

Post-COVID-19 Sociology

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This dark time of the Corona pandemic calls to mind how I felt during the long hours of waiting in front of Israeli checkpoints, during my time working in Ramallah and living in Jerusalem between 2000-2004. The waiting for the waiting's end, being controlled and oriented by others, the rule of non-rule, became a suspended violence. This deprivation of a temporal existence (a process of change, an ontological time in anticipation, and one beyond my control) reduced my being to, as Heidegger (2008) would put it, a linear time, where I did not feel a "spacio-cide" (Hanafi 2013) but a "chrono-cide"². Today, with its imposed alienation of time, and its disruption of the life of the half of humanity, which includes being under lockdown and even curfew, feels like those days in Ramallah and Jerusalem. The current disruption will change, at an unprecedented rate, how we eat, work, shop, exercise, manage our health, socialize, and spend our free time. This virus has changed the direction of the wind. As [Arundhati Roy](#) eloquently put it:

"[u]nlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the

world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine."

The surreal atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault lines in trust among human beings, among countries, between citizens and governments, and it is pushing us to raise big questions about ourselves, our social relationships, and life generally. And this crisis is not just limited to public and environmental health or the economy — what we are witnessing is a moment of truth regarding the crisis of late modernity and its capitalist system on a broad, overarching scale. We will not be able to simply revert to 'business as usual' after we get through this crisis, and the social sciences should work to both analyze and actively engage in addressing these new realities. Tasks are of two sorts: ones that are urgent for now, and others that are important for tomorrow.

Two urgent tasks

First, in order to unpack the social origins and to understand the magnitude of the impacts COVID-19 has had, and continues

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² For more about this heavy time of colonial experience, see (Tawil-Souri 2019) and the notion of hollow time in (Burris 2019).

to have, to understand how the upward curve of infection can be flattened, to gain insight as to how to deal most effectively with the consequences of social distancing, and to properly study the immediate measures required to alleviate the consequence for those who have lost their work, it is urgent for scientists in all fields to collaborate with one another. As Mounir Saidani put it, [we need not only medical labs but also sociological ones](#). The ILO estimates that as many as [25 million people could become unemployed](#), with the loss of workers' income reaching as much as \$3.4 trillion USD. Second, we need to understand the conspiracy theories and fake news around COVID-19, and to seek ways of mitigating the increasing discrimination against foreigners and refugees, including rising stereotypes against Chinese, and to those being accused for "bringing the virus".

The important: taking the sociology to task

One year ago, I wrote a piece that offered recommendations regarding possible new directions for Global Sociology (Hanafi 2019), which included a call for supplementing the current postcolonial approach with an anti-authoritarian one, and a call for taking into account the new features of our post-secular society. While these concerns remain valid here, 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.

1. Multi-level focuses: from community to humanity

First, the situation in light of the coronavirus showed very clear how truly interconnected the world is, transforming the image of a global village from a metaphor to a reality. But we still need to generate more global solidarity and more humanistic globalization. To do so successfully, it requires a multi-scale conceptualization. Gilles Deleuze argued that the Left (and with it, most social scientists, with the exception of orthodox economists!) perceives the world in terms of relationships that begin from the most distant, and move inward³. 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

³ <https://thefunambulist.net/philosophy/deleuze-what-is-it-to-be-from-the-left>. For more analysis of the Left, see (Hanafi 2020)

relationships. For instance, Trump supporters do believe in his capacity to address the social inequalities faced by forgotten communities of rural white Americans⁴. 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 (1999), 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 the 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 nation-state and the humanity as a whole. Eric Macé conceived of this multi-scale focus in his recent, excellent book (2020) where he moves solidarity away from the single level – the society à la Durkheim. Instead, he draws attention to the levels of social relationships and to the social actors within

these relationships who are involved in establishing networks and classifying how they organize, including the solidarity that exists at different levels, all of which is dictated by the (ephemeral or stable) logic of these actors and their specific social groups. This “augmented sociology” seeks to get rid of the paradigm of domination⁵ and replace it with that of power (being robust and/or vulnerable). I believe it is important for Macé, and for social scientists, to apply this methodology to challenge the notion of society in the global north nation-states. Yet, for the global south, the meaningful solidarity requires the inclusion of society level such as national movements struggling to establish democratic societies and state-building as well.

