

Meeting report: „Politics, science and technology in times of crisis“. Annual DVPW group meeting, 2022 (online)

Rosine Kelz*,¹ 

76

The annual meeting of the German Political Science Association (DVPW) Working Group on Politics, Science, and Technology was held on March 3 and 4 2022. The online meeting, organized by Alejandro Esguerra and Holger Strassheim (both Bielefeld University) as well as Silke Beck and Sebastian Pfotenhauer (both Technical University Munich) explored the topic of “Crisis”. As an exceptional situation requiring extraordinary measures, a crisis often reveals existing tension in the relationship between scientific expertise and policy-making. Moreover, the specific temporality of a crisis situation, with its sense of urgency and narrow windows for action, can alter the roles of technologies and knowledge in decision-making processes. As demonstrated most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in political authorities and experts might have to be renegotiated. While usually framed as a threat, the disruptive potential of a crisis situation can also be taken as a chance for positive transformation.

True to the spirit of the working group, around 30 participants at this annual meeting represented a variety of disciplinary backgrounds across the social sciences and humanities and explored the topic of crisis from various theoretical and empirical perspectives. While a broad scope of topics was covered, not surprisingly, the pandemic took center-stage.

Situating the concept of crisis

Several contributions sought to analyze the meaning, forms and roles of “crisis”. Despite the omnipresence of crisis declarations, participants argued, still much has to be done to better understand the role crisis plays in political thought and action as well

as for the relationship between the sciences, political institutions, and publics. The meeting opened with a contribution by Alexander Bogner (Austrian Academy of Sciences) who proposed a distinction between acute and chronic crises. Using the corona pandemic as example, Bogner argued that politicians’ expectations of scientific advice changes when a crisis proceeds from the acute to the chronic stage. While in acute crisis situations expertocratic tendencies remain unproblematic, the diversity and polyphony within science comes to the fore in a chronic crisis. Endre Dányi (Goethe University Frankfurt) argued that the idea of climate change in terms of a chronic crisis complicates the notion of crisis as such. While usually a crisis is defined as an extraordinary situation, a deviation from the norm, this does not fit when climate change is seen as an outcome of the modern exploitative relationship to the environment. From this perspective, the actual crisis lies with the breakdown of the modernist idea of technological progress and endless economic growth. As an unresolvable crisis, however, climate change and the end of the progress narratives are linked to “melancholy”. This melancholy could become analytically and politically generative providing an alternative to both false hope in technoscientific fixes and complete despair. Similar themes emerged when Jens Jetzkowitz (Thünen-Institute of Rural Studies/Helmut-Schmidt-University, Hamburg) used the example of the species extinction to explore what it means to declare something as a crisis from a speech-act theory perspective. In the ensuing discussion about the historic roots of the crisis concept the importance of calling something a crisis as a call for action, from Marxian to more recent neoliberal theories, was highlighted. In declaring planetary crises, however, calls for action become intermingled with notions of belatedness. As issues like species extinction and climate change cannot be resolved, current discourses on crisis bring to mind Offe’s diagnosis of a “crisis of crisis management”, where only secondary or “superstructure” crises are addressed, while the fundamental crisis of capitalism remains unresolved. Drawing on debates in philosophy of technology and on the Foucauldian notion of biopower, Larissa Ullmann’s (TU Darmstadt) theoretical contribution explored the human factor in the pandemic, as a more general issue in humanity’s relationship with technology. Matthias Braun (Erlangen University) also spoke about human-technology relationships, exploring the role of relationality in establishing trust in new technologies.

