

Big cities, mental health and Covid: Learning from sociologists Georg Simmel and Robert Dingwall

Oh when there's no future
How can there be sin
We're the flowers
In the dustbin
We're the poison
In your human machine
We're the future
Your future
God save the queen
We mean it man
We love our queen
Sex Pistols, God Save the Queen, 1977

By Clemens Heni, PhD, December 24, 2020

December 21, 2020, I made an interview with Professor Robert Dingwall from Nottingham Trent University in the north of England. Our point of departure was the fact, that Dingwall did something very special on that Monday. He did something all people in London, Berlin or Munich were not able to do at that time and won't be able to do for an uncertain period of time to come: he went to a hairdresser and had a hair-cut, imagine.

The irrational and panic driven policies of Boris Johnson or Angela Merkel do not allow many Britons and all Germans to go to the hairdresser for a nice look for Christmas or just for the last ten days of the year. We started our interview with sociologist Georg Simmel. In 1903, Simmel wrote an article about "The Metropolis and mental life". In it, Simmel wrote:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.

These stimuli are now lost, as everybody needs to wear a mask in shops, trains, busses, libraries, galleries, places, streets – if they are open at all, which is no longer the case in Tier 4, 5, 9 or in completely locked down countries such as Germany. “Completely” translates into the closure of all things that can make people a bit happier, like pubs, restaurants, shops, libraries, galleries, events – it does not translate into the closure of manufactories like in spring 2020, perhaps because politicians believe that 17.000 people in a car factory are less “infectious” compared to three people in a bookstore. In fact, almost no one of the so-called “cases” is infectious, as scholarship has shown. A positive PCR-test says NOTHING about the fact if a person is sick or infectious. Period. We have the worst test epidemic in the history of mankind.

Dingwall wrote about Simmel a few days ago (“COVID, Simmel and the Future of Cities”):

Simmel composed this lecture against the background of a critique of cities from late 19th century conservative writers. Cities were seen as dark, dangerous and unhealthy places, where human beings lost touch with their nature. People became restive and disruptive, challenging the existing social order of church and social hierarchy. They were prone to fickle mass behavior in mobs, crowds and demonstrations. Societies would be much better if they could return to a more pastoral way of life, not necessarily entirely in the countryside. Model villages or garden townships could house workers close to their factories, where paternalist employers could exclude corrupting influences like pubs and promote civilizing cultural pursuits. Every

house would have its own green space or access to an allotment or community garden so that healthy workers could grow their own fresh produce. Trades unions would be barred and co-operative staff associations encouraged. The pre-industrial peasant would be re-invented as the deferential worker.

While Dingwall lives in a pretty much homogenous white neighbourhood in Nottingham, I live in a very much diverse environment in the south of Germany, where some 50 percent of the population have a migration background. What is fascinating about Dingwall's approach is the following: He writes in the times of Corona and has a strong working-class perspective, which is emancipatory.

Many people, though, take Guardian editors or almost the entire University elites, live in a fantasy world of virtual reality. Those people ignore that there are workers at the docks in Liverpool who unload ships or make shipments ready for embarking. In our globalized world, a huge amount of shipments arrive via ships or by aircraft – take the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine, which is produced in Belgium and the UK struggles to get access to the continent, taken the latest and even more irrational panic attack by Boris and the reaction by Macron and the EU.

Dingwall's close reading of Simmel shows the importance of an insight view in modern society. Ironically, it is the Left and the Green-Left that is again or still walking in the footsteps of the conservatives of the time around 1900. Dingwall writes:

The 15-minute city is often seen as a project of the left or of Green thinking – but it is, in fact heir to the conservatives that Simmel opposed. A city of self-sufficient neighborhoods or urban villages is a city that loses most of the things that make urban life worthwhile. If we are not working from home, we are spending time at an office hub or a

local factory, mixing with people like ourselves. My own neighborhood is almost exclusively white, with a few South Asian professional families who have been attracted by the larger housing capable of accommodating multi-generational households. Where is the challenge of diversity?

