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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?

Sociology's empirical research, public policy, and public sociology traditions are all well-positioned to analyze various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, sociology's empirical quantitative research describes important organizational, structural and cultural dynamics of COVID-19, most noticeably, how social inequalities of class, race, gender, ethnicity and citizenship make COVID-19 a vastly different experience for privileged and disadvantaged populations; why black and brown people, poor people, the elderly and those who do the dirty work are more likely to die from COVID-19; how public health policies and funding have an important impact on the spread and treatment of COVID-19; and how media shapes perceptions of the pandemic itself. Sociology's empirical qualitative research traditions offer nuanced discussions of how people experience these broader social trends in their families, workplaces, communities, schools and among one another.

At the same time, mainstream sociological theory, especially within American sociology, may be less useful in illuminating the social forces

that underpin this global pandemic, primarily because it has been far too timid in claiming a critical posture toward important social issues of our times. COVID-19 is one such issue, as are worldwide global protests against structural racism that occurred in the context of a global pandemic, and the economic vulnerability of a large percentage of the world's population whose plight became more visible. These three, intertwined social issues are visible today, but they also signal long-term, global social problems that require structural analyses. Sociology's research and theoretical traditions may have tools for generating a critical analyses of phenomena such as these but is unlikely to do so if a critical posture is not built into the very fabric of the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a cleavage within sociology as an academic discipline. Fundamentally, mainstream sociological theory remains disconnected from theoretical analyses that might inform and guide the increasingly sophisticated methodological tools of its own empirical research. More importantly, it is disconnected from engaging important social issues of health disparities, structural racism, and economic vulnerability that remain marginalized within mainstream sociological theory. Much mainstream sociological theory overemphasizes questions that most concern elites or approach such questions in ways that are targeted toward elites, at the expense of the kinds of questions that concern ordinary people.

Social theory *within* sociology has atrophied, with mainstream sociological theory's value increasingly reduced to providing some sort of explanatory framework for data sets that have already been collected, an afterthought rather than a leader. We have strong sociological empirical research that *describes* topics such as deeply-entrenched and growing differences in wealth and income, racial disparities in health, and gender differences in encountering social problems like violence. Yet our theories, no matter how eloquent or tightly argued, remain written in dense prose that the majority of sociologists can neither read nor understand. In a context where questions of a global health pandemic, structural racism and global economic insecurity for disenfranchised people cry out for structural analyses of power and wealth, mainstream sociological theory's overemphasis on questions of culture and individual identity seems strangely out of tune with the concerns of ordinary people. The outcome is a field that shies away from investigating research questions and interpreting findings that stray too far away from conventional wisdom.

Because I am a sociological insider, I offer these criticisms of sociology from a place of love. I see tremendous potential in contemporary

sociological theory if we do a better job of nurturing *critical* theoretical traditions within sociology that confront the social problems of our times. Meeting the challenge of understanding and explaining this global pandemic requires bold, imaginative approaches that ironically think outside the box in order to craft a new "box" of contemporary sociological theory. The pieces of such bold analyses exist, but not necessarily within sociology as a discipline. When I taught contemporary sociological theory to graduate students, I increasingly relied on social theories that were developed *outside* sociology as a discipline. Other fields of study offered far more space for critical theoretical exploration of important questions about decolonization, women's oppression, racism, human rights, and similar global phenomena than within American sociology. Philosophy, literary criticism, and narrative traditions within media studies, women's studies, American studies, cultural studies, and similar interdisciplinary fields offer rich analytical insight for thinking about the social world. Yet because these fields of study often lack the structural analyses of sociology and the social sciences, their critical theoretical frameworks have been unevenly incorporated into sociology.

