus, for which there will one day be a vaccine. Terrible though the coronavirus may be, the infection of our politics by the police powers and data-hungry surveillance measures necessary to combat the disease could ultimately turn out to be even more dangerous. There is no vaccine against them.

But if virality per se is the basic principle of modernity and global interconnectedness itself, it should come as no surprise that it eludes control and can also turn against the very people (i.e. the ones living in liberal democracies) who have long used it with great success to serve their own ends. And the fresh resistance being mounted by biological-parasitic virality against the metaphorical virality of modernity is not new; our generation is not the first to experience it. It hampered and slowed early colonialism, too, and probably delayed the spread of Western-style

modernity for centuries, as we can see from the high rate of deaths from tropical diseases among Europeans posted to the colonies. The spread of the virus is a biological reaction to globalisation just as international terrorism is a political one. The question we should be asking ourselves, given the history of our handling of terrorism, is not how to completely wipe out terrorism or the virus; the price we would have to pay for this would be (and already has been, in the case of terrorism) far too high. The answer cannot be to declare a war which – in the absence of military or medical targets capable of being categorically defeated – can never be conclusively won. The question can only be how to rob the virus and terrorism (which has amply demonstrated its own viral characteristics) of their resonance chambers and opportunities to develop.

Another conclusion we might draw from our comparison of 9/11 and the corona crisis is that differentiating between politics and biology, between terror and the virus, is of secondary importance, and ultimately misleading. It hinders our understanding of current events, and makes it harder for us to learn lessons from one situation to apply to the other.

One of the lessons which can be gleaned from looking back at 9/11, and which would be helpful to us now in thinking about our long-term handling of the corona crisis, is that we should listen to what our opponent has to say to us, or seems to want to say, no matter whether this opponent is a terrorist or a virus, and no matter how uncomfortable or even unacceptable this message may seem at first.

The attitude of pseudo-superior arrogance that was cultivated after 9/11 must not be repeated. If the ‘lesson’ we take from a crisis is to carry on doing exactly the same thing we were doing before – if not more zealously – then it is not worthy of being called a lesson. What is at stake here is nothing less than societies’ ability to learn – liberal democracies in particular. If they do not have this ability to learn, they will not be able to stand firm against autocratic tendencies. There is a very great deal at stake.

## PART 4. THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

Terrorism shares with the corona crisis another condition without which neither of them would have been able to emerge, at least not on the scale they have done. I am talking about a political plight: that of undemocratic political rule. This sounds abstract, but is easily explained: it is likely that coronavirus would have been rapidly halted if the Chinese authorities had not censored initial reports about it from doctors. Censorship is a sure sign of, and a method favoured by, autocratic political regimes which lack democratic legitimacy. One might argue that the very thing which enabled China to combat the virus effectively later on – namely the government’s extensive authoritarian control over society (for which, paradoxically, the Chinese have often been praised) – was also what enabled the virus to spread in the first place, given that the censors suppressed early reports from doctors.

There is likewise a clear link between the emergence of Islamist terrorism and the despotic, undemocratic regimes in the Islamic world. These regimes were the original target of Islamist terror long before targets in the West. This was true of secular and Islamic regimes in equal measure, particularly Saudi Arabia (one of the main opponents of Bin Laden and IS). The internationalisation of terror has, like the international spread of the virus, been fuelled by regimes lacking in democratic legitimacy and acceptance: in order to distract opposition movements from focusing on the domestic situation, the Islamist ideology – with the support of the states that had found themselves in its firing line, chiefly the emirates and kingdoms in the Persian Gulf – was exported, and its violent representatives were driven underground, abroad, or into warzones like Afghanistan or Iraq. From there, these militants (Bin Laden being one example) began to seek out new targets. The exporting of extremism and terror, the displacement of what was originally domestic terrorism into other countries, was central to the survival of these regimes and their ability to ward off criticism and conceal their lack of credibility and legitimacy.

This sheds light on a phenomenon which is rarely acknowledged in people’s assessments of the Chinese response: the exporting of the virus, the problems it is now causing all over the world, have lent China’s authoritarian handling of it a retrospective legitimacy which would have been out of the question if the crisis had

not been exported. If the virus had been contained within China, the corona crisis would have been interpreted as a uniquely Chinese scandal. It would have been seen as an aberration which open, democratic societies would have believed themselves safe from. Because all countries are now being forced to implement similar measures to China, however, the Chinese government's strategy is seen as exemplary. Because the virus is now putting every political system in the world to the test, China has managed to avoid scrutiny of its own mistakes.