2. Struggle against Anthropocene / Capitalocene

COVID-19 is a disease not only of globalization but also of anthropocene. The creed of human consumerism is depleting resources that our earth cannot renew, and this virus is but one (albeit significant) episode of this consumerism. As we know, this virus was transmitted from non-domesticated animals (like civets, pangolin, and bats) to human beings through the consumption of these animals by those in China. Are they really so tasty? Bourdieu would consider this as a sign of distinction, pointing to the significant amount of

⁴ I refer to the excellent analysis of Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016).

⁵ Domination can come from the notion of society as a necessary and functional dominant structure, from ideology of dominants (ruling classes for

Marxism), from modernity as a domination (Max Weber, but also to some extent Michel Foucault), or, finally, from the subalterns who believe that their resistant can be simply marginal (creating simply some spaces of autonomy). (Macé 2020)

unnecessary and luxurious objects that we, the middle and lower-middle class, consume. There is a known joke in Lebanon about the middle-class person, who “buys a gift they do not like, with money they do not have, to give it to another who hates it”. Unfortunately, this joke reflects much truth about how many people in this class behave, globally. For many Lebanese, a vacation becomes synonymous with traveling abroad.

This voracious consumerism is induced by what the French sociologist Rigas Arvanitis called the mythological access to happiness, which ultimately serves as an effective accelerator for more health troubles, epidemics, deaths, and disasters. Examining these multi-scale relationships cannot be done without reconnecting the individual, society, and nature. For instance, addressing climate change and the political economic system cannot be done without raising public awareness to the relationship of people to the earth and to humanity. The American sociologist and environmental historian, Jason Moore, proposes the notion of the capitalocene as a kind of critical provocation to the sensibility of the anthropocene. For him, capitalism is organizing nature as a whole: it is world-ecology that joins the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in successive historical configurations. (Moore 2016).

This multi-scale approach requires reconnecting the economic to the social, and connecting these to the political, and to the cultural. Neoliberal and speculative capitalism is not just about economics, it is also a system of power, and a system of culture, and these interrelations mean that even democratic systems are not always successful in preventing collusion between political and economic elites, or the domination of wealthy lobbies (Pleyers 2020).⁶

We need to revive Karl Polanyi’s concept of social embeddedness. Polanyi introduced three forms of integrating society to economy: exchange, redistribution, and reciprocity. Our social sciences thus should rethink these three terms seriously, as the market (a place of exchange) needs to be moralized, which includes establishing firm societal control against all forms of speculation. Redistribution cannot be done without taking significant measures to prevent the concentration of wealth in a minority of companies in each sector, without establishing heavy taxation on high levels of capital and wealth (Piketty 2014), and without moving to a slow-growth economy and its corollaries (including the need for cheap and low-carbon public transportation, *seeing public services as investments rather than liabilities, and for increasing the security of labor markets*). I

⁶ For more criticism of the current liberal democracy, see Micheal Burawoy’s (2005) analysis on how it has propelled third-wave marketization with its attendant precarity, exclusion, and inequality. Also see the Lebanese philosopher

Nassif Nassar (2017) who argues that democracy cannot be discussed outside the issue of the type of development we want.

will leave the question of reciprocity to the next section.

