



# Conjuration and Conspiracy. The Controversy over the German Covid Policy as a Mediumistic Trial, or: The Medium is the Mess

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## Abstract

Based on anthropological fieldwork among protesters against the Covid policy in Germany, this paper elaborates the symmetry of accusations made against each other by proponents and opponents of the state-imposed protection measures against the backdrop of an asymmetrical distribution of power. The social dynamics that emerged during the pandemic are often understood as the result of a knowledge controversy that most participants thus categorize as a media problem. A key finding of my research on protests against the German Covid policy is that, as in my research on the controversy over mediumism, the controversy is about the agency of human and nonhuman actors and carried out to a great extent based on the same values on both sides, which at the same time accuse each other of not conforming to these values. The protesters are part of a heterogeneous minority that in large parts embodies the values of the majority and, in a way, exceeds them, i.e., a minority that is hypercritical and has extreme expectations about the values of the majority society – in this case: of solidarity, science, transparency, rationality, and coherence. From its marginal position, the minority develops a canny eye for the unfulfilled promises of the majority: its contradictions and conscious or unconscious double standards are perceived as bigotry against the backdrop of the aspiration to absence of contradiction. Therefore, this minority suspects that the motivations and goals behind the measures taken are other than just the protection of health, while the majority in turn see the minority's commitment to society and democracy as (self-)deception and also suspect hidden motives and actors behind it. This mutual suspicion leads to a hysterical state of doubt and distrust, which is rooted in the nature of mediality.

**Keywords** Corona · Protest movement · Mediumism · Conspiracism · Germany

## Introductions<sup>1</sup>

In his attempt to outline an ahistorical and ideal-typical psychology of epidemics, in which an epidemic is characterized by the situation that the biological disease is followed by the psychosocial epidemics of fear, of explanation and moralization, and of action or proposed action, the sociologist Philipp Strong opined in 1990 that under certain conditions, pandemics could, at least temporarily, trigger a Hobbesian situation of “all against all”. During the Corona pandemic, this situation cannot be confirmed, at least for Germany. Instead of an “all against all” situation, a dichotomy of society emerged immediately after the pandemic was declared and has persisted to the present day: a majority of society that conformed to the state-imposed measures showed solidarity against a minority that criticized these measures, and vice versa. The associated controversy, however, is in fact inflamed by the points named by Strong. Among the majority, fear of the virus dominates, perceived as an extraordinary threat requiring extraordinary measures – a novel and thus extraordinary virus passed from animal to human in an extraordinary situation, accompanied by the moral imperative to work together in solidarity to slow the spread and/or combat the virus. Among the minority, this explanation is questioned; there is also fear, but here the dominating fear is of the measures of the majority. The measures are considered a far greater threat to individual health and society than the virus, which is usually denied the character of exceptionality and normalized to one virus among many. Contrary to the view of the majority, large sections of the critics perceive above all the measures as lacking solidarity, because it is above all the vulnerable of society that suffers. The changes in routines propagated and moralized by the majority are countered by the propagation of a retention of familiar routines as a reaction to the virus. The controversy is partly very emotional and violent; people report dissolved circles of friends and partnerships and broken contacts within families due to different assessments of the situation, and there are verbal attacks on strangers in the public, sometimes even to the point of physical attacks. Each side denies the other moral and intellectual sanity and for both sides, it seems to be about everything: the defense of one’s own life and values.

In May 2020, I started to attend demonstrations against the Corona policy in Berlin, Chemnitz, Freiburg im Breisgau, Kempten, Leipzig, Markranstädt, Murnau, and Ravensburg with the aim of getting closer to the “native(s)’s point(s) of view(s),” which seemed to me after my first visit of a demonstration in Leipzig to be too undifferentiated and portrayed too negatively in the common media as well as by people I know. Furthermore, in addition to following the pandemic through observations of and conversations with neighbors, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers in everyday life and at demonstrations as well as the well-known established media, I familiarized myself with various people and channels in the so-called alternative media that were critical of the measures and that I was made aware of during the protests, as the corresponding references played an important part in the everyday communication within the protest scene and in their assessment of the situation.

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What is striking – in addition to the mixture of right-wing and left-wing actors at the demonstrations, as well as the symmetry of the accusations of proponents and opponents of the measures against the background of an asymmetrical distribution of power – is the widespread interpretation of this controversy, both among the majority of proponents and the minority of opponents of the measures, as a knowledge problem and thus as an information and media problem. Elsewhere I have documented in detail the heterogeneity of the protest movement in original quotations and interpreted the protests as part of a preexisting “conspiracy culture” with a specific overlapping of various social tensions and discourses and a specific history of stigmatization, counter-stigmatization, and scapegoating (Voss 2020b, 2021). Building on that, in this article, I elaborate further on the measures’ proponents and opponents (mis)interpretations of each other and argue that these (mis)interpretations are, on the one hand, rooted in the characteristics of mediality and, on the other hand, are a certain effect of what Alexander Bogner (2021) calls an epistemization of the political, which obviously even critics of this development cannot escape.

## Contestations

On September 26, 2021, a new Bundestag was elected in Germany, and Olaf Scholz from the Social Democratic Party replaced Angela Merkel from the conservative Christian Democratic Party as chancellor. Less than three months later, he gave his first government declaration, in which he talked about the Corona pandemic, among other things, invoking the majority position at that time:

“Today, in December 2021, every adult in Germany could long since have been doubly vaccinated. At least all citizens who are particularly at risk could have been boosted. Then we would have the pandemic under control now. Then we would all now be enjoying a peaceful pre-Christmas season with our old freedoms and our families and friends. The power of scientific progress would have enabled us to do just that. That’s why I understand the frustration of many citizens. After all, these are the people who were always careful during the pandemic, who did everything right, who followed all the rules, who were doubly and triply vaccinated. They have done everything for us to get back our former life and freedom. To all of them, on behalf of the entire federal government, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. [...]

“To all of them, I promise: this federal government will always stand firmly by your side. It will always stand by the side of those in our country who show solidarity, by the side of those whose caution and consideration make the cohesion of our society possible.

“But what also exists in Germany today is a denial of reality, absurd conspiracy tales, intentional disinformation, and violent extremism. To be clear, a small extremist minority in our country has turned its back on our society, our democracy, our polity, and our state, not just on science, rationality, and reason.

“On behalf of the entire federal government, I say: we respect serious objections. We listen. We seek debate. We are open to criticism and contradiction. And we will not give up trying to convince those who have been reluctant so far to get vaccinated

after all – with the power of facts, the power of reason, or the power of the better argument.

“But it is equally clear that we will not tolerate a tiny minority of unrestrained extremists trying to impose their will on our entire society. We will oppose this tiny minority of haters, who attack us all with torchlight marches, with violence and death threats, with all the means of our democratic constitutional state. Our democracy is a democracy able to defend itself.

