

Sociology in the Time of Coronavirus

Part I

Introduction

Due to the coronavirus pandemic our social world has changed in ways we could not have easily imagined at the end of 2019. From the moment the virus was first discovered in the Chinese city of Wuhan natural scientists have analysed the new disease, trying to understand the ways in which it attacks the body, how it transmits between people, the development of patterns of infection, and how societies might respond to these.

*But what is the role of social science in understanding the new world of the virus? How can Sociology help us to understand society in the time of the Coronavirus?*

While much of what we know about the patterns of transmission of the virus comes from the field of epidemiology, which involves studying the distribution of disease in populations using methodologies drawn from the social sciences, the sub-field of social epidemiology enables us to understand the ways in which patterns of infection relate to social categories, such as age, gender, race, and class, and the social inequalities linked to these categories. For example, we know that in the UK the virus impacts upon ethnic minority populations more than white British people. The question is whether this is because of genetic differences or social inequalities, relating to differences in employment, housing, and so on?

If we want to study the relationship between the virus and genetic difference we would need to use the methods of the natural sciences. However, the study of the way in which social categories impact upon the virus is very much the subject matter of the social sciences. This is the case whether we are interested in establishing statistical patterns, say between people working in a particular occupation and rates of infection, or understanding the day to day experience of people living under lockdown and coping with social distancing.

Although medical sociology is a specialist sub-field within sociology and the social sciences, we can also understand important aspects of the world of the virus using classical sociological thinking. Indeed, sociology is perfectly suited to understanding the world of the virus because *sociology is the study of social relations, the social world, and what happens when social life no longer functions, starts to break down, or is defined by conflict*. Let me illustrate this point through reference to some classical sociologists who every undergraduate learns about over the course of their degree.

### The Causes of the Coronavirus - Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Negative Globalisation

In the early 2000s the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman told us that we are living in liquid modern societies defined by change, movement, and communication. In the past society was highly structured, immobile, and stable. We call this form of society 'traditional society'. Developing this idea Bauman writes about societies based upon the principle of solidity and explains that everything began to change in the period we call 'modernity' when rapid transformation became normal. One of the founders of sociology, Karl Marx, wrote about an earlier phase of modernity (running through the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and specifically modern industrial capitalism, and said that we can understand this new situation in terms of the 'melting' of solid social structures. In his famous *The Communist Manifesto* he wrote that modernity is a historical period where 'all that is solid melts into air'.

Extending this idea to explain the impact of more recent 20<sup>th</sup> century processes of globalisation and particularly electronic globalisation (for example, the internet), Bauman says that we are now living in a form of society that is even more fluid. We are now living in 'liquid modernity'. But what are the consequences of this shift in social organisation? According to Bauman, liquid modernity has meant that people living in rich western countries have much more freedom to travel, communicate, and explore the world. But there is another, negative side to the emergence of the liquid society and Bauman is alive to the problems caused by high levels of social connection in the new fluid social system. He understands that the dark side of high levels of global communication is the threat, or, what the sociologist Ulrich Beck writes about through the idea of 'risk', of 'contagion' and infection. According to both Bauman and Beck the other, negative side of communication is, therefore, the possibility of contagion and the spreading of negative conditions (what Beck calls 'bads') around the world.

Moreover, Bauman and Beck similarly explain that it is extremely difficult to have one (freedom, global communication) without the other (negative interactions, contagion). The new global liquid society is, thus, defined by freedom of movement and fear of exposure and contagion.

Thus we start to see that while a global society enables high levels of communication, so that we can travel and speak to people in distant parts of the world, it also opens up the possibility of contagion and the transmission of infection. This is precisely what happened in the case of the coronavirus. China, the workshop of the world, became the epicentre of the pandemic, and high levels of communication (travel) enabled the transmission of the virus to every country and community in the world. This is a classic example of the contagious nature of what Beck calls 'bads' in his work on the global risk society.