In a similar way, people have praised (and still do) despotic regimes, kingdoms and emirates which have bred and exported terrorism. They praise them for using ruthless measures to combat this terrorism – measures which, when they appear successful, are then also adopted by democracies. The fact that terrorism has emerged in those states *because* they are despotic, and that terrorism is a response to this despotism, is forgotten the moment terrorism becomes an international problem and open societies find themselves having to combat it too. Once exported, terrorism and the virus justify the means to which they owe their existence, and confer legitimacy on regimes which do not otherwise possess it.

One of the lessons of the era of terror which might help us in our response to the corona crisis is to apply the principle of social distancing to our interactions with undemocratic regimes which, when you get too close to them, export their own lack of democracy like a virus. 'Social distancing' when dealing with these states (just as with social distancing in real life) does not mean breaking off all dialogue with them, suspending all trade or stopping all human contact. But it does mean reducing dependencies, keeping links transparent and creating political and economic 'airlocks' which act as a form of quarantine: building delays and buffers into interactions, for example, and ensuring self-sufficiency when it comes to medical equipment, food and energy. The real danger, then, is not the movement of people but the movement of goods and capital, or overly liberal trade agreements.

If we did take this path, it would soon become clear that we are making it too easy for ourselves, and persisting in the paradigm of a complacent liberal world view, by locating the cause of the problem solely in the undemocratic nature of illiberal states and systems. Instead, we need to recognise – as terrorism and the virus are forcing us to do – that the legitimacy and illegitimacy of political systems exist in a

symbiotic, even parasitic relationship to one another; that they need each other, and that terrorism and the virus exploit this symbiosis.

The acceptance of liberal societies by their populations, and thus a central pillar of their legitimacy, depends upon their affluence. The present affluence of many societies has only been made possible by globalisation, and thus by low wages in other countries. The governments of these other countries, however, cannot offer the prospect of similar affluence to their own populations – at least not to large swathes of them – and so cannot gain legitimacy that way. In a simplified and rather polemic vein, we might argue that the liberal societies of the West owe their legitimation to authoritarian systems in other parts of the world.

In undemocratic and not fully democratic societies, on the other hand, legitimacy or acceptance by the population is ensured in a different way – by a promise. This promise consists of providing the security and order necessary for people's basic existential needs to be met, but nothing more. There is a tension, however – even a conflict – between precisely this basic promise and the further-reaching, more generous promise of open societies to give all people the greatest possible scope for self-realisation. In order to combine the two – a stable order and maximum freedom – you need enough affluence to give broad sections of the population the feeling that despite the order and security, they are able to live the way they want. This, however, is only possible in a few societies or countries, because of the expenditure and consumption required to achieve it.

To be able to generate the added value necessary for freedom and self-realisation, affluent societies are invariably dependent upon other societies which are *not* able to do this. This problematic mutual dependency between liberal and illiberal societies is the joint, the interface, across which terrorism and the virus jump from one form of society to the other. Any sign of insecurity, any semblance of a loss of control, such as those represented by terrorism and the virus, undermine the legitimacy of regimes and systems which offer little other than the guarantee of order, security and the existential minimum.

The affluence of liberal societies is dependent upon the stability of these systems, and therefore also upon their constraints and control mechanisms. This makes liberal societies complicit with autocracy and censorship – and thus with the basic conditions that provided a breeding ground for terrorism and the virus, and enabled

their spread across the globe. In the event of global 'economic distancing', and the economic disentanglement which now seems advisable, it remains to be seen whether open societies will be able to retain the legitimacy their affluence has bought them.

For most people, the clearest and most palpable similarity with the last epoch-making change they experienced – 9/11 – is the sudden omnipresence of the state. Until recently the state was still in retreat, in justification mode, under pressure from ideologies which preached freedom from state regulation as the cure for all the world's ills. Now, however, the crisis has turned the state into a crucial player and director once more.

What is new about the corona crisis is that the state has entered into a custodial, and thus (according to the liberal conception of the state) antagonistic, relationship with its own population. It has to discipline people for the sake of the greater good, thus disempowering them to some extent; it has to impose upon them certain ways of behaving which they would never have adopted voluntarily. This kind of antagonism between the population and the state is something we did not see so much of after 9/11. At that time, the restrictions placed on certain basic rights went unnoticed by most people and, unlike the current changes, were perceived by very few as existential; they were even welcomed by many.

The clear prioritisation of the healthcare system above all other important social spheres (which seems so far to be unanimous in most parts of the world) is as logical, in light of the situation caused by the virus, as it is striking considering the economy-focused and austerity-driven policies of the last few years and decades. It is unsurprising that something which is a threat to life should alarm the state. But only superficially unsurprising. It is certainly not as if the state intervenes in every case of life-threatening danger to its citizens; nor would it be possible for it to do so. Even where it would be possible, however, most states – if they act at all – act with reluctance. Climate change and environmental issues are two examples of this.