“There is a lot of talk at the moment about an alleged division in our society. I would like to say that our society is not divided. The overwhelming majority of citizens in our country are acting in solidarity, rationally, and cautiously. The federal government is the government of this overwhelming majority. It is the government of all solidary, reasonable, and cautious citizens in our country, and it is explicitly also the government of those citizens who still have doubts or perhaps simply have not yet had the opportunity to be vaccinated. The government is the government of citizens who play by the rules and who, conversely, expect their state to protect them in times of need and to safeguard their freedom” (Scholz 2021, transl. EV).

Surveys have shown that in Germany the majority of the German population is in favor of the measures (Statista 2023). In Thuringia, the number of those who find the measures disproportionate ranges between 14–36% in the period between March 2020 and March 2021, and about half as many say from May 2020 that they are prepared to demonstrate against the measures (cf. the charts entitled “Anteil der Maßnahmen-Ablehner” and “Reaktionen auf Einschränkungen” in Betsch 2021: Welle 27–39; cf. also Maurer et al. 2021). In his first government declaration, the Chancellor uses this question to divide the population into a well-behaved good and a naughty bad part and thus (re)produces the predominant view of the majority, which he assigns the attributes of reason, solidarity, freedom, democracy, caution, and conformity to rules, and a minority associated with the attributes of hostility to science, a self-imposed secession, hatred, disinformation, unsolidarity, extremism, and a threat to freedom and democracy, whose behavior is held responsible for the pandemic not being over yet. In doing so, Scholz aligns himself with the worldwide trend among leading politicians and media representatives at the time to talk about the “pandemic of the unvaccinated”, with which the unvaccinated, often equated with critics of the measures, were made into scapegoats by considerably reducing complexity.

As the cited statement of the German chancellor shows, at that time a discourse that seems to know only friends or foes and good or bad in a rather undifferentiated way resulting in a perceived dichotomization of society into one big camp of supporters of the state-imposed measures and a smaller camp of critics of these measures, increasingly gained contours. Large nationwide street protests like the ones in Berlin at the beginning and end of August 2020 (cf. Voss 2021) have not been staged since; the attempt to repeat them in Berlin for their first anniversary in 2021 failed, like many other demonstrations, due to bans. But toward the end of 2021, protests were again increasingly visible on the streets. Now, all over the country, half a dozen to several thousand people gathered unannounced every Monday (in allusion to the Monday demonstrations against the government of so-called communist East Germany) for what they called *Spaziergänge* [walks] in order to circumvent the bans on announced demonstrations, whose justification was usually argued for with a need

for infection protection. At the beginning of January 2022, the Federal Ministry of the Interior spoke of around 188,000 people having been on the streets at 1,046 different “walks” across Germany (WELT 2022). Still in summer of 2022, two years after the proclamation of a pandemic state and the simultaneous start of the protests against the Covid policy in Germany, the controversy about the best response to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 had not diminished and continued to cause social disruption. The critics of the measures still cannot be easily summarized in terms of political orientation, educational background, profession, or financial situation; most striking is that a clear majority seems to be beyond the age of 40 (cf. Nachtwey et al. 2020).

It is nothing new that pandemics result in a social, society-wide state of exception and people trying to make everyday sense out of it – not infrequently accompanied by hysterical behavior on all sides (Honigsbaum 2013; Strong 1990), and it is not surprising that the occasion for a protest quickly expands to more general issues. The protests against Covid policies have taken on the character of a social movement whose issues go far beyond questions about the best way to deal with the virus; the public spheres have become increasingly fragmented and reconfigured, and the peaceful coexistence of different positions and concepts of life seems increasingly in question. In the heated and morally charged debate, the majority of the German population is stunned by the heterogeneous scene of protesters and obviously does not understand what drives them, which, among other things, leads to a problem of categorization. The majority tends to frame the protesters in line with Chancellor Olaf Scholz, cited above, and before him Chancellor Angela Merkel (cf. Aschmoneit 2020a, 2020b) as “the Other,” as something that differs fundamentally from them and contradicts the basic values and norms of society, such as reason, science, democracy, and solidarity; and frequently the critics are thus categorized as extremist enemies of society and the state. They are associated with radicals, criminals, *Gefährder* [endangerers], terrorists, and even murderers. Accordingly, critics of the Corona measures are given numerous defamatory terms by the majority (including many politicians and media representatives). Some of these terms already existed before, such as *Verschwörungstheoretiker*, *-erzähler*, or *-ideologen* [conspiracy theorists, -narrators, or -ideologues], Nazis, *Faschisten* [fascists], *Antisemiten* [anti-Semites], and *Esoteriker* [esotericists]. Others have been newly created or made popular, such as *Aluhutträger* [tin foil hat wearers], *Covidioten* [covidiot], *Coronaleugner* [Corona deniers], *Impfspinner* [vaccination wackos], und *Schwurbler* [confused mumblers] (cf. Klöckner and Wernicke 2022; Voss 2020b, 2021). While many of the protesters in the beginnings of the protests used the term *Querdenker* [those who think outside the box] as a positive self-designation, from the early days, this term has persisted primarily as a derogatory designation by observers and critics of the movement. In contrast, in the meantime, the adoption of the insult *Schwurbler* has become established among the protest scene as an ironic self-designation. While most people, politicians, and the established media in their obvious perplexity usually try to understand the protest movement by reducing it *pars pro toto* to the categories of right-wing or right-wing esotericism, which includes claiming that the rebellious are obedient to authority, the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* (BfV) [Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution], which has officially observed parts of the protests since the beginning of 2021, has created a new category for this movement. Since it does not fit into any

of the previously used categories for extremist movements, such as right-wing radicalism, left-wing radicalism, or Islamism, the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* now refers to the protest movement as *verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates* [delegitimation of the state that is relevant to the protection of the constitution] (Götschenberg 2021) – a category that may deepen the problem since presumably few of the protesters who are commonly invoking Germany’s constitutional document, the Basic Law, feel that this categorization applies to them, especially because they themselves perceive extremism and a delegitimation of democratic principles and institutions in the attitudes and behavior of the majority, including its official representatives. A humorous reference to this circumstance is, for example, the cardboard sign of a demonstrator in Berlin in April 2022 with the inscription: “*Wir sind der Verfassungsschutz!*” [We are the (Office for the) Protection of the Constitution]. Since the people from the protest scene also refer to reason, science, democracy, and solidarity (Voss 2020b, 2021), they have equally contemptuous and spoofing terms ready for the equally unified majority, such as *Verschwörungsleugner* [conspiracy deniers], *Grundgesetzleugner* [basic law deniers] *Zeugen Coronas* [Corona’s Witnesses], *Systemlinge* [systemlings], *Schlafschafe* [sheeple], and *Coronazis*, or the terms *Covidioten* and *Schwurbler* are simply mirrored in the vein of the saying, what you say about others says a lot about you (cf. Voss 2020b: 107–115).

