

# The Future Has Begun

In a polyphonic patchwork of talks, performances and local physical events, the Freiraum Festival held the last weekend of October delved into the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on civil liberties in Europe.

**By Uwe Rada**

Translated from German by Eric Rosencrantz

"Freiraum is a call to those who are silent as well as a call to give those who are silenced a hearing." This appeal in the *Freiraum Manifesto* did not fall upon deaf ears at the end of October at any rate. The quintessence, as it were, of three years of the Freiraum project involving 42 Goethe-Instituts and their artistic partners, the *Manifesto* did get hearing – even from the highest European authorities: it was handed over during the festival to the European Commission's Director-General for Education and Culture, Themis Christophidou, who expressed her thanks with an exhortation to protect our *Freiraum*, i.e. our freedom: "*Freiraum* is what we must safeguard and constantly fight for."

So, after three years, the Freiraum Festival was the culmination of the project up to this point. It was a hybrid and movable festival, mostly online owing to the pandemic, with events lined up all over Europe and masterfully, if remotely, moderated from down in Thessaloniki, Greece. The pandemic did not curtail all the freedoms necessary for a successful festival: on the contrary, in fact, it actually catalysed some key reactions. By the spring of 2019, Freiraum participants has formulated the project's five main issues and were steadily working up the project content and artistic contributions. And yet it was still missing a big subheading to place under the much bigger banner of freedom.

But the gap was filled overnight. To stem the first wave of the coronavirus, flatten out the exponential curve and keep the healthcare sector from collapsing, civil liberties were curtailed on an unprecedented scale. Since then, we've all got stories to tell about the epidemic – and how it brought our everyday lives to a sudden halt. Europe came to a standstill, and we all experienced it first-hand on our own doorstep and inside our own homes. But it did have a serendipitous side for Freiraum, because the virus and the efforts to combat its spread tied in with Freiraum's inquiry into the "state of freedom in Europe".

"The Day After" was the big headline for the three-day festival. So the very first day, 30 October 2020, after Themis Christophidou was presented with the *Manifesto*, Bulgarian

political scientist Ivan Krastev took up that headline in his keynote talk, asking whether today is already the new tomorrow: "How new is the normal?" Krastev, who just published a book on this subject last summer, pointed out that the increasing surveillance, among other things, in the wake of the coronavirus restrictions has long since become normal. "Only the experience goes deeper now," said Krastev in his half-hour talk from Vienna. He also stressed the importance of trust in government for adherence to the rules. "China is succeeding, the US is failing."

He further underscored the pandemic's role as a driver of the future with a rather grim comparison: over the course of history, pandemics have shown the same propensity to cause radical transformations as wars. "The coronavirus was not a turning point, it has merely amplified pre-existing trends."

But haven't any *positive* developments been amplified or catalysed by the pandemic? asked sociologist Eva Illouz, who teaches in both Jerusalem and Paris and joined us from the French capital, in the ensuing discussion. "The coronavirus may be the dawn of a new solidarity," even on the part of the state, she remarked: governments have significantly increased healthcare spending to cope with the pandemic. "Planetary awareness" is what Illouz calls the novel experience that we are all sharing. "We're thinking about ourselves and others as people who live on the same planet. It's like the way we think about the environment – only this is more intense."

It was a foregone conclusion that the coronavirus would dominate the conversation at the festival because the pandemic and the efforts to tackle it have brought out all the other Freiraum issues as if under a magnifying glass: freedom of speech, social diversity, freedom as an economic luxury, the rise of nationalist movements and Euroscepticism and, last but not least, the uses of urban space. And as with other "planetary" events and watershed moments like 9/11, we can all break these abstract issues down into personal experiences. If everyone has a personal story about one and the same event, then it clearly constitutes a watershed moment.

Krastev and Illouz recounted their own personal experiences during the panel discussion on Friday evening, as did their fellow panellist, Goethe-Institut Secretary-General Johannes Ebert, who told us how the coronavirus has impeded his usual mobility. Krastev, who had to cancel no fewer than fourteen flights between March and May, brought up another question: "When you're told to stay home, the question is: Where is your home?" And Eva Illouz, who commutes between Paris and Jerusalem, has suddenly found herself confronted with new borders.

