We need more public debate

Von John James for bachheimer.com   26.03.2020

Monday`s news that German lawmakers consider the rising levels of Corona Virus to be a reason to suspend key provisions of the Grundgesetz, the country`s subsitute for a constitution, (Grundgesetz can be translated into English as Fundamental Law, the country has technically had no constitution since 1945) suggests that the German elite are once again abandoning rational, public debate in favour of the pleasures of state control. (See the links at the bottom of this article)

Do the German parliamentarians really think that the Corona Virus cares whether its host live in a free society or in an authoritarian state? What is going on? Why is there no serious discussion in the German media, in German universities and the German parliament over the correct interpretation of the statistics collected by the medical profession.

The German elite has apparently decided that the Corona Crisis is an appropriate moment to engage in constitutional reform. In the UK and in the USA a public and academic debate about the Corona Virus is taking place, in which the accuracy of the statistics and the measures adopted by the government are critically examined.

In today`s blogpost I link and excerpt from two studies taking opposite sides in this debate. The first, from Imperial College London, argues that the virus is extremely dangerous and that if no measures are taken 56 000 US American, (0.67% of the population) could die.

The second, from Oxford University, argues that the first reported death in the UK on the 5th of March occurred one month after the infection began spreading across the U.K.

Based on the assumption that Covid 19 has been spreading in the UK since the beginning of February, the researchers conclude that up to 40% of the UK population may already be carrying the virus. That would mean that the UK is well on the way to gaining ´herd immunity`.

Both studies use the same basic assumptions:

1. That the fatality rate of those infected is 0.8%,
2. That the rate of reproduction is 2.6 new infections per person and
3. That there no way to stop the virus from ultimately spreading throughout the population. All than governments can do is to slow the rate at which it spreads in order to ease the burden on national health services.

According to the statistics published on this blog, the death rate in Germany and Austria among carriers of Covid 19 is 0.5%, while in Spain and Italy it is between 7% and 10%.

Maybe it is time that German lawmakers spent less time wondering what consitutional changes they would like to make and more time critically examining the situation in Spain and Italy. Can it be that the high death rates in these countries have less to do with the Covid 19 virus and more to do with local phenomena, such as the results of the Euro bond market crisis and the austerity measures imposed on these countries by the EU? Both of these led to an economic crisis in the mediterranean countries and caused massive cuts in state investment in health services, pensions and in the general welfare of these countries.

Perhaps there is something the Germans can do to help their European neighbours? [Expropriating private property](#) and [introducing internet censorship](#) within Germany isn´t going to stop the virus. If that were the case, Communist China would have remained free of disease.

https://reason.com/2020/03/18/are-we-battling-an-unprecedented-pandemic-or-panicking-at-a-computer-generated-mirage/

Are we battling an unprecedented pandemic or panicking at a computer-generated Mirage?

A close look at the new study from Imperial College which models worst-case scenarios and makes the case for social distancing by Ronald Bailey

More than 80 percent of Americans would eventually be infected and about 2.2 million would die of the disease, according to the projections in a new modeling study by researchers at Imperial College (I.C.) in the United Kingdom. **That implies a case-fatality rate of just over 0.8 percent.** In this baseline scenario, in which no public health measures are taken, the death rate would peak at around 56,000 per day sometime around late June.

In order to prevent this dire scenario, the I.C. researchers calculate that the adoption of population-wide social distancing combined with home isolation of cases and school and university closure could cut death rates by more than 90 percent. By population-wide social distancing, the researchers mean that all households reduce their contact outside the household, school, or workplace by 75 percent. To suppress the epidemic and flatten the disease curve, these control measures would have to stay in place until a vaccine is developed and deployed in about 12 to 18 months.

Interestingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) just last year did a comprehensive review of various non-pharmaceutical measures aimed at mitigating the effects of influenza epidemics. What did the WHO recommend?

(1) Voluntary isolation at home of sick individuals with uncomplicated illness is recommended with the exception of the individuals who need to seek medical attention.

(2) **Home quarantine of exposed individuals to reduce transmission is not recommended because there is no obvious rationale for this measure, and there would be considerable difficulties in implementing it. (This contradicts that I.C. study's recommendation.)**

One of the modelling studies cited by the WHO report finds, in a high flu transmission scenario, that a 100 percent "school closure causes a small reduction in cumulative attack rates, but a more substantial reduction in peak attack rates (of up to 40%)." **That is, school closures slow down the epidemic although they do not reduce the overall number of folks who eventually become infected.**

The reproduction number for the pandemic 1918 Spanish flu is estimated to have been around 1.8, that is, each infected person passed the illness on to nearly two other people. The same number for seasonal flu viruses is about 1.3. **It's still early in the coronavirus pandemic, but preliminary estimates suggest that 2.6 is the basic reproduction number f**or that disease. If that number holds up, the novel coronavirus is more infectious than regular flu, making it more difficult to control.

Half of the United Kingdom Already Infected with Coronavirus, Says Oxford Model

Great news if true, but only massive population testing can tell us if that's really so by Ronald Bailey

Lots of media reports are citing the results of an epidemiological model developed by researchers at Oxford University that suggests that half the population of the United Kingdom may already have been infected by the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

If this is true, that would be great news! Why? Because it would mean that the coronavirus is vastly less lethal than many researchers fear that it is and that lockdowns can be lifted soon.

There are two big assumptions in the model that basically determine its projections of the percentage of the population who will eventually die of the infection. The first is the basic reproduction number (R_0), that is, the average number of people to which an infected person will pass along the disease. The other crucial assumption is that the fraction of the population who are vulnerable to severe disease and death is small.

The researchers explain, **"Our overall approach rests on the assumption that only a very small proportion of the population is at risk of hospitalisable illness." How small? In one scenario, only 1 in 1,000. In two others, 1 in 100 are susceptible to severe disease.**
The researchers run three scenarios based on the assumption that the first reported death occurred one month after the infection began spreading unnoticed throughout the U.K. They fit their model to the data on deaths from the disease reported after the first 15 days following the first recorded death. They argue that this is a way to avoid any potential effects of control strategies in slowing death rates.

Combining an assumed susceptibility to severe disease rate of 1 in 100 with R_0s 2.25 and 2.75, the researchers project respectively that 36 and 40 percent of the U.K.'s population was already infected by March 19.

If these infection rates are true, then the U.K. is approaching herd immunity, making the spread of this disease from person to person less and less likely, thus providing protection for even the more vulnerable segments of the population.

Of course, all models, including those projecting epidemiological doom, are only as good as their assumptions and data that drive them.

The researchers suggest that the way to test their model is to begin an immediate campaign of population screening using serology tests for coronavirus antibodies. If a significant proportion of people tested positive for exposure to the virus, that would confirm their model's projections. If few people test positive, then that would mean the worst of the epidemic still lies ahead.

As it stands, the public, policy makers and public health officials don't have the data that can tell them which course of the epidemic is more likely—the Imperial College model's dire coronavirus projection or the Oxford model's rosier one? The Oxford researchers are right that massive testing would resolve this vital issue, so let's get started sooner rather than later.