

The Post-Corona Society? Pandemic, crisis and its consequences

Joint Congress of the German Sociological Association (DGS) and the Austrian Sociological Association (ÖGS)

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"All wheels stand still when your strong arm wills it!" This was the encouragement to the working class as a revolutionary subject in the 19th and 20th centuries to bring about radical social change. In the 21st century, it is an unknown virus that triggers a global pandemic, and as if by irresistible command, all wheels stand still. "Shutdown" becomes a profoundly new experience for all contemporary societies. It seems to be the chance for a "Great Transformation", which is being called for everywhere from various sides. Climate change, environmental degradation, resource depletion – everything associated with modern extraction techniques is suddenly up for grabs. Globalisation as a driver of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism is also suddenly called into question, although it has undoubtedly contributed to the reduction of global social inequality in the past, despite all the bitter costs, and catapulted 300 million people into the middle class, especially in China.

Post-Corona Society – the title of this sociology congress might suggest that Corona is a problem of the past and that we have long since entered a phase of normalisation. This is clearly not the case. Corona continues to challenge society, still and on many levels – even if the great moment of shock when the world held its breath seems to be over for now. Sociology is discussing at virtual meetings and in video conferences how things can continue and what lessons can be learned from the ongoing crisis. What will post-Corona society look like? How does society emerge from a situation in which the economy, the world of work and public life were uniformly subjected to the imperative of not overburdening the health system? Can this global experience of crisis set the course for a new society that questions the old imperatives of progress, growth, acceleration? Will it even be possible to identify something like an epochal break or does the post-Corona society rather describe a phase in which the coronavirus gradually becomes a completely normal social actor (just like prions or neutrinos)? And what new trends and tendencies can be observed?

One thing is beyond doubt for sociology: every crisis tests the state of society. It tests the stability of order, the functioning of institutions, the resilience of habits and traditions and, of course, society's ability to learn how to deal with the consequences. For sociology, the Corona crisis is therefore an interesting stress test for some of its concepts and theoretical assumptions: From the perspective of the sociology of work, experiences with the home office may enrich the debate on the dissolution of work boundaries. From the perspective of family sociology, the question arises to what extent the (unequal) distribution of care burdens means a relapse into gender roles that are believed to be outdated. The sociology of technology will ask whether digitalisation and artificial intelligence are now being implemented even more rapidly and more comprehensively than before and what consequences formats of digital communication have in all areas of life. Political sociology will be interested in whether extreme crises such as the Corona crisis promote a certain type of political rule and which type of political government acts better and more effectively than others with its style of governance. From the perspective of the sociology of conflict, it may be of particular interest to know how to classify the peculiarly broad protest movement that developed in the context of the demonstrations against the restrictive political measures and is referred to in the feuilleton as "Pandemic Pegida". From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the boom in conspiracy theories and "fake news" is irritating – in a crisis that underscored the importance of scientific expertise, of all things. Environmental sociology worries about whether the exit from the crisis is an unrelated return to the "normality" of global turbo-capitalism in order to make up for the material losses as quickly as possible, but precisely at the price that the ecological decay of our world will still be fulfilled in the 21st century. And of course the economy: Does the hope for the post-Corona boom strengthen the legitimacy basis of social market economies or does the aforementioned opportunity for a Great Transformation arise?

Last but not least, the Corona crisis also challenges social theory: What are the consequences for a functionally differentiated society when this extremely dynamic and heterogeneous order is programmed by political default to a central guiding value, namely the protection of life? How did the different societies of this world react to the pandemic? What learning processes could be observed? What course was set and why? What repercussions will the pandemic experience have for the way we live? What about the future of mobility in the air, rail and car sectors? Does modernity, with its logic of constantly outdoing itself, need "fate", for example in the form of a virus, to be able to be diverted from the irresistible path of permanent self-exceeding before the horizon of self-extinction? Does the virus play "God" and can bring us new commandments that allow us to embark on a sustainable path of transformation?

The Sociology Congress in Vienna will revolve around this set of questions. How is it possible that an aggressive, flu-like virus can achieve what this world has so far been unable to do? Pausing, reflecting and questioning basic routines? The congress in Vienna wants to take up and deepen this productive impulse of the coronavirus. In a series of plenary events, ad hoc groups and section events, the rational sociological content of the socially diagnostic thesis of a post-corona society will be put up for discussion.