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“YOU HAVE TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE!” OUR COMMON POST-CORONA FUTURE THROUGH A SWEDISH LENS

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Intensive care unit in Algemeen ziekenhuis St-Maarten

(Saint Martin’s General Hospital) at Mechelen, Flanders, Belgium, 10 June 2018, © Ad Meskens

By [Sigurd Bergmann](#)

Once the coronavirus pandemic is over, we will wake up to a new society. Before everything gets better, however, everything will get worse—for a long time yet. We are faced with frightening images and stories of suffering in refugee camps, ill-equipped hospitals in poor countries, and the suffering of so many people across Europe.

Ever since the coronavirus migrated from China’s “wet market” from animals to humans, we have gained daily insights into how the social body works. Does the pandemic offer us new opportunities, or will it lead to “a deafening silence—one that stops all rational thought”?^[1]

Discussions about the post-corona future have already started—long before we have buried all the dead and the chains of infection have come under control. In the near future, one might expect harsh and conflictual debates between those who strive for business as usual as quickly as possible and those who follow Churchill’s advice to “never let a good crisis go to waste,” envisioning a new, just, sustainable, and resilient global society. Conceivably, the virus might even accelerate a transformation to the still unseen “Ecocene,” beyond the Anthropocene.^[2]



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But will we finally be able to change course from a dysfunctional growth society to a “post-growth” society, beyond the supposed eternal growth of happiness at the “price” of the poverty of nature and the poor? Will the experience of quarantine teach us to slow down in economic, social, and cultural spheres, so that we can finally allow ourselves to really negotiate what characterizes a good life?

Will the national banks in Europe finally redistribute capital to those who produce goods and services for welfare, nature, the climate, and justice instead of providing intensive care for the profits of large corporations? Will anyone shed tears over the loss of budget airlines, SUVs, profit-making welfare companies, and coal-fired power plants? And can we hope that politics will be reborn from the iron grip of the pandemic? A virus can kill politics, but it can also obviously provoke politics, breathing new life into it. The opportunity is there, but it is important to seize it—after we have buried our corona-dead.

Unless the Swedish government realizes this, the country’s democracy is going to be in serious need of intensive care. How well is the Swedish government’s “immune system” functioning as the pandemic accelerates? Alongside intense activity with regard to mitigating the economic effects of the crisis, the Swedish government has made one central decision with regard to human health: to hand over all power to the Public Health Agency of

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Sweden (*Folkhälsomyndigheten*). However, this national agency has obvious problems in cooperating with scientists, who have protested several times, questioning the agency’s diffuse strategy. The agency does not disclose data to virological researchers, and the government does not really govern in what political scientists have described as a “government scandal.”[3]

The national health agency decrees “recommendations,” with only a few official restrictions having been implemented.[4] Sweden has chosen a separate path, different from all other European countries, relying on its citizens’ common sense (*folkvett*). Fortunately, enough citizens are following the recommendations, even if, due to the spring weather, one can observe an increasing number of people who do not.



Partying, “Kungsparken,” Malmö, Sweden, 9 May 2020, © Author

Consequently, the death rate in Sweden in comparison to the other Nordic countries (and Germany) is 3–5 times higher, which is deeply sad news. Nevertheless, this does not seem to concern the national health agency, the government, or most of the population. A

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virologist asked me whether this might cohere with secularism, but I think it is rather due to lacking remembrance of war. Swedes are “damaged by peace” so to say.[5] Such weak preparedness for crises in combination with a long-term feeling of security and trust in the welfare state (that has nevertheless been unhinged in a brutal neoliberal way) may lie behind the current state of affairs. At the same time, the well-known process of “social dissociation” comes, of course, into play, downplaying threats that can be overwhelming. Sars-CoV-2 obviously provokes a similar social process to that of our ongoing climate change crisis, where eco-anxiety can lead to denial and climate skepticism. Maybe the virus can also, therefore, help us in searching for antidotes and a vaccine against such climate apathy?

It is apparently too early to evaluate the number of fatalities and amount of suffering likely to occur in the long run and to compare different national strategies, but when the situation is rather painful, one must wonder if a politics more capable of acting *might* have been able to avoid the suffering evident among one’s neighbors. The public health agency’s consistently diffuse way of answering the question of whether they are striving for so-called herd immunity, as a method of defeating the virus, is plaguesome. Such a strategy demands that there be victims and human lives lost, and yet not many people are convinced of the effects of herd immunity.[6]

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Throughout the last few weeks, the virus has invaded the majority of elderly care homes, even though the public health agency had as a clear goal the protection of elderly citizens. In this context, the government was still allowing visitors to elderly care homes for a long time *after* the virus had already been detected in a number of care homes in Stockholm (31 March). Those who may be tempted by the “Swedish model” should, according to distinguished publicist Hans Bergström, understand “that a defining feature of it is a higher death toll.”^[7] Most countries in Europe are rather striving to suppress the waves of the virus, awaiting a successful vaccine. Of course, Sweden is also striving to flatten the curve. If the Swedish model proves to be right in the long run, a new lesson will have been learnt. If not, the country will face a horrible process debating the country’s irresponsibility, a process that has already started and that will be continued by the National Evaluation Committee.