But critical social theory developed outside sociology is no substitute for critical social theory developed inside it. COVID-19 offers an important opportunity for sociology to examine its own assumptions and practices. As a border discipline, sociology would do well to turn its eye outward toward the many fields that are also grappling with the meaning of this pandemic, and craft new patterns of sociological practice. I offer a diagnosis of one main problem within sociology: the relationship between critical sociological theory and sociology's empirical research illustrates a gap within the field of providing hard-hitting analyses that are accessible to large number of sociologists in the public sphere who care about addressing social problems, and ongoing sociological research that informs social issues. Issues of employment discrimination, structural unemployment, housing shortages, and disparities in schooling, adequate housing and family well-being are all studied within sociology. These issues all reflect economic concerns and can form the basis for developing a critical sociological theory that analyzes, explains, and/or suggests action strategies in terms that laypeople can understand.

Sociological theory that is up to the task of grappling with a global pandemic will arise neither from the detailed, methodical, and cumulative nature of empirical social science research nor from being disconnected from the needs of our students and the general public. I'm tired of hearing people breathless with the discovery of Black disparities in health care, arriving at the place that racism may be at fault, without having much

theoretical exposure to critical race theory. Before both COVID-19 and the global protests against structural racism, sociologists could hide behind their data, producing eloquent analyses of trends that they had no role in creating and no obligations to try and fix. Sociological theorists have been more removed than their empirical colleagues – it's easy to assume that racism, and sexism, and poverty are happening to someone else because they do not affect us. But COVID-19 has exploded that fantasy. These practices within sociology that fostered theoretical agreement now seem ingrown and myopic in a COVID-19 context. For example, sociologists are far more in agreement on what sociological theory has been in the past than on where it might be going. Ironically, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel among others, the historical forefathers of sociology, seemingly have more to say about how sociological theory informs contemporary sociological research than contemporary sociological theory. Their ideas endure because they were critical thinkers about the big issues of their times. These thinkers incorporated ideas about the social world they confronted into the heart of the discipline. Contemporary sociological theory would do well to do the same.

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

This is a straightforward and frustrating question for me to answer, primarily because I am not surprised by the ways that multiple forms of social inequality shaped the emergence of COVID-19 as a global phenomenon as well as the vast range of organizational, political and emotional reactions to it. Social inequalities of race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality are not simply distinct scholarly specializations for me. Rather, they signal systems of power that constitute important, explanatory frameworks for understanding the social world but more importantly, also shape my everyday life, including my career as a sociologist. As a Black woman who was raised working class, I was never meant to have a seat at the table of sociological theory and certainly not at the helm of the discipline itself. As a critical social theorist, I have long had to interrogate the very conditions that make my work possible and accessible and, if they do not exist, work to make them happen. The political economy of the production and consumption of social theory broadly, and sociological theory in particular, shapes the questions, knowledge base and implications of all intellectual work.

For me, however, it's been fascinating and disheartening how the US media, many of my colleagues, as well as the American public has been seemingly surprised at what I experience as social facts, namely, that African Americans die at higher rates from COVID-19 than white Americans, a pattern that is observed among Latinos, members of the Navaho nation and other people of color, and elderly people living in care facilities. This story of excess deaths within U.S. society is not new, reappearing with depressing frequency in statistics about police misconduct, medical neglect, high rates of incarceration, or the vulnerabilities that accompany just being poor. African American, Latino, indigenous leaders and progressive intellectuals have been raising these issues for some time. As the global pandemic has unfolded, similar patterns of excess deaths have unfolded in numerous national contexts. As the excess deaths in the U.S. and Brazil make painfully clear, the quality of national leadership makes a big difference in addressing important social issues under the best of times. And COVID-19 is the worst of times. This global pandemic has peeled back a gentleman's agreement not to speak of social inequalities of race, class, gender and sexuality, an agreement with which many academics have been complicit. Throughout my career, it has been exhausting to encounter a form of naiveite about social inequalities from people who want me to see them as good people. Is this ignorance benign or deeply complicit? Regardless, what should my response to this situation be? Grappling with COVID-19 is emotionally draining, especially confronting the same questions that I have heard for decades now.