## Conjurations

The starting point and core of the controversy is the question of the appropriateness of the measures taken against the spread of SARS-CoV-2, that is, in a nutshell, whether the therapy is not more harmful than the disease. Presumably, all critics of the measures would in one way or another answer this question in the affirmative. In the controversy, fear of the virus is juxtaposed with fear of the measures: the majority accuses the minority of downplaying or even denying the danger of the virus, while in contrast, the minority accuses the majority of downplaying or even denying the dangers of the measures. The controversy about the appropriate response to the virus thus turns into a perceived knowledge controversy, which is primarily understood as a problem of media practice. In this process, the media are divided into so-called established media, on the one hand, and so-called alternative media, on the other, whereby this dichotomous division of the media is often synchronized with the dichotomous division of positions, and the established media are equated with the positions of the proponents of the measures and the alternative media with the positions of their opponents (cf. Voss 2021: 118). That is why, for example, many protesters wear T-shirts expressing their own (alternative) media preferences at the demonstrations as a statement (Voss 2021: 121–122). For many supporters of the Covid measures, the messenger service Telegram or the expression Telegram group has become synonymous with conspiracy theory = *Querdenker*, to which, for example, the sticker “Make Love not Telegram” mockingly refers. Just as many supporters of the measures say they don’t watch alternative media, critics of the measures quite often emphasize that they stopped watching public media a long time ago. If the controversy is understood as a media problem, this means it is a problem of information

because misinformation is the supposed cause of conflict, and opinions differ about what is to be considered misinformation.

Majority and minority alike accuse each other of a lack of media skills and regard each other's media and media practices as one-sided. A misunderstanding on the part of the majority in this regard is illustrated by a scene I once saw in a YouTube video about a clash between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators, in which a counter-demonstrator shouted to the demonstrators in an insistent voice that they should simply watch the *Tagesschau* once, just once, and then they wouldn't be standing here anymore! – a scene that is not without a certain irony, since for many demonstrators the *Tagesschau* [the German daily news broadcast on the public-service television network ARD] is the epitome of a medium of disinformation loyal to the government.

Both sides often see capitalism as a decisive cause of problems. The majority regard financial interests as the primary reason why social media platforms, in particular, censor too little misinformation, as their business model is based on fueling conflicts, because it is the controversial topics and extreme positions that garner clicks and thus money. This is why the majority not only demand that certain people and content be deleted and sometimes even discuss banning entire platforms; at the end of 2021, German politicians and journalists increasingly brought into play a ban on the messenger service Telegram, because, they said, conspiracy theories and other misinformation were spread there (Brause 2021). The minority, too, regard the media corporations as a main problem but for opposite reasons: in their eyes, the media censor far too much in order to foster the capitalist interests of the large corporations to which the media themselves belong and that are allied with the state, using the declared state of emergency as a vehicle to change society to their advantage and to the detriment of “the people.” While some critics of the measures simply see that as an unfavorable development of capitalism and wish for a return to the Golden Age of the postwar period in Western Europe, others see in the current state of affairs monopolistic and authoritarian late-stage capitalism and hope for a genuine communist alternative. On the political right, there is a further variant of interpretation that fantasizes an approaching socialism in the censorship practices and current developments (cf., for example, the far-right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* that illustrated the cover story of its issue No. 14, March 2023 on how major global corporations are pushing a left-wing undemocratic agenda with a drawing of crowds cheering a guru bearing the logos of companies ranging from Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Netflix to BlackRock, among others). An omnipresent topic of discussion in the protest scene is the compulsory levy that everyone in Germany has to pay for public broadcasting, which is often rejected because of its perceived manipulation of the population, and many just call it state media and don't want to pay for it.

While the public is fragmented by different media practices, the fragments nevertheless remain largely related to one another. Even if the majority oscillates in its assessment of whether the minority should still be considered part of society, many practices, such as vaccination campaigns, assume a common ground that makes it theoretically possible to convince the other side. Similarly, many critics of the measures assume that their proponents merely lack the right information, and so these critics throw information brochures into the proponents' mailboxes, place statistics on billboards in public spaces, and don't stop sending unsolicited links to reports from

the so-called alternative media to their family members, friends, and acquaintances by e-mail or messenger services. Particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, there were repeated calls from critics to mix the media spheres and thus the public spheres by, for example, bringing scientists arguing for and against the measures together in a dialogue on public television, or having people in favor of the measures take part in the discussion in the alternative media. Among the majority, on the other hand, there was a tendency to exclude the alternative media and its protagonists; Chancellor Angela Merkel's speech to the nation at the beginning of the crisis called on the population to believe "only the official communications, which we always have translated into many languages as well" (Merkel 2020). And there are or were only a few actors who appear in both media worlds, including a rare example on the side of the proponents of the measures, the epidemiologist and head of the Institute for Public Health at the Charité in Berlin, Tobias Kurth, who held a two-hour conversation with the critic of the measures, Wolfgang Wodarg, on the platform Oval Media in September 2020, and the political scientist Ulrike Guérot on the side of the critics who was for a long time very present simultaneously in all sorts of alternative as well as established media, until she also expressed a dissenting opinion on the war in Ukraine. She was later exposed to accusations of plagiarism and then hardly found any space in the established media anymore.

Despite the mutual addressing, a feeling often spreads on both sides that, after all, because of missing or wrong information, the opposing side doesn't actually think and act appropriately and on "their own," which is why the respective other position is often equated with a religious belief. On the one hand, this is reflected in the categorization of the critics of measures as irrational or esoteric or as following the QAnon conspiracy, which strongly displays characteristics of a religious cult (Rothschild 2021). Among the critics of the measures, on the other hand, the name *Zeugen Coronas* [Corona's Witnesses] has become established for the proponents of the measures. On Twitter, critics have established the hashtag *#esisteinkult* [#itisacult], under which they collect videos, images, and statements that they consider to represent a clearly religious attitude toward the Corona measures. According to this, the supporters of anti-Covid measures blindly believe in physicians and virologists as "gods in white" and follow senseless ascetic rules with which they believe they are fighting for good against evil and can avert the finite nature of life. From this perspective, vaccination has taken on the character of a baptism as a gateway to immortality, which transfers one into the community of the better people, a sign by which one recognizes the members of one's own community with a corresponding condemnation of all heretics and a corresponding missionary urge. A critic told me in December 2021 that the acceptance of contradictions in the Covid policy and the behavior of the people by the majority reminded her strongly of the majority Catholics in her hometown in Baden-Württemberg. And at the demonstrations, one could see T-shirts with a quote by the head of the Robert Koch Institute, Lothar Wieler from July 2020, "These rules must never be questioned at all" (Phoenix 2020), which is also cited with amusement in other situations as proof of the orthopractical nature of the measures and the religious faith of their proponents.