What happens to innovation in the 15-minute city? We have yet to find a satisfactory online alternative to physical agglomeration. What is the equivalent to the social settings where people with different skills hang out, interact and spark ideas? If university education moves online, it becomes mere instruction, the reproduction of knowledge and skills rather than the frictional engagement that provokes novel thinking. A senior partner in a large local law firm confided to me her worries about the loss of collective problem-solving and shared learning among her assistants. They brought their challenges to her because the isolation of the virtual world did not allow them to brainstorm in the same way as an open-plan office. Do we really want to be frozen in time and slow to adapt as the world around us changes?

As the Great Barrington Declaration by Prof. Sunetra Gupta from Oxford, Prof. Martin Kulldorff from Harvard and Prof. Jay Bhattacharya from Stanford has shown, it is cynical by the middle and upper white class in the US or Europe to impose lockdowns, while the working class – overrepresented by migrants – is of course still out there to take the virus: dock workers, taxi drivers, nurses, doctors, supermarket labour staff, car or chocolate factory workers and the like. Thanks to these millions of people our herd immunity is growing on a daily basis. Those self-locked pseudo intellectuals behave like landlords: they let the slaves work instead of them.

Dingwall concludes:

If you are in a certain class at a certain career stage with

a certain kind of family, 15-minute living may be very cozy. Simmel encourages us to think about whether this is a fundamentally selfish notion whose costs have been concealed by its advocates.

We talked about the surreal and anti-scholarly idea of the Guardian, to follow a “zero Covid” strategy. As if mankind could eliminate such a respiratory virus! The fact, that those Guardian people after 10 months into the crisis, still believe such irrational tropes, is shocking.

We had a short look at John Kampfner’s fall 2020 bestseller “Why the Germans do it better” and came to the conclusion, that Merkel for sure outplayed Boris up until February 2020. But since the Corona crisis started, Merkel acted as irrational and authoritarian as the Prime Minister of the UK.

The printing of a beetle on the cover of that book, alongside with other German stereotypes such as beer, sausages and the Brandenburg Gate, is telling. Kampfner does of course not tell his British readers the story of the beetle and its invention by the Nazis in 1938. At that time, the organization “Strength through Joy or Kraft durch Freude, KdF” was a core element of National Socialism.

The 1933 established KdF showed movies, worked as tour operator and had a strong ideology of a “healthy” German body. In 1938 they started their biggest project: to build an entire city, dedicated to a car factory, the “Volkswagen” car for the people, with the beetle as its main product. Today this city is called Wolfsburg – known from the Champions League, while it is a running gag in Germany that some train conductors missed that station in the land of nowhere in the north of Germany.

If Kampfner had read my 2013 book “Antisemitism: A Specific Phenomenon”, he could have learnt that story of the Volkswagen car factory – I got a blurb for that book, for example, by Dr.

Anthony Julius (“A thorough, objective and intelligent analysis of the principal form taken by contemporary anti-Semitism”), former Lady Di’s attorney and he was also the lawyer in the Penguin books and Deborah Lipstadt’s process against Holocaust denier David Irving. Kampfner literally embraces Merkel for her entire career, including her authoritarian and irrational Corona policies. Ever since March 2020, Merkel ignores serious epidemiological, public health and medical expert advice, when it comes to Corona. Her advice comes exclusively from not fact-based mathematicians and virologists, pretty much the same happens in the UK.

Kampfner, a former Telegraph-man, ignores all these facts about the failure of Merkel in 2020. Merkel is responsible, though, for the extreme underfunding of German hospitals and nursing homes, the huge lack of staff and the shameful bad payment for these people. Merkel intentionally did not change that system in the last 15 years, but made it even worse. Merkel is not just acting antidemocratic during the crisis – as all politicians outside of Sweden did and do -, she also is representing a poor medical system which is based on capitalist profit and not on the well-being of patients and staff alike.

