

Go die!

The Corona crisis shows that social Darwinist ideas are taken up by left wing politics as well.

By Rebecca Maskos and Stephan Weigand

In the face of the corona pandemic, right-wingers are again mounting heroic masculinity against the alleged sensitivity of the supposedly frail modern man. Thus, for example, German far right magazine "Sezession" headlined: "Courage instead of fear. Death is great".

Right-wingers transform a structural principle under capitalism into a glorification of death: The idea that duration and quality of life must be measured by economic criteria. The Social-Darwinist competition of "all against all" inevitably devaluates the so-called risk groups. Capitalism's fierce competition considers all those expendable that cannot be sufficiently utilized or that have already been worn out physically and mentally by many years of wage labor. Only few people are concerned about the fact that poor people, on average, die ten years earlier, disabled people often live isolated and are exposed to violence or that nursing home residents are left in their feces. German Health Minister Jens Spahn's plan (CDU - Conservative Party) to forcibly transfer people with respiratory needs from their homes into nursing homes, for example, didn't cause much alarm.

In the Corona crisis, elderly, sick and disabled people seem even more superfluous for the economic utilization process than usually. While the Bundesliga (German professional football league) is running again at great expense in terms of resources and requiring huge testing capacities, residents of nursing homes continue to die due to inadequate hygiene, lack of protective clothing and tests. Because no more visitors are allowed to enter nursing homes and institutions, they "become total again" in Corona times, according to Swantje Köbsell, Professor of Disability Studies at the Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin, in an interview with the weekly newspaper "Freitag": "Old people's homes, homes for the disabled, facilities for refugees, accommodations of harvest workers and prisons have become closed systems while under lockdown."

Apart from the restrictive and sometimes life-threatening effects of the pandemic, inhumane arguments are carelessly debated. In late March, investor Alexander Dibelius wondered in newspaper "Handelsblatt": "Is it right that ten percent ... of the population is spared, but 90 percent, including the entire economy, is extremely handicapped?" And in late April, Gregor Vashinsky, correspondent of the same paper, pondered: "What price are we prepared to pay for which life?" In the swiss conservative "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", consequences of Social Darwinism were even openly touted as progressive: "Let's accept that man is mortal, that a long life cannot be the goal per se, ... that prosperity comes from productive work ... that seven fat years can be followed by seven lean years, and that the latter represents a chance for renewal".

Some German leftists openly propagate for the avoidable death of many people or at least advocate for its acceptance. They stand in the tradition of those socialists, who in association with "racial hygienists" had discovered Social Darwinism as attractive opportunity for the solution of social problems even before the "Third Reich". Especially in parts of the left-liberal and eco-alternative camp, nature is transfigured into a legitimate power to shape things, as if a highly developed civilization would inevitably have to surrender itself to the deadly forces of viruses and bacteria. Left-liberal Blogger Meike Lobo, for example, described the "dying of old individuals" as one of the "processes that are healthiest for the world's population".

Joseph Wilhelm, managing director of the quite famous German organic brand "Rapunzel", which originates from the fair trade movement and boasts its support of refugees, views viruses as "part of biological life on our earth, (which) made their contribution to the further development of the latter and of human anatomy and psyche". And he declared: "The older people get, the less significant is their cause of death". And whoever does not voluntarily resign her or his "already painful life" to the forces of nature should be put in his place by force, according to the anarchist weekly magazine "Zündlumpen" from Munich: "If there are certain people assigned to a 'risk group', who put their - real or possible - slightly statistically increased risk of death above all the needs of others, ... such people... deserve at least a kick in the teeth...".

Other leftists can be at least implicitly assigned to the Social Darwinist camp. Although they do not openly claim that the lives of "risk groups" aren't worth anything, they downplay the specific danger of the corona virus by equating it with influenza and ignore the sometimes massive excess mortality in countries such as Italy and Spain. In addition, they shift the burden one-sidedly onto precisely those "risk groups". Heike Haarhoff, an editor of the German left-liberal daily newspaper "taz", speculated about "the limits of our academic solidarity with millions of especially older people". As straw men, she put forward some old people who do not want the younger generations "to be held responsible for ensuring that we old people survive". The left-liberal commentator Jakob Augstein moans about the crushing weight of the minority: "According to all we know, Covid-19 is a disease that seriously threatens a minority of people. The politicians have decided to place very heavy burdens on the majority in favor of this minority."

In contrast to many other struggles, in which a very clear position had been taken, the left has so far reacted rather indifferently to the Corona crisis. Fortunately, after initial passivity, the radical left has established an understanding of the "hygiene demonstrations" as reactionary marches. These demonstrations are platforms for right-wingers, conspiracy theorists, „normal people“

and some leftists, spreading inhumane ideologies about the Corona-virus' alleged harmlessness and about global conspiracies. However, left wing criticism of the irrational production of myths and antisemitic conspiracy theories often omits right-wing and left-wing Social Darwinism. Even in the practice of left-wing Corona solidarity - that ranges from social protests, donation fences for the homeless and support for refugees - old and disabled people hardly ever occur. Why, for example, is nobody calling out employers, who force risk group members to work in close customer contact? Why can't we hear a left-wing outcry about the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive and Emergency Medicine (DIVI), which has published recommendations for physicians, allowing selection according to discriminatory criteria when medical resources are limited? Why are there no demonstrations against nursing home corporations, which often pay high dividends, while nursing home residents are socially isolated due to staff shortage? Where is a left-wing solidarity with disabled people like Markus Igel, who had to fight German bureaucracy, cutting his personal assistance funds?

Several reasons for the silence of the left should be considered: For a long time the radical left in Germany has been predominantly a youth movement that likes to present itself as active, dynamic and modern. Older and chronically ill people, with their needs and lifestyle, do not fit into this community. Their issues seem neither sexy nor cool. Disabled, old, sick people live on another planet in the eyes of many radical leftists. Topics like aging, illness, disability, care and dying are hardly taken up and seldomly understood as a systematic part of left-wing social criticism. The social devaluation of pensioners who are no longer able to work is rarely discussed in squatted houses or leftist summer camps. Outside feminist circles there are hardly any left-wing debates on how the care sector can be organised in a humane way. Yet these issues are closely linked to the expectation of people's utility, the spheres of wage labour and reproduction, and they point to continuities of fascist eugenics and euthanasia.

A few years ago, Cologne based group "Sonne, Mond & Sterne" published their "16 Theses on the Left's Denial of Death", which are becoming even more relevant in the face of the Corona crisis: "Today's debates about 'lives not worth living' have a common ground with National Socialist thinking: the identifying, bourgeois consciousness that divides people according to their utility and perceives every (supposed) difference as a threat. The distinction between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' life is also present in today's debates about dying, for example about euthanasia, living wills, organ donation, and prenatal diagnostics etc. as well".

According to Frankfurt School's thinker Ernst Bloch, death is the "hardest counter-utopia". Following Herbert Marcuse, a pronounced agreement with the death of numerous people, which is repeatedly expressed in the Corona crisis, means "Compliance with death is compliance with the master over death: ... the state, nature or

God". Social Darwinism, together with the dystopia of death, thus opts for the false whole of domination, while the emancipatory left stands up for the praise of life and the utopia of a better, liberated society. The promise of the longest and best possible life should apply to everyone, whether young or old, rolling or limping, "multimorbid" or severely normal.

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