

The illusion of endless awakening

Socio-psychological aspects of crisis management or lessons that could be learned from the pandemic

By Vera King

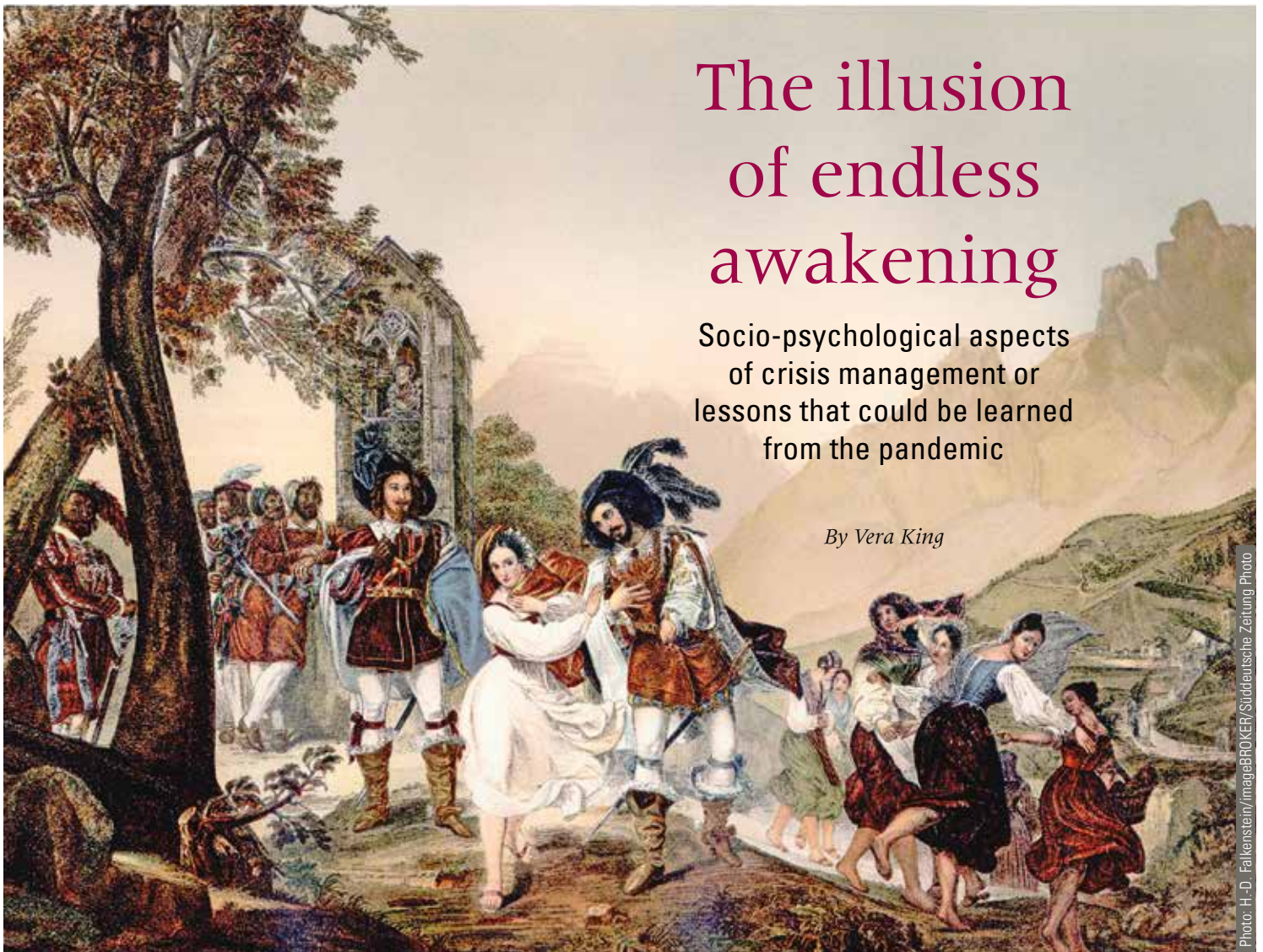


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During the coronavirus pandemic, the illusion of “endless awakening” and perpetual optimisation has gradually become undeniable. But there is still a lack of sustainable change, also in view of the ecological crisis. Without significant rethinking, it is likely that these threats will also be suppressed by the same mechanisms that have occurred throughout history in times of crisis. The grave consequences of trivialisation and denial have also been expressed in literature dealing with the Black Death.

Coveted youth: Feudal lord Don Rodrigo has cast a lustful eye on young Lucia, forcing her to flee with her groom, Renzo. This picture portrays a scene from Manzoni's novel “I Promessi Sposi”, which also describes in detail the events surrounding the plague in Milan in 1630.