Merkel prefers to spend way over 500 billion Euros, probably rather 1000 billions in the decades to come, for lockdowns, instead of some 10 billion Euros for 180,000 nurses and medical staff, for example (based on 5000 € salary a month per person).

This a complete failure of a government. Covid is not very dangerous for most people. The infection fatality rate (IFR) is between 0,14 percent and 0,24 percent, as the WHO and Prof. John Ioannidis have shown. The flu in the old FRG in 1970 had an IFR of 0,29 percent, as the Robert Koch-Institute has estimated in 2016. Some 40,000 people died in 1970, which translates in to 56,000 deaths taken today’s population in Germany.

We cannot but laugh at Merkel – she seriously thought and still thinks one can eliminate a virus. Now we have sometimes three or four times as many deaths a day like France (IF these deaths truly died FROM Corona and not only WITH it!!!, many get tested despite the fact that they died of other causes or Corona just played a minor role etc.), while most Germans made fun of France during spring, as if they are unable to stop a virus, while Germans can. No one can. It is not a deadly virus for all of us either, just for a small part of our society, the very old and the seriously sick, without ignoring that we all can die every day – so no panic at all.

Euromomo still shows no or a very small excess mortality for Germany (based on the data of Hesse and Berlin, which is indeed representative for all of Germany, although in the north of Germany Covid did not cause as many deaths as in Bavaria, where the most hardcore lockdown policies have been implemented).

Finally, I asked Dingwall about the relationship of the social sciences and criticism of the Corona panic industry. Take TalkRadio as an example: it struck me, when I overheard that one of their shows made fun of the very term “social psychology”, as if that does not exist. They said, the infamous SAGE panic group, which is indeed at the core of Boris Johnson’s irrational and not evidence-based Corona policies, is made up of behavioural scientists, including social psychologists.

Well, in fact, London would be a great place to start with the analysis of social psychology, I would add, as both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud are buried in London (I recall my first visit to the remarkable grave of Marx in the late 1980s, when my school class went to London, but no one joined me going to visit Marx, no surprise, either, it was the time of Margret Thatcher).

Dingwall and I concluded, that we both do not see a

substantial (if any) excess mortality (take the data of Euromomo when it comes to Germany, for example) and we both hope that the UK, Germany and the rest of the world finally stops intimidating adult and young people alike and starts realizing that Corona is nothing but an Influenza like virus that is here to stay.

If we want to survive as a modern society, we need urban life. Diversity cannot exist in a 15-minutes city, as Dingwall points out:

You might be the only gay in your village: in the city, you could be part of a gay neighborhood, associate with like-minded people, and create a market for products and services to support your preferences. You were no longer strangled by the fate of your birth but free to make of yourself what you could. The market economy liberated you from seasonal scarcity and the quirks of others – with money as a neutral medium of exchange, you could deal impersonally rather than depending upon the goodwill of the village traders and their moral judgements.

Taken the fact, that there is indeed the notion of a “Great Reset” by the World Economic Forum (May 2020) and many leading politicians, virtual teaching and hygiene state measures are threatening our liberty and our entire social life, democracy is in danger.

Both Johnson and Merkel fail to understand that Covid is only about focused protection – not isolation! – of the elderly and particularly the very old, exhausted and sick people in nursing homes or in their own homes.

A huge portion of this exhaustion comes from the unprecedented 24/7 drumfire and the a-social consequences (no visits and masks all over the faces!) of the panic industry, be it the BBC, the Guardian or the ARD and the Sueddeutsche respectively.

It is very unlikely that Boris Johnson or Angela Merkel ever heard of Georg Simmel. Thatcher might have and that was the reason why she detested the very term "society". Today, TalkRadio has screaming fits when they hear the term "social psychology". In fact, an analysis of the authoritarian character of many millions of people in our society could be very helpful to show how deep their desire to dominate and humiliate others (like those who cannot wear a mask), while being dominated and humiliated by the elites, still is. This is no surprise in a country such as Germany (take Heinrich Mann's "Subject" ("Der Untertan") as an example), is it a surprise in England or the UK?

