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Blog da Biblioteca Virtual do Pensamento Social

SYMPOSIUM

SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC

Edited by

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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?

On the whole, most sociology and social science appear ill-prepared for understanding and explaining the Corona pandemic. What sociological theory is called up by the pandemic? Two, first of all, none of them very developed. One is a theory, and a body research findings, of the interface of the social and the bio-medical, how they interact and affect each other. It will require a wider empirical perspective than Foucauldian governmental bio-politics, more related to Anglo-Saxon public health and Swedish social medicine. Focused on the interrelations of social inequality, the prevalent diseases and health risks, and life-course trajectories of health, ill-health, and mortality. Epidemiology, developed into a leading socio-medical investigation by British scholars such as Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson has been neither an acknowledged sub-discipline of sociology, nor a major trans-disciplinary neighbour.¹ The other theory called up, and, I think, found wanting is a comprehensive, multidimensional theory of the contemporary world. Immanuel Wallerstein's world system analysis was an epochal contribution, but it was not developed to include the planetary ecosystem, which is now needed.



The same limitation, together with others, holds for the globalization literature.

The COVID-19 experience is the largest conscious global experience in human history. Some other epidemics have been more devastating, e.g. the “Spanish” flu –originated in Kansas, USA –and by May 7 the death toll of COVID-19 is still less than two thirds of the annual killings by malaria. However, here we have a simultaneously common, if differentiated experience in (so far) 212 countries and territories of the world. The pandemic brings together an unprecedented global society, interdependent, interconnected, interacting, and divided, locked out and locked in.

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

I have never been much interested in self-promotion, so this question is somewhat difficult or embarrassing to answer. However, I do think that two areas, among several of a fairly long career, pertain to the current situation. First, global sociology, as a committed anti-imperialist since the age of nine (the Korean War), I have always had a global curiosity and commitment. Scholarly, this has resulted in several multidimensional contributions to understanding our world.ⁱⁱ However, recent ecological and climate interests have not been integrated, and political economy and geopolitics mainly in occasional pieces only. Second, my work on inequalityⁱⁱⁱ has explicitly striven to include health and mortality -what I call vital inequality –into a multidimensional discourse and practices of (in)equality. It is developing a three-dimensional conception of human inequality, derived from an conception of three dimensions of being human, and inspired by, if not exactly following, Amartya Sen.

A living organism susceptible pleasure and pain, health and ill-health, and a variably delimited life-span, subject to socially determined vital inequality; a reflective person, with or without autonomy, who may be ignored or recognised, respected or humiliated, who may be favoured or discriminated against, subject to existential inequality; a goal-pursuing actor, with varying resources, of income and wealth, of social contacts, of power, in brief resource inequality. The three dimensions interact and interconnect, but they have each their specific weight on different periods of the human life-course, their particular dynamics and different developmental trajectories, and therefore have to be tackled in different ways. Most important is bring issues of human development, vulnerability



and resilience, issue of health and ill- health into the mainstream of sociology.

Class analysis, another important interest of mine, has also had its relevance vindicated by the pandemic and the latter's specific social division: the upper middle class working in the safety of their homes, the "essential" workers feeding and caring for the former and their parents under risk of contagion, the ordinary workers unemployed or furloughed, the day labourers and vendors without savings who lose their livelihood, and above them all the self-isolated bourgeoisie safely drawing their rents and planning their post-pandemic exploits.

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?

It is mainly underlining, deepening and accelerating processes already in motion. Processes of widening intra-national vital inequality and of resource inequality overall, of ending (since the financial crash of 2008) neoliberal market-driven globalization, and its replacement by a more state-centred world of geopolitics, tending in the direction of a US-China war, hot or cold. But this acceleration will surely lead to a different world after the pandemic. The post-pandemic world is likely to include two vistas. One, would be a world of 1945, looking forward to an end of a nightmare of poverty, inequality, and violence, and an opportunity to build a better world, less unequal, less unfair, more democratic. It is envisaged by an emergent Egalitarian Enlightenment of a whole phalanx of distinguished economists, including Thomas Piketty and at least four recent Nobel Laureates, and by a broad spectrum of progressive social forces, including enlightened minorities of the bourgeoisie, for instance the London *Financial Times*.

The other probable scenario would resemble that of 1932, in Euro-America. The forces of inequality, xenophobia, nationalist hatred and violence have not been defeated, and have in some places or countries been strengthened by the crisis. On the other side, egalitarian, peaceful forces have also been reinforced by the failure of reigning neoliberalism. In a 1932 scenario, after the pandemic, there will be two stark options, peaceful, democratic egalitarian reform – then chosen in USA and in Scandinavia – or hateful, violent nationalism, a road then taken by Germany and almost all countries of Eastern Europe.



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

I don't think there is a syllabus of relevant sociological literature in waiting. Instead, I think it is more important to ask ourselves, what works need to be written. There will be a spate of literature of the causes, the responses, and the consequences of the pandemic. The spread of the contagion and its severity differed widely across places, states, and continents. Why? This does not seem to be something which virology alone can explain. Sociology has crucial contributions to make.

The different timing of recognition and reactions, and the varying forms of quarantine, and the implementation, testing and care will be explored along lines of political cultures, social policies and the character of caring institutions. Assessing the governmental economic responses will take us deep into political economy. The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic will have to be traced back to business and labour market structures (the scope of "informal labour), systems of social rights, and to class, ethnicity, gender, and religious structurations of societies. Along the investigations, new theoretical developments will be made.

A good bet on the intellectual effects of the pandemic, is a boost of biomedical-social science, and developments of a multidimensional planetary sociology, of power, privilege, poverty, and vulnerability, integrating nature, from the viral to the climatic, cultures, the digital revolutions, markets and supply-chains, geopolitics, and the patterns of human livelihoods and life-courses.

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Notes:

ⁱ This distance has been maintained despite the recent mind-blowing contributions by ,e.g., M. Marmot, *The Status Syndrome*, (London 2004) and R Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (London 2009)



ⁱⁱ For example, *Sexo e poder* (São Paulo 2006); *The World* (Cambridge 2011), *Cities of Power* (London 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Killing Fields of Inequality* (Cambridge 2013; Spanish translation, *Los campos de exterminio de la desigualdad*, Buenos Aires 2015), and a number of articles in books and journals.

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