Similarly, when proponents of the measures in discussions with critics repeatedly pose the polemical question whether the critics are virologists, or why they



think they could judge the measures, it is interpreted as blind faith in authority and is countered by the imperative to “think for oneself” in the spirit of the Enlightenment, expressed, for example, in a protester’s T-shirt on which was written in the style of a company logo: *Selbstdenker, est. 2020* [Self-thinker, est. 2020]. In an allusion to the term “hobby virologist,” which parts of the majority use to mock critics of the measures, and the term “top virologist,” which is often used in the established media to refer to the scientists advising the government, some critics refer to themselves ironically as “top hobby virologists,” for example, the very active and highly followed and retweeted Twitter user Zacki @FrankfurtZack. The majority makes fun of the fact that the supposed prophecy of the critics failed to come true – namely that all vaccinated people would soon die – for example, a cardboard sign at a counter-demonstration at the end of November 2021 in Leipzig read “vaccinated and still alive”; meanwhile, the critics of the measures make fun of the behavior of the majority who still trust in the state and the pharmaceutical industry, even if the vaccination did not fulfill all it was promised to do: even if they have been vaccinated three times and nonetheless had a severe case of the disease, they say that they are glad that they were vaccinated, because nobody knows how bad it would have been without vaccination – a statement that protesters mostly just consider a self-fulfilling prophecy, like the statements about the effectiveness of all other Corona protection measures. For many critics of the measures, the last word has not yet been spoken in this regard. Even after the proclaimed end of the pandemic, they still consider vaccination as the cause of every news item about a “sudden and unexpected” death, collect such cases under the hashtag #plötzlichundunerwartet and #diedsuddenly, and do not cease to see their criticism and predictions as the greatest “I told you so” story ever.

On both sides, apocalyptic world views prevail and many give the impression that the end of humanity is at stake due to human misbehavior (Dein 2021; Nagel 2021). The majority see the threat in environmental destruction and an associated imminent “age of pandemics” due to the minority’s selfish behavior and lack of solidarity in not complying with the protective measures and in the increase in right-wing extremist tendencies in society. And the minority sees the end of the free world through medically useless measures that lack solidarity because they favor the powerful at the expense of the weak, destroying the health and livelihood of many people. Both sides invoke the values of the Enlightenment and a conversion to avert the self-inflicted apocalypse. While the majority accuses the protesters of unnecessarily prolonging the pandemic through insufficient compliance with the rules as the virus continues to spread, the critics counter that it is only the majority’s compliance with what they see as senseless measures that prolong the pandemic ad infinitum, as compliance with the measures as an exercise in obedience is the actual goal of the measures. In the face of the apocalypse, which is seen either in the virus or in the measures, in any case in the inadequate behavior of the other part of the population, two “awakening” movements have emerged, accusing each other of being just that. Related to this is a different view of how to deal with the virus that became particularly apparent when the Zero Covid campaign emerged at the beginning of 2021. The idea of a fight against a virus, aimed at avoiding or eliminating it, is opposed by the idea of living with the virus while strengthening the immune system, according to the principle that the pathogen is nothing, the milieu is everything, as Wolfgang Wodarg, for example,

used to emphasize. Wodarg is a retired German physician and former member of the German Bundestag for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as well as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, responsible primarily for security, medical, and health issues and a famous critic of the measures from the beginning.

One of the frequent criticisms early on was that the measures have not been scientifically evaluated and that, even more than one-and-a-half years after the start of the pandemic, no sufficient cohort studies exist that provide an overview of the development of immunity in the population and that the corresponding data collection is disastrous and an example of GIGO (=garbage in, garbage out), as a critic of the measures put it to me in autumn 2021.

If one follows the online and offline conversations as well as social media postings by critics of the measures, they are primarily concerned with exposing inconsistencies, contradictions, injustices, and double standards in the response to the pandemic. Regardless of how one might evaluate the particular criticisms, these include pointing out:

- that the measures are regularly justified as protecting against overburdening the health care system while at the same time the state is cutting intensive-care beds and closing clinics;
- that the government’s interest in the health and well-being of the elderly seems implausible in light of the persistently poor conditions in nursing homes for the elderly;
- that some of the same politicians who have created these bad conditions by for years actively promoting the privatization of the health care system are, through lockdowns, now letting the citizens suffer the consequences of this economization;
- that there is a focus on only one disease, ignoring other avoidable diseases with much higher mortality rates, as well as the increase and exacerbation of other diseases due to Covid measures;
- that the investments in health protection during the pandemic do not lead to a sustainable strengthening of the health care system;
- that target criteria for reducing or ending the measures are either nonexistent or are constantly changing;
- that the risk of infection and illness is not the same for all people, but the modeled forecasts are usually based on this assumption;
- that the absence of the predicted deaths after two years of completely different measures in Germany and other countries can no longer be explained by the so-called prevention paradox;
- that comparisons with other countries without lockdowns and mandatory masking suggest a lack of effectiveness of the measures;
- that some politicians and some of the scientific experts they consult obviously have some conflicts of interest;
- that the congestion of hospitals in Germany, which is repeatedly cited to justify harsh measures, is not a peculiarity of Corona times but occurs every winter;
- that in the proclaimed biggest pandemic ever, many clinics, of which it is said that they are on the verge of collapsing, have time and resources to produce elaborate videos for the “Jerusalem Dance Challenge”;

- that key terms such as pandemic, herd immunity, vaccination, and anti-vaxxer were given a modified definition during or insignificantly before the onset of the pandemic in a way that favors the maintenance of the pandemic state and the interests of the pharmaceutical industry;
- that the vaccination campaigns are based on false promises, i.e., that no herd immunity can be achieved with the vaccinations, but the vaccination campaigns nevertheless argue on this basis and do not take into account that the vaccinations do not fulfill what was initially promised of them;
- that many politicians do not abide by the rules they themselves have imposed on the population;
- that politicians celebrate their election victory or other things without distance and masks while school children attend school with masks;
- that demonstrations against the Covid policy are branded irresponsible and banned for reasons of infection protection while at the same time politically favored demonstrations such as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations with about 15,000 participants in Berlin in June 2020 are permitted and publicly praised by the same politicians and journalists;
- that despite constant talk of solidarity, the rich Western countries bunker vaccines while poorer countries go empty-handed, which is hardly solidarity, and in the rich countries the young people receive boosters while vulnerable people have to wait; that it is mainly a wealthy middle class that propagates lockdowns and does its work from home at the same salary, while parcel service providers and workers in supermarkets or meat factories, for example, have to maintain the infrastructure, and artists have difficulty claiming so-called “system relevance” and financial “Corona aid”.

