The ambiguity of the psychological limitations of globalization Or: an uncanny cocktail of viruses

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Theoretical Study

Abstract

The Coronavirus epidemic has become a pandemic. The induced crisis has had a global impact. Moreover, there is an uncontrollable interplay between the coronavirus, panic as an emotional virus, viral communication, and the economic and political borderline experience. The world is facing an unprecedented factual and psychological challenge. People are therefore seeking emotional orientation and protection above all in their own group, family, close friends, and nation. However, this often leads to radical dissociation from other groups or nations. This functions in the sense of a psychological defense as a group and is a normal process during an epidemic. In the past two decades, globalization has focused on boundless performance and efficiency increase. In doing so, it has not sufficiently taken people into account; one could say that globalization does not respect humans as humans. It is in danger of succumbing to a narcissistic fantasy of omnipotence. The current virus crisis is holding up its own mirror to the world. It therefore functions as a psychological disillusionment that seems to have the entire world under control. People and nations feel the limits of what is possible. They experience their powerlessness and fall into a state of panic that seems to paralyze people. There is no doubt that medical, economic, and political action is absolutely necessary. A far greater challenge is to reach people with their very own concerns and needs. This cannot be achieved through political war rhetoric. It can only be done if people and nations become aware of the competence of ambiguity tolerance. This, combined with the development of an experienceable and visible sense of community, strengthens resilience, namely, one's psychological resistance.
Keywords: Virus crisis, Globalization; Panic; Narcissistic omnipotence; Resilience; Tolerance of ambiguity

Introduction

For a good 3 months now, the coronavirus has dominated the global headlines. While initially only seen in China, it has now spread all over the world. The coronavirus has now swept over politics and the global economy and is causing global panic. The growth of the world economy has also been infected; this is happening globally, simultaneously, and in real time.

The debate over the virus is, one might be inclined to say, related to a factually and psychologically seen pandemic in nature, by this I do not only mean the reporting of the dangers of the coronavirus:

It is not only the Coronavirus which matters in times of globalization

We are talking about a specific biological virus. "It's about panic as an emotional virus. It is about digital, viral communication via media, especially social media as the third virus" (Sollmann, 2020b), and the economic dynamics as the fourth virus. It now seems to make no difference from which angle you look at all this, so you really have to be aware of the other viruses at the same time. So, how do we handle this impact?

Currently, the world is not controlled by only four viruses. "Rather, the world seems to have drunk a cocktail of viruses that has thrown it considerably out of step" (Sollmann, 2020b), a cocktail that has had similar effects in many parts of the world. So, we are all in the same boat.

But we do not feel accordingly and we do not act accordingly.

The shock accompanying this has triggered a deep, overwhelming, and almost uncanny reaction of global uncertainty. All over the world, nations, societies, and people, are experiencing themselves as being threatened and attacked by an external, invisible enemy. This seems to be an enemy you have to be aware of everywhere in the world.. This enemy has influenced the world like a tsunami and threatens to inundate old, familiar securities. Thus, it is not astonishing that many politicians like Trump and Macron use war rhetoric like: "we are in a war", "corona is the enemy", and "when will we win the battle".

This rhetoric reflects three psychological mechanisms:

1. "We can feel secure within our group, our nation. The enemy is outside."

2. "As long as we are fighting the enemy outside, we can be sure that we are in control of the situation. We can rely on our weapons" (But this of course is an illusion).

3. Nations seem to act as if they can survive only by themselves. This is by no means a spontaneous, natural reflex to globalization. At this instant, it has become clear that people no longer believe in what is called globalization (Globalization 101, 2020). Globalization has become the opponent (an enemy?) to fight against existentially.

"Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in societies around the world.

Globalization is not new, though. For thousands of years, people—and, later, corporations—have been buying from and selling to each other in lands at great distances, such as through the famed Silk Road across Central Asia that connected China and Europe during the Middle Ages.