Clearly, therefore, the question of life and death is less important than the question of whether the state is able to establish a form of control and thereby retain its legitimacy. The comparison with 9/11 illustrates this: the terror attacks marked a radical loss of control by US institutions (i.e. the state). This loss of control was visible to all; it was almost obscenely evident, in fact, due to the attacks being

broadcast live all over the world. It led to the rise of populism, the desire to 'make America great again', and manifests itself today in the loss of a shared, society-wide concept of truth, both in the USA and elsewhere.

Seen in the light of September the 11<sup>th</sup>, the corona crisis turns out to be a test of the sovereignty of the state and its capacity for control. Especially when (and precisely because) the state has lost control of the virus, and the virus and its consequences have started to determine the state's agenda and perception in the media, it is forced to demonstrate control in other ways, sometimes merely symbolic ones, such as declaring states of emergency. Against this backdrop, there is a danger that certain measures will be introduced not because they are particularly effective against the virus, but because they give the impression that the state is in control and capable of acting, and thus counteract the erosion of legitimacy and trust in the state and in the social order as a whole. Precisely this course of action, however, could undermine people's trust in the state even further.

## PART 5. NATIONALISM

Nationalism – which has surged again in the wake of 9/11 and the refugee crises – and the complacent fantasy of ‘splendid isolation’ both play a key part in the tendency to see the virus crisis as a national one and the desire to approach it as such. In many countries, it is now impossible to tell whether border closures are driven more by public health concerns or by ideological motives. Instead of helping those who are currently being hit hardest by the virus crisis, and who might be able to help others in their turn later on, the situation is descending into a pointless medical, economic and political competition between different systems. The EU is in danger of foundering on the protestant economic ethics of the Dutch and the Germans, and the corona figures published daily by John Hopkins University, which are reminiscent of sports league tables, fuel notions of systemic competition. Whoever emerges strongest from the crisis has won: this is the prevailing mood, despite the fact that it makes little sense given how interconnected and interdependent our world is.

One of the problems here may be that the strengthening of state control, reassuring though it might be, usually amounts to *national* control; it emphasises borders and gives rise to separate attempts at problem-solving rather than coordinated solutions. This approach actually compounds the problem that needs to be solved. The health crisis has become a systemic and existential crisis for many countries because, right from the beginning, governments tried to solve it only at a national level.

To understand the potential for cooperation during the corona crisis, we must take into account the time factor in the spread of the virus. The disease does not flare up everywhere all at the same time, but moves around the globe like a wave. This means that not every country is affected to the same extent at the same time. And it means that less badly hit countries often have spare capacity in their healthcare systems which could enable them to help those worse affected, who could then help them in turn at a later date, as the wave moved on. If such international medical cooperation could be achieved, relief could be provided to every country’s healthcare system at the peak of its own wave of infection. The same



goes for protective equipment, which is not needed in the same quantities everywhere at once, as well as medical personnel, testing capacity, ventilators and so on.

Of course, even in the event of closer cooperation and greater solidarity between nations it would still be vital to ensure that the virus was not allowed to spread unchecked. It would probably still be necessary to limit freedom of movement, including, of course, movement across borders. But if the restrictions were largely identical in Poland, Germany and France, for example, it is hard to see why people should not be allowed to cross those national borders.

If borders are declared barricades, on the other hand, the inevitable implication is that people from other countries – Poland or France or anywhere else – are infectious, and that we must avoid contact with them in order to protect ourselves. Here too, border closures feed a fantasy, cultivating ideas of clinical cultural or national purity and implying a self-sufficiency and autonomy which has not existed for a long time, and which the virus has revealed to be a fiction – just as international terrorism and economic globalisation did before it.

But what can we do instead to curb the spread of the virus? The answer is simple. We should pursue a very similar strategy to the current one, but link it to different aims, package it differently, communicate and convey it differently. As mentioned above, it is sensible to restrict travel and the movement of people. But it is possible to limit or completely eliminate traffic, especially air traffic, without portraying these measures as national ones, without using national borders as a marker or yardstick for these measures, and without ascribing to them a significance which – in the face of the virus as in the face of terrorism – will only ever be illusory and which exacts an absurdly high price whilst actually causing even more damage.