We have seen many examples of this negative form of globalisation in recent years:

- Global terrorism (from 9/11 onwards), which relies on the ability of terrorists to spread their ideas to 'vulnerable' populations in other parts of the world;
- Financial crashes (the crash of 2008), caused by high levels of interconnection between economies across the world;

- Pandemics (SARS and now the Coronavirus), brought about by ever increasing levels of global travel and interconnection.

Contagion and the Origins of Modern Society in Quarantine - Michel Foucault, 'the Great Confinement', and Modern Norms in the time of the Plague

While sociologists such as Bauman and Beck explain the dangers of globalisation, and in many ways predicted the social nightmare of the coronavirus, the sociologist Michel Foucault explains that much of our 'modern world' emerged from steps taken to manage infection and contagion in a pre-modern age. In other words, we are already living in a world shaped by earlier responses to disease and infection.

In his book on the history of madness Foucault starts by explaining a state of lockdown in premodern society. He writes about the time of the plague and what he calls 'the great confinement' when villages and cities were cut off from each other and early scientists tried to understand processes of infection and transmission. Foucault tells us that this led to the emergence of processes of labelling and the division of people who were thought to be healthy from those considered unhealthy. For Foucault this original form of social distancing supported the emergence of the medical and psychological sciences (that are all about identifying and treating disease) and attempts to separate normal healthy people from abnormal unhealthy people. Moreover, Foucault tells us these efforts to separate the normal from the abnormal eventually extended into the kinds of social norms that we can still see operating today about what we can and cannot do and where we can and cannot go. In respect Foucault connects the response to disease to the emergence of social control.

In Foucault's view the social norms governing behaviour started to emerge through what he calls 'discourse', which in the current crisis would include the popular media that communicates ideas that enable us to understand our world and what is and is not considered acceptable. Let's consider an example:

An example of the way that discourse communicates and shapes our understanding of social norms in the time of the coronavirus would be the British tabloid's idea of 'the covidiot' who breaks the rules of lockdown set up to ensure social safety and prevent the spread of infection.

For Foucault, this is exactly how ideas of deviance form, spread, and become cemented in our thinking about what is normal and abnormal behaviour.

But beyond the current case reference to this contemporary example enables us understand Foucault's wider point, which is that modern society, and our understandings of normality and abnormality, first emerged from a state of lockdown and thinking about what was and was not 'safe' behaviour. Moreover, what this shows us is that a situation like the current coronavirus crisis is not simply destructive, but that it also produces new social forms and new ways of living. In Foucault's view, crises create social norms. They are productive in the sense that they invent and reinvent society.

Unfortunately, Foucault's history of the kind of society that emerged from attempts to manage the plague in the pre-modern period is not particularly positive. In fact, in his history of madness he traces more or less all forms of modern social control back to this moment of lockdown and quarantine. Although we have seen that people are similarly concerned about the emergence of new forms of social control in the case the coronavirus pandemic (so, for example, the possibility of the extension of surveillance through new 'track and trace' apps), it is not inevitable that we will repeat Foucault's story and there may well be positive transformations that emerge from the coronavirus crisis. For example, we might think about possible changes to the way the capitalist economy functions, and see the potential for a more humane workplace emerge from the miserable condition of social distancing. In order to explain this possibility we might refer back to the work of one of the founders of sociology, Karl Marx.

## What kind of Society will the Coronavirus Produce? Karl Marx and the Political Economy of the Virus

Although Foucault can help us to understand the interaction between infection, identity, and changing definitions of normality, abnormality, and deviance, Marx can enable us to understand the potential socio-economic transformations emerging from the time of the coronavirus.

We know that the coronavirus has not only caused a health emergency. It has also plunged the world into a very serious economic crisis that has thrown millions of people into unemployment and poverty leaving them with very little sense of how they will make money to provide for themselves and their families. How can Marx help us to understand this social, political, and economic situation?

