Political Topology in the Anthropocene: Reconsidering Political Space in Light of Covid-19

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Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many governments turned away from the international to the national in order to deal with the arising challenges. Strategies of stay-at-home orders or lockdowns were enacted worldwide, regardless of the completely different particular situations and circumstances: In 2020, more than 90 countries (3,9 billion people) were under lockdown, among others, war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Syria or the Democratic Republic of Congo. The policies to respond to the pandemic were received differently in Europe – responses ranged from full support to fierce criticism. Some of the critical comments might have been a bit overdone, such as Agamben's initial comments about the invention of the pandemic for the purpose of governing. However, already a short glimpse at the repercussions of the lockdown policies is more than sobering: Not only did they not contain the virus, but they were of dramatic effect for millions of people, from the global north to the south.

Had the current pandemic indeed been as test for the upcoming crises due to climate change, as Bruno Latour claimed, then most governments would have failed it. Humanity seems to be dramatically ill-prepared politically to deal with transnational challenges of the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic, whether they concern a virus or the devastating consequences of climate change. This paper describes the failure to politically handle the pandemic as a result of the shortcomings of the modernist conception of political space and suggests an alternative approach. In doing so it describes political space along an Anthropocene topology. Finally, the paper elaborates on an eventual shift from the national to the sub-national that could be necessary to politically follow through the necessary spatial paradigm shift.

Shattering the modernist paradigm of political space through the pandemic

The lockdown policies are based on the modernist conception of political space. It presupposes the European idea of sovereign human thinking as most prominently exemplified by the Cartesian distinction between res cogitans and res extensa. On this foundation, human rationality penetrates the world, divides it into a natural and a human realm, grasps its entities, and makes them understandable and controllable. Thereby, political reasoning is able to provide a safe haven for mankind by constructing an artificial home, separated from nature's arbitrary dynamics and contingencies. Nature for Hobbes is inscrutable to mankind as god's creation, whereas the human world is human-made and thus comprehensible and controllable. (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 201) However, the rational penetration of the world strips it of all its particularities and conceals them beneath the veil of artificial nature, from where the world resurfaces as an abstract and pale replication. (Serres 1995, p. 35-36) The creation of an empty stage for human history comes at the cost of the world's infinite particularities.

Creating an artificial home for humankind through rational abstraction concerns both the non-human and the human realm. While already Hobbes rejected circumstances such as customs, power, wealth or religion as politically irrelevant compared to the overarching individual principle of physical survival, also more recent modernist reasoning such as liberal theory subordinates particular circumstances to supreme ideals. Excluding social particularities from political space finalizes the construction of empty political space that is populated with naked and abstract individuals. The idea of empty space epistemologically and ontologically resonates with Kant's conception of space as an apriori category of the transcendental ego – it is independent from human experience. Lockdown policies follow

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the assumption of modernist political space and an abstract concern for human life. On this foundation, the virus as an intruder from the domain of nature can be separated from humans and thereby starved out. However, that did not work – not at all.

Already a few numbers regarding the repercussions of the anti-Covid-19 policies indicate severe shortcomings. By spring 2021, the Covid-19-related death rate is estimated to range around 2.010.000. An additional 150.000.000 to 265.000.000 people will join the extreme poor. Severe economic growth downgrades are expected in all world regions. Most economies will have shrunk to the level of 2019. Global human development is in decline for the first time since its concept was introduced in 1990. Half of all domestic workers worldwide were significantly affected.

The anti-Covid-19 policies are of detrimental relevance for all mankind, in the global north and south alike. Still, the more precarious the living conditions, the stronger the effects. The precarious working conditions of workers "and job/income insecurity hinder them from stocking up on food and other essential items. Meanwhile, many frontline workers in the health sector have contracted the coronavirus and died in the line of duty." The lockdowns increase among others the economic, gender, digital or educational divide. Accordingly, domestic violence – particularly against women massively increased. The out of school rate dramatically rose to levels not seen since the 1980s. In essence the "virus is ruthlessly exposing the gaps between the haves and the have nots, both within and between countries."