This current wave of globalization has been driven by policies that have opened

economies domestically and internationally. Many governments have adopted free-market economic systems, vastly increasing their own productive potential and creating myriad new opportunities for international trade and investment. Governments also have negotiated dramatic reductions in barriers to commerce and have established international agreements to promote trade in goods, services, and investment. A defining feature of globalization, therefore, is an international industrial and financial business structure. Technology has been the other principal driver of globalization. Globalization is deeply controversial, however." (Globalization 101, 2020).

Psychologically speaking, the boundaries between cultural and social identities are becoming blurred. A feeling of "world identity" has been created, suggesting orientation, appreciation, group membership, and security. But people and cultures are different, people and cultures need identity, as expressed for example in national identities, I am German, Chinese, or Iranian. But people also need a *felt identity*, which is created on the basis of a common experience. This is essentially characterized by a perceptible, tangible, experienced, and familiar togetherness in the community of those with whom one shares one's life, one's everyday life, and the fulfillment of life. This is what I understand as a felt "community identity", among other things. The more you are familiar with this, the earlier you can open up to another identity or representative of a cultural identity like a Chinese, Iranian, or American. To put it in a nutshell, the sensed and felt "I" can encounter the felt and sensed other.

Thus, we are the same and different at the same time in this era of globalization.

The opponent is not only the coronavirus. Panic is also experienced as an opponent, like something that threatens to fall on you and the world. The viral communication of panic infects people when they look for information or want to exchange information with friends and relatives. It will hit people and cause panic, rumors, hostility, exclusion, discrimination, and of course unconscious emotional suffering. And you try to protect yourself against this viral opponent.

Psychological aspects of globalization

In the beginning, there was the fear of the virus, then, viral panic, the viral communication, the threat of economic collapse, and now, the interaction of globally changing scenarios of political and psychological demarcation. This is being lived right now in Europe, Germany, America, etc. Many people and nations hope for mental and factual orientation and security through this. True to the motto: "my leaders will manage it". However, this overlooks the fact that the political leadership of a nation is, especially now, as much at the mercy of feelings of insecurity, fear, powerlessness, etc. as the individual. They too are humans and not at all prepared for such a pandemic and devastating experience. Sociologically, it is appropriate that they in their role and this specific crisis act directly, here and now with a "strong hand".

German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed this emphatically in her speech to the nation on 18 March 2020. The war rhetoric of other leaders like Macron, Trump, and Johnson therefore functions as psychological defense. This rhetoric also promotes nationalist aspirations and intensifies the tension between perceived identity and "world identity".

Instead of experiencing the world and oneself as "I and you", one distinguishes between, and separates "I from you".

If one follows this kind of rhetoric, one is deceiving oneself about the very fragile and unstable worldwide state of being during this Corona crisis, is likely to succumb

to the danger of one's own narcissistic hubris, and will fail to recognize that the corona crisis holds up its own mirror to people and societies. Now, at the limits of globalization, at its breaking point, we recognize the dangers of overestimating ourselves. But we also fail to recognize the need to look at people, at their very own needs, feelings, and cultural differences, and at their very personal sense of the situation. The war rhetoric seems to be another attempt to make us believe that we have everything under control. At the same time this devaluates the "other", the counterpart.

But globalization, as I referred to above (I referred to the kind of globalization created during the last 30 years), does not have enough respect for humans. Globalization ignores them by preaching the dictate of limitless performance and efficiency. It makes people believe that that which is called globalization will provide orientation, security, limitless growth, and contentedness as well as happiness.

This kind of globalization is, however, an abstract for the experience of people, an undertaking that will never be sensually experienced by the individual. Globalization could therefore be understood as a promise of orientation, security, and identity, a promise of contentedness and happiness. Globalization is a promise that simply cannot be achieved, and it is now being exposed as such by the present crisis. It remains a deceptive promise.

Individual trauma, globalization as trauma, and traumatization of globalization

It is not surprising that people want the experience of security, not the promise of it. They seek sensed protection, which is often expressed in the desire to belong to a group. This room is expected to be a safe room, a space in which to shelter oneself against subtle or open psychological shock and traumatization. Such an effect, which functions "automatically", happens everywhere in the world, both in places where there is an external violent impact by the virus and/or spaces which are not yet infected by the coronavirus. Against the background of the SARS epidemic of 2002/2003, it also has retraumatizing features.