Intellectually, it would be far easier for me to identify seemingly non-controversial aspects of my existing scholarship and simply say more of what I've been saying for some time. If I beat the drum of pointing out social inequality in the COVID-19 climate, I may finally be heard, but in ways that may be just as forgotten over time as the legions of intellectuals before me who thought that more evidence was the solution to insensitivity. But I think that we need to push beyond what we think to be true and ask ourselves how COVID-19 challenges everything that we think we know, especially those frameworks that we claim with total certainty. For many academics, the global pandemic has provided an opportunity to try and "sell" more of the same ideas within the academy, a site that values our ideas and our very bodies if we serve neoliberal agendas. Our experiences with commodity capitalism within academic venues reflect processes of intellectual smothering that shape our ability to aggressively resist the very market conditions that limit our ability to frame the arguments we need. This kind of self-reflexivity and diagnosis is challenging even under the best of times. It is especially difficult now

because trying to analyze key issues in the middle of events that explode daily and can change direction so quickly is extremely difficult. Yet, the disruption of the global economy means that this may be exactly the time to step back and see where we are.

When I started answering the questions for this interview, I had to remind myself that my fatigue and distress with how COVID-19 was unfolding meant that I needed to think and feel at the same time – reason emboldened by passion has long served me well. The explosion of global social protest against structural racism that took up the banner of Black Lives Matter energized me. The global social protests did not give me fresh eyes concerning how my work might speak to the global pandemic, but it did give me a renewed passion for doing so. This is the other audience that forms the public readers of our work. If we think too narrowly and only speak to academics, our analyses will be similarly limited.

Currently, I am questioning my own work on intersectionality in order to assess where I am with this work for where I want to go. How would the two books that I just finished on intersectionality read differently if I were writing them during the pandemic or in the context of an imagined post-pandemic landscape (see *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 2019; and *Intersectionality, 2nd edition*, with Sirma Bilge, 2020)? My ongoing work on intersectionality rests on a foundation of taking the social world as my text and putting ideas in dialogue with one another that typically have not gone together. Intersectionality offers an especially robust analysis both of why patterns of social inequality exist but also how people who care about fixing social inequality have gone about doing so. Intersectionality uses and contributes to existing disciplines, e.g., sociology's focus on documenting existing patterns of social inequality (its focus on social structures as well as individual agency). But intersectionality is only as good as its use – it's meaning emerges through use, and the global pandemic puts intersectionality to the test.

In response to the lack of theoretical sophistication concerning what intersectionality is – the aforementioned "discovery" of deep-seated inequalities of race, class, gender among others that are hard wired into U.S. society – I am using this opportunity to identify what now stands out for me within intersectionality, even if it is muted in my own work. One core premise of intersectionality, namely, the idea that people are interconnected across categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity and citizenship status, is an important theoretical construct in this pandemic. Because all of the categories have their own specific histories with social inequality, intersectionality provides a pliable tool for

examining specific intersections, for example of race and sexuality, or gender and ability in specific locations. Because COVID-19 is a global phenomenon, and shows no favoritism in its routes of transmission, it reiterates intersectionality's thesis that we should examine the interdependence of human beings, not what separates us. Studying the interconnectedness of all aspects of the social world is profoundly sociological. The global pandemic has led us to an historical moment that clarifies these interconnections. The global social protest that highlights these interconnections reflects how everyday people and local social protests against structural racism have led the way in showing how separate struggles are in fact intertwining and mutually dependent. In this context, intersectionality as critical social theory provides an important framework for thinking about globalization whereby people's lives are interconnected and mutually dependent even if such connections remain invisible. There is no need to try to connect things – rather, the question is why we fail to see the interconnections that already exist? How do the walls around us compromise not only our analyses but also our humanity? Not taking stock of existing interconnections, makes it difficult to imagine and work toward a more socially-just, post-pandemic social world.

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?