For many critics of the measures, it seems insufficient to explain the contradictions they have discovered with the usual counter-argument of the constantly changing progress of scientific knowledge or pardonable inexperience in pandemic control with resulting overload. Thus, they suspect that there is more, i.e., something else, behind the measures than simply the attempt to ensure health and the best for all. For example, the poor and opaque data situation is recognized as an attempt to avoid accountability. This, however, is not interpreted indulgently as a general modern human behavior, but rather as a strategy in favor of a business model of a vaccination subscription for all that is unprecedented in its scale, marketed by governments that commit to purchasing the vaccines regardless of the quality of the substance – with the associated privatization of profits, on the one hand, and socialization of costs and damages, on the other, which is well known from other areas. This suspicion is fed, among other things, by what critics see as strikingly different collections of the data, i.e., above all, an over-reporting of Corona infections without considering the viral load by taking into account the Ct value of the PCR tests as well as an over-reporting of Corona deaths without differentiating between deaths from and with Corona. Other reasons given are an underreporting of vaccination damage due to a complicate reporting system without sufficient compensation for the time spent on it by physicians, as well as a downplaying or glossing over of vaccination failures in order to avoid damage to the reputation of the vaccination concept. These assumptions are

combined with the fear that mandatory vaccination with expiring immune statuses will lead to the establishment of a “turnkey” digital surveillance infrastructure that, once in place, can be armed with “a turn of a key” and could thus lead to a combination of total surveillance and a social credit system that eclipses Orwell’s dystopias and spells the end of what is called the Free World. The lockdowns, it is often said, served to conceal a collapsing financial system, to drive the Western countries into over-indebtedness and thus to make them dependent on financial backers who would ensure the privatization of public goods, to destroy the middle class and thus the possibilities of a welfare state, and consequently to make impoverished populations compliant and grateful to accept the new totalitarian normal.

In the meantime, critics feel confirmed in many of their worries, which were often expressed right at the beginning of the pandemic. This applies not only to indirect mandatory vaccination, which many saw introduced already in the summer of 2021, but a few months later also to direct mandatory vaccination. The same politicians who categorically rejected mandatory vaccination before the federal election at the end of September 2021 and dismissed related concerns as conspiracy theories, just as many counter-demonstrators did, changed their rhetoric shortly after the election, removed the fear of compulsory vaccination from the list of Corona conspiracy theories on the federal government’s site, and first passed mandatory vaccination for everybody working in the medical sector as well as soldiers and then introduced a finally failed bill for a general mandatory vaccination, as already enacted in Austria. With the introduction of the so-called 2G rule and thus “lockdowns for the unvaccinated,” according to which people who had not been vaccinated or could not provide proof of an infection within the past six months were excluded from large parts of public life, many critics of the measures saw basic rights as being degraded to privileges and a social credit system as already a *fait accompli*, in which the state grants or withdraws privileges from its citizens according to their wanted or unwanted behavior. Combined with a familiarization with a constant identification of one’s immune status and thus one’s own identity by means of a QR code, Western societies are, in the view of many critics, in the process of practicing and normalizing the feared total surveillance following the Chinese model. Against the backdrop of the EU’s plans to introduce digital vaccination certificates and international agreements on centralized worldwide pandemic control of future pandemics, with national laws being suspended, most critics consider the assumption by many supporters of the measures that this is only a temporary state of affairs to be naïve. Thus, the following self-assured joke has now become established among critics of the measures: “What is the difference between a Corona conspiracy theory and the truth? Answer: six months.”

## Conspiracies

Critics of the measures suggest that the struggle for health and the talk of solidarity is merely a guise to drive entirely different agendas; they thus turn the controversy over the appropriateness of state-imposed measures against the spread of SARS-CoV-2 into — among other things, but largely — a controversy over the issue of conspiracism, which can be understood as a transatlantic “boundary object” (Star & Gries-

emer 1989) that emerged at the end of the 18th century and continues to have an effect today. What I would like to call the pandemic trial, in reference to my research on the mediumistic trial (cf. Voss 2020b), turns out to be basically a mediumistic trial as well. The mediumistic trial can be understood as a controversy over the possibility of testing and verifying parapsychological claims and thus about the possibilities of human and non-human mediums and the question of where the actual agency is located (Voss 2020a; Schüttpelz 2015). Since the Corona controversy is understood as a media problem, the same questions about locating agency arise (cf. Freedman 2015, who sorts the various possible answers to the question of where media power should be located into four different paradigms). Accordingly, the pandemic trial is also about the attribution of human or non-human agency, and thus about human capabilities.

As in the mediumistic trial, the question of immanence and transcendence is at stake in the pandemic trial. What remains underdetermined in this boundary object is the agency active in the course of history and its influence on the media. The agency can be attributed to one or more transcendent good or evil or ambivalent beings or forces, the abstract and anonymous power of a structure or society of whatever kind, or to immanent individuals. And it can be traced either to a concerted or chaotic cooperation based on a convergence of interests or to an opposition to a planned or chaotic action by one or more good or evil or ambivalent immanent individuals and/or transcendent forces or beings (cf. Voss 2020b: 113). Since conspiracy theories, as heterodox knowledge practices, are situated at the intersection of secular skepticism, popular sociology, and spiritual salvation (Aupers and Harambam 2018: 64), the pandemic as well as the mediumistic controversy are situated between popculture, therapy, entertainment, art, science, and religion (Voss 2020a, 2020b). However, it should be noted that even proponents of the measures do not operate without insinuations of conspiracies, for example, when right-wing extremists, right-wing or economic liberal think tanks (Pötter 2020), and/or Russian forces (Gensing 2021) are suspected of appropriating the protest movement for their agendas, or the government is suspected of planning a secret infestation [*heimliche Durchseuchung*] through the increasing lifting of measures (Kastellan 2021; Zanni 2020), but usually without such suspicions being labeled conspiracy theories and excluded from the discourse. The mediumistic and the pandemic trial are two controversies that have a common transatlantic history of heterodox knowledge practices with an accompanying dichotomous constellation between an established majority opinion and a precarious minority conviction. In both constellations, the controversy is conducted based on a common set of values with symmetrical mutual accusations that the other side is not conforming to these values, and in both controversies, conjuration, conspiracy, skepticism, and suspicion are deeply intertwined and crucial elements.

Every exorcism provokes the appearance of the possessing entity in order to get rid of that entity. It is this indissoluble connection between exorcism and evocation that often results in an infinite regress. The same applies to the two transatlantic controversies about conspiracism and mediumism, both of which can be conceptualized as underdetermined boundary objects that have been active for more than 200 years and that differ in their approach to occult powers. In mediumism, these assumed powers are conceived democratically as generally available to everyone, while in conspir-

acism they are mostly conceived as limited and accessible only to an elite. Skepticism is an elementary part of both controversies; the constellation of antagonisms results in a reversal figure based on shared values. The conjurations in the mediumistic trial are opposed by the deconjurations by the skeptics, who reject the idea of contact with occult forces or beings as irrational deception or self-deception. The suspicions of conspiracy in the conspiracy culture are opposed by the anti-conspiracy culture in the pandemic trial, which rejects the suspicions of conspiracy – all the more so when they are presented in connection with an accusation of the use of occult forces – as irrational deception or self-deception (Voss 2020b).