Trauma researchers speak of "...a vital experience of discrepancy between threatening situational factors and individual coping possibilities, which is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and defenseless abandonment and thus causes a permanent shaking of self and world understanding" (Fischer & Riedesser, 2009).

This personally experienced and socially manifested shock thus amounts to personal traumatization. In addition, it also globalizes this personal experience. Specific patterns of experience, behavior, and reaction are thus also visible as an expression of social and cultural experience. This can be called a pattern of a traumatized globalization. In China, they often say: "we are all suffering, we as a society are suffering again like we have the last 200 years".

Resistance and discrimination

How do you encounter, sense, and experience people who are (possibly) infected by the virus, like those who come from China, but live thousands of kilometers away from the immediate crisis area around Wuhan? How can you live with the flood of polarizing and devaluating comments of social media? How can you live with the "black or white" media coverage? How can you hide away from discrimination, exclusion, and xenophobic reports like that in Germany and other countries against people who have a Chinese appearance? How can you feel safe and strong when trying to defend yourself against this influence? The cover story of "Der Spiegel" and front page of the issue of February 1st 2020 are striking examples. This kind of cover story gives the impression that SarsCov2 was manufactured in China ("Coronvirus:

Made in China") (Spiegel, 2020). This kind of implicit, suggestive message conveys that again China is regarded as a dangerous red dragon. This arouses not only consternation, but also outrage at the viral effect of such a message. Most recently, it can be assumed that (not only) Der Spiegel readers need to know where the enemy is situated. And once they have identified the enemy, they can feel safe again. As can be seen in the title of the cover story of "TIME" in the US ('Our Big War' As Coronavirus Spreads, Trump Refashions Himself as a Wartime President).

Quite quickly, not only in Germany, but also other parts of the world there was a clear resistance to turning one's attention to this war. Even if a war-metaphor divides the world into friend and enemy, one can not help but acknowledge the fact that the virus has spread all over the world and does not differentiatebetween friend and enemy. There is a part of society and media which represents the so called "hard facts". They compare the current development with other big influenza-waves in Germany (e.g., Germany 2018). It is said that the 900 deaths (as of 10.02.2020) from corona are no reason for panic compared to the 20,000 deaths due to winter flu in Germany in 2018 (Sollmann, 2020b). Then, there are the representatives of compartmentalization. They suggest that if the external borders were tight, then one would be sufficiently secured. This means that nobody from the outside would be allowed to enter the country, and if someone did, he would be quarantined for two weeks. Those who personally want to be on the safe side hang a sign that prohibits Chinese-looking people from entering their restaurant, as they did so in Germany.

This is no longer only directed toward Chinese people, but also toward people from Italy and France, and even people from the highly infected areas in Germany, with the motto: the enemy is everywhere.

Then, there are those who play the role of world explainers from a safe distance, often overstraining one or the other perspective, but not including themselves. Not to mention those who want to rise above everything through satire. We should also mention that those who fall into old accusation behavior and divide the world into good and evil by pointing their journalistic index finger (once again) at China, as is being done in the US and Germany. The opposite is also true as China for example points its finger at the US and accuses the US of discrediting China again and again. In Germany there often is a deep anxiety toward foreigners, you may call it xenophobia. The political and cultural resentments now reported on a daily basis are unparalleled in history. There are those who see their prejudices confirmed, but who are angry about them in a small circle, silently, what would have been in former times called "nobly restrained". Nothing really changes then.

Thus, seeking protection means I am ok, even if you are not ok.

Looking at myself as an emotional mirror

All these people seem to have something in common. They feel deeply insecure in themselves and within the world and know not how to react well when confronted with the uncanniness of this virus cocktail. They are afraid, even if they do not want to admit it to themselves. Their behavior and their psychological strategy of defense, of resistance to a balanced view of the situation can be seen as signs of this fear (Sollmann, 2020b).

