

Germany and Corona

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The quarantine occurred completely unexpectedly in Germany. We were very busy with ourselves. Germany was in major debates, which we all took seriously: what about gender equality? How do we deal with the flare-up of right-wing radicalism? Who will be the new ruling party leader? And above all, the question of climate change. In the middle of the discussion about stopping CO2 emissions, and whether we stick to the exit from nuclear energy, whether we shut off the coal-fired power plants before having built enough wind and solar plants, the crisis broke out.

In a city in China that hardly anyone had heard of, an illness had spread. We saw in TV blurry images of uniformed men building roadblocks, high-rise buildings in the flickering air, and close-ups of food markets. With the curiosity of anthropologists, we Germans followed what was happening there, but it was not an important message for us. It followed at the end of the news after all the essential subjects had been discussed. Did the infection come from a bat or a pangolin? Too bad for the concerned Chinese people.

And then it happened quickly, that Corona became the most important news of the day. Before we knew it, there were first infections in Germany. There was an outbreak in a small town, Heinsberg. Reporters who have never been there travelled to this city now stood excitedly in front of the town hall, speculating whether it would be possible to control the pandemic in Germany. We saw on TV how northern Italy was affected worse. Uniformed men put up roadblocks there that looked like the roadblocks in China. One German state after another fell: "Lower Saxony has the plague", "Thuringia has Corona", "Now Mecklenburg-Vorpommern". The first schools where there had been illnesses closed. Public events were called off. The journalists were still chasing each of these little nests of infection. We saw passport photos of sick people, and we mourned the first deaths as if they were distant relatives. But then we stopped following individual sufferers and deceased. They became numbers, numbers that were getting bigger and bigger: two-digit, three-digit, finally four and five-digit numbers.

Our government initially did nothing. At least nothing we noticed in public. Throughout February, it only distributed general press releases. When the Minister of Health stepped in front of the cameras on March 9 and advised older adults to behave cautiously, we young people did not feel addressed. Then, on March 10, the bang came: Details emerged from an internal government meeting. The Chancellor should have said that "60 to 70 per cent of people in Germany will be infected with the coronavirus".

We were unsettled. Suddenly it was no longer a media event - our own lives were concerned. The stock market prices of German companies collapsed. From March 10 to 12th, they continued to drop to lows. On March 12, the Chancellor stepped in front of the cameras. We should be solidary with ageing people and therefore refrain from attending "big" concerts and anything "that is not essential". Some events will have to be called off. When we sat in front of the TV, we nodded. All that she had said made sense to us.

However, it was unclear what she meant with that unspecific words. How should we react? Should football also be avoided? A first division game was scheduled for the next evening in a particular affected region. The football officials met the morning before the game, and the result was the cancellation of all football games. That surprised us. Sure, we had vehemently discussed in the few hours before that this one game should be cancelled and these officials should take the common good more important than profits. A few particularly daring people had even asked that all games be postponed because there was a high risk of infection in every full stadium. But we did not expect this to happen. For many years we had seen our caste of officials and politicians to take refuge in administrative regulations, and being entangled in debates on responsibility and bureaucracy. We didn't remember politics any other way. And now suddenly a committee acted, took its right to really decide something that had far-reaching consequences.

The weekend came, and we sat at home with our families. In my family, we discussed our trip to Austria, which we had planned for two months later. Should we cancel it? We decided to wait for more clarity.

The clarity increased over a few days, namely that the trip would hardly work. For many decades we had enjoyed the freedom of travel within the EU. On Tuesday, March 17, all of these accomplishments were gone, wiped out with an order from the Home Secretary: France, Austria, Denmark, Luxembourg and Switzerland were prohibited without special permission. Flights were cancelled and long traffic jams of 30, 40, 50, 60 kilometres formed in front of the borders. The evening news showed aerial photos of these long lines of standing vehicles. Suddenly, all Schools closed, public buildings were shut off. I received a call that the next day I should only come to my university. The TV stations changed their broadcasting scheme and brought special programs as part of the regular schedule. Restaurants had to close. We should only leave the house in the most exceptional emergency!

With the changes, a race to supermarkets began. Shelves were cleared. Some products, such as pasta and toilet paper, were particularly popular. Each household made a bulk purchase in the two days from March 16-18. From then on, we were isolated in our families.

We have been sitting like this for two weeks now; allegedly, the government will decide on further isolation in two or three weeks at the latest. When we do our walk once a day, everyone we encounter has a rushed look on their faces. We change sides of the street, avoid speaking to them. Each family is isolated in the cell of its apartment. We only become cherish with friends and family when we talk on the phone and share photos and videos.

Germany has not seen anything like this since the Second World War. I always wondered how all Germans back then had agreed at that time so unanimously. But within the last days, I experience how my home country, which was all my life full of different opinions, universally follows the quarantine. The opposition politicians disappeared just like the colourful political birds, all the EU officials who had previously been considered very important. The car industry, the core of our economy, cut production without an outcry. The Germans, who otherwise ignore every speed limit, bowed without contradicting to the authority of the state.

In the past, never one had ever appeared on the German public stage without resistance. People striving for attention had always had to overcome ridicule and shake off envious persons. And now, all of a sudden, the public stage was left without discussion to new personalities. Now the course of this country is without any debate in the hands of pale medicals.