

A plea for global sociology in times of the coronavirus

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The coronavirus has brought science back to the centre of public space, even in countries where populist leaders used to delegitimise it. Epidemiologists, medical doctors and biologists bring us facts: the pandemic progresses every day; it is far worse than a “strong flu” and it takes thousands of lives on all continents. Social scientists have come up with facts that are as hard and as unquestionable: while the virus itself is a biological agent that may infect any of us, we are deeply unequal when confronted with it. Public health policies and social inequalities matter at least as much as the way our bodies react to it when it comes to the virus’ deadly consequences. Social scientists have shown that the CoVID-19 pandemic is not only a sanitary crisis. It is also a social and political crisis, and should be treated as a moment of rupture that will bring major changes into our lives, our societies and our world. While often sidelined by policy makers, social sciences’ contributions in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic have been as important as, and in many ways complementary to, those of the hard sciences.

Echoing the strong comeback of Nation States as the key players in controlling the

response to the outbreak, most contributions from social sciences have focused on the national scale and addressed their country’s fellow citizens and policy makers. Scholars and experts have conducted national statistical studies, analysed the differentiated impact of the virus across class and race in their country, region or city, scrutinised the national policies to deal with the crisis and contributed to the national public debate.

This rise in methodological nationalism is a paradox as the CoVID-19 pandemic is a profoundly global phenomenon and an intrinsic result of our Global Age². The pandemic has generated a cycle of de-globalization. States have closed their borders, travelling and mobility around the world have sharply reduced. Major international events have been cancelled or postponed. Families have isolated themselves at their homes and national governments’ priority is to secure access to healthcare equipment to protect against the virus and basic supplies to “their own people”. This is however happening globally. The virus does not stop at closed borders and reveals how deeply connected and interdependent we have become. It has spread faster and more broadly than any

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² Albrow M. (1996) *The Global Age*, Cambridge: Polity.

previous pandemic thanks to the unprecedented circulation of human beings across the globe. The lockdown and the virus threat have deeply shaken societies and lives around the world. It is a global event that intersects with the daily life of each human being on the planet.

International collaboration at the global scale is crucial to dealing with the pandemic. It is certainly true in the fields of medicine and natural sciences to reach a better understanding of the virus itself. Chinese researchers have isolated and sequenced the virus genome in January and communicated the results of dozens of scientific studies, opening the way for the publication of thousands of journal articles dedicated to the CoVID-19 by medical doctors, virologists and epidemiologists around the world. Learning from experience, failures and good practices is fundamental to reach better understanding of the new virus, to set up better treatments that may save thousands of lives and to mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

In social sciences also, we need to learn from other countries and other world regions' experience of the pandemic. A more global sociology is required to better understand and tackle the challenges we face, to gather good praxis and successful examples, to warn about threats and to think about the world that will emerge out of this global crisis. Such a global perspective should not yield to

“methodological globalism” and be limited to macro-analyses. Fostering a global outlook does not mean dismissing the national scale. On the contrary, it requires empirical, epistemic and analytical insights from different regions of the world, fully embedded in a reality that is at the same time local, national, regional and global. The very aim of the ISA is thus to foster dialogue among social scientists from all continents and combine analyses from the local to the global³, and from personal subjectivity to globalization.

While the production of goods and services have sharply decreased with the lockdown, social sciences have been particularly lively during the first months of the pandemic. Thousands of analyses have been published in the media and on dedicated websites. Most of these contributions focus on four sets of challenges and debates: (1) revealing and analysing the social dimensions of the pandemic; (2) monitoring and analysing the ways political regimes and national governments have tackled the crisis and how those reveal their weaknesses; (3) analysing the way the pandemic and the lockdown have deeply affected individuals and societies, how it reconfigures social relations and how social actors implement new forms of solidarity and ways of living in this very peculiar context; (4) and reflecting on how the crisis and the way social actors deal with it may have long term consequences and pave the way towards alternative futures that may come out of it.

³ Hanafi S. (2020) A post-CoVid Sociology, ISA: Global Sociology and the Coronavirus.

1. The social dimensions of the pandemic

The first mission of social sciences is to assess the way the virus affects our society, with rigor and in a critical perspective. Social scientists have contributed to provide and discuss indicators that allow for monitoring the pandemic. They have revealed that, while the virus may infect each and every human being, the pandemic affects us differently and the way the virus is treated is closely connected to social factors. The CoVID-19 pandemic exacerbates social inequalities and reveals the social structures, notably in terms of class, race and gender. In the United States, minorities are far more affected by the virus⁴. In France, the popular suburbs of Paris have seen a rise of 72% of mortality during the first month of the lockdown. An intersectional approach is thus crucial to understand how the crisis is experienced and why the way we face it is deeply unequal and unfair.

The issue takes dramatic proportion in the Global South. The pandemic leaves an estimated two billion people at risk of abject poverty. The virus has a devastating impact on the most vulnerable communities, from the favelas in Rio and the slums in India to the refugee camps. It leaves informal workers without a revenue and spread in slums and favela where social distancing is impossible. The virus spread

fast in slums' overpopulated rooms and streets. In addition, slum dwellers cannot afford to stop working for a week, neither to stock up on food, which increased their exposure to the virus outside of their community.