And how is the pandemic impacting other freedoms? Illouz is convinced that "the worldwide lockdown is an experiment unprecedented in history". Like Krastev, she compares it to war: "During a war, however, we know who the enemy is and we have a

certain repertoire with which to react, whether or not to glorify something. Now the mortal danger is something invisible that puts our relations with others on hold."

Krastev, Illouz and Ebert have no doubts about the necessity of fighting the pandemic with drastic restrictions, but they all pointed out the dramatic consequences of the lockdown. In countries that have no trust in their own government, they said, people view the restrictions with a critical eye, partly because they suspect that their governments' actions are not just about fighting the pandemic, but about consolidating power and control. Secretary-General Johannes Ebert warned, "We have to watch out lest the curtailment of freedom becomes the new normal."

## **Stay home**

Until the outbreak of the pandemic, public discourse and public space were writ large in the Freiraum debate, while the private realm was mentioned in passing, if at all. In this respect as well, the pandemic turned everything on its head, as well as home-office and home-schooling. So the second day of the festival began with a keynote talk about the home by Eva Illouz.

She opened with a rhetorical question. "Can the home provide a safe haven in a crisis-ridden world?" Illouz deconstructed the modern conception of the home, which is the upshot of a long process of separating the private and public spheres that lasted from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "In the wake of the coronavirus, however, the home has become a hybrid place, a private and public place," she observed.

"But an apartment is no substitute for a school," she pointed out. And the repercussions are not confined to the private sphere, for they have hit public life, too. "What will become of us, our social and public lives, if the home is the only place we live?" For Eva Illouz, the home is not a safe haven, but a threat to our freedom. "The home can only fulfil its function if it is part of the world."

Still, as Illouz noted in the conclusion to her talk, the desire for social and public life has not disappeared. In French polls, for example, 35 per cent of the respondents would like to see their friends again soon. And their second wish is to be able to go to restaurants and cafés again.

## **Act locally**

Even if it seemed as though many Freiraum discussions reduced freedom to a call for a "safe space", the festival made a strong political statement by stressing "planetary awareness".

Two other political issues were thrashed out after Illouz's keynote on the second day of the festival. Addressing the "Ongoing Biopolitical Crisis of Democracy", several experts and artists mulled the risk that the Covid-19 state of emergency might become the new normal. That was followed by a discussion of "Social Movements and Newly Emerging Solidarities", which homed in on the projects and issues of local activists.

This "hybrid festival" took place off and online. One featured offline site was Berlin's Mierendorffplatz, where architect Yasser Almaamoun, the Goethe-Institut Amsterdam's Freiraum partner, brought a classic urban issue into focus. He invited various stakeholders from Mierendorff Island in Berlin to discuss local issues in this insular urban area, which really is surrounded by water on every side. It forms the northern tip of the affluent district of Charlottenburg, and yet it happens to be one of the city's "problem hoods". A circular path now runs around the island to bolster a sense of local identity.

At the very start of the public event in Berlin, which was followed by workshops at individual desks, someone pointed out that, of all places, the area used for a Freiraum-project was cordoned off with barrier tape. Not only that, but everyone attending had to leave their address for contact-tracing purposes. Almaamoun said with a shrug, "Only on these conditions would the district authorities in Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf authorize the event." So freedom and checks on freedom went hand in hand: should they have called off the event?

## **Digital public space**

After two days spent dwelling on the state of freedom in Europe, the last day of the festival was reserved for the state of the arts. Sunday's lineup included nightmarish images of deserted city streets in the video work by landscape urbanist and artist Eric Ellingsen, based in St Louis, USA. One conclusion drawn from the video was: "Digital space is part of public space. The pandemic has amplified this development."

The absence of cultural life is sorely felt all over pandemic-stricken Europe these days. Slovenian activist and anthropologist Svetlana Slapšak noted differences, however, in the way people are protesting. "The demos in Ljubljana were started by artists themselves," she pointed out. The rallies in Germany, on the other hand, are dominated by coronavirus deniers. And down in Italy, neo-fascists protest alongside professionals in the arts and culture. The pandemic has catalysed public protest as well. This is why Slapšak calls for political intervention. "There are no individual solutions," she said. "Nobody can solve the crisis as an individual. This is a systemic problem. So it has to be solved politically." And that solution, she added, includes deconstructing the obvious lies spread by conspiracy theorists.