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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?

Well! There is more than one sociological theory. Yet I see some general common features. Gilles Deleuze argued that the Left (and with it, most social scientists, except for orthodox economists!) perceives the World in terms of relationships that begin from the most distant, and move inward. Social inequality, for instance, has been understood as a large, global phenomenon of exploitation whose relationship can be traced in toward imperialism and colonialism. Because of this, most social scientists call to address the existence and structures of imperialism and colonialism in order to properly address the suffering of the affected (abstract) social classes. Contrary to this are some identity politics movements (i.e. some Islamic movements, and far right-wing and conservative movements), which view relationships as beginning from a close point, moving to the most distant. They believe in community work and on family and neighborhood relationships. For instance, Trump supporters do believe in his capacity to address the social inequalities faced by forgotten communities of rural white Americans. And faith-based organizations in Lebanon are currently the most proactive NGOs dealing with families who



lost their job during the curfew. For the other identity politics movements (around ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc), their struggle may vary considerably depending on context but often is anchored in community struggle, armed by the universalist human rights doctrine. Yet, for Richard Rorty, this “cultural Left”, while advancing a cultural agenda of pluralism, their struggle for social class justice is sometimes very minimal (as the case of the US).

I see our post-Corona sociology as one capable of re-inventing how it has traditionally commanded its focus (from being outward-in, or from the inward-out) to creating methods that use multi-scale focuses: rethinking the importance of the family, community and of the ethics of love, hospitality and caring, and then scaling up to the level of the nation-state and the humanity as a whole.

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

My current research interests revolve around how paradigms of knowledge productions in the Arab World and beyond, and how to connect the social sciences with moral philosophy. As a president of the International Sociological Association, I am interested in promoting a global sociology. This sociology goes in two particular directions for this sociology: supplementing the postcolonial approach with an anti-authoritarian one, and theorizing post-secular society. One cannot but acknowledge the scars of the colonial era, but postcolonial studies have been rightly used but also abused. I would identify two abuses: the over-emphasis on external factors while neglecting local ones, and the binary logic of antagonistic categories such as East/West, universalism / contextualism. Thus, I make the call to supplement the postcolonial approach with an anti-authoritarian one.

Then, how to go beyond the militant conception of secularism toward multi-secularities? And how to theorize post-secular society? For me, this term is still salient for two reasons: first as a declaration of the necessity of a finding a new approach to secularism, distinct from the historical way of seeing it; second, the changing in religion from its social secularization to its public resurgence, to its piety conveying political subjectivity (that the Arab uprisings, for instance, unleashed). I argued that post-secular society should be theorized as a society dealing with three challenges: first, religion in multi-ethnic and multicultural society needs to be managed by the state;



second, the rise of public religion; and finally, the deliberation in the public sphere which is in confluence with neoliberalism.

In this dark time of Corona, these concerns remain valid but, I want to place further emphasis on three tasks for sociology: to build multi-level focuses that branch from community to humanity; to take an active approach in fighting against the diseases of *anthropocene* and *capitalocene*; and finally to set a better agenda for recognition and moral obligation. This agenda is similar to that of anti-utilitarian and convivialist sociologists such as Alain Caillé but also in Brazil Frédéric Vandenberghe and Paulo Henrique Martins. We are all aware that the struggle for the environment is inseparable from our choice of political economy, and from the nature of our desired economic system – and these connections between human beings and nature have never been as immediately or intimately connected as they are now.

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 post-pandemic should be prepared by us social scientists, as well as all civil society actors and political policymakers, in order to turn this tragedy into an asset. Just to remind you, the Great Depression in the early 1930s had the deepest impact worldwide, and the political responses to the crises were radically different. Let us take the US and The New Deal proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1939. It was a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, labor reform, inter-racial relation reform enacted. On the contrary, Germany, in its response, was replacing democracy with a Nazi system. Michel Wieviorka, in an interview in March this year with the French newspaper, Liberation, reminds us in post-WWII, the French resistance has created an [Action Program for the Resistance](#) and was given the label “Les jours heureux” (The Happy Days) (in 1944). It is essential to say that it was not only some political measures to restore democracy, but radical economic measures characterized the nationalization of large scale economic and financial feudalism from the management of the economy, and of course some social measures, in particular the significant salary readjustment, the reestablishment of independent trade unions and working group of delegates, and a comprehensive social security plan. The following 30 years were indeed happy days for France. Thus, it is us to decide in which direction we will go.



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

Post-Corona sociology will only have meaning if it is armed with a utopia, or “real utopias”, as Erik Olin Wright would put it, that, even if it is not fully realizable, will direct our actions. There is no ethical life without utopia, and the difference between clerical peaching and a sociologist’s utopia is that the latter does not necessarily denounce the anti-utopian vision of the others, and may seek to work with those who believe in it. This sociology thus should appreciate and further the Maussian gift relationship and the moral obligation connecting the social sciences to moral philosophy.

It is important to re-think the construction of otherness, not only with regards to who is perceived as the adversary and why that may be, but with regards to how we care about ‘*the Other*’. The French sociologist Eric Macé in a recent piece remind us the importance of re-working our interdependence (human vs non-human, man vs woman, society vs nature, etc.). The patriarchal division of labor between caring women and working men cannot continue.

Here serious ethical discussion could tame the pursuit of our own self-interest. This is the sense of Paul Ricoeur’s aphorism, “the aim of living the good life with and for others in just institutions”, where, in other words, the ethics of love, hospitality, care, and solicitude with and for others may be included in institutional frameworks to ensure and reinforce social justice and democracy. This is in line with Alain Caillé, Frédéric Vandenberghe, and many other anti-utilitarian scholars, who have proposed different manifestos calling for ‘convivialism’ as the successor to the secular ideologies of communism, socialism, and anarchism.

To remind us how to think responsibility regarding freedom, and how to foster and encourage meaningful relationships to our ‘other’ fellow human beings, sociology should go back to these and other salient insights of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, who, simply and astutely explained, “avant *cogito*, il y a bonjour” (before *cogito*, there is “hello”).

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