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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?

I think it is. To me, the crucial political task of sociological theory is to participate in trying to resolve some of the most significant and urgent challenges of our time. Thereby I see theory not only as a system of ideas, but also – and essentially – as a *practice*, as a way of connecting with and caring about the world. And I am convinced that sociological theory has a lot to offer not only in terms of helping us grasp the social and political consequences of COVID-19, but it may also enable us to get a sense of the genesis and spreading of the virus and how both of them are entangled with human relationships in the dynamic, partially uncontrollable fluid and complex relational world we are living in. Ultimately, sociological theory may enable us also to learn *from* COVID-19, not only learn *about* it.

However, I do not see grand theory very helpful here. Nor do I think that we can grasp the multiple spatiotemporal scales of the virus and its effects by resorting to such preconceived and accustomed sociological categories as ‘agency’ and ‘structure’, ‘micro’ and ‘macro’, or ‘individual’ and ‘society’. To really see what is happening, what the COVID-19 pandemic is about, and what it means for us both individually and collectively, we cannot



stand above or outside the world, as it were, but our knowledge and theories need to grow from our engagement with the world.

We of course also need to try to pay attention to making our voices heard. To be sure, sociology is fairly marginalized in today's big public discussions about society and the future of humanity. Having something to say is not enough. We must find ways of reaching people and speaking to different publics.

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

My own field or method of approach is processual-relational thinking. I think that relations constitute much of the central stuff of social life; whatever happens in life stems from assemblages, processes, fluxes, and flows. I believe that relational thought can significantly contribute to our understanding of the genesis, nature, and effects of the virus. Analogous to what Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati has called 'relational goods', COVID-19 is a sort of *relational hazard* in the sense that it has to do with relations. It cannot be explained by reference to individual agents and their goals, intentions, or ambitions. In fact, irrespective of their possibly good intentions (such as personal empathy), individuals may unknowingly infect a great number of others and spread the disease. The virus is relational through and through: it originated, as it now seems, in human-animal relations, is transmitted by small droplets (and possibly via aerosol particles) in human contacts or through contact from contaminated surfaces, and also forces us to impose protective measures over human relations, such as quarantines, lockdowns, and spatial distancing.

Relational thought may also help us come to terms with the simultaneously local and global nature of the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how old microsociological assumptions concerning the autonomy of local interactions and their confinements to a demarcated site simply are not adequate. Our social contacts are simultaneously constitutive of global social formations and affected by them. The pandemic is produced and assembled through seemingly tiny, insignificant, and local contacts as well as through mobilities of people from place to place. This also means that it would cease to exist were these localized contacts successfully eliminated or temporarily suspended. However, the fact that this has not been the case shows how life cannot be contained, as our subsistence is dependent on leakage.



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?

The pandemic is certainly a global catastrophe in that it touches each and everyone: not only each of us individually, but all of us together, all our actions and all that happens to us, possibly the entire world order as we know it. But it does not affect all of us the same way. For fairly well-off people like me, who have been able to stay at home during all this time, life has been pretty safe and securing. But I am also fully aware that this is not the reality for many others, such as nurses or doctors doing their best every day to save the lives of infected patients, migrants crammed into small apartments, and homeless people with no place to go to self-isolate themselves. And there are several others from whom home is not a safe place due to domestic violence, for instance.

Consequently, while we are all affected by the pandemic, we are not in it together. We seem to be witnessing a violent collision of two realities. Some people, like myself, live in a reality of containment, where everything stands still and the entire world seems to have brought to a halt, which produces an eerie sense of calmness. The enclosed space of the container protects the inhabitants from the outside chaos (as illusory as the feeling of safety and security produced by it may be due to unavoidable leakage). However, beyond this world there is a fluid reality inhabited by disadvantaged people. This is a reality with no possibility of withdrawal, a reality where things fluctuate, mix, and mutate uncontrollably, and a reality of uncontrollable, involuntary encounters, life-threatening contagions, and transformations. All in all, the pandemic seems to amplify existing social divisions rather than creating entirely new ones, but we definitely need empirical research on this to tell whether this indeed is the case. In any case, what happens after the state of exception is decisive for the post-pandemic world order.

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

Besides the kind of processual-relational sociology that I already mentioned, social network analysis, too, might prove very fruitful, as well as global studies, sociology of social inequality, sociology of health, sociology of space, new materialisms, new vitalist approaches, the study of mobilities... you name it. I think that it depends on the questions we are



asking what theoretical and methodological resources we may find useful, while of course the ideas, concepts, and perspectives that we use also largely shape the problems that we pose.

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