2. CoVID-19 governance

A second set of contributions analyzes the way policy makers and political regimes deal with the virus spread. Nation-States have imposed themselves as the main actors in charge of dealing with the pandemic. This renewed strength of Nation States and national communities is not a new phenomenon. It has been at the core of China's rise as a global power for decades and has become the core of the United States national and international politics with Donald Trump. Over the last decade, we have witnessed the rise of populist and/or authoritarian state leaders who have put nationalism and authoritarianism⁵ back as a major feature of our time. This comeback of nationalism and of states has however reached an even higher level with the CoVID-19 outbreak. States have closed their borders, and citizens turned to their national governments for protection, care and guidelines. International institutions have vanished in the global crisis, including the UN and the European Union. International solidarity has suffered one of its strongest declines in recent history and the quest to find a vaccine looks more a

⁴ Purkayastha B. (2020) Divided we stand – the pandemic in the US, Open Movements/Open Democracy
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/divided-we-stand-the-pandemic-in-the-us>

⁵ Hanafi S. (2020) Resurgent Authoritarianism: The Sociology of New Entanglements of Religions, Politics, and Economies

global race among transnational corporations than a common scientific challenge.

Social scientists have analyzed how political regimes respond to the pandemic and the challenges it poses to each of them. Populist leaders have been challenged as the virus cannot be reduced to a flu or encapsulated in fake news. The early failures of the Chinese communist party to deal with the new disease pointed to the limitations of authoritarian regimes, but the Chinese government has dealt with the epidemic and now uses its experience and the help it provides to other countries to strengthen its diplomacy.

The pandemic also raises challenges to democracy as it underlines inequalities and as some argue for increased social control as a necessity. It requires reasserting the fundamental values of the democratic system, whereby decisions are based on scientific knowledge and on citizens monitoring and participation.

The pandemic has revealed the strengths and limitations of national political systems. The lack of efficiency of a national government or reiterated discourses by a state leader mocking the pandemic and delaying lockdown measures may result in hundreds or thousands of additional deaths. Most governments have not assessed the importance of the pandemic in time and have failed to provide basic protections against the virus spreading to their health care workers, not to mention the whole population. Confronted with this unexpected sanitary crisis, each

government has set its own necropolitics. Through their policies, governments give less opportunity for some people to cope with the virus than to others, while people who die at home or in elder people care homes do not appear in most countries' public statistics. The pandemic and the lockdown have also transformed the relation between citizens and government. Citizens turn to national governments to provide protection, care and the guidelines to get out of the pandemic. Many of them accept stronger social control by the state and new surveillance technologies and facial recognition as a price to pay for limiting the pandemic and getting out of the lockdown. All over the world, authoritarian, populist and liberal governments tend to hide their own failures and limitations in dealing early on with the crisis by placing the blame for the crisis on individual citizens who do not comply with the lockdown orders.

3. How society reacts

A third set of contributions unveils and analyzes the way social actors are handling the crisis and proposing concrete solutions. Social distancing measures have put solidarity at risk and have challenged its meaning and often shrunk the limits of the community within which it takes place. Collectives who received little consideration have proved to be crucial in maintaining society afloat. Nurses and care workers risk their lives to take care of patients and elderly people. Supermarket cashiers have become visible as people playing an important role in citizens' daily lives. Social and solidarity economy is

providing paths for a more re-localised economy. While new networks of solidarity have emerged in neighbourhoods and cities, we also witness the limitation of solidarity to closed national communities or to families. This set of analyses also explores the deep impacts of the lockdown on people's lives, subjectivity and social relations. Intergenerational relations have taken new shapes and meanings. Digital technologies have taken on a major role in maintaining social relations, from friendships to redefining love affairs under lockdown conditions.

4. Will a new world rise out of the crisis?

The fourth set of analyses deals with the longer-term impacts of the pandemic and the way society deals with it. As a global crisis of unexpected size and consequences, the CoVID-19 has opened new horizons of possibilities and may be seized as an opportunity to reshape the world in a different way. The crisis has shaken economic dogma that has ruled the world for decades. State budget deficit and even the dogma of economic growth has been (temporarily) put on halt, as governments focus on mitigating the pandemic.

Social scientists have underlined the fact that the crisis may also be an opportunity to rebuild the world in a different way. Many stress the need for a world more sensitive and attentive to human beings, care and social inequalities, and with stronger public healthcare systems. Amidst sharp falls of GDP and a rise of public debts, state leaders now call for increasing re-localisation in the production of food and essential goods.

However, previous crises have shown that these hopes for a fairer world are only one of various alternative futures that the crisis may open. The way the pandemic has been managed so far has chosen competition over solidarity both in society as among nations. The wealthiest will get out of the crisis much stronger. Rather than increased solidarity at the national and international levels, the pandemic may lead individuals and states to prioritise the protection of their own community over shared global interests. The actors who are better able to seize the opportunities following the rupture of the economic dogma may not be the ones in favour of better public services and healthcare for all. In the United States as in most countries, massive economic help packages have channelled huge amounts of public money to rescue national corporations from the crisis. For companies as for countries, those that will get faster out of the crisis will have a significant advantage in the global competition, as China seems to show.

The pandemic may also pave the way for a new authoritarian era, with biopolitics grounded in new technologies and artificial intelligence. Part of the population accepts the increased state surveillance and monitoring to limit the spread of the virus. Authoritarian regimes or leaders are considered as efficient providers of solutions and protection, and China is building on its prompt management of the epidemic to conquer new markets and advertise its governance model. In terms of biopolitics and social control, the border

has been blurred between democracy and authoritarian regimes, as the lockdown has limited social protests in some countries and proved useful to confine and control the population of the poorest suburbs.

The way humanity will get out of the CoVID-19 pandemic will depend on medicine and sciences, notably to find out a vaccine. It also relies on the results of an ongoing struggle over the social, political and geopolitical meaning of the pandemic and the world that shall come out of it.