Exploring the relationship between science, technology and politics in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

Several contributions analyzed the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic in different European countries, focusing on issues such as the role of scientific expertise for policy-making and in media reports. Drawing on research conducted as part of an international comparative study on national COVID-19 responses, Silke Beck, Esma Gelis, Sebastian Pfotenhauer and Matteo Vivi (TU Munich) analyzed the German response to the COVID-19 crisis through the lens of public reason. They argued that the

* Corresponding author: kelz1@uni-bremen.de

¹ Institute for Intercultural and International Studies, Universität Bremen,
28195 Bremen, DE



© 2022 by the authors; licensee oekom. This Open Access article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).
<https://doi.org/10.14512/tatup.31.2.76>
published online: Jul. 18, 2022

pandemic has brought into focus a broader crisis in the established relationships between science, politics, and society, magnifying already present trends and fissures. Similar to Bogner, they pointed out changes in the development of the COVID-19 response. In the first year, German political institutions returned to their traditional political culture emphasizing consensus and delegation to highly institutionalized forms of expert authority. In year two, however, growing tensions and controversy in the performance of consensus became apparent. This inability to patch over political differences in the protracted crisis underscored the degree to which political consensus had already been eroded prior to the pandemic – e.g. in the aftermath of the refugee crisis. Similarly, Joakim Juhl (TU Munich) argued that Danish COVID-19 responses can be understood as a rupture of

exander Schniedermann's (German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies, DZHW) presentation reported a citation context analysis of references to scientific publications in the German press before and during the pandemic. They asked whether and how the German press, as a mediator of scientific expertise, has shaped the latter's authority during the pandemic.

Crises – always and everywhere?

Further exploring the relationship between media representation and the declaration of crisis, Mirco Liefke (FU Berlin) argued that constant declarations of crises solve framing issues for media reporting. Highlighting the relationship between politics and the media, he argued that a given situation only constitutes a cri-

While usually framed as threats, the disruptive potential of crisis situations can also be taken as a chance for positive transformation.

77

the modernist settlement between scientific expertise, government and public perception. Alexandra Hofmänner (Basel University) addressed systems of expert advice to governments, using the example of Switzerland's COVID-19 policies. She argued that these systems are usually difficult to study, but that the pandemic provided an opportunity because it highlighted structures and processes of expert advice. In their study, Caroline Schlauffer, Caspar Hirschi, Céline Mavrot, Johanna Hornung and Fritz Sager compared advice in Switzerland's COVID-19 response to the role of expert advice after the financial crisis of 2008 and the Fukushima accident in 2011. Jens Hälterlein (Freiburg University) explored the political dimension of mathematical modeling in the context of the corona crisis by presenting early findings from an ethnographic study about state financed project using agent-based modeling of infection dynamics. The project aims to develop a system that supports municipalities in coping with complex crisis situations by creating an agent-based simulation based on the evaluation of smart city data. This enables simulating possible effects of local measures by using artificial intelligence (AI) methods.

The role of different media in the COVID-19 pandemic was also an important topic. Highlighting the role of social media in establishing the diagnosis of long covid, Phillip Roth (Aachen University) analyzed processes of de-institutionalization of expertise at the beginning of the pandemic by drawing a comparison with Gil Eyal's research on autism and social media communities. Karolin Kornehl (Hamburg University) explored whether scientific knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic was communicated effectively on social media platforms. Her study used Twitter as an example to examine how knowledge about corona is legitimized on social media platforms. Arno Simons and Al-

sis when it is made publically visible by media reporting. To be eligible as a crisis, moreover, a situation has to be suitable for solving specific political problems. Concentrating on cyberwarfare, Janine Scholdt discussed the performativity of digital crises. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's and Judith Butler's re-reading of Austin's speech act theory, she argued that constant iteration, repetition and recitation of cyberwar speech-acts have inscribed a particular image of cyberwar onto reality. The question whether a permanent and encompassing epistemic or normative issue or conflict can constitute a crisis was central to Rosine Kelz's (Bremen University) presentation, which focused on the challenges new biotechnological tools and the notion of the Anthropocene pose for nature conservation. Cordula Kropp und Kathrin Braun (Stuttgart University) spoke about the promise of digitalization as a solution for the many and lasting crises of the construction industry. They argued that these visions of an efficiency, integration, singularization and sustainability revolution tend to follow industry-modernist hopes for a technological fix.

In reflecting on the discussion, participants emphasized that sociology, unlike political science, has always legitimized itself by addressing crises. The status of a 'crisis science' has recently been taken up by natural science disciplines, especially with reference to climate change. Political science by contrast addresses crises either when political institutions lack mechanisms to sufficiently deal with crises, or when the trust in the political institutions itself crumbles.