That the protesters against the Covid measures are predominantly right-wing esotericists with a penchant for conspiracy theories is a common allegation (Kleffner & Meisner 2021; Pöhlmann 2021). Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) suggest the term “conspiratoriality” to describe the merger of political conspiracy theories and what is called New Age religiosity as a new, surprising overlap of two intrinsically different fields that is emerging because of the proliferation of the Internet. But this overlap is neither new nor surprising, as Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) made clear in their response to Ward and Voas. Referring to Michael Barkun (2003), they cite the long European esoteric tradition, which in the course of the Enlightenment becomes a stigmatized, rejected knowledge and thus, on the one hand, turns against the establishment and, on the other hand, always has a conspiracy theory at the ready as to how the stigmatization and marginalization of esoteric knowledge comes about. The affinity with conspiracy theories also described for the counterculture of the 1960s (cf. Morrison 2007) was therefore already widespread in the 19th century with regard to physicians, scientists, the Jesuits, the Jews, and rival secret brotherhoods. Using Mesmerism as a case study, Robert Darnton (1968) has shown particularly extensively how these controversies overlapped as early as the late 18th century, and even then they were already transatlantic (cf. McKenzie-McHarg 2013, 2018). For Asprem and Dyrendal, therefore, the situation is exactly the opposite: conspiratoriality is not an exceptional overlap of different domains, but the common origin of all institutions that attempt to separate conjuration and conspiracy, emphasizing “that the connection between conspiracism and right-wing groups is the result of a historically contingent social and discursive formation rather than an intrinsic aspect of ‘belief in conspiracies’” (2015: 369).

The mediumistic trial is about testing trance practices and the verifiability of miracles. Those who believe in the possibility of “real magic,” i.e., that people have paranormal abilities that they can access in altered states of consciousness, contradict official public institutions. In line with the content of these official public institutions are the skeptics, as the other side of the constellation, even if they act without an official mandate and even if they see themselves as part of a minority against the backdrop of a very strongly religious society, so that anti-religious secularism is experienced as a quasi-religious conversion. The transatlantic mediumistic trial has resulted in a stable constellation of unstable institutions that has now been in existence for more than 200 years. Neither skeptics, nor parapsychologists – be they magicians or not – nor ghost hunters, nor spiritualists have created a stable institution. Any institution on trial is undermined by the mediumistic trial itself and remains precarious. Only the constellation of attack and defense has been relatively stable since the 19th cen-

ture. The common ground is the belief in the objective verifiability of the existence or nonexistence of paranormal abilities; and in the debate, both sides accuse each other of unscientific belief; the skeptics accuse the spiritualists, ghost hunters, and parapsychologists of wanting only to confirm their belief in ghosts and/or “paranormal phenomena,” while the ghost hunters, spiritualists, and parapsychologists accuse the skeptics of equally unscientific dogmatism, since they rule out the existence of “paranormal phenomena” from the outset. The ideal of the skeptic is shared by all, and the best skeptic is always oneself. Trance cults can have a stabilizing effect in terms of values and power relations, but with their states of effervescence, they have also repeatedly become revolutionary chiliastic movements that justify their claim to renewal by claiming access to higher knowledge (Lewis 1971). In its ambivalence between hospitality and hostility, the mediumistic trial has so far remained mostly peaceful. Through the shared conviction of being able to convince the opponent of one’s own promise of salvation and the shared values of individualism and scientific verifiability, the mediumistic trial aims at resolving the controversy.

The pandemic trial is about testing the existing institutions, mainly science and democracy, in a crisis. What in the mediumistic constellation is the rough border between believers and skeptics is in the pandemic trial the rough border between supporters and critics of state-imposed protective measures — a constellation that also has a long transatlantic history of conspiracism and that in the current crisis is developing its own and still unpredictable dynamic. Its stability or instability has yet to be proven. Both sides see existing institutions endangered by their respective counterparts. The majority of the supporters fear that the states of agitation of those who smell a conspiracy, and who are imagined primarily as right-wing esotericists, will turn into a conspiracy of their own and end, as already too often in the history of conspiracism, in persecutions and an ominous revolution (cf. Bergmann 2020). The critics of the measures instead see a coup “from above” by the — from their equally undifferentiated view — classic media, politics, and multinational corporations pulling in the same direction.

While in the mediumistic trial the spiritualists, parapsychologists, and ghost hunters believe in the extraordinary abilities of humans, and the skeptics declare this to be deception or self-deception, many protesters believe in the power of individual humans to control the destiny of the world through conspiracies, which the proponents of the measures declare to be deception or self-deception. For many critics, the pandemic trial is a magic trick that works through the classic methods of misdirection and preshow. By making everyone look at Corona, existing institutions are systematically hijacked behind their backs. Seeing the others’ delusion and hypnotic state — that one once found oneself in — endows the followers of the protest movement with a higher knowledge that comes close to a quasi-religious awakening experience and is indeed regularly described with the vocabulary of awakening, even among those who do not frame the struggle between good and evil within a classic religious cosmology. For many of the supporters of the measures, the critics’ invocation of the free democratic constitutional order and of freedom of speech is just a masquerade that the supporters have long since exposed as a method of right-wing populists and thus as a trick used by those who actually want to abolish the free democratic basic order (cf. Adorno 2019[1967]; Richter & Salheiser 2021; Stahl 2019; Voss 2019; Wodak 2015).

So, both sides in the pandemic trial also claim the same set of values and accuse each other of being unscientific, irrational, and undemocratic. The ideal of the enlightened defender of democracy is shared by all, and the best enlightener is always oneself. However, those who put the pandemic to the test and question its basic assumptions, such as the extraordinarily hazardous nature of the virus, the assumption of symptomless infectiousness, or the efficacy of vaccines, and thus the rationality and proportionality of the measures, are, unlike in the mediumistic trial, dealing with a state that actively questions them themselves, which clearly reinforces the asymmetry and jeopardizes the sharing of a common basic order and the prospect of a more or less peaceful proceeding like the mediumistic trial. The protest movement finds itself ambivalent between trying to save the existing institutions and restoring what its supporters see as lost qualities – such as liberal liberties – or renewing the institutions by creating its own institutions, such as “alternative media” or a “Corona Committee” modeled on a parliamentary committee of investigation, or even trying to work on a new constitution as was announced at the second big demonstration in Berlin on August 29, 2020 (Voss 2021: 129–130).