This dramatic account does not only disclose inequalities and vulnerabilities worldwide, but emphasizes the infinity of different vulnerabilities, globally between various world regions, but also within states. Most of all, the far-reaching effects of the policies to respond to the pandemic reveal that the modernist paradigm of governing is dramatically ill-suited to deal with challenges such as the pandemic. Modernist governing does not only not live up to its claims to manage and control worldly affairs, but either allows or fosters disastrous social repercussions. Either way, governing has to be made less disastrous. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared, the "pandemic, as horrible as it is, must be a wake-up call that prompts all political leaders to understand that our assumptions and approaches have to change".

A reconsidered conception of political space

Agamben already emphasized the absurdity of the policy of separating humans from the virus to starve it out. After all, the other who is to be protected from a threat becomes at the same time the threat. Fighting the virus along those lines amounts to an obscure civil war. Latour also pointed out that the virus is no secluded object from the realm of nature, but is constitutively and inextricably entwined with society. Therefore, any policy that seeks to fight the virus through separating humans from the sphere of nature had to fail inevitably. Conversely, the assumption that the world can be divided into a human and a natural sphere cannot be upheld in the face of the disastrous impact of a policy that is intimately linked to it. Like the more and more obvious effects of human-induced climate change, also the catastrophic effects of the anti-Covid-19 policies indicate that humanity is already living in the Anthropocene. In the Anthropocene, nature is no empty stage on which humans can act at will and thereby meticulously craft their social order. Rather, neither human society nor nature alone, but the complex interrelations between them shape and guide natural as well as societal processes. (Harrington 2016, p. 491) On this foundation, politics is everything else but an autonomous sphere, carved out of nature and shaped and guided by human rationality. (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 211; Chandler, 2018, p. 15-21)

This ontological shift is of fundamental topological relevance. Accordingly, space in the Anthropocene is the fluid manifestation of the complex and constant dynamics between the human and non-human world. While the gravity of the repercussions of the lockdown policies shatter the concept of empty political space, the vast variety of vulnerabilities that it revealed indicate that it comprises an infinite diversity of social and natural particularities. Accordingly, there are no abstract individuals living in an empty space, rather, among others, it is men, women, transgender or children, family fathers, mothers, football fans, businessmen, alcoholics, schizophrenics, students, animals, insects, microbes, viruses, plants or mushrooms that dwell in particular places such as mountains, valleys, forests, deserts, glaciers, caves, villages, city centers, peripheries, dense, rich, poor neighborhoods, shared flats, cottages, villas, barracks, streets etc.

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The modernist approach to fight the virus favors abstract life at the expense of particular life. That turns Agamben's depiction of modern sovereignty upside down. After all, it excludes distinct forms of life and other particularities from the political space and leaves it populated with a shallow and abstract depiction of life. For one thing, this exclusion is outrageous from an ethical point of view, since it lays ground policies that ignore particular human beings and their concerns. On the other hand, this ontological reduction is of relevance for governing in terms of effectivity. Politics embedded in a dynamic relationship between nature and culture could be described along Plato's metaphor of the ship, whose conductors have to permanently deal with unsteady streams of water and wind. Ignoring those forces beyond and underneath the boat that actually define the fate of its passengers only conveys the deception of control which is shattered once the ocean's untamed waters sink the boat. (Serres 1995, p. 38) Rather, governing has to permanently seek to respond to the constant and complex flow of natural and social dynamics in order to navigate through the water's particular positions and contribute to shaping the fate of its dwellers.

While modernist governing does take into account the incomprehensibility and complexity of involved dynamics, it would see itself operating on an island rather than on the sea, where the stage of nature represents the solid foundation of human activity. However, there is no stable ground to refer one's activity to. As a result, the boat cannot be directly steered towards its destination on the shortest possible way, but will indirectly be navigated towards a certain goal through reflected responses to the water and wind dynamics at any given point in time and space. In the same vein, governing cannot directly control the processes within a distinct space but it can indirectly affect them once it comprehends the dynamics that determine a particular place. (Chandler 2018; Stengers 2015, 50; Haraway 2016, 30-31) Ignoring the full spectrum of particular places and its dynamics in the political space of the Anthropocene will only uphold the illusion of governing while the sidelined particularities determine the world's processes behind the presumptuous veil of modernist mastery.