What bothers me most about this situation is the deconstruction of politics in the context of coronavirus. In Germany, an exemplary method of discourse ethics, involving many experts and practitioners, offers the possibility for conditions of political decision-making. In Sweden, by contrast, the public health agency suffers from an inability to communicate with science, and yet wields the power to administrate every epidemiological dimension of the pandemic. Even if such work and responsibility-sharing

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follow a Swedish tradition, maintaining a clear division between national agencies and the government and the parliament, such a division appears deeply problematic in a state of crisis. It seems to be a risky continuation of the well-known abyss of modernist social engineering.

By contrast, politics is, in my view, meant to be an avenue for making wise decisions for the good of all in society on the basis of a dialogue between different voices and experts. To rely solely on a single agency, which appears to be immune to criticism, means to renounce one's political responsibilities and therefore abandon the people. Contrary to this agency's constant obfuscation and refusal to tolerate criticism, it is now the right time for (constructive) criticism and dialogue for the good of all.[8]

Even more extraordinary is the gap between medical realities on the one hand and the bureaucratic world on the other. Doctors in Stockholm came very close to reaching the limit of available intensive care beds, with staff suffering exhaustion as a result of the steadily increasing number of patients. In response, the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) let a single scholar trained in the field of so-called “medical prioritizing” compile within one week new guidelines for the ethical prioritization of patients through its ethics committee. This scholar's recommendations via the ethics committee implied that “biological age” should be used as a

criterion for the prioritization of patients. This might seem reasonable. Yet it allows, in fact, for a rational selection of strong and weak and is, therefore, a constitutionally and morally dubious claim made in accordance with a small group's prevailing understanding of what it is to be human. In the worst case, as in Italy and Spain, some people must be prioritized for care. Yet to do so according to the principles of highly questionable utilitarianism puts the constitutionally protected value of human life at stake. Even before hospitals had reached their limits, reports were flowing in suggesting that doctors were avoiding offering older patients an intensive care bed in order to keep a bed open for a younger patient who *might* come in the next day—a deeply immoral and illegal practice implemented due to stress and chaotic management. The national controlling authority took immediate action.

In his speech to the people on 22 March 2020, the Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, talked about the increasing death toll at the same time as he kept schools and preschools open to safeguard the labor market, or in his own words to care for “life, health, and jobs.” Allowing the national bank to abdicate its responsibility for managing financial aid and transferring it to the (unwilling) private banks, instead of sharing the funds according to social criteria, has already been severely criticized.

The active long-standing disarmament of all

social protection networks in a hostile neoliberal environment now proves to have been devastating. The restructuring of public life in accordance with New Public Management's socially harmful principles has for a long time crippled health care systems and public life. The pandemic has revealed in bright light the brutality of neoliberalism. It seems as if we can finally ask and discuss the question that environmentalism has formulated and so widely discussed for decades: Can we all just go on as before? How can we accelerate the “great transformation,”^[9] so necessary in these times, after our experience of the pandemic? Can the virus assist us in developing the truly green, global citizens once envisioned by Ulrich Beck?^[10]

*Kohlekraftwerk Niederaußem, Germany, 26 March
2012, CC BY 3.0*

The virus no doubt tests the values of a liberal democratic society and the professional ethics

of medicine. But has it also infected and started to replicate within the body politics? Will the splendid Swedish “folk home” (*folkhem*), which for so many years has been so proud of its egalitarianism, choose solidarity and human dignity, or will it instead choose to prioritize the lives of some over the lives of others under a dubious claim to “ethical prioritization,” and hence “rational selection” over solidarity? Older people are also not the only ones facing the greatest risk of becoming victims to the virus, with poor immigrants living in crowded housing also at high risk.

Traditionen bygger på en förtroende för att alla människor är lika värdefulla och att alla har rätt till samma möjligheter. Detta är en grundläggande värdegrund för Sverige.
, 22 June 2018

One needs to be careful about generalizing such critical remarks. Digital trolls and bots from Russia, China, and other autocratic regimes have attacked European countries, especially Sweden, with similarly exaggerated criticisms over the last few years in order to discredit

liberal democracies. At present, however, autocratic regimes have proved to be extremely bad at responding to the coronavirus crisis and protecting the life and health of their citizens. Democratic regimes seem to prove better. Hopeful developments are also taking place within the Swedish *Sonderweg*. Many people are acting in solidarity and following common sense by listening to the government's recommendations. One can only hope, along with sociologist Heinz Bude, that the experience of vulnerability leads to increased solidarity.[11] Trust in politicians and authorities is empirically increasing, which is perhaps what can one expect in times when comfort and safety are needed. “What characterizes Sweden in March 2020 is a new collective learning,” Sverker Sörlin aptly observes,[12] even if it is still unclear what lesson is being learned. Hopefully, Sörlin is right after having overcome his own struggle with the infection.

