

“New normality”: the political unconscious of corona discourse and global rearrangements

Jens Maesse



DiscourseNet

Collaborative Working
Paper Series

no. 2/1 | May 2020

Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays
on the Corona-Crisis

About the author

Jens Maesse, Assistant Professor (PD Dr. habil.), Department of Sociology, University of Giessen. Research focus: discourse analysis, sociology of science and education, economic sociology and political economy. His publications include: “Globalization strategies and the economics dispositive. Insights from Germany and the UK”, *Historical Social Research* 43(3), 120–146 (2018). “The elitism dispositif. Hierarchization, discourses of excellence and organisational change in European economics”, *Higher Education* 73, 909–927 (2017).

<https://www.uni-giessen.de/fbz/fb03/institute/ifs/prof/allggesell/teamalle/maesse>

Contact: jens.maesse@sowi.uni-giessen.de

© Jens Maeße 2020

Any reproduction, publication and reprint in the form of a different publication, whether printed or produced electronically, in whole or in part, is permitted only with the explicit written authorisation of the authors.

Typeset by David Adler

Citation

Maesse, Jens (2020): “New normality”: the political unconscious of corona discourse and global rearrangements, *DiscourseNet Collaborative Working Paper Series*, no. 2/1, Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis, <https://discourseanalysis.net/dncwps>.

About the CWPS

The DiscourseNet Collaborative Working Paper Series (CWPS) reflects ongoing research activity at the intersection of language and society in an interdisciplinary field of discourse studies. Prolonging the activities and publications of DiscourseNet, it welcomes contributions which actively engage in a dialogue across different theories of discourse, disciplines, topics, methods and methodologies.

All contributions to the CWPS are work in progress. The CWPS offers an environment for an open discussion of the drafts, reports or presentations. Authors are provided with two expert commentaries for their paper and more extensive discussions of their ideas in the context of DiscourseNet Conferences.

The CWPS seeks to provide support for the advancement and publication of the presented works. It does not inhibit further publication of the revised contribution.

For further information on the CWPS visit:

<https://discourseanalysis.net/dncwps>

About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

Edited by Jens Maeße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

“New normality”: the political unconscious of corona discourse and global rearrangements

Jens Maesse

The short paper reflects on the social reactions of various countries to the corona pandemic. The slogan “new normality” will be interpreted as a discursive positioning of various countries that may reflect their position in upcoming global order. The paper expects a further disintegration of the former “global West” and a rise of a tripolar structure lead by the Asian region.

Keywords: New Normality, Economic Sociology, Economic Expert Discourse

1. The material and economic context of the corona discourse

The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 is a virus that is spreading around the world as much as many viruses before and after corona. To decide if the virus is “simply a flu” that will disappear sooner or later, or a “serious virus affecting the lung and other organs” is the business of virologists and other medical professionals.¹ Yet, what fascinates me, as a sociologist and discourse analyst, is the social and political reaction to the coronavirus as it is reflected by many corona discourses, because this reaction can be seen as an indicator for the socio-economic and discursive position of a country or a region within the social order of the next few years and decades.

The corona discourses emerged at many levels of social meaning production, let me just mention a few of them (the most important in my eyes). First, the corona discourse is a kind of “real-time” discourse, following the virus and its complex effects almost immediately as continuous panopticon. There is no chance for anybody to control this panopticon because no space is left in this decentralised dispositif for conspiracy between the moment of observing the event and the discourse about this event. Second, the corona discourse is a global discourse that is not restricted by political systems, cultural boundaries or national economies. Third, the economic reaction to it is the biggest and quickest shut down of the world economy ever. Every socialist planning economy would salute! Forth, yet, the economic discourse on it follows very typical imperial discourse mechanisms of making certain things visible (especially in the media) and ignoring others. Whereas every single victim of the virus, especially in the leading economic countries, is counted in real time by several charts and tables, the many more victims of the economic reaction (the shut down of global production chains) are still discussed as “necessary side-effects” (if this happens at all!). Thus, million of people in the global periphery (especially in Africa, Asia, Latin America, but also in some regions of South-East-Europe and the US) starving not because of the coronavirus itself, but because of the shut down of the economy as reaction to the virus in the capitalist core countries. People in the periphery need not simply masks. What they rather need to survive the lock down of the economy are access to food and water, welfare systems, minimum wages, savings, health care systems, functioning states and so on. Fifth, while in neoliberal discourse the state was always blamed as “weak”, “inefficient”, “corrupt” and so forth, and the market forces were seen as the most effective solution for everything, now, we experience an unprecedented come back of the state applying a multi tasking crisis management on several levels of social control: locking down the economy and providing

