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# TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

It is said that the COVID-19 pandemic acts like a burning glass in which things become larger and sharper. What do we see more clearly now? And are we also seeing something new? As a society are we ready to really look more closely? Are we ready to learn that “after the pandemic” cannot go back to “before the pandemic”? Are we ready to face the challenges that are now so clearly evident at all levels of our society? Will we resist the all too understandable longing to return to “normality” and draw consequences? Because we have noticed that something has to change – and that something can change.

We have known for some time that our (the German in my case) education system produces and reinforces inequalities. The pandemic, coupled with the deficits in digitization, made this grotesquely and embarrassingly clear. But what will this mean for the children and students affected by it, for their further development, for their degrees, their careers, their self-esteem? How do we want to take account in the future of the fact that digitalization is fundamentally changing our ways of acquiring, retaining and passing on knowledge, and that we therefore need to carefully recalibrate our notion of education, upbringing and skills. This does not mean simply expanding the networks and multiplying the number of end devices. But it also means accepting the pedagogical challenge of this epistemic break and rewriting it for a very heterogeneous society

with its very different preconditions and requirements.

We could all have known for a long time that our health care system has been transformed into profit-making units through the economization of recent years and has become increasingly “sewn to the edge”. It is not surprising that this had to fall on our feet in the pandemic – at most, it is surprising that things have not (yet) gotten worse. It is not surprising that those who were being applauded and hailed as system-relevant heroes are being told the next moment that in times of maximum debt due to COVID-19, higher rates are not possible. The fact that in healthcare some of the promised bonuses have still not been paid out is as shameful as it is expectable. This is based on the insight that social recognition and its economic remuneration do not go hand in hand with system relevance, i.e. social and productive importance for a society, but depend on economic power and political representation. If we are really serious about “system relevance”, then there is a considerable need for change here.

What consequences do we draw from the insight into the situation in nursing homes and homes for the elderly under COVID-19 conditions – where the highest death toll is paid in this pandemic? The fact that being old, dying, disability and death are not among the attractive items in our society trimmed for efficiency and functionality is not new. In the COVID-19 pandemic, however, once again it became abundantly clear that old, dying people and those with disabilities could lose their self-determination and dignity overnight, and that suddenly and very drastically others could determine what happened to them – whether they could understand this, wanted to or not. The ban on contact had not only locked

out relatives. People who were dependent on everyday assistance because of their disability were suddenly cut off from it or exposed to an incalculable risk. How should these people, who are in need of help and care, be appreciated in the future? It is unacceptable that their fundamental rights to self-determination and a dignified life are unceremoniously curtailed for reasons of health protection. Here we have a problem as a society that cannot be remedied by shaming a professional group that is notoriously understaffed in its work.

The fact that Germany entered the field of digitization as “uncharted territory” only a few years ago is often laughed at and illustrated with a critique of the dead spots in the republic. But the fact that such a digital infrastructure with the corresponding devices could become the central medium in times of tightened contact restrictions makes one wonder. It is the many video conferences, the electronic communication and trade channels that keep an important part of society running and together. This is not a plea for “Digitalisierung first, Bedenken second” (this was a campaign slogan of the party FDP in 2017: “digitalization first, concerns second”). But it does mean reflecting more closely on the conditions of a modern society and shaping them accordingly, because the opportunities for participation of many, if not all, people depend on this. Nevertheless, digitalization is not the overall solution that can now be applied to all social encounters to make everything nicer, better and more optional. The digitized registration procedures for an immunization appointment make it clear in a curious way – if it were not so serious – that people cannot simply be replaced by machines and that contact between people and machines can and must be made much better.

I don't want to conjure up the glib talk of the crisis, which is always also an opportunity. I consider that to be pure cynicism in view of the suffering, disruption and destruction that accompany this pandemic. But it would be fatal if we - individually and socially - made nothing out of this massive disruption of our orders and routines other than to return to them as quickly as possible. As understandable as the longing is that (almost) everything should be as it was before, this wish misses the possibilities and necessities of this situation.

This pandemic has shown that it is suddenly possible to do things that were previously considered impossible: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions can be drastically reduced. In view of the pandemic, enormous restrictions are possible. What could be done in view of the hardly less urgent climate crisis? Money doesn't seem to be the problem – at least not in our parts of the global north, where a “bazooka” is supposed to deliver the big “bang”. Sure, it all has to be paid back someday – by future generations, who may now be suffering the most from the curtailment of their prospects. But perhaps they would be willing to pay this price if we involved them more and really spent the money wisely.

It is internet and pharmaceutical companies, of all people, that are helping us to endure this pandemic and – if all goes well – to survive the majority of it. And above all the people who work for months in the clinics and homes for the survival of people beyond their own breaking point, who risk their own health, isolate themselves from their families partly for safety reasons, and watch and endure the horror of mass death. And all those who, in families, in risky workplaces or through their creativity, set an example of solidarity and perseverance. We can only do

it on both sides at once: the technical and the social. But this is precisely where the inequities intensify: While there is no shortage of money for masks, zoom licenses or even vaccines in Germany and other European Countries, there is no sign that caregivers, medical staff, cashiers, cultural workers or cleaners would be paid to the same extent.

The situation is complex and confusing, simple answers and quick solutions are honestly not to be had – also because the matter can only be dealt with globally. We will only be safe if everyone else in the world is safe. This means that when it comes to the distribution of vaccines, ventilation places and personnel, we have to think beyond our small world and direct our energies to the well-being of all people. Think globally, you can't get any smaller. And there are encouraging signs to be seen: the WHO's global Covax strategy, the European idea of joint vaccine procurement (not necessarily its implementation). All very laborious, slower than going it alone nationally, but – if done well – with more vision and sustainability.

Take a closer look and learn something new. That could be a lesson. It's not about knowing better than the others. It's about putting that better knowledge to work for everyone else and, in a sense, coming out of this pandemic stronger with a global immune system.



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