Because the situation with the global pandemic changes daily, my answers to this questions seem to change as rapidly. Because I am writing my responses to the symposium questions three months into the pandemic, and shortly after the global social protests against structural racism, it is simply too early to predict a post-pandemic reality. I certainly hope that the momentum gained from global social protest will continue to shine a light on structural racism, and that intersectionality as a tool of critical social theory will be prominent in thinking through global social inequality. That said, I do see two themes that have become increasingly visible in media coverage of the pandemic that I hope will generate policy changes in post-pandemic societies. The vast numbers of people who lost income from work, as well as benefits that were associated with jobs, highlights the meaning of work in people's lives. Similarly, the visibility of hunger, not just among the globe's poor, but also people who thought they would always have enough to eat, emphasizes the importance of food security for life itself. Before the pandemic, the meaning of work and assumptions about food security were taken for granted, what I call

hidden-plain-sight issues that naturalized and normalized social inequality. The pandemic brought work and food to public consciousness.

COVID-19 has upended the structures of all that we thought we knew about the organization and meaning of work in our lives. What was once taken for granted can no longer be. For example, the pandemic has created space to reevaluate the importance of different kinds of work to society. In a pandemic, who are essential workers? The pandemic has highlighted the vital nature of jobs that serve society – the front line workers in hospitals, emergency medical technicians, nurses, and doctors. Their service is currently celebrated, but are they adequately protected while exposed to COVID-19 and are they adequately compensated? COVID-19 has revealed the significance of care work as essential work. The pandemic has shown how food service workers, home health care workers, day care providers, teachers (many of whom moved their classes to on-line platforms), and all those who help feed, nurture, teach and nurse people are essential workers. These essential workers are the foundation for the wealth and prosperity of a society. Seeing who really mattered in a pandemic raises some uncomfortable questions about what kind of work is valued and well-paid, and what kind is not. How important or essential is an advertising executive? An influencer on Instagram?

COVID-19 has shaken to its core understandings of the assumed entitlements of work for some and the uncertainties work for others. The kind of work that people do, how it is viewed, and how we feel about it varies greatly across democratic and autocratic societies, as well as rich and poor nation-states. Yet the true soul of a nation rests on how it values and treats people who do care work and the dirty work, as well as people who for a variety of reasons cannot work. Significantly, if essential workers really are so “essential,” why are so many treated so badly, the case of workers in meat-packing plants, paid so poorly (day care workers) or deemed so expendable that they must leave their families to send remittances home (seasonal workers who harvest food)? In some nation-states, the message is a stark “work or starve.”

This leads me to the second theme, namely, the visibility of food security as a politically charged issue. All human beings need food every day, but food is not distributed equally, leaving many people hungry and malnourished. I live in a country where enormous amounts of food are wasted in affluent neighborhoods where the restaurants that cater to middle class customers, and that stigmatizes poor people who need food assistance. Food security is a political issue in the US but has not been viewed as such.

Currently, food security can be a sub-theme of concern for the environmental movement, especially its emphasis on the unsustainable nature of our current lifestyles. Indigenous people have led the way and continue to do so about the sanctity of the earth, and the necessity of caring for the earth as a way to ensure human survival. This is a collective effort that requires people to see not only how they are connected to one another (a hard sell under the best of times), as well as how they are connected to the earth. Along with other social actors, they point to the damage done to the earth by industrial farming and agribusiness as unsustainable ways of producing food. Ironically, the crucial human connection provided by food is often buried in discussions of the environment whereby once the environment is fixed hunger would be reversed.

The global crisis of COVID-19 reveals how the abundance, shortage, or absence of food across diverse neighborhoods, populations and nation-states has brought the importance of food to the forefront. More people may die of hunger during this global pandemic than will die of COVID-19 itself. Social scientists and political activists would do well to enhance analyses and advocacy work for feeding people. Politically, it is far easier to organize people about issues of food insecurity in their own households, neighborhoods, and regions than an amorphous concern for the planet. It is hard to become an effective advocate for the planet it you are hungry. Food potentially grounds existing movements for environmental justice and health disparities in especially poignant ways, highlighting how food is central to health and mortality.