1 Yet, statistical numbers for March and April 2020 show that in most European countries the “excess mortality rate” is at around 20-30%. This is not comparable with flu.

different sorts of support for people and firms; organising a sort of quarantine that was unbelievable only a few weeks before it started (“only the Chinese would do that”, because they are “different”); setting up a communication apparatus that convinced huge majorities of the people to follow their governments in “social distancing”, “staying at home” or “keeping calm” (even though some countries applied authoritarian measures as well).

2. What is the “new normality”?

The tendencies that I have enumerated above could easily be extended and variegated from country to country depending of the observer’s perspective. Yet, what we see are huge differences on how certain countries react to the coronavirus. Whereas almost every government in Europe (and their citizens) take the virus serious, applying strong economic measures (the ECB’s programs, the quick extension of unemployment benefits, credit programs for small businesses and firms, short time allowances and many other initiatives) and organising a more or less encompassing medical surveillance apparatus, the UK and the USA simply followed for a long time the idea of “herd immunity”. They first talked down the virus and then reacted in unprecedented mix of idiotism and panic. By the way, this applies obviously for all right wing governments, as a look at the first reactions by Salvini-led local government in Lombardi reveals.

Rather, in “old Europe” the initiative for introducing Corona-Bonds pressed forward by the European Commission, the European Parliament, economically huge countries such as France, Italy and Spain, and supported by all countries except Germany and the Netherlands represents a enormous and historically unique call for strong European solidarity. This would lead, finally, to a European state. And even in Germany a clear majority of the people opts for the introduction of Corona-Bonds². In contrast to the Euro-crisis 2009–2015, Europe is no longer “split” between two strong camps. The neoliberals and austerity protagonists seem to be a small minority now (but still controlling many policies). It is probably a question of time until a solution is found. The announced European fiscal programme of around 1.5 trillion € for the time after the lock down sounds in the ears of neoliberal market fetishists like a nightmare and the resolute and quick reaction of the ECB to take every measure (“what ever it takes”) to prevent a financial crisis seems to be a post-neoliberal normality already!

But what can we learn from the disastrous reactions to the coronavirus in UK and USA? Well, both (former) economic super powers served in the last 100 years in Europe and the world as liberal role models. The combination of liber-

alism, democracy and economic success of a free market economy attracted people all over the world: if you want to be successful, do it like the Americans! We find hundred of examples for that (the collapse of the USSR, the war on terror, the EU-Maastricht project etc.). And now? From the perspective of the European-average-citizen, both “global role models” are controlled by freaks (Trump and Johnson) and ruled by stupid ideas! They lost their reputation for political legitimacy, economic rationality and cultural attractiveness.

There is now a clear difference between the old western power centres and “old Europe”. For example, the media debate is much more characterised by “rhetoric of war” in UK and USA. “Looking at the German data, we do not find many instances of this kind of language. Among the strongest collocates of Coronavirus, only two verbs come from the domain of warfare ‘bekämpfen’ (meaning fighting or combat) and ‘besiegen’ (defeat). We find other words that are frequently used in the vicinity of Coronavirus that were conspicuously absent from collocates in the UK and US corpus; these include ‘informieren’ (to inform), ‘untersuchen’ (to investigate/test), ‘entwickeln’ (to develop) and ‘vergleichen’ (to compare); also the verb ‘testen’ (to test) is one of the strongest collocates in the German data. All the verbs point to the significance of an approach grounded in science and also communication about the disease.”³