The mediumistic trial and the pandemic trial are both about different states of sociality: the mediumistic trial is about individual everyday routine being supplemented by testing procedures as a search for a state of exception, while the German pandemic trial is a social, society-wide state of exception and people trying to make everyday sense out of it. The two have different scales: little controversial miracles, on the one hand, and big universally acknowledged misfortune, on the other. The heterodox knowledge practices involved in the mediumistic trial scale the little miracle as a cosmic event (by verifying, typifying, exemplary knowledge, etc.), and the heterodox knowledge practices involved in the pandemic trial scale the big misfortune down as a big delusion and a personal decision (or illumination). Conjuraton and conspiracy belong inseparably together and open up the possibility of a double vision that discovers something unapparent that actually steers events behind what is apparent, but the actors put the positions and perspectives in suspension in a flip-flop game. This also includes the different attitudes toward the opposition between hospitality and hostility. In this flip-flop game, what seems natural is artificial and what seems artificial is natural, i.e., the pandemic is not natural but made up, and the social is not natural but it is made with a purpose (a conspiracy). What seems paranormal is natural, what seems natural is contrived, what seems normal is paranormal, what seems an event is a trick, and what seems a trick is an event. With the controversies described, we find ourselves in the sphere in which, for the actors, “things are not what they seem to be.” This also includes the possibility that things that seem to be different from what they are may themselves only seem to be what they are supposed to appear to be. As soon as one deals with appearances, one can deceive oneself. And even the theory of self-deception is capable of active deception. If one understands the so-called Corona crisis as a knowledge controversy and thus as a media controversy, then Corona, like the classical controversy over mediumism, is also a controversy over the localization of agency, which due to the vagueness, indeterminacy, and doubt inherent in the medium as something in between can never be brought to a standstill.

The treatment of the Corona controversy as a knowledge controversy is criticized by sociologist Alexander Bogner (2021). Independently of Corona, he diagnoses



a long-standing tendency toward an epistemization of the political. Political questions, he asserts, are increasingly negotiated as questions of knowledge, be it climate, Covid, vaccination, or crime. This would suggest the possibility of objective decision-making through science and a lack of alternatives in political actions that obscures the values behind the decisions. Because even if there were agreement on the side of science, the political decisions derived from it are dependent on political preferences. One effect of this epistemization of political issues, he argues, is that any oppositional position is labeled as guided by the wrong knowledge, that is, as unscientific and thus incapable of being part of a reasonable discourse, leading to exclusion from the discourse, and second, that by shifting the discussion to issues of epistemology, certain political groups strategically hide their own political goals behind factual discussions, thereby complicating or even impeding democratic decision-making. Thus, he argues, epistemologizing the political is ultimately a danger to democratic culture.

The mechanism of stigmatizing oppositional positions as the fundamentally distinct Other can also be observed in the treatment of critics of anti-Covid measures, when politicians and other public figures label them in the media as irrational Corona deniers and thus science deniers, insult them as Covidiot, and ostracize them from public discourse as serious dialogue partners. Moreover, the protest movement is labeled as politically right-wing, which is equated with an undemocratic agenda. The majority thus denies the minority common ground in terms of intellect and values and, by the associated marginalization as not worthy of attention or discussion, the majority misjudges the common value base. This includes, on the one hand, that the denial of the existence of the virus represents a negligible minority position in the protest scene and, on the other hand, that it is precisely on the part of the protesters that an epistemization of the political is criticized by repeatedly asking the value-based question of how we want to live, cf. for example, the statements of my interlocutors at demonstrations already in 2020 (Voss 2021: 149), or the conservative critical journalist Boris Reitschuster, who in January 2021 proudly points out on his blog that he has finally received a statement from Chancellor Angela Merkel that the Corona measures are a political and not a scientific decision (Reitschuster 2021), or the critical assessment of the German Corona policy published 2022 by Ulrike Guérot, a political scientist supporting the protest scene from early on, who explicitly refers to the question “how we want to live” in the title of her book (Guérot 2022). Such misrepresentation leads the ostracized to counter with the same accusations they are confronted with and reinforces the divide (see the descriptions under the subtitle “Contestations” above).

At the end of his book, Bogner welcomes the critics of the measures since they show with their “wild protests” that even if all value questions translated into knowledge questions are answered, the actual problems continue to exist. But it remains a patronizing gesture, an ironic joke, which thus remains inscribed with asymmetry. For according to Bogner, it is apparently above all the side of the postulated “we” that seems to include the readers, in distinction from the supposed deniers and fundamental oppositionists, that can take this perspective. Although Bogner criticizes the mechanism of epistemicizing political discussions, he himself adopts the stigmatization of the opposition as unscientific when he categorizes critics of the Covid policy

as Corona deniers and fundamental oppositional science deniers and mocks the fact that Covid policy is presumed to be the implementation of other agendas. Bogner's fundamental opposition to a symmetrical analysis of the conflict and the associated misrepresentation of the minority side is symptomatic and exemplary of the majority's treatment of the oppositional minority and one of the decisive causes for the emergence, persistence, and solidification of the conflict. Of course, asymmetrical considerations also occur on the minority side (cf. Voss 2020b, 2021). But due to the asymmetrical distribution of power, the ball for defusing the conflict seems to lie in the court of the majority for the time being.

## Outlooks

Already toward the end of 2022, even before the pandemic was officially declared ended, I had the experience that people who noticed that I was dealing with the controversy surrounding the Corona virus took the opportunity to ask me if I could explain to them why people were still demonstrating, even after the pandemic was now slowly coming to an end. This points to the quite different perceptions of those who supported the state-imposed measures or accepted them uncomplainingly with a shrug of the shoulders and those who objected. It seems that especially the supporters of the measures have forgotten or want to forget the events of the last three years and wonder why some people still continue to protest in the streets or want to talk about the appropriateness of the measures, while many critics of the measures remain disturbed by the occurrences they witnessed in the past three years and seek to call to account those they consider responsible for what they see as a stupid or even criminal course of events (e.g. Brüggemann 2022; Guérot 2022; Klöckner & Wernicke 2022; Reichel 2023). This may be partly because those who followed the rules have not experienced any of the hostility and exclusion experienced by those who have protested against them. And it may be partly because many supporters of the measures may not be aware that, as is common in most protest movements, many in the protest scene are concerned with much more than just the Corona measures, which they see as merely a symptom of broader political problems that remain even after the end of the pandemic or have become even greater as a result of the pandemic.

