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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?

I think not. This is because a discussion on earlier pandemics has been restricted to poorer regions of Europe (Spanish Flu) or the global south (HIV, Asian Flu) and thus these debates were constrained by regional analysis associated with various distinct weaknesses within regional health systems, such as nature of medicine and uneven understaffing and financing. However, today what we are seeing is its global outreach that has highlighted the differential inadequacies of the medicine and the biomedical systems in various regions. As a consequence, we have an epistemic opening to comprehend a more fundamental question: how and why does neo liberal modernity and its risks organise differentially public health access across specific geographies in the world and within these in terms of its access to individuals and households from distinct class, caste/race, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliations. Such an analysis not only allows the reframing of the content of social theory, but also propels the use of a methodologies that can analyse this question through distinct scales and thereby to ask a much larger question, that of the differential impact of the Anthropocene in the globe. This epistemic window will help to move away from the Eurocentric positions taken on risk by Beck and others. It will help scholars to use a comparative political economy



approach to comprehend how the present pandemic is part of the uneven processes of capitalist accumulation promoting the middle classes and in turn is related to creating hedonistic aspirations, consumerism, urbanisation and migration for them. In the case of the global south these intersect to create instable and precarious ecologies and economies organised through informal and unregulated circulatory labour markets. Given that these are associated with weak administrative systems and supported by rightist governments who target the minorities, deplete social services and welfare benefits to them, these furthers inequities, deprivations and marginalities.

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

I work in the intersecting fields of sociology of the labouring poor (India has almost 90% of its workers in the non-formal sectors), urbanization and migration (45 to 50% of the informal sector workers are internal circulatory migrants) and its impact on the formation of cities and towns in India. My research is primarily focused on the city of Bombay in western India, a city representing modern Indian capitalism where more than 50% of its citizens live in overcrowded and dense slums and where they have no legal right to housing and land. This city articulates the various dimensions of the crisis that we are seeing today: lack of access to public health facilities, little to no concern with psychosis associated with overcrowding even in normal times, lack of access to water, sanitation, and housing, covert and overt violence against the old, women and children, and the influx of circulatory internal migrants from discriminated groups that compete for jobs and livelihoods. I have published three coedited volumes on Bombay and at this moment am trying to build a network of scholars who can, in the present context examine specific processes regarding deregulated urban ecologies and economies in Bombay and its peripheries. I believed this can help to reconceptualize ways to think of the 'urban experience' in Bombay but also India in general. I also edit a Series titled *Cities and the Urban Imperative* for Routledge which has elaborated how the intellectual investment in urban based capitalist modernity by the Indian nation-state has created new forms of conflicts and opened up the population of the nation-state to new ecological social and health risks. I see this work as collective re-thinking to comprehend the present moment.



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?

Yes, to both questions. Short-sightedness and lack of adequate information did not allow the Indian government to prepare a short-term and long-term intervention to control and spread the pandemic. Given neoliberalism, the public health system in India (except in the state of Kerala) was in crisis. There was understaffing and underfinancing of medical supplies on one hand and privatisation of health on the other as part of neoliberal policy. No test kits and protective gear for health staff while privatisation gave access to treatment to upper end patients.

The lack of preparation of the pandemic as a health problem, the lack of knowledge of how to solve a public health crisis (that is, the need to isolate, quarantine, and stop community transmission those who brought in the virus especially the international travellers from the upper sections of society) and the lack of supplies (such as test kits) allowed the Government to be sanguine initially (as numbers were not high as testing was minimal) and later to intervene through two policies: country wise lockdown and social distancing, both to be managed by the police at the behest of provincial authorities who in turn were also not prepared to handle the pandemic.

The lockdown planned for those who had homes and who could isolate themselves (about 10 to 15% of the population) and not for the densely populated urban population (50 to 60% in western and southern India) living in overcrowded slums, most of who were daily, casual and contract workers with almost 50% being internal short-term circulatory migrants. It isolated the upper and middle classes from the lower groups breaking bonds of trust, care and concern that had evolved to organise informal networks of economic and social relationships that exchanged goods and services between communities across classes. It has led to furthering of caste-ist stigma, prejudice and discrimination. The lockdown blocked income earning capacities of the worker, leaving them with little sustenance wore off, forcing them to walk for weeks back to their villages across the country leading to many tragedies. It also led to stoppage of the economy and the trust systems that organise the latter through economic and social bonds of care, concern across classes and community affiliations.



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

Given that I have argued that this moment opens an epistemic window to comprehend the deep-seated processes of inequality being articulated, a new perspective is in order regarding both risk and trust. Thus, in addition to the standard work on trust (Luhmann, Sztompka, Giddens) and risk (Beck and his colleagues), there is a need to reorient these concepts to the issues and processes of the Global South. To do so, there is a need to conduct workshops at many regions and localities to grasp the intersections of these complex processes at work globally.

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