Work and food are deeply connected, and both point to the essentials in everyone's lives. The meaning of work and food security constitute two core themes that are sociologically grounded, theoretically rich, and unlikely to disappear post-pandemic societies. Both have or promise to change dramatically in response to this global pandemic and its aftermath. Both demonstrate the interconnectedness of people, whether in one's own neighborhood, within one's regions, and/or across national borders in a global context. COVID-19 is laying a foundation for thinking relationally about work, food and social change itself. It is becoming clear to many of us that our actions in our everyday lives have implications that go far beyond what we can see.

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

Sociology has always faced this challenge of trying to figure out changes in the social world while they are happening. If we misread the signs around us by holding too fast to our sociological beliefs, we misread important social changes. For example, who could have predicted the emergence of a global, multiracial social protest against structural racism, under the banner of Black Lives Matter? And who could predict that it would occur in the context of a global pandemic? It is always easier to see the changes that were already underway after they are behind us.

That said, COVID-19 presents an opportunity for sociology as a field of inquiry to rethink the relationship between sociological theory and (1) broader trends in critical social theory, especially those identified by women, people of color and others who have faced barriers to intellectual work; (2) the empirical traditions within sociology as a science, defending Western science against claims that it is "fake news" while maintaining a critical posture toward science's participation in racism and colonialism; (3) a renewed sociological practice that is theoretically informed; and (4) the insistence that *sociological* theory be more closely aligned with important social issues of the day, and not simply the idiosyncratic interests of a theorist.

This may seem like a tall order, but it is not impossible. The corpus of work by Zygmunt Bauman models the kind of sociological theorizing and practice that I have in mind. In *What Use Is Sociology?* Bauman explains how his work tries to address this overarching question in the context of an extended interview about his work. In accessible language, Bauman provides a backstage view of the complexity of doing critical social theory and empirical work within sociology. As a social theorist, Bauman confronted the existential question of what use his sociology could be in analyzing the Holocaust. Bauman's diagnostic work is first class – his classic book *Modernity and the Holocaust* provides a provocative thesis concerning the bureaucratic contours of naturalizing and normalizing killing and the modern era. We would do well to ask ourselves the question that propels Bauman's work – *what use is my sociology*? Collectively, we might ask, *what use is sociological theory*?

Tools that will help us think about that world cannot be formulaic recipes, choosing a favorite text to explain the pandemic. This merely reinforces what we already believe to be true, rather than challenging our own ways of reading. The meaning of a text does not lie within the text itself, but in the

meaning we make of it. Rather, we need to equip ourselves and each other with tools of critical thinking so that we can diagnose social problems and develop creative solutions for problem solving. Paulo Freire's notion of literacy for critical consciousness speaks to this framework of "reading" the social world through a dual lens of diagnosis and social action. I am less concerned about turning to existing texts for guidance – there are many such texts within sociology – than I am in sharpening diagnostic skills that will enable me to read our times without my own blinders.

This pandemic provides an opportunity for us to critically assess our cherished frameworks and practices. Just as everything associated with this pandemic seems to be upended and up for grabs at this historic moment, so too are our existing frameworks. If we are timid, by hiding behind a perpetual stance of critique of what exists, we squander this historical moment. By refusing to assume responsibility for what we argue and why we do so, by default, critical social theory in the academy becomes increasingly critical in name only. The contours of the new normal that will emerge after the pandemic depend on what we do now to prepare for it. Our intellectual activism lies in asking new questions, advancing bold arguments, and proposing action strategies that solve problems, not just diagnosing them. When it comes to critical social theory, this is no time to follow the crowd. We must think beyond the here and now in order to envision the society that we want to create. And the seeds for that society lie in what we think and do now.

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