

Covid-19 and the Necessity for a New Democratic Science
Opening for the conference “Critical reflections on pandemic politics: left-wing, feminist and anti-racist critiques”

9 March 2022

Laurens Buijs | University of Amsterdam

Dear all,

Welcome at this event: **Critical reflections on pandemic politics: left-wing, feminist and anti-racist critiques!** We are very happy to have you here at the University of Utrecht.

My name is Laurens Buijs, I work at the department of interdisciplinary social science at the University of Amsterdam. I teach and do research in the fields of gender & sexuality and science & technology studies. Also I am one of the initiators of De Vierde Golf, a platform that arose out of the desire to formulate left-wing and democratic critique on pandemic politics. The science circle of the Vierde Golf unites scholars from different Dutch universities, and played an important role in organizing this symposium.

The relevance of an event like this is underlined by a quote of Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, Professor of Health Policy, Stanford University Medical School:

"The lockdowns were an enormous catastrophic mistake that should never be repeated. When we think about lockdowns, we should recoil with horror because the policies we followed have violated not just medical ethics, but also crushed the ability for scientists to discuss openly with each other facts and evidence. It's taken a great amount of effort and willingness to face abuse in order for scientists to speak up and many have been silenced. I think [we need] the restoration of the freedom for scientists to discuss with one another openly what the evidence actually says without fear of repression that we've seen during the pandemic. I think that the proper place of science in society needs to be restored so that scientists can advise, but not dictate policy."

Indeed, during the pandemic we have seen a worrisome narrowing of the public and scientific debate. Scholars who were critical on policies like lockdowns, curfews, vaccine passports, social distancing, etc, were very easily attacked and framed or stigmatized as unscientific, conspiracy theorist, far right, or indifferent to the health of vulnerable people. Even when this critique came from left wing and minority perspectives. This narrowing of the debate made clear to us that we needed to organize an expert meeting to open up the discourse and to strengthen the position of left-wing critique and approaches to global crises like the pandemic. This event is the attempt to do that.

The 21st Century is an exceptional one, in the sense that humanity is increasingly confronted with crises on a global scale. The discipline of Complexity Thinking (a stream in Philosophy of Science) calls these crises Wicked Problems. These wicked problems are characterized by the fact that they have emergent properties arising from their complex sub-systems. This makes wicked problems very unpredictable and instable, and also hard to clearly pin down in terms of definitions and solutions.

Humanity will be more than ever confronted with the fact that we live in an inherent unpredictable world. Scientists who are confronted with this uncertainty, are often tempted to fall back on the traditional ideal of science as a haven of objectivity and certainty.

This is also the science we have often seen during the pandemic: top-down, monodisciplinary, driven by instrumental rationality and with a hyperfocus on predictability and model-thinking. I believe that the stubborn but also naïve ideals of science as the producer of unproblematic and objective facts, is ultimately the driving force of the many problematic and detached aspects of global pandemic politics and policies we have seen throughout the world.

The organizing committee of this symposium are scientists also affiliated to De Vierde Golf (The Fourth Wave, www.vierdegolf.org), a platform for left-wing and democratic politics and policies for the biggest wicked problems of the 21st century, such as the pandemic. The science circle of the Fourth Wave is thinking through how science should be reformed so that it can fully embrace uncertainty as the heart of the scientific process. We believe that the traditional view of science as certainty should be put upside down. Science, in our view, is on the most fundamental level “organized doubt”, a way to relate to not-knowing and in doing so allowing as much as perspectives as possible in a pluralistic and inclusive way.

Today we will hear some of the perspectives that have been excluded from the debate too much. We explore today new ways of thinking critically about pandemic politics, especially from left-wing, feminist and anti-racist perspectives. The presentations today will inspire us to find ways to move away from a science too much rooted in instrumental rationality, and towards a science that is value-driven and based on a more inclusive definition of rationality.

Before I close this introduction, I would like to thank the Universiteit Utrecht and the Institute for Cultural Inquiry at Utrecht University for their generous sponsoring. Also I would like to thank the organizing committee of this event: Rick Dolfijn, Martijntje Smits and Ingrid Hooft.

For now, I would like to wish you a very pleasant and inspiring day.