The declaration of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic confronted societies with stress tests that can be overcome only by widening the focus to reveal common social processes and by understanding and involving all those affected, with their perspectives. And anthropology can make a great contribution to this, especially when, as in this case, the journalism of the majority society has difficulties to achieve an adequate, open-minded and non-judgmental approach to the minority that does not follow a *pars pro toto* argument but acknowledges the heterogeneity of the minority, since many protesters point first to what they perceive to be biased and unfair media coverage of Corona, and the protests against the measures as a reason for their increasingly negative attitude toward established media and other official institutions. In the Corona pandemic, the imperative is to be in solidarity with the weak and vulnerable, and this is usually equated with following the rules imposed by the government, which are presented as based on science and reason. And therefore, anyone

who questions, criticizes, and/or disobeys these rules is perceived as unscientific, unreasonable, and lacking in solidarity and thus a problem for democracy and social cohesion. A key finding of my research in the field of protests against German Covid policies is that, as in my previous research, the protesters are a minority that in large part embodies the values of the majority and, in doing so, quasi-exceeds them, i.e., a minority that is hypercritical and places extreme expectations on the values of the majority society – in this case: of solidarity, science, transparency, rationality, and the absence of contradictions. From its marginal position, the minority develops a canny eye for the unfulfilled promises of the majority society, i.e., its contradictions and conscious or unconscious double standards, which it perceives as bigotry against the background of a claim for an elimination of contradiction. It therefore suspects that the motivations and goals behind the measures taken are not primarily the protection of health, while the majority, in turn, see the minority's commitment to society and democracy as (self-)deception and also suspect hidden motives and actors behind it. This mutual suspicion leads to a hysterical state of doubt and distrust, which is rooted in the nature of mediality. The mutual process of attribution based on the unavoidable vagueness of mediality is, thus, a central dynamic of the conflict and the resulting increasing social polarization, amplifying differences and masking commonalities in basic values of supporters and opponents of the measures.

Since the protests against the Covid measures, as is common with protest movements, quickly move beyond the cause of the protests to address broader political developments and issues, the current protest movement, too, can be understood as a symptom rather than a cause of social problems: the movement's seismographic potential could actually be very beneficial for a democracy. In this way, the protest movement draws attention to the increasing entanglement of media, politics, and capital and related problems for democracy and populations, which is negotiated elsewhere – even if capitalism is mostly not fundamentally questioned – with terms such as “corporatocracy” (Perkins 2004), “post-democracy” (Crouch 2005), “philanthro-capitalism” (McGoey 2015), “ghost managed medicine” (Sismondo 2018), “strategic ignorance” (McGoey 2019), “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019), or “epistemic corruption” (Sismondo 2021).

Thus it is foreseeable that this protest movement will not disappear when the pandemic is declared to have ended. The loss of trust in the established institutions in the media and politics, as well as in the power of judgment of the masses, has become too strong among most of the people I have met, so that even those who just recently, during the pandemic, got involved with the long-existing so-called conspiracy culture will hardly be able to return to so-called old normality. This assessment is supported by a representative study commissioned by the public broadcaster SWR in April 2022 and conducted by the Allensbach Institute, according to which 30 percent of those interviewed in Germany stated that they lived in a sham democracy, whereby, interestingly, those who agree with such a diagnosis are interpreted as a danger to democracy (SWR 2022). Once one has taken the perspective of conspiracy culture, the issues become flexible. There are already indications in the discussions among critics of the measures that, with climate protection, for example, a new topic is being negotiated with similar objections (as a critic of the measures told me already in 2020, cf. Voss 2020b: 120), especially because politicians have been increasingly

linking climate protection and health protection discursively. Here, too, there are different assessments of the causes, the threats, and, above all, of suitable measures for averting a crisis that is also categorized as existential. And here, too, diagnoses similar to those in the Corona issue are emerging: for example, with regard to the effectiveness of the chosen measures or the principle of the privatization of profits and the socialization of costs, i.e., those politicians and large corporations who are in large part responsible for causing the crisis and have made money in the process are identified as those who are now shifting the costs of solving the problems onto the individual citizens and, at the same time, are now also earning through the chosen measures and in this way, also in the case of the climate crisis, the rich continue to profit at the expense of the poor. On this issue, too, the media and politicians are accused of dramatizing the situation with questionable statistics. The media also play a central role in the criticism of the handling of the war in Ukraine. In a nutshell, a cardboard sign at a Corona demonstration in Berlin in April 2022 already merges the topics of Corona and war: “The same ‘media’ that reported on Corona are informing about the Russia-Ukraine-Nato-USA conflict.” And in the case of the war, the media coverage is also perceived as one-sided propaganda behind which the interests of the rich are also hidden at the expense of the poor. Also at the beginning of the war, a critic of the measures active since 2020 told me how the situation is presented from the well-rehearsed apocalyptic perspective of the conspiracy culture: “Corona was the pre-wash, with the war comes the main wash, and when we’re done with the spin cycle, we’ll all be ready to accept the planned Great Reset of the World Economic Forum.”

As with the topic of Corona, it is unhelpful to act on the topics of climate or of the war in Ukraine with a friend-or-foe scheme – or, to put it in media-critical terms, with a like-or-dislike scheme. It does not help the discussion about Covid to equate every critical question about the effectiveness and effects of the measures with Corona denial, lack of solidarity, right-wing radicalism, and hostility to the state; similarly, it will not help to equate anyone who doubts the measures for combating climate change with climate or science denial, lack of solidarity, right-wing radicalism and hostility to the state (for example, whether switching to electro-mobility without changing attitudes toward individual transport and a massive expansion of nuclear power are really the best ways to solve the problem, combined with the question which political and financial interests are tied to such measures), just as it does not seem appropriate to equate any criticism of the measures taken against Russia in the same way (for example, whether it makes sense to stop direct gas imports from Russia and at the same time continue to obtain energy resources from Russia via expensive detours or whether it is a good idea to agree to the delivering of cluster bombs and depleted uranium weapons, combined with the question which political and financial interests are tied to such measures). In this case, too, it will be important to look and listen carefully and to choose dialogue and integration rather than denunciation and exclusion as “the Other” with its tendency to turn into self-fulfilling prophecies, so that the social distortions and the emergence of fundamentalisms that tend to threaten social cohesion that already exist do not become even greater. Anthropology cannot promise a solution to these conflicts, but it can at least promise, as in other controversies (cf. Akrich 1993), not to fuel the conflicts further, by neither

joining in with any of the accusations in the field nor adding new accusations to the field. In this way, anthropology can avoid deepening the rift between the positions by not giving the impression that even the sciences are ignorant and uncomprehending. Even if there can be no escape from the mess of mistrust and doubt due to the ambivalent nature of media as a source of transparency, on the one hand, and opacity, on the other, the struggle for untangling the mess in order to achieve understanding and cohesion is equally inevitable. This can probably best be done by raising awareness of the common grounds of a controversy – a controversy that in this case comes to a climax in the attempt to hold the respective opposing side liable for the course of events by means of an enormous reduction of complexity on both sides, with all the associated side effects of social distortions. Then it can slowly become clearer where one agrees to disagree – both between as well as within the opposing camps.

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