We need sociologists such as Georg Simmel and Robert Dingwall to understand the importance of urban life. It is not Corona that destroys our lives, it is the irrational Corona policies by our politicians, who have no idea whatsoever what sociology is all about.

A last word for my English football fans: we miss you, we need you. We will never forget the 2001 5:1 of England against Germany in Munich. We need fans to come back to our stadiums. We need English fans back in German stadiums, too, as well as on German streets like in 2006 in Stuttgart during the World Cup. The tiny but vibrant anti-German movement of the far Left always embraced "There were ten German bombers in the Air ... And the RAF shot one down".

Today, though, almost all of the left-wingers in Germany and the UK not only support the conservative governments (Boris or Merkel), they even attack left-wing critics of the not evidence-based Corona policies. The Left should finally wake up in 2021 and fight biopolitics (Foucault), support the victims or collateral damages of the draconian measures taken by our governments. Mental health is a huge topic and psychologically sick people will not be in the lists of excess mortality, at least not in 2020. But the damage done by the one-sided policies is huge and unprecedented since the end of

the Second World War.

Dingwall and I spoke about those 17 or 21-year old students, who are now stuck in London and cannot visit their families and friends for Christmas. Imagine you are 17 and for the first time in love and the state does not allow you to see your cool boy or girl in Birmingham, Exeter or Norwich for the holidays. You are locked down in your prison cell called student accommodation. You will just be once in your lifetime 17 on Christmas or 21 on New Year's Eve – and the irrational policies will destroy this day and time of the year forever.

These working-class people or students from Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds or Nottingham might have much more to say about life during Corona than the detached British or German cultural elites. Public health is about all people, internationally. This supplements Simmel's notion of the mental health situation in big cities. Freedom and diversity translate into international solidarity and not the nationalism and narcissism – “It is my life that counts, not the one of a working-class man in Liverpool or of child in India or sub-Saharan Africa” – of elitist panic driven closures of borders, cities, and our entire lives.

Social science finally needs to take over the crisis management, that is for sure. Simmel and Dingwall can show us a path back to 'normal'.

Warhorses such as Boris or Merkel are part of our anti-intellectual elites, unable and unwilling to face reality. They will never ever admit that they made a mistake – the mistake to seriously think a virus can be stopped or contained without causing huge collateral damage, which then comes in addition to the damage done by that virus or any other virus in the future to come (if there is a future at all on the long run).

Merkel intentionally spreads panic and fear, as it is written

in the worst panic paper ever written by a German government since 1945. That panic paper from March 2020 by the German Ministry of the Interior urges politicians to spread panic and the fear that little children see their grandparents or parents die in their living room – and the children SHALL have the guilt of having made their parents or grandparents die, due to Covid. That paper is part of the worst policies ever taken by any chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Let's look at a final quote from Robert Dingwall, who has written another (so far unpublished) piece about Philip Strong's 1990 essay on the "Epidemic Psychology".

Dingwall concludes:

We sociologists have relevant knowledge that is not being brought to bear in thinking about the restoration of orderliness in society and that sense of stability that is fundamental to everyday life. This does not necessarily involve a world turned upside down to establish a 'new normal' whose pathologies would soon become apparent.

Several journalists have asked me how I came to identify some issues of concern for public policy way before others, particularly the disabling consequences of the level of fear induced in the UK population. It is not a matter of any particular skill on my part so much as the strength of Strong's original analysis in describing the broad trajectory of any epidemic or pandemic. As this essay has shown, there are, of course, also features that are distinctive to Covid-19 and its challenge to so many assumptions of the contemporary world. However, I may also have given some sense to a new generation of why Phil Strong was so revered by those of us who had the privilege of being his contemporaries and how the BSA Medical Sociology Group came to perpetuate his memory in its only named prize."

