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SYMPOSIUM

SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC

Edited by

Andre Bittencourt (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Maurício Hoelz (Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Peter Wagner (University of Barcelona, Spain)

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?

The initial reaction by social scientists was very often to draw on one's toolkit and apply it to the situation, without much reflection about whether the tools are adequate for the purpose. This reaction is well understandable as a combination of three elements: a highly novel socio-political situation that one feels one should have something to say about; a lack of specific expertise outside of a rather small area of specialization that, furthermore, is marginal in sociological debates (medical sociology and the social-science component of public health research); and an eagerness to be present in public debate. But it is not really justifiable: it avoids doing what one should always first do, namely, take a careful look at the phenomenon that one wants to understand.

As time went on, interventions became more nuanced and subtle. It is now more widely acknowledged that we deal with a phenomenon that for sociology, though not for epidemiology, came entirely unexpected. Therefore, we have a profound lack of knowledge of both causes and consequences, even though both of those are significantly “social”, not the virus itself, but the way it spreads among human beings and can be prevented from doing so. As to consequences, furthermore, there is a great



degree of uncertainty, which mirrors the uncertainty within epidemiology and virology, as, e.g., expressed in widely diverging figures in mathematical modelling, but with the expanded scope of the variety in the intensity and extension of social relations.

With regard to sociological theory, more particularly, two observations should be made. First, the phenomenon gets at the core of sociality, namely human contact, and it shows sociological theory unprepared to get to this core, having preferred broader theorizing about forms of social bonds and coherence or contradictions in the structure of social relations. Second, the late-20th-century debates about agency and structure have led to a wider acknowledgement of human agency and creativity as well as, consequently, contingency of social outcomes, against the determinism and functionalism of earlier theorizing. But faced with a highly contingent occurrence – a pandemic that was possible but not necessary – there seems to be little, at least until now, that can be drawn from those theoretical insights.

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

Given the newness of the situation, two forms of questioning impose themselves: reflections on knowledge, and the search for useful comparisons.

The former calls upon the sociology of knowledge and of the sciences. One strand would address the knowledge of the virus. The question is what kind of virological and epidemiological knowledge was available and how it could be increased, and which techniques, such as mathematical modelling, can usefully be applied. Significantly, there is a tension between the knowledge that is generally available, about viruses and how they spread, on the one hand, and on the other, the need to know *this* virus in particular, which in significant respects is different from other viruses. Importantly, in contrast to what we social scientists tend to think about the knowledge of nature, the virus also changes, thus present knowledge cannot entirely predict the future.

Another strand would look at the ways this knowledge enters into society and politics. The question is about the formation of epistemic communities, the plurality of forms of knowledge and the contest between them, and the possibility of epistemic hegemony or domination.



The search for comparisons calls upon historical-comparative sociology, given that we look at what used to be called a “macro-sociological” phenomenon: of large-scale, namely reaching very quickly global extension, and of the potential to generate a major social transformation. Historical-comparative sociology has been rather out of fashion for quite some time, but given current disorientation, it provides both approaches and a reservoir of knowledge that can be usefully mobilized to understand the present.

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?

This is what everyone would like to know and what many are speculating about. In public and political debate one can observe, understandably so, the almost obsessive intention to go back to “normal”, whereas in the social sciences and philosophy grand visions proliferate, both in the form of utopias and dystopias. But in the medium-term it is more likely that we will lose the sense of what “normal” is or was and will refer to the past merely as the way things “once” were. I propose three fragments for further reflection.

First, we may compare the upcoming changes, given that they are likely to include increased monitoring and surveillance, with the “securitization” policies that have gone on for decades. A long time ago, a friend and colleague said to me that he had long hoped that Israel would become more like the rest of the world, whereas in fact the rest of the world has become more like Israel in terms of security measures. We have gotten used to many practices that were considered as inconceivable even shortly before they were introduced. We do not consider them as part of a major social transformation that our societies have recently undergone (even though maybe we should).

Second, we can also compare covid-19 with HIV/AIDS, a pandemic that arose suddenly and shockingly and led to reflections about the major social change that it might trigger. Most concretely, this change was expected in sexual behaviour, but there also was a widespread impression of experiencing an “end of an era”. Change certainly has happened, but much less than widely expected; the world has “gone on”. With hindsight, the main component of the answer has come from medical science through improvements in treatment. Now again, the hopes concentrate on a



medical-science solution, not least with a view to going back to “normal”. While we should indeed hope that there will be such a solution soon, we should not overlook our societies' tendency to work towards a scientific “fix” to avoid having to contemplate major changes in our practices. Climate change offers the most worrying example of such attitude.

Third, the observation has been made that the 1918-1920 pandemic (to which Max Weber succumbed) was followed by major changes in socio-political institutions, not least an abrupt turn-around in the preceding “globalization” trends. We can leave the question open whether it was not rather the experience of the First World War than the pandemic that was decisive for the reorientation. In either case, we have here a relatively recent example of a major social transformation that was conditioned upon the widely shared experience that something unacceptable had happened and that measures should be taken to avoid the recurrence of anything similar in the future. Thus, these events provide for a useful comparison for our current situation. They should be carefully re-examined in great nuance and with a view to distinguishing the desirable from the undesirable outcomes.

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

In the light of the above, we should take a fresh look at analyses of social transformations that take a truly historical approach, that is, considering the knowledge and orientations of actors at the moment they had to act (such as William Sewell's *Logics of history*, 2005). Rather than seeing social change as determined by interests and functions, we should look at the ways in which self-understandings of societies have been transformed in reaction to crucial experiences – in particular at the ways in which collective institutions that are, by and large, still in place have been created from the late 19th century onwards; and in comparison at the ways in which societies in the late 20th century embarked on the dismantling of those collective institutions.

Furthermore, we should try to understand better how social imagination is and has been used to try to stabilize expectations for futures that are marked by great uncertainty, and to orient collective action (Jens Beckert, *Imagined futures*, 2016),

Finally, covid-19 is a reminder of our dependence on natural processes, thus should provide another occasion, in addition to climate change, to re-



connect our knowledge of social and natural relations. This is an ongoing work, for which an important opening was provided by Bruno Latour (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, 1991) and a widening towards historiography and theory of history by Dipesh Chakrabarty (“The climate of history”, 2009), but which needs further reflection and detailed investigation, not least in the conceptual context of the notions of “anthropocene” and “sustainability”.

Peter Wagner is ICREA Research Professor in the Department of Sociological Theory, Philosophy of Law and Methodology of the Social Sciences at the University of Barcelona, Spain. Is the author of *Progress: A Reconstruction* and *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation*, among others.

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