

Leading German columnist Heribert Prantl denounces coronavirus lockdown measures

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Profound social crises are invariably accompanied by intense political and ideological shifts that, in turn, anticipate fierce class struggles. The middle classes, which in periods of calm serve as a buffer between the two main social classes, disintegrate. Above all, more affluent elements react to the emerging radicalisation of the working class by moving sharply to the right.

The appearance of Heribert Prantl, the long-time editor for domestic affairs of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on the programme “Talk im Hangar 7” of the private Austrian channel Servus TV, must be seen in this context. Prantl, who has a degree in law, has long been considered the voice of liberal democracy in Germany and has received more than 20 prizes and awards for his editorials, commentaries and books on this subject. But now he is agitating against the German government’s coronavirus lockdown on a notoriously right-wing television channel.

Servus TV belongs to the Red Bull corporate empire run by the Austrian multibillionaire Dietrich Mateschitz, who also acts as the station’s managing director and is politically close to the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). The program “Talk im Hangar 7” regularly invites right-wing extremists. Previous guests include the leader of the Austrian Identitarian Movement Martin Sellner, the new-right ideologue Götz Kubitschek and the far-right historian Jörg Baberowski. Other segments on the channel—“Corona Quartet,” “Wegscheider”—are dedicated to playing down the consequences of the pandemic. Even the *Süddeutsche*, for which Prantl continues to write a regular column, has described Servus TV as the “home station for Austrian right-wing populism.”

The title of the talk show on January 21 posed the question, “Is politics bypassing the people?” Against the backdrop of a demonstration in Vienna protesting lockdown measures—commented on sympathetically by the program’s presenter Michael Fleischhacker—Prantl condemned anti-coronavirus restrictions in Germany as a violation of the constitution. The lockdown demonstrates “a brutal lack of imagination,” he scolded. “We will see a collapse of business the likes of which we cannot imagine. We are beating all social life to death at the moment.”

Prantl was supported in his comments by the media manager Helmut Thoma and new-right author Cora Stephan. The latter writes regularly for the far-right blog “Achse des Guten” (Axis of the Good). Stephan was also one of the first signatories of the anti-refugee “Joint Declaration 2018” drawn up by the far-right clique centred around Jörg Baberowski, Thilo Sarrazin, Matthias

Mattusek, Vera Lengsfeld and *Junge Freiheit* editor Dieter Stein. Thoma is the former director of the German television station RTL, which has lowered the cultural level of entertainment to an all-time low.

Throughout the program, Prantl, Stephan and Thoma encouraged and supported each other. Even after Thoma brutally spelled out the murderous consequences of his line of argument, Prantl, who usually seeks to pose as a moral force, remained unperturbed. The 82-year-old media magnate praised to the skies the Swedish coronavirus policy of herd immunity and its creator Anders Tegnell, urging the program’s audience to get used to the fact of millions of casualties.

“We have had so many epidemics in the past hundred years,” Thoma said. “There was an Asian flu with one-and-a-half to two million deaths, then there was a Hong Kong flu, that also killed over a million people. There are so many others, I think HIV alone caused 36 million deaths and nobody contemplated shutting everything down. Nobody got upset. It was just accepted.” The economy, he concluded, must be left alone, otherwise the collateral damage would be too great.

Prantl condemned the restrictions associated with the pandemic lockdown as an attack on constitutionally guaranteed liberties—as if the right to life and protection against contagion were not basic rights. He criticised contradictions in the government’s policy because they unsettled the population and created unrest—but not from the standpoint of advocating more consequent lockdown measures. On the contrary, he argued that the current measures should be largely repealed.

Following objections from Salzburg professor Christian Zeller, Prantl increasingly lost his temper, shouted at Zeller and openly spelled out the social Darwinist and anti-scientific essence of his stance. Zeller supports the petition “#ZeroCovid,” which advocates a European shutdown with accompanying social measures to bring the pandemic under control.

When Zeller said that it had been scientifically proven that children were spreaders of the virus, Prantl responded venomously: “Don’t act as if you have the studies on your side.” Prantl argued that it was necessary to live with the virus. “Zero COVID means zero basic rights,” he claimed, “I say no, it won’t work!” Zeller assumed that health meant a total absence of disease, Prantl continued. “That is a definition I will not tolerate. Health also means having to live with disease. I have to learn to live with disease even in times of COVID.”