The idea of nations ‘going it alone’ is not only morally reprehensible, costly and dangerous to economies and public health, however: it also shows that we are still not ready to listen to the virus, to take its ‘lesson’ on board, to adjust our mindset to take account of it. We know that we can slow the spread of the virus by travelling around less; but we also know that it does not care about borders, does not come to a halt at borders. If nations were to shut themselves off for this purpose, it would be even more costly than establishing a border which no refugee can cross.

The suspension of all cross-border movement of people, as we have seen implemented by most countries, is a cosmetic control policy, smoke and mirrors designed to make people believe that the government is taking effective action. It plays into ideological, ethnic, identity-related and nationalist prejudices. Even worse, such a policy surrenders to these prejudices, falls into their trap, amplifies them, grants them a potency which – measured against the infectiousness and invisibility of the virus – does not exist. Such a mindset thereby reduces the courses of action open to the most important player (the state) to *national* interests alone, and ignores the existential international integration and interconnectedness of all nations. It endangers the security of supply to populations, for example, as well as the economy, which cannot be sustained in any country without borders having to be crossed.

A simple example of this is tourism. Many countries, by closing their borders based on a nationalistic mentality, are undermining their own economic foundations if they happen to be reliant on tourism. A flexible approach would be much more helpful. Tourists from countries or regions where the virus is under control could be permitted to travel to rural regions – such as coasts or islands – with similarly low levels of infection. Cities and other urban centres with high population densities, on the other hand, could remain closed to tourists, since the risk of mutual infection would be too high.

The irony and stupidity of purely national approaches is illustrated by the way cruise ships have been denied access to ports due to suspected coronavirus cases on board, even though we can assume that in most places it would be possible to quarantine people on dry land. To leave these cruise ships stranded at sea is nothing short of immunological populism. It is a betrayal of all civilised values, not least the values often invoked in justification of unpopular measures like stay-at-home orders – such as the importance of saving lives.

The perverse irony of this treatment of cruise ships and the uncanny resemblance to post-9/11 politics lies in the fact that it is now the wealthiest sections of the world's population (for who else can afford to go on a cruise?) who are being ostracised like lepers. We are used to seeing this sort of treatment meted out to people seeking sanctuary, but until now it was only the poorest who were affected. We saw it with the odysseys of refugee rescue boats which were forbidden from docking at any port.

There are huge differences between cruise ships and refugee boats, of course, but in both cases it is the same absurd logic driving the treatment of people in need: the belief that it is possible to prevent infection – in the former case by the virus, and in the latter by poverty, suffering, persecution and war – by implementing a primitive and antisocial border policy. The very same policy, however, which certain countries have used to try to shut out the poorest sections of the world's population and avoid all contact with them, is now affecting and attacking the richest sections of the world's population (as if it really was a virus). It is exposing them – just as it did the refugees before them – to mortal danger, stigmatisation and ostracism. People who can afford to go on cruises, who probably live in gated communities and are keen to keep the rest of the world at bay, are now being shut out by the rest of the world.

There is no cause for *schadenfreude*, however, because the mentality in both cases is the same, and it is a bad one. Not only is it fatal, but it can also backfire at any time upon those who think they can exploit it and manipulate it for their own ends – those who think they can exclude and marginalise others while they themselves are safe on the inside, unaffected by poverty, terror, tyranny, war or the virus.

It is becoming abundantly clear, however, that this mentality and these policies can be directed against anyone, even against the rich – which makes it all the more foolish to adopt this mentality as the guiding principle of immunological policy and to believe that it (of all things) can protect us. Sensible though it is, as I have said, to restrict travel and contact between people in the short term, letting cruise ships or refugee boats into ports will not do much to worsen the crisis (which has already taken root), and nor will allowing local border traffic, or clearing refugee camps by taking in refugees or distributing them across various countries. Doing this would be a powerful symbol of international solidarity, which is also needed when it comes to tackling the refugee crisis. We would be reinforcing the universal values we often invoke and defend on a national level. If we see them *only* as national, however, we find ourselves occupying a contradictory position, since universal values – by their very nature – apply to everyone.

In conclusion: when it comes to combating the virus, there can hardly be a more foolish kind of politics than one which divides people. That kind of politics has already failed in the fight against terror. Not only has it failed: it has bred new

terrorism, in the form of so-called Islamic State, for example, or the far-right terrorism which is now also a global phenomenon. The current corona policy threatens to sow the seeds of something very similar: the old virus of isolationism, which runs deep in our societies. It is this virus – which, as shown by the wars of the twentieth century, is a great deal more dangerous than coronavirus – that we will have to fight hardest to overcome in the years and decades ahead. If we do not succeed, then the inverted world in which we have been living since the emergence of coronavirus, if not since the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, will become a permanent reality.