I myself know how difficult this is. In my blog post about Wuhan from February 1, 2020 (https://www.focus.de/11612919), I tried to describe factually typical Chinese behavior patterns in dealing with a crisis in order to make the situation more comprehensible. But at the same time, as I have since understood, I reported "too objectively distanced". As an expert, I did not think I "should" become personal or

even emotional. In writing about the Chinese suffering in such a situation, which is unbelievably terrible, as an expert I cannot remain so distant. As a person, I could not perceive that this also includes me and us here in Germany (Sollmann, 2020b); we also drank from the virus cocktail.

Drunk on the virus cocktail, I thought that the expert role could offer me sufficient protection and security in this global event, protection against the possible emotions of fear and insecurity. Writing in this way I now understand that I unconsciously took the risk of losing human empathy for the people in Wuhan and in China. I failed to see their traumatic experience, to which, if I saw them, I would have to react very differently. This almost made me lose track of myself emotionally.

The security I secretly hoped for in the expert role, therefore, turned out to be deceptive. It offered me (only) security in the group of experts, but at the same time it separated me from the group of people who were flooded by the effects of the virus cocktail, and I am one of these people.

One can assume that now (May 2020) the entire world has been infected by the tsunami of the virus-cocktail. This happens with a variety of intensities and through changing ways of effect. Therefore, it is no longer helpful to only look for security in any one subgroup. We have to seek emotional protection and security by being open with all our senses, which can help us experience the Covid19-crisis not only as a crisis caused by the biological virus. By doing this, I experience myself as a human being in relation to other people. I feel the emotional similarity that we have in common despite our different social and cultural experiences. I experience myself as I feel now, similar to my counterpart and yet also different from my counterpart. To accept the difference and the similarity as they are, namely, to respect both as equal by being different, can be the emotional light on the horizon.

As a result of this impressive experience, I know that not only the other is other, but I am also other (to myself).

Tolerance of ambiguity as part of resilience

Psychologically, being able to sense and experience the emotional similarity of humans resembles the competence of ambiguity. Competence of ambiguity is the quality of being open to more than one interpretation, inexactness. Social-psychological competence is called tolerance of ambiguity, sometimes also referred to as uncertainty or uncertainty tolerance. It is the ability to endure ambiguous situations and contradictory ways of feeling, sensing, and acting. Persons tolerant of ambiguity are able to perceive ambiguities, i.e., contradictions, cultural differences, or ambiguous information that seems difficult to understand or even unacceptable without reacting aggressively to them or evaluating them unilaterally negatively or - often in the case of culturally determined differences - unreservedly positive. The better you can sense yourself in this process, the better you are able to sense your own compass within a globalized world.

After all, we know from resilience research that there are at least four factors that make protection, security, and recovery possible. Resilience means, among other things, the ability not to give up on oneself after several blows of fate and to manage to steer life back into positive directions. These four factors are:

- Alone is by no means good.
- Resources must be available or jointly developed to meet these requirements.
- Confidence can be established and experienced by personal effort and a corresponding experience with others.
- Experiencing and regaining confidence helps people to again experience life

as predictable, understandable, and explainable.

Therefore, the basic experience is that one cannot overcome such situations alone. Together with other people, one can find hope again and regain control of a bad situation. Xenophobia is a bad advisor. Trust in oneself is necessary and helpful. It is also helpful to realize that other people and countries in the world like China, Iran, and Italy are also infected. Even if there are differences in the extent of infections, each one will realize that we are all part of the same game. Only the group of people affected can provide protection and security. Pulling together can regain hope and control of the situation. Trust in oneself and in one's counterparts, here in Germany as well as among the people in China, Iran, Italy, or elsewhere can disenchant one with the virus cocktail.

If dialogue is a globally accepted, desired, and valued form of global communion and does not remain merely an announcement of itself, it will act as *an art of thinking together.* This transforms communication into an art, namely, to give both oneself and others the same right to think independently and to respect each other in the relevant exchange. This is an essential difference to a cocktail. While in a cocktail the ingredients are mixed without being individually recognizable or perceptible, the art of thinking together is distinguished by "I am when you are (also when being different)".

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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