

Power and responsibility in the Covid pandemic

LEANDER LOEWE

Student at the Cologne School of Journalism

During the pandemic, politicians have frequently reminded people that each and every one of us can make a big difference through our actions. That means we all have power, over ourselves and others. But not everyone uses that power responsibly. An angry mob stormed the steps of the Reichstag and was only forced back by three police officers wielding batons. The young 'Jana from Kassel' stood up at a demonstration and said that criticising the Covid restrictions makes her feel like the Nazi resistance fighter Sophie Scholl.

EVERY RIGHT IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED WITH POWER AND THUS RESPONSIBILITY

These examples from 2020 show that many people cannot grasp the simple principle that our rights as citizens are inseparably bound up with power and responsibility. This principle can be explained as follows: people have universal rights. They have various options for how to live their lives and exercise these rights, which they can freely choose between.

'The question we ask ourselves shouldn't be what are we legally allowed to do, but rather what we can do without being irresponsible. We need to weigh up our basic rights and consider which restrictions require the smallest sacrifices.'

So what is power? Power is an interpersonal nexus of forces that directly or indirectly affect people's lives. It is ubiquitous in our day-to-day lives, but varies in its intensity. Government authorities, for instance, often directly control people's day-to-day lives, while the amount of power that individuals possess can differ greatly from person to person.

RESPONSIBLE USE OF POWER CONTINUES TO GAIN IN IMPORTANCE

People can use their own individual power either responsibly or irresponsibly. Acting responsibly means being mindful of how you use your power and bearing the consequences. Power and responsibility go hand in hand and are proportional to one another: the greater the power, the greater the responsibility, while someone with no power also has no responsibility. Alfred Herrhausen was aware of this relationship, and advocated a responsible use of power. But during the Covid pandemic, using power responsibly has taken on a new significance. If a person can't meet up with other people due to Covid restrictions, then their individual freedom of choice has been taken away. They are relieved of responsibility. If people ignore the restrictions, by contrast, they are exercising their power and are responsible for their actions.

In 2020, there were frequent cases of people ignoring social distancing rules, refusing to wear masks or, like Jana from Kassel, misappropriating victims of the Nazi regime to encourage others to flout the restrictions. Their behaviour is just as irresponsible as a mob attempting to storm a democratically elected parliament. They threaten our democratic order by abusing freedom of assembly and the power it gives us over others in order to deliberately transgress legal restrictions. A ban on gatherings was the logical consequence.

Coronavirus and the rules put in place to tackle it have created a new divide in our society between the two sides of this debate, with those who responsibly accept the restrictions in a spirit of solidarity with other people on the one side, and those who deliberately violate those restrictions so they can retain their

individual freedoms on the other. That puts us in a legal dilemma, for human rights and basic freedoms apply even in a pandemic and suspending them would be incompatible with rule of law. They're guaranteed by the constitution.

HOW MUCH CAN WE DO TO AVOID ACTING IRRESPONSIBLY?

In order to avoid a conflict between our various basic rights, the pandemic has taught most people to think differently. The question we ask ourselves shouldn't be what are we legally allowed to do, but rather what we can do without being irresponsible. We need to weigh up our basic rights and consider which restrictions require the smallest sacrifices.

However, the demonstrators simply don't want to make any sacrifices full stop. Nobody likes giving things up, after all. Getting them to see why their behaviour is problematic is just as difficult as getting the general public to take the climate crisis seriously. People are happy to buy soy burgers and sustainable packaging as part of their lifestyle, but no way would they give up their Caribbean cruise. But it lies within their individual responsibility to do just that.

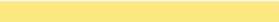
In times of crisis, this individual responsibility has added weight. There's no place in our society for people who deliberately endanger the constitution and our basic freedoms. Individual action, the courage to defend our beliefs and a willingness to stand up to those who abuse their power over others are needed if we are to respect and uphold equal rights for everyone.

If a person repeatedly and deliberately ignores their personal responsibility, their power must be restricted by the community and the individuals who make it up. The idea isn't to inflict harm on those who act irresponsibly, but for a critical mass of other people to exert pressure on them and remind them of their responsibility. That means continuing dialogue and attempting to understand each other. But it also means drawing a line in the sand when someone oversteps the mark, and clearly saying, 'I don't share or accept your view.'

CONSTRUCTIVELY STANDING UP TO PEOPLE IN THIS WAY IS A LOGICAL, RATIONAL THING

One steward at a demonstration in Hannover showed exactly how it's done. He told 'Jana from Kassel' he could no longer support 'such nonsense'. He drew a line in the sand. His example sparked a debate that emphatically reminds us of individuals' power and responsibility. These days, you don't necessarily need to take to the streets to achieve that. But it still takes courage and strong nerves, and requires us to keep speaking out against bad ideas and arguments.

Constructively standing up to people in this way is the logical, rational thing to do. In exceptional situations like a pandemic, the question boils down to: what counts more, subjective freedom, or mine and other people's lives?



IMPRINT

Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

Members of management: Dr. Anna Herrhausen and Daniela Kaiser

Unter den Linden 13-15

10117 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 3407 5559

Fax. +49 (0)30 3407 4209

E-Mail: info.ahg@db.com

Commercial Register: Local Court of Charlottenburg, 116881B