

Viral Coupling - Society's Fight for Survival

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A tiny virus has changed our society in ways we could not have imagined: empty streets, shut-down companies and runways of international airports packed with airplanes no longer taking passengers from one continent to another. The word “shutdown” is hanging over all of us and having an unparalleled real impact on worldwide activity - like the icy powers of a Disney princess who has frozen life around the globe with her spell.

To grasp what is currently going on, we must understand how modern society works. Because it is not only the lives of thousands of individuals but society as a whole that is at danger here.

Organic solidarity

Modern societies use functional differentiation, developing specific subsystems with respective functions: politics must make decisions that apply to everybody; science must make discoveries accepted as truths by others; the law must limit the abundance of possible actions to a lawful few. Functional systems are self-contained, with internal communication only referring to the system in which it is used. Information from outside the system is irritating and therefore translated into the system's own way of communication, following binary code: the government is ruling, the opposition is not; a scientific explanation is true, an older one is not; an action was lawful, another one was against the law.

A connection between these systems can only be made through “structural coupling” (Niklas Luhmann), i.e. creating channels of information through which the systems can perceive their environment in a system-specific way and translate irritations into their internal means of communication. If economists, for example, find that political action must be taken, the political system will translate this finding into a question of power, used by the government to show its ability to act and by the opposition to attack the government. The paradox is that by egocentrically reproducing only itself, each system can best serve the greater good by providing specific functions. Only by treating a scientific finding as a question of power, and not a question of truth, the political system can fulfill its specific function. The subsystems of society are like organs in a body: it is exactly by being different that they share a close collaborate connection with each other. For this phenomenon, sociologist Emile Durkheim has coined the term “organic solidarity.”

Viral disruption

At the moment, however, we are seeing another type of environmental communication: through viral coupling, information that cannot be translated internally to serve the system's survival is inserted. This begins with the bodies of those infected, paralyzing pulmonary functions. In the next step, the sheer quantity of patients is testing the limits of the medical system. The function of this system is to secure individual survival by distinguishing between sick and healthy and using state-of-the-art treatment methods.

Once clinics reach the point at which they do not have the capacities to treat everybody in need of treatment, they will have to decide whom to treat using parameters that are not medical as such. The infamous word is "triage" and derives from disaster medicine: age, chance of survival and value for society are criteria now taken into account when deciding whom to treat first. Professionally, physicians are hardly trained for making these kinds of decisions, and it is exactly because the list of criteria is open and not rooted in professional practice that underlying insecurities when making these decisions can lead to enormous individual stress: it is the physician as an individual who makes decisions on life or death, not an established social norm. While the economic system is practically made to handle shortages by adjusting prices, existential shortages in the medical system do not only affect individual organizations, such as hospitals or university clinics, but cause the very function of the medical system to collapse as sick people and their relatives expecting treatment are disappointed.

Such unmet social expectations have an endemic effect: the virus spreads to the next functional system. Outrage is immediately directed at the political system, accusing it of not having made the necessary decisions to secure the functionality of the medical system under stress: "You have destroyed the medical system in the name of saving money!" The political system loses credibility and legitimacy, its decisions no longer find acceptance - unless the opposition takes power, blaming the current situation on past decisions made by the old government and making different decisions.

If this is not the case, the virus will force its way through all functional systems, paralyzing them: the political system becomes a mere executive power, left only with enforcing existing norms; the economic system halts all payments; the legal system refers to emergency law and is brought into line by politics. Science loses its autonomy, too, as questions of truth are answered in the service of politics instead of irritating the political system with their inherent scientific logic, which is that of the ivory tower.

With the viral coupling of systems, it is hence not only individual parts of society that are undergoing a crisis but the entire system of functional differentiation. Viral coupling is causing functions to be mechanically interlinked, blocking each other like a screw in a gearbox. As a result, societies descend to "mechanical solidarity" (Emile Durkheim), to segmental forms of differentiation. It is not a coincidence that states are isolating themselves from others under current circumstances, cutting connections; that people are retreating to smaller or even tiny

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communities, in which fates are once more interlinked as a grandchild's party mood becomes a grandparent's lethal threat.

We have seen such situations in modern times, not caused by a pandemic but by wars. At the end of World War II, the major systems of social order had collapsed; the occupation law enforced by the victorious powers was considered arbitrary. In this time of social insecurity, in which everybody was a potential threat, it were small communities that rebuilt a more solid foundation for social order. It was the hour of families, neighborhoods and church communities, segmentally stabilizing everyday norms and thus gradually enabling functional differentiation.

We are facing a similar development today. It is not the hour of international organizations, of state unions and multinational agreements. Every political entity capable of acting, which usually is every national state, must first and foremost find a way of stabilizing itself by pushing back the spread of the virus through the isolation of segmental units. Only once this has been achieved, international collaboration can be gradually resumed. The shutdown is a controlled retrogression of society to segmental differentiation; a vaccine that is to protect the organism of society from a lethal disease by provoking a smaller, less severe one.

This, however, also shows that in crises, the functionally differentiated global society needs the segmental order of nations, states, neighborhoods and families latently underlying it. A social order that allows for nothing in between the individual and the global society - no communities and no intermediate institutions in their irrational historicity - and that has modernized and therefore abolished everything that seemed dysfunctional does not have anything to fall back on when trying to restabilize.

What is the consequence?

But what can we do in the meantime? As paradoxical as this may sound: return to the ivory tower of science. We can ask ourselves how to include the virus into research questions and use it as productive irritation of the scientific system. Because once companies start earning money with the crisis, once politicians start using the crisis as a resource in their struggle for power and once the medical system can show for successful treatments that can be built on - only then will this crisis be overcome.

Does this mean we should simply return to the old system? In my opinion, we will need to rethink functional differentiation and consider how much global society we can actually afford. Is global mass tourism a good worth preserving? Do we really need a global market for basic foodstuffs? Shouldn't we be sacrificing some efficiency in the division of labor for the sake of limiting the mobility of capital, goods and people? On a more abstract level: do we need less society and more societies?

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While differentiation may make modern society more stable on the inside, enabling it to process vast amounts of irritations, the construct as a whole becomes ever more vulnerable to changing environmental circumstances. In our common language, we call these changing circumstances “catastrophes.” Our modern global society is an artificial construct that is threatened by catastrophes more quickly and substantially than traditional societies, precisely because everything is interconnected through the division of labor.

Even if, going forward, the coronavirus becomes part of the equation of functional differentiation as an everyday risk - the next global catastrophe will come, be it an asteroid, an erupting volcano, a debt crisis, a climate surge or another pandemic destroying all the wealth we have built through globalization in one swoop. Precautions can only be made by taking a step back.

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