Therefore, to fight the virus and allow for more effective governing, we have to account for all the particularities that life and the virus are entwined with and reconsider the conception of political space accordingly. In other words, for reasons of governing effectivity, the continuous exclusion of structurally excluded others has to stop. Looking at the particular places that are affected by the Covid-19 policies unveils the particular issues and dramas that are taking place and that governing should take into account. It reveals that simply confining work to the boundaries of one's home will not work if the street is one's place of work or one's home is the street; home office for young parents will not allow for working as effectively as from office; home schooling is not very likely to succeed if internet is not available; protecting oneself from the virus might not be of primary importance for the extreme poor of Kabul or Manila: closing the public markets has far worse repercussions than Covid-19 could ever had; the lives of many women have been severely worsened by violence at the hand of their partners.

For some, the available options to deal with the pandemics represent a dilemma that does not allow for a satisfying approach. As Jan Pospisil suggests, one might either subscribe to modernist politics and thereby end society through separating human from nature and from each other – given that society can be ended through physical distance –, or one might accept the non-solvability of the situation in light of an Anthropocene ethics and thereby end the lives of countless of human beings. However, the catastrophic impact of modernist politics might as well seal its own fate by making obvious its fundamental shortcomings on a global stage. At least, it should do so and thereby end its restrictive and distorting concept of political space, for ethical reasons as well as for reasons of governing effectivity.

From this perspective, going back to normal despite or because of the crisis, as Agamben suggested, would only prolong the confidence in the deficient conception of political space and thereby prolong our misery while signs keep arising that things are going wrong. Agamben's insistence not to try to alter the situation in order not to worsen it, would indeed make things worse if the modernist conception of political space is not discarded. Therefore, the sheer necessity to be prepared for upcoming crises on a comparable scale such as the Covid-19 pandemic calls for a topological paradigm shift: Political space has to be reconsidered as the fluid manifestation of the complex human-nature dynamics and thus comprising a vast diversity of particular places that are populated with diverse human and non-human entities.

Shifting to the sub-national perspective

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Grasping the full spectrum of the political space in its fluidity is probably not possible from a nation-wide perspective. After all, the state as such is an abstract and virtual entity that is not part of everyday experience and might encourage treatment as a void space, in which politics can manage and order affairs at will. Therefore, the state might not have been the ideal type of political community from the beginning on as a safe haven for its citizens. As Burke et al. (2016, p. 502) describe in their Manifesto from the end of International Relations: "We are an array of bodies connected and interconnected in complex ways that have little to do with nationality." States might simply not be suited to deal with this daunting task of imagining political space in an adequate way. Instead, cities as the actual place of living under particular circumstances might be. After all people do not actually live in a state or walk its streets. People live in particular places that belong to particular cities, villages or settlements. There, they hear or smell issues that are of relevance for governing. In such a place, it is difficult to ignore the particular circumstances that humans and non-human entities are embedded in and to adjust governing accordingly. For example, the city of Vienna had already been stocking up and strengthening its resilience capacities in the health sector when it was overruled by the federal government which imposed a nation-wide lockdown.

While a narrower focus on the city or a smaller settlement might be able to better perceive local particularities, it seems to endanger the broader translocal, transnational or global perspective that is evidently of crucial relevance not only for a pandemic, but also for other social or economic processes. This translocal perspective must be gained through the integration of the local within an international coordinating body. The Covid-19 pandemic initiated a reorientation towards national security. The failure of the associated policies does not only represent a failure of modernist politics, but most ironically, also a failure of the national in its function as a safe haven for its citizens. Among others, Mary Kaldor called for new strategies to respond to the horrendous exposure of political failure and injustice on the national level in the face of the pandemic. She advocates for transnational structures to provide for comprehensive human security on the local level in order to complement the lack of effective national mechanisms and thereby foster a sense of political legitimacy. This paper argued that such a shift must be accompanied by a topological paradigm change that calls for discarding the modernist conception of empty political space. Instead, political space has to be imagined as an agglomeration of an infinity of particular places that harbor a myriad of diverse human and non-human entities.

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