We are 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. There is an acute crisis of rapid growth that was expressed very clearly by the former President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, when he said: [“\[t\]here are no such things as limits to growth, because there are no limits to the human capacity for intelligence, imagination and wonder.”](#) For the American economist James Galbraith and the German sociologist Klaus Dörre (2019) this growth was based on the assumption regarding the long-term stability of the fixed costs of raw materials and energy, and, when this was no longer the case, financial speculation intensified, profits shrunk, and it generated distributional conflicts between workers, management, owners, and tax authorities. In addition, the cost of climate change is high, as the massive reductions in carbon emissions will make many consuming-based business activities unprofitable. Taking all of this into consideration, the authors suggest “a consciously slow-growing new economy that incorporates the biophysical foundations of economics into its functioning mechanisms”. I will add that we also need to think about the serious social effects of digitalized forms of labor and the trend of replacing labor by automaton. Even if the digital labor partially

reduces the unemployment rate, the lack of social protection for digital laborers would have tremendous effect in the future generation.

3. Politics of recognition and moral obligation

Now I will come to the question of reciprocity in Polanyi’s social embeddedness. Polanyi defined it as the mutual exchange of goods or services as part of long-term relationships, where reciprocity and moral obligation and concerns are added to contractual relations. I would qualify this reciprocity in two ways. The first reciprocity requires politics of recognition (Honneth 1996) between groups and/or networks who accept the identity of the others, which work in line with the paradigm of pluralism and multiculturalism. Functioning reciprocity is dependent on the strength or weakness of the moral obligations in social relations. Strong social relations may be seen in solidarity networks posited by Mark Granovetter (1985), who argues that sometimes strong network relationships are gift-based relationships. Related to, and expanding on this is the view of Alain Caillé (2008) who pushes an anti-utilitarian hypothesis, where the desire of human beings to be valued as givers, means that our relationships are not solely based on interest alone, but in pleasure, moral duty, and spontaneity. Here, the gift only takes on its full sense when understood as a means, performer, and symbol of public and/or private recognition. (Lazzeri and Caillé 2015) The second way of qualifying the reciprocity is with the fact that the

sense of moral obligation can also be weak. In an interview with *Le Monde* in May 2019, the French philosopher Bruno Latour explained that, while people may not necessarily be ignoring climate change, they do not feel as though they belong to the land in which they live, and, in turn, may move quickly to other places as an individual exit strategy.

Post-Corona sociology will only have meaning if it is armed with a utopia, or “real utopias” as Erik Olin Wright (2010) 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 even 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’. 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 (2008), Frédéric Vandenberghe (2018), 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”).

Conclusion

Taking sociology to task has always been an integral reflection of the International Sociological Association, and the terms I proposed are not far from the reflections of Geoffrey Players, the current VP of Research and President of ISA Forum of Sociology "Challenges of the 21st Century: Democracy, Environment, Inequalities, Intersectionality"⁷, from the reflections of Filomin Gutierrez in the upcoming 5th ISA Council of National Associations Conference, Social Transformations and Sociology: Disposessions and Empowerment and of course the congress XX ISA World Congress of Sociology⁸, or finally, from the upcoming 2022 XX ISA World Congress of Sociology, Resurgent Authoritarianism: The Sociology of New Entanglements of Religions, Politics, and Economies.

⁷ 23-27 Feb. 2021 in Porte Alegre.

⁸ May 10-13, 2021 in Slovenia.

This global crisis may have prompted fresh strategies to reinforce exploitation, dispossession, and our neoliberal capitalism, and increased the reach of our greed and selfishness, but it has also given us an opportunity to explore and provide new ways of understanding and reclaiming our social justice and humanity. I have attempted here to sketch some thoughts for post-Corona politics of hope, that may signal to the possibilities for transcending our neoliberal and speculative capitalism, for reconnecting individuals, societies, and nature, and for embedding the economy in on social relationships, cultural values, and moral concerns.

Let me finish it with a positive note that here in Lebanon, my colleagues at the American University of Beirut have measured a reduction of air pollution by 36%, and even the reduction of the noise pollution has invited our birds to sing along the board of my home window, all that with the intimacy of self-reflection. During this confinement I re-watched the film “Love in The Time of Cholera”, reflecting on the beauty of creating love for the sake of it. Maybe one day another Gabriel García Márquez would write “Love in the Time of Corona”.

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