To Zeller's response, "How many deaths are you prepared to accept?" Stephan replied: "What frightens me is this inconceivable hubris: we can manage all this, we can do all this, with measures and with a tightening of the reins. I fear a hubris that declares: we are saving the climate, we are protecting people from a virus, which humans have been unable to do in thousands of years. The fact is we have to live with viruses, including the fact that they mutate."

Stephan accused the proponents of a shutdown policy of using the crisis to spread general pandemonium, crush the armaments and auto industries and build an "eco-socialist paradise." She could no longer hear the word "solidarity," she moaned. "COVID as a launch pad for a radical restructuring of the social system," moderator Fleischhacker added in agreement with Stephan.

In an earlier period, Prantl had, in his articles and books, defended the right of asylum, freedom of expression and other basic democratic rights against excessive state intervention. In the meantime, however, his invocation of basic rights has degenerated into mendacious hollow phrases that serve to protect the privileges of a rich minority and is directed against the democratic rights of the working class. In doing so, he is lining up with Islamo-phobic extremists like Stephan, who makes no secret of her sympathy for authoritarian movements and has won the praise of the far-right Alternative for Germany.

The German government's coronavirus policy is based on the principle that profits are more important than human lives. It has driven up share prices to record highs by handing out billions of euros to the big corporations and banks, while hospitals and schools lack the most basic necessities. It strictly refuses to completely close down non-essential businesses, schools and day-care centres, although experts say this is urgently needed to bring the pandemic under control. The current lockdown in Germany is totally insufficient—55,000 people have now died in Germany in the first year of the pandemic.

Prantl, for his part, attacks this policy from the right. He is not concerned with the basic democratic rights of the population at large, which are meaningless without the right to life and protection from a deadly pandemic. He is concerned with the "right" of corporations to exploit workers even under pandemic conditions, and with the privileges of a small minority who have enough money in their bank accounts to afford the best medical treatment in an emergency. When asked which basic rights he had in mind, Prantl named freedom of trade and freedom of movement.

In this respect it was the height of cynicism when, at the end of the program, Prantl posed as an advocate for nursing staff who have suffered most during the pandemic and are sacrificing their health and even their lives to help others. Prantl proposed they deserved their own memorial and be paid better in future. His comments recalled those of an arsonist who praises firefighters for their life-threatening efforts in putting out a house he himself set on fire.

Prantl's march to the right began a long time ago and typifies a broader social development. Back in 2015, he celebrated the Bundestag's adoption of a drastic austerity dictate for Greece as a "good day for parliamentary democracy."

"He is indifferent to the fact that the new austerity package for

Greece represents a milestone on the road to the abolition of democratic and social rights across Europe," we commented at the time, and drew the conclusion: "This is not an individual question. The crisis of European capitalism and the consequent social polarization between rich and poor have reached a level which can no longer be reconciled with democratic forms of rule. Formal democracy has degenerated into mere drapery which hides the naked dictatorship of finance capital. The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle for a socialist society that does not serve the enrichment of a tiny minority, but which uses all existing means and ways to solve today's major social problems."

Six years later and after a year of pandemic, the crisis of European capitalism and the consequent social polarisation between rich and poor is incomparably more advanced—and Prantl is now making common cause with pandemic deniers and right-wing extremists.

His shift to the right is symptomatic of those representatives of the affluent middle class who dominate the leadership of the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and above all the Greens, for whom Prantl has long harboured sympathies. Only recently, in his *Süddeutsche* column, he praised the Greens as a new party of the "bourgeois centre" that could form a governing coalition with the conservative CDU/CSU in the autumn "in keeping with the spirit of the times." In the form of Green Party leader Katrin Göring-Eckardt, Prantl said, the Greens could also provide the next federal president.

The Greens had ditched their lip service to pacifism and democracy way back in 1998 when they entered a federal government for the first time. In a coalition with the SPD they organised the first ever post-war international interventions by the German army in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and implemented hitherto unprecedented social cuts under Gerhard Schröder's "Agenda 2010."

In the meantime, the party is the front runner in German politics when it comes to advocating increased militarism and aggressive world power policies. The same criteria apply to the party's advocacy of arming the police and censoring the internet. Prantl's appearance on Servus TV is a warning of what to expect from such social forces.



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