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Blog da Biblioteca Virtual do Pensamento Social

SYMPOSIUM

SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC

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1. Sociologists and social scientists in general seem mobilized to interpret the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is sociological theory up to the challenge of understanding and explaining the phenomenon?

Sociological theory is a broad field of resources, not a precise set of instructions for producing explanations. This is crucially for understanding COVID. Obviously, COVID is a matter of biology and individual health, but equally obviously it as an infectious disease it is transmitted through social contact. Social factors like inequality, the way work is organized, and the way housing is built all shape its effects. So do socially organized responses – like whether to shut down travel, stop eating out, or end public gatherings. So do socially organized infrastructures, like communications systems that enable some – mostly the better off - to work from home and delivery systems that bring them food and supplies – to those who can afford them.

To understand all of this, we need Durkheimian insights into social solidarity and anomie; Marxist insights into social contradictions, class inequality, and ideology; Weberian insights into rationalization and bureaucracy; feminist insights into the work of social care and into what is hidden and visible in social order; DuBoisian or critical race theory insights into complexities of identity, consciousness, power, and social inclusion;



world-systems or dependency theory to see the global patterns. Indeed, it is actually a good thing that different perspectives yield competing explanations, for these illuminate different aspects of the objects we try to understand and encourage us to think harder about the whole. Of course, sometimes explanations are wrong, tested, and discarded. But more often they are different fragments of a larger picture we are not yet seeing clearly.

So yes, sociological theory is up to the task – if we use it creatively and even add to it.

2. How can your research area contribute to examining different dimensions of the phenomenon?

To understand the COVID crisis – both the disease and responses to it – it is necessary to think at once about social organization at both very large scale and more locally and in interpersonal relations. We tend to separate these as though they are different concerns. Some people study the modern world-system and some study local communities. Take the networks through which the disease has spread. We commonly and correctly point to globalization and international transmission patterns. But equally important are domestic and even local patterns. The connections between the different levels are crucial. And we underestimate how much these have changed and are changing.

The term ‘social distancing’ has become common to describe keeping physical distance among people who would otherwise relate face-to-face. It can be frustrating, painful, and lonely. It is not possible for everyone. And it reminds people how much they value social interactions they often took for granted. Checking in on friends and family has become a new daily routine. We try to stop ourselves from being socially distanced even while we are physically distanced.

Upheaval in direct interpersonal relations makes us see their importance. For example, universities have abruptly switched to teaching online. This has come with its own problems, and there is much debate about what is lost in the move from face-to-face to online. But this is also a demonstration that we have tools for connecting at a distance. Academics use email and conferencing tools for the same purposes. So do social movements, which are not just protesting crowds but organizations. Modern societies are far too large to be knit together entirely by directly personal relationships.



At the same time that the pandemic makes us value local community and public spaces, it also demonstrates the importance of indirect social relations. Markets, transport systems, and communications media are the obvious vehicles for such long-distance linkage. But they support a variety of different structures of social relations. Amazon and other large corporations are not simply ‘the market’. The organization of markets themselves has been transformed. Not least, they became less centered on physical places – village centers gave way to stores, then shopping malls, and now a ‘logistical economy’ utilizing warehouses and shipping systems but much less face-to-face connection.

This is closely related to prioritizing efficiency over resilience. For example, when shipments out of Wuhan, China were stopped to contain the virus, car factories in Korea had to stop production because they lacked parts. More tellingly, perhaps, national health care systems and hospitals found themselves short of protective gear for workers because instead of stockpiling they relied on ‘just in time’ purchases in the logistical economy.

3. Is the pandemic provoking deep social, political and cultural changes? Or is it speeding up trends of change already underway? If so, is it possible to glimpse the contours of post-pandemic societies?

In most regards, the pandemic is speeding up patterns of change already under way. But it could also be a tipping point. It has placed huge stresses on democratic governments that were already weakened by battles over populism – and the combinations of corruption and complacency of elites that helped to lead to the populism. It is likely to further increase the concentration of wealth among the very rich that neoliberalism, financialization, and global capitalism have helped produce. Many leaders are embracing belligerent nationalism, not just in blaming each other but in allowing global cooperation and institutions to decline. The damage could be long-term. We could end up still dependent on large-scale systems of indirect relations, but with much less capacity to govern them for the public good. Of course, we could also find national solidarity reinforced and strengthened, but there seem few countries in which citizens are mobilizing effectively to make this happen.

One of the biggest questions is how confronting the pandemic – and the uneven global response – which change how we address climate change. I don’t know the answer, but it seems likely that in the short-run economic



emergency will reinforce those who say jobs are a bigger priority than saving the environment or reducing carbon emissions. In the longer term, though, experiencing the pandemic may provide support to those pointing out that we need not just economic growth, but a different economy.

4. What work(s) of Sociology or Social Sciences can help us to comprehend and dialogue about the challenges underway?

Well, lots. It is crucial that we bring social science to bear on public understanding right now, as well as on producing better explanations in the long term. At the SSRC, I led efforts to encourage ‘real time social science’ with immediate analytic engagements. Both reaching millions on the web and somewhat fewer in multiple books, we addressed issues from the 9/11 attacks and global securitization in their aftermath, to Hurricane Katrina and the impacts of inequality and poor planning it exposed, to the 2008-9 financial crisis that emphasized the strong desires to return to business as usual and consequent failure to address deeper issues. It is crucial that these were mobilizations of social science knowledge and analysis not just expressions of opinion.

It is important to learn from studies of HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and SARS. Andrew Lakoff’s *Unprepared* is superb on what we have and haven’t learned about health preparedness since the Cold War. But it is also important to study ‘pre-existing social conditions’ which like pre-existing medical conditions shape outcomes. There are important recent books like Thomas Piketty on *Capital*, Shoshanna Zuboff on *Surveillance Capitalism*, and Andrew Lakoff. I would especially recommend going back to Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* to get an understanding not of infectious disease, but of how power, material interests, and ideology combine to shape inhumane responses to human suffering.

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