Many voices already argue against continuing the neoliberal destruction of health care and other social welfare services. Additionally, national ownership of corporations that receive government relief funds is being reconsidered. Although the Swedish Green Party partakes in government, the strongest arguments for a sustainable green economic recovery process are coming from civil society and transnational corporations, such as Ikea, Volvo, and H&M.[13] The late modern system of capitalism has been put on notice by the virus, and it will be exciting

to see if societies characterized by unsustainable and unjust lifestyles and modes of production and consumption will fall victim to it or recover, moving further towards therapy for a much-needed transformation.

When I first moved from Germany to Sweden as a young student in 1976, I was proud to be part of Swedish society's development of a fair, compassionate, and empathic community based on solidarity. When I moved back to Sweden in 2011 after twelve years in Norway, solidarity had been replaced by clan tribalism operating in the self-interest of diverse alliances. The two legislative periods dominated by right-wing parties, which called themselves “the alliance,” replaced what was formerly known as community or *folkhem* (the people's common home) in small-scale cultural contexts. Social and environmental justice have been relegated down the agenda, and empathy and solidarity have had to seek new expression on the margins of society, while the economic gap between rich and poor has consistently increased. Can the new country that we need to build in post-corona times become a resilient, sustainable, climate-friendly, and transnationally and locally just society where compassion overrides self-interest?

Rainer Maria Rilke's imperative, “You have to change your life!” (1908) might serve as a sign of the times and a way forward. It is actually quite possible to reverse or to go backwards, or in a

spiritual language, to repent. If we take up Rilke’s imperative and change our lives, the pandemic will have changed the world.^[14] Maybe the World Health Organization President’s vision, “to come together as one humanity”^[15] will come to pass in Sweden as well as elsewhere around the globe. The pandemic will then serve as “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”^[16]

This text was written on 22 March 2020 when the chains of coronavirus infection in Sweden were running out of control, and many European countries were starting to wonder whether the Swedish response was too lax. It was published in the online edition of the Church of Sweden’s *Kyrkans Tidning* in Stockholm. See Sigurd Bergmann, “Omvändelse fullt möjligt post corona,” *Kyrkans Tidning*, published March 30 2020. It was subsequently translated, revised, and expanded for SeeingtheWoods on 25 April 2020.

[1] Donald Worster, “Another Silent Spring,” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2020, no. 1 (22 April 2020), Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9028.

[2] Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, Chapter 8, in *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change* (forthcoming),

(London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

[3] Richard Sannerholm, “Kan vi lita på Sveriges politiker i skarpt läge?” *Expressen*, 21 March 2020.

[4] Such as an entry ban (for “unnecessary travel”) and a ban on public meetings of more than fifty persons. Universities and high schools have been shut down, while elementary schools and preschools have stayed open in spite of virologists’ warnings that intense, though often asymptomatic, infection chains are possible among children.

[5] Elisabeth Åsbrink, “Coronakrisen visar att Sverige är ett fredsskadat land,” *Dagens Nyheter*, 30 March 2020.

[6] “Herdenimmunität noch lange nicht in Sicht: Das Coronavirus-Update mit Christian Drosten,” *NDR Info*, 20 April 2020.

[7] Hans Bergström, “The Grim Truth About the “Swedish Model,” Project Syndicate, published 17 April 2020.

[8] Cf. Gero von Randow, “Corona und der Staat,” *ZEIT online*, 21 March 2020.

[9] Uwe Schneidewind, *Die Große Transformation: Eine Einführung in die Kunst des gesellschaftlichen Wandels* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2018).

[10] Cf. Ulrich Beck (ed.), *Politik der Globalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 61–66.

[11] Heinz Bude, “*Verwundbarkeit macht solidarisch*,” *Tagesspiegel*, 20 April 2020.

[12] Sverker Sörlin, “*Vi försöker gemensamt finna en väg – där en väg aldrig funnits*,” *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 April 2020.

[13] Cf. also the call for Green Recovery Investment Packages acting as accelerators of the transition towards climate neutrality and healthy ecosystems in “*Building Back Better: Green COVID-19 Recovery Packages Will Boost Economic Growth and Stop Climate Change*,” University of Oxford, published 5 May 2020. See also the call for mobilization in “*REBOOT & REBOOST our economies for a sustainable future*,” introduced by Pascal Canfin, EP Environment Committee Chair, BirdLife International, 14 April 2020.

[14] Rightly summarized by Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm in “*Corona-Pandemie wird die Welt verändern*,” Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Bayern, 19 March 2020.

[15] “*WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 20 March 2020*,” World Health Organization, 20 March 2020.

[16] Arundhati Roy, “*The pandemic is a portal*,”

Financial Times, 3 April 2020.

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