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“As much as it pains me to say it, you cannot negotiate with a virus”

The Covid-19 pandemic began a year ago. Time to set the record straight on the Swiss response. Psychoanalyst Peter Schneider tells us about his misguided belief in Switzerland's invincibility, lost confidence, and his own form of Covid fatigue.



INTERVIEW: SUSANNE WENGER

Peter Schneider is a busy man – our video call with him took place on a Sunday in February. Switzerland was still in its second nationwide lockdown, after restaurants, shops, and cultural and leisure venues had shut in mid-January. Months of government prevarication had preceded the restrictions, which ended up being less strict than those in neighbouring countries. Ski resorts and mountain railways remained open to everyone, including tourists. The biggest vaccination campaign that the country has ever seen had also begun. Case numbers were falling, but infections from new variants of the virus were increasing – a source of anxiety for the authorities. Despite this, centre-right and right-wing politicians were clamouring for an end to the lockdown and trying to force the government's hand on the issue. There had been almost 9,000 Covid deaths by February, mostly as a result of the second wave. Zurich-based psychoanalyst Peter Schneider, 63, is a university lecturer, book author, satirist, and columnist known in Switzerland for hitting a nerve. He smoked a cigar during the interview.

Peter Schneider on Switzerland's "middle course" during the pandemic: "We certainly saw the worst aspects of federalism come to the fore, but we cannot blame federalism for everything."

Photo: Ursula Markus

“The first lockdown had somewhat of a scouts-and-guides feel to it, didn’t it?”

Swiss Review: Hello Mr Schneider. The pandemic began almost one year ago.

How are you doing?

Peter Schneider: Not too bad, but that is mostly down to luck. I no longer do face-to-face appointments and have been giving my lectures online – which is better than it sounds, as it saves me from having to travel around. Essentially, I am just as busy as before, and I can still choose when and what to write. The restrictions have not affected me that much, given that I tend to stay at home anyway.

And how is Switzerland doing?

Which Switzerland do you mean? My fortunate circumstances are different from the experiences of people who are on short-time working hours, have lost their jobs or are fearing for their livelihoods. Their situations are of course a far cry from mine. I don’t want to imply that the country is split between the fortunate and less fortunate, but we cannot think that everyone is the same. We need to look at why some people are having a particularly hard time and who those people are.

After bringing the first wave of the pandemic under control, Switzerland became a European Covid hotspot during the second wave – to many people’s surprise. Yours too?

Yes, I was surprised. The first wave and lockdown had somewhat of a scouts-and-guides feel to it, didn’t it? We saw people clapping for carers and playing music on their balconies on the evening news. There was something

adventuresome about it, at least here in Switzerland. We watched the Federal Council press conferences and felt in good hands. The public appreciated this calm, considered approach to dealing with the pandemic – but then things unravelled.

How?

So many things went wrong. It turns out we made some serious mistakes during the first wave. The authorities questioned the effectiveness of protective masks – an expedient line to take because there were not enough masks available in the first place. From summer onwards, you could sense that the opinions of a self-serving lobby were beginning to drown out scientific logic. There was not enough testing. Track and trace was inconsistent. Politicians were at loggerheads. It is not only the myriad restrictions that people currently resent, but also the lack of clarity. They feel disoriented. I think a great deal of public confidence has been lost.

Ostensibly, Switzerland is well placed to fight any pandemic – with its world-class healthcare system, its stable system of government, and its widespread prosperity.

Yes, and during the first lockdown I still believed in our own invincibility. I thought Switzerland would come out smelling of roses once again – unfair, I know, but reassuring nonetheless. I was at a loss for words for what hap-

pened thereafter. I often defend my country when people start criticising, because some of the arguments are quite facile. They moan but have little idea of how the political cogs turn. But I cannot disagree with them this time.

Why was the Swiss response so inept at times?

I really don’t know. We certainly saw the worst aspects of federalism come to the fore, but we cannot blame federalism for everything. Most politicians spoke of the importance of individual responsibility, even though it made no sense. It is for governments to fight pandemics. If I drive from Zurich to Berne, it is not my job to build the roads that take me there.

The Federal Council tried to strike its own middle course. Is that not a legitimate way of going about things?

There are many Swiss approaches that I like, even if some of the political outcomes leave something to be desired. At least our system establishes broad support for the decisions that are made. Even in a pandemic, it is not all about restrictions. There are political intricacies to take into account. But to think that a virus will be more amenable to us because we are Swiss? As much as it pains me to say it, you cannot negotiate with a virus.

Do you think economic interests were prioritised ahead of people’s lives, as critics are suggesting? Does the pandemic show that society has its priorities wrong?

It is a mystery to me why we have to pit the economy against human lives

“It is not only the myriad restrictions that people currently resent, but also the lack of clarity. They feel disoriented.”

in the first place. Do you really think the economy will flourish if the population is sick and mortality rates soar? Does the economy exist in some sort of parallel universe in which other laws apply? It does not. Even now people are still at it, saying that we should open up the economy as soon as possible. I am sick of hearing the same fact-denying arguments over and over again. You can call it my own form of Covid fatigue.

It is as if certain politicians and a proportion of the population have turned into whiny teenagers who won't take no for an answer. There comes a point when you want to say: “Go out this evening if you must. Drink as much as you like. Here are the car keys. Now clear off.”

For a long time, the high mortality rate was less of a public concern. How come?

It took a while for us to realise that care homes had basically turned into death traps. I thought the consequent rhetoric was awfully callous. We had the beard-stroking brigade telling us via the media that we all have to die sooner or later. The elderly were urged to make out living wills, so that intensive-care units would not have to resort to triage. Why go through the ordeal of being put on oxygen? Let them all die peacefully of Covid instead. By the way, I caved in myself and filled out my own living will.

Dare we ask what you wrote?

I said I wanted to be kept alive at all costs and not treated by someone infected with Covid. Ironically, it does

not hurt at all to think about your own mortality now and again. Anyway, the fact that the authorities failed to act earlier to counteract a second wave is the real scandal. They said the public would not swallow a second lockdown, yet there was no lack of solidarity within the population during the first lockdown. No one said, “Covid is only dangerous for old people and heavy smokers, why penalise us?” Then the debate about Covid deaths was turned on its head at Christmas. Suddenly everyone wanted to hug granny and grandad again but couldn't. It was over all the newspapers. I have never read so much drivel.

Switzerland was nowhere near as good at fighting the pandemic as many thought.

Does this change our opinion of Switzerland, where everything is meant to go like clockwork?

Not really. If you have an inflated view of Switzerland, you are probably not that concerned. Actually, you are more likely to think that the middle course was terribly un-Swiss. And the rest of us are probably too realistic or fatalistic to have been incredibly surprised. But this means it could be hard to restore confidence when future cri-

ses come around. It certainly will not be the last pandemic we have.

Will Covid-19 change Swiss society?

No. The pandemic and its sub-plots provide more than enough fuel for everyone to feel vindicated. The best we can hope for is that the powers that be get their act together. Developing a better track-and-trace app would be a good start. Sobering it might be, but Switzerland never was and never will be a special case. But nor is everything bad here either. We can wallow in self-criticism if we are not careful. Admittedly, Switzerland has not covered itself in glory over the past year or so. Nevertheless, many things have functioned very well. And to be fair, other countries that were doing better than us at one stage are also experiencing their second or third wave.

A dossier containing every “Swiss Review” article on the Covid-19 pandemic can be found at www.revue.ch

Direct link to dossier: revue.link/covid19