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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?

In my understanding of social theory, I follow the conception of what Charles Taylor once called ‘The best account principle’. This means that it is our task and responsibility to try to give the best possible account, or interpretation, of what is going on in the world, thereby drawing on all available sources: Empirical Data, Statistics, phenomenological observations, journalists’ and politicians’ accounts, and social as well as philosophical theories. And by doing this, I think we can actually contribute a lot to the understanding of the current crisis. What we observe beyond the human suffering caused in part by the virus and in part by our reactions to it, is a historically unparalleled sudden rupture and slowdown in the global chains of production and interaction, and this actually allows us to take a deeper look into the ways modern societies actually work. For a long time there has been a split between sociological and political theories of modernity: For the latter, modern society is predominantly a political society: It is up to (democratic) governments to regulate the relationship between the spheres of the economy, science, culture etc. and to shape the social frames we live in. By contrast, for those following NiklasLuhmann, modern society is first and foremost functionally differentiated such that



science, the economy, politics, religion etc. are all more or less autonomous systems which cannot be governed politically. With the advent of coronavirus, we all of sudden see that within a few weeks, political action can regain supremacy and gain control over activities in all spheres. According to Carl Schmitt, he who has the power to call a state of emergency is the true sovereign. There can be little doubt that politics has right now regained primacy against the markets. Most social theorists so far thought that in modernity, this could only happen in wartimes.

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

Looking at the situation through the perspective of acceleration theory is very revealing. We see a historically unique slowdown of physical and material mobility as well as of sociocultural life. It looks like some gigantic brakes have been put on the incessant wheels of production, movement and acceleration. For more than 200 years, the globe has experienced a (uneven and often forceful) process of dynamization: We have literally set the world in motion at an ever increasing pace. When you look at the overall movement of people and goods and materials circulating the globe, you get an impressive curve of growth that virtually knows no significant breaks, pauses or boundaries. Just look at the figures: Since 1800, world economic production and consumption, the use and depletion of resources, the use of energy, the total mass and number of people in motion are all going up incessantly. Even wars have been causes for acceleration and mobilization. But now the world is coming to a halt. Not through an economic crisis, a war or a natural disaster. The virus is not corroding our airplanes, destroying our factories or forcing us to stay at home. It is our political action who does it. Why is this so remarkable? Because for the last fifty years, we experienced an increasing sense of political powerlessness towards the 'blind' forces of the financial markets and the global economy which produced a horrendous ecological (climate) disaster and appalling social inequality. 200 years of fundamental critique could not do a thing against the accumulatory motors of capital. But now: They stand still. We did it! This is an experience of collective self-efficacy: Yes, we can steer, or at least stop, the world! But of course, stopping the system is not creating a different form of society. It is more like causing an accident. Time will show whether we are capable of taking this second step, too!



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?

On the one hand, the crisis surely intensifies trends and also problems that were already existent. For example, the trend towards the digitalization of social life. In fact, it has produced a sharp break between a physical and material world that is 'locked down' and a digital world that is speeding up its flows and activities. But on the other hand, I am quite convinced that corona creates a historically unique possibility for a social paradigm change. In society's normal form of operation, social activities are determined by long-standing rules and routines; social actors are deeply embedded in long and complex processual chains which determine their actions. In dynamic and complex societies, breaking these chains and leaving the entrenched routines is far too risky and unpredictable. Therefore, society operates mainly in a mode of path-dependency. But now the chains of production and interaction are interrupted, routines fail and in many respects, there are no rules any more. This is exactly the situation in which a change of paths or paradigms can occur: It is a point of 'bifurcation': We can either try to get back into the oldpaths as fast as possible – or we try something new. In such a situation, there are no sociological or economic models to predict the future course of action: It is a situation which is not about prediction, but about (political) action: The future is open!

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

For this latter aspect – the fact that the specificity of human beings is their very capacity to break the causal chains of interaction and routines and to start life anew, to become creative and inventive actors – I recommend Hannah Arendt's seminal book *The Human Condition* in which she develops the concept of *natality* to describe this.

In order to understand the logic of the current social situation as a revolutionary phase in which a paradigm-shift can occur, I would go back to Thomas Kuhn's work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn analyzes how the routine processes of 'normal science' can come to a halt in times of crisis and give way to revolutionary new paths. Kuhn takes this model actually from the political world and applies it to science, but it has been



re-applied to the analyses of social life by Sheldon Wolin, Gary Gutting and others.

Finally, what I really find most impressive is the way in which the French sociologist of speed, Paul Virilio, predicted a world of 'polar inertia' forty years ago. He foretold a world in which physical and material mobility is reduced to almost zero while the flows of data and information travel with the speed of light. It is a world of a hyper-accelerated standstill: Corona gets us pretty close to it!

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