Alessandro Manzoni's famous 1827 novel “I Promessi Sposi” (English: “The Betrothed”) describes the events surrounding the Milan plague around 1630 in an evocative and emotional narrative. The work, which is considered the first example of the modern Italian novel, also impressively describes

in socio-psychological terms that which Umberto Eco was later to call “mass delusion” (1989: 932), referring to how populations deal with existential threats. Manzoni's narrator reports on the beginning of the epidemic: “Anyone who mentioned the danger of the pestilence, whether in the streets, in shops or in private houses – anyone who even mentioned the word ‘plague’ – was greeted with incredulous mockery or angry contempt.” (569). As vividly as a film, the horrors of the plague unfold, aggravated by trivialisation and denial; the search for scapegoats and acts of violence that are not far removed from our present situation: “The main odium fell on two doctors... The situation of those two men... was certainly strange and worthy of record, as they saw a terrible catastrophe coming nearer and nearer and did everything they could to avert it; and at the same time encountered obstacles where they looked for help, became the butt of popular indignation and were regarded as enemies of their country.” (572) This behaviour is eerily familiar to how people have behaved during the coronavirus pandemic, ranging from prudent concern

to failing to grasp reality and facing down professionals who bring bad news with hostile indignation.

Manzoni's narrator reflects ironically on the different phases and variations of avoiding reality: *"In the beginning, there had been no plague, no pestilence, none at all, not on any account. The very words had been forbidden. ... Then it was 'not a real pestilence' – that is to say, it was a pestilence, but only in a certain sense; ... Last of all, it became a pestilence without any doubt or argument – but now a new idea was attached to it, the idea of poisoning and witchcraft, and this corrupted and confused the sense conveyed by the dreaded word, which could now no longer be suppressed."* (582). Avoiding reality is a method of self-assurance and maintaining a sense of security as an individual, even if it is only the belief that one simply cannot be mistaken, even at the cost of increasing the risk that is associated with being wrong.

In the current pandemic, there have been many examples of how frustration and helplessness caused by an invisible virus that is a potential threat to everyone and restricts our daily lives can spill over into anger against people we believe are responsible. Although few still

believe in witchcraft today, conspiracy theories and paranoid-aggressive phantasms are still present in our society. Fingers are often pointed at the very people who are expected to rectify the situation but who can hardly be expected to console extreme degrees of fear and uncertainty, regardless of how honourable their intentions are. Nobody can foresee the course of the pandemic and this places society under a great burden, a discomforting position which often provokes negative interpretations of state interventions as acts of tyranny. When grave mistakes are made publicly and political control appears to fail repeatedly, it only intensifies misgivings and mistrust. Mistakes that are made in response to existential threats can have fatal consequences, but denying that the threat exists at all can be just as deadly.

Endless optimisation as a strategy for coping with morality

Social-psychological mechanisms for dealing with epidemics have been documented throughout history and in literature, but the current situation demands a new rule book. The coronavirus has not only fundamentally changed society and amplified many of the threats, fears and alternative ways of thinking that exist today, it has also challenged our contemporary patterns of coping with mortality. How we now perceive our own mortality has not only become more imposing as sickness and death are more present than before the pandemic, the threat of mortality is gnawing away at us because existing cultural patterns and strategies for coping with it are no longer working.

In contemporary cultures, we attempt to mask the fact that our lives will eventually come to an end on many levels by attempting to control time as a resource, gaining in efficiency and trying to pack as much into our lives as humanly possible. To "get more out of the world" as Blumenberg (2001:73) puts it, our lives must be dominated by the principles of speed and performance in many aspects (King, Gerisch, Rosa, 2021). Speed and performance appear to be the inescapable conditions of adding value in contemporary society, enabling a manic way of experiencing the world in which we perceive boundaries, including restrictions of the self and our bodies as temporary limits that can be overcome, forcing our mortality further into the background. We can package these patterns into the metaphor of "perpetual optimisation", accentuating the paradoxical unity of perpetual new beginnings and the never-ending not yet (King 2020).

How we deal with mortality, age and our limitations affects our relationships with following generations. Consequently, when older

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IN A NUTSHELL

- Alessandro Manzoni described trivialisation, denial and the aggressive search for scapegoats during the Black Death in 1630 in his famous novel "I Promessi Sposi" (English: "The Betrothed").
- Similar psychosocial strategies and patterns of behaviour have arisen during the coronavirus pandemic, including aggressive accusations against the people responsible for fighting the pandemic.
- The current pandemic is challenging how mortality has been dealt with throughout late modernity and in contemporary society. Defence mechanisms no longer function when death is lurking behind every corner.
- Endless awakening and perpetual optimisation in contemporary society masks the conflict between generations and shows little consideration towards conserving limited resources. This scenario has begun to fracture during the coronavirus pandemic and presents an opportunity for rethinking our approach to the environmental crisis which poses a greater existential threat.



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Manzoni describes the experience of Milan physician Ludovico Setta during the plague as follows: “One day, when he went out in his sedan chair to visit his patients, a crowd began to gather round him, shouting that he was the ringleader of those who wanted there to be a plague at all costs and that he was the one terrifying the whole city (...) – and all just to improve business for the doctors. The crowd quickly grew larger and angrier (...). This was his reward for having judged things correctly, spoken the truth...” That almost sounds like the description of the lateral thinking movement of our times.