Even if some countries in Europe such as France also used rhetoric of war and applied authoritarian measures (lock down and punishment in case of ignoring it), the general strategies of interpreting the virus as a serious danger and locking down the economy as well as public life was similar in almost all European countries (except Sweden). In contrast to the USA where basically sates governed by the democrats tried a resolute lock down, European states applied a triple strategy: lock down and communication, setting up economic and social aid programmes, and finally developing a plan for an economic and social restart for summer/end of the year with a huge European investment programme. Here, Germany may be a special case because it seems to be one of the few countries that allowed people to go out (except in Bavaria and Saxony) for doing sports and leisure. In addition to that, the German government applied a strategy “reasonable communication”: explaining the reason why social distancing is necessary and trust in people’s agreement on that (even if penalties were imposed too, but more or less without a drastic rhetoric). This was accompanied by de-central, collective “stay at home” propaganda: artists, politicians, sportspeople, normal people on Facebook, TV shows and news and many more used their reputation to communicate: “stay at home, keep calm, be in solidarity with your neighbour and be reasonable”. TV stations changed their programmes to support parents for child at home education; neighbourhood support was organised to help elderlies etc. Thus, an entire

2 http://www.mpifg.de/forschung/forschung/themen/baccaro_coronabonds.asp

3 <https://viraldiscourse.com/2020/04/13/is-the-war-rhetoric-around-covid-19-an-anglo-american-thing/>

apparatus was mobilised to convince the population in a deliberative-democratic way (as Habermas would have put it).

The US, in contrast, apply a different strategy: Trump simply ignores the virus, he applies a strategy of “getting the population through” the crisis without lock down in order to achieve global competitive advantages vis-à-vis Europe and China. Accordingly, Trumps communication strategy is completely different: he blames China for “bringing the virus in”, closes the border to keep out migrants, mobilising right wing armed groups to “free” certain states from lock down and recommends now to inject disinfectant. Whether or not this calculation will finally work out is doubtful. According to a (internal) model estimation of the German Warburg Bank, in worst case the US will suffer up to 6 Mio dead. And the UK has no plan at all, Johnson will “get Brexit done” even though corona is controlling global production chains. This is economic, moral and social suicide.

Today, in many European countries, we hear politicians and commentators in the media talking about a “new normality” after corona. From a discourse analytical perspective, the adjective “new” makes a break between the “past” and the “future”, whereas the noun “normality” has an existential function: “we will exist in the future, but the future will be different”. In global politico-economic contexts, this phrase may work as a repositioning of Europe: first, to the future, second, away from what is associated with the past, and third as an entity that can and will take action for that. What could this re-positioning mean today?

3. The “political unconscious” of the corona discourse

The Marxist and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson (drawing on Althusser and Lacan) has once introduced the notion of the “political unconscious” as analytical category that may help as to understand the sub-text of a discourse, a text that cannot (yet) be expressed by words but that is driven by the Marxian laws of the “economic base”. Against this background it is impressive to see how quick we (in Europe) start now learning from Asia (China and the USA are already trading partner for EU on the same level) in fighting the corona crisis and developing attitudes toward a strong (yet democratic) state.⁴ On the other hand, the former liberal western world is step by step moving away (Trump’s “trade war” and “decoupling China”, Johnson’s Brexit and his idea to form an “economic pirate state” against Europe). And finally, a post-neoliberal European order is now getting negotiated and developed with a much stronger and much more Europeanised state at the centre of the “new normality”. It seems to me that the corona discourse, as a metaphor for something different, brings to the surface of visibility the contours of a new European reality in a new world order. Though all indicates that this will be a capitalist world order too, it is still open what role socialist, environmentalist, emancipatory and libertarian elements will and can play in it. Current global transformations are huge and interesting challenges for both, social scientists as well as political activists. We should accept these challenges (and keep calm)!

4 The critics on authoritarian measures in countries such as Italy, France or Spain are an expression of exactly this democratic self-image of European citizens!