In light of the fact that Marx tells us that capitalism is the social and economic form of the individualised worker who works to earn a wage in order to live, the economic transformations we have seen in recent months would have been unthinkable before the discovery of coronavirus. In effect, Britain, the home of industrial capitalism, has become a kind of Marxist communist society under conditions of the coronavirus, because the state is currently paying the wages of a great number of people who are no longer able to work (the furlough scheme). Although this turn to communist principles is, no doubt, a short term measure in order to enable the economy to survive the pandemic, reading Marx enables us to understand that the social and economic conditions of Britain (to take the case of our own country) are unlikely to return to a pre-coronavirus state for years to come and in fact may never return to what they were, but might instead lead to the emergence of a new kind of economy.

But why would this happen and what would this new social and economic system look like?

In recent history our economic system has been organised on the basis of a set of ideas (or what Marx would call an ideology) called neoliberalism. The basic idea of neoliberalism is that the economic freedom of the individual is important to ensure the economy functions efficiently and that this means a minimal contribution from the state. In other words, the state should not interfere with people's economic lives. Society must take a back seat and allow individuals to go about their business.

Of course, the British economy was based upon a very different set of principles in the immediate aftermath of World War II (the most recent crisis comparable to the case of the coronavirus) because it was understood that people needed social support and intervention in order to recover from the devastation brought about by six years of war. At this point the economic orthodoxy was based upon principles of state intervention set out by the British economist John Maynard Keynes. However, the neoliberal idea, and the emergence of a vision of a highly individualised kind of economy, came about because of the fear of another group of economists led by the Austrian writer Friedrich Hayek. Hayek and his colleagues from what was called the Austrian School of economics were terrified of the dominance of state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the idea that the infection of socialism might spread to the west and lead to the destruction of liberal freedoms. In short, Hayek and the Austrian School believed that too much state intervention in people's lives might lead to the transformation of people into socialist robots unable to exercise their freedom or behave like individuals.

As a result of the influence of Hayek's idea, from the 1970s onwards Western societies and economies tended to turn away from idea of state support and public intervention and swing back towards the other extreme where the state had very little involvement in the economy and capitalists are encouraged to operate without interference. This meant a rolling back of the socialism of the immediate post-World War II period that led to the formation of massive institutions like the NHS in favour of a return to an older model of capitalism based upon reducing costs and maximising profits wherever possible without worrying too much public services. The individual was now king and big state run institutions were considered problematic because they reduced the possibility of competition and the freedom of individuals to start businesses and make money. The problem with the socialist model was, therefore, the idea of the monopoly of the state and the way this limits individual freedom. Against the socialist model the neoliberal idea was that in an individualised society we should not need or expect the state to interfere in our lives. The individual should be free and able to look after themselves.

We have lived with this socio-economic model since the late 1970s, but there is clearly a problem with this vision of how to organise a society and economy in the world of the virus. The idea of the highly individualised society and economy is no longer realistic in the new world of coronavirus, simply because the individual must follow strict rules about what is and is not possible in order to protect everybody else. The individual is no longer their own master in this world. Instead, the individual is restricted in the name of what we might call the social good.

The related impact of this need to limit the individual in the name of society is that capitalism itself has been forced to change. Given the limits placed upon the individual, it is no longer possible for capitalism to operate on the basis of reducing costs in order to maximise gains when people must be socially distanced simply because they can no longer be herded together and treated as a kind of mass. The irony of the control of the individual (what we can do, where we can go, how close we can come to each other) in the name of managing the virus is, therefore, that the capitalist business model that relies on handling increasingly large groups of people becomes unsustainable and businesses are forced to separate groups out into individuals. In other words, we must be treated separately and divided up in order to ensure that we do not spread or catch the disease.

The new social and economic conditions of the world of coronavirus must be distanced and as a result everything becomes far more expensive for capitalism which is an economic system based upon making profits. While this is a problem for capitalists making very large profits, which will be reduced by the need to take into account new safety measures, in instances where businesses have low profit margins the need to account for coronavirus could mean bankruptcy. In this situation the alternative is either state support, which leads back towards the idea of socialism, or finding ways to reduce the costs of safety, which would open up a new Marxist class politics based upon the struggle between workers and bosses over what is and is not safe. The struggle here is, importantly, between a more humane or less safe workplace.

Although this shows how class could be key to understanding politics and