Photo: Florian Boillot/Süddeutsche Zeitung

people create generational tension, it reflects a form of coping with mortality. This is evident from the following example. The essential conflict between generations demonstrated when older people treat younger people with contempt for bringing new ideas into the world is also an attempt to defend themselves against their own limitations, as younger generations will eventually survive them. This tension between generations can be expressed in a rejection of youth and the new, which includes the pain and anger experienced by older people in view of their own limitations.

However, this context is changing in our contemporary society. If perpetual optimisation has become a goal for everyone and no longer just the young, a defence strategy targeting young people is hardly appropriate. Instead, we can identify a functional pattern of idealising rather than rejecting the new. Older people are



Photo: Florian Boillot/Süddeutsche Zeitung

now staking their claim to perpetual optimisation, innovation and new beginnings in an effort to stay young. This development is supported from both sides due to social and economic pressure on the one hand and masking mortality on the other, explaining its effectiveness. It is difficult to escape the pressure to conform, and denying individual limitations is also attractive, propelling youthfulness into a quality that permanently mobile, flexible, innovative older people are also claiming for themselves. Tension between generations in contemporary society is therefore more commonly manifested in the concealment of boundaries and generational differences rather than an explicit conflict between generations.

Denial or generative responsibility

What is often harmlessly dismissed as an “ideal of youthfulness” also has more sinister implica-

tions. If we disregard the implicit age racism that the cultural pattern of perpetual optimisation exhibits by shrouding limitations, including the impermanence of life itself, we can also observe a latent aggressive lack of consideration towards our descendants through the radical orientation of our society with regard to the present. We might choose to put it this way: Right now we are using the world's resources without showing any concern for future generations. As a consequence, means of production dominate that are focused on short-term increases rather than sustainability, instead of making the transition to a generative way of thinking (Latour, 2000) that will protect the environment for coming generations, long beyond the lifespan of an older generation. Although the destructive and illusionary dimension of perpetual optimisation and endless awakening is palpable, it has become a tenacious and hegemonic cultural pattern, not only because of its economic potential, but also due to the perceived benefit of ignoring mortality.

But this pattern has also changed, at least gradually, during the coronavirus pandemic, as we are confronted with more prominent images of death and mortality. Living under the pressure of perpetual optimisation, progress, performance and constant mobility have been interrupted in many areas of our lives during lockdown. Differences in age and between generations have also become more evident than ever. Younger people are less at risk than those who are older, despite how young older people might appear to be. At the same time, older people are now demanding the same consideration from younger people that they have failed to show themselves towards future generations, in a broader rather than an individual sense, insofar as an environmental crisis can be seen as being caused by the ignorance of an older generation towards future generations.

Thus the illusion of "endless awakening" and perpetual optimisation as a cultural pattern of processing and defending against transience has developed cracks during the coronavirus pandemic: in normative, psychosocial and practical terms. Meanwhile, the environmental crisis facing our planet remains a smoking gun, although the pandemic has proven a significant distraction. Attempts to combat this crisis, insofar as that is even possible, could benefit from recurrent evidence which suggests restricting perpetual optimisation is achievable and more sustainable for the benefit of future generations. Unless there is a significant change in thinking, the existential threats of environmental degradation and climate change will continue to be trivialised by similar mechanisms of distorting reality as described by Manzoni 200 years ago. The

only difference being that the threats posed by environmental and climate change are far more insidious and have even graver global consequences than the Black Death. Echoing his description of plague denial, Manzoni might have written today: *"At the start, the environmental crisis didn't exist, just saying the word was frowned upon; then there was climate change but only natural climate change; finally, total environmental destruction without a shadow of a doubt. But soon our attention turned to other ideas, such as the scapegoats of the crisis, who were then either branded or sacrificed."* For a fighting chance of a better future, we need to adopt a position of generative responsibility. ●



The author

Vera King, born in 1960, is a German sociologist and social psychologist. She is professor of sociology and psychoanalytical social psychology at Goethe University and director of the Sigmund Freud Institute in Frankfurt am Main. King's research focuses on the psychological consequences of social change, particularly in the context of digitalisation, acceleration and optimisation. One focus is on the impact on relationships between generations and generativity. She is spokesperson for the interdisciplinary research project "Measured Life. Productive and Counterproductive Consequences of Digitally Quantifying Optimization" and the doctoral research programme at the SFI. She also coordinates a sub-project in the DFG research group "Medicine and the temporal structure of the good life" and is principal investigator in the research cluster "ConTrust – Trust in Conflict. Political Life under Conditions of Uncertainty". Her publications include "Lost in Perfection. Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche", edited by V. King, B. Gerisch & H. Rosa (Routledge 2019) and she edited the issue "Destruktivität und Regression im Rechtspopulismus" "WestEnd. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialforschung," co-authored with F. Sutterlüty.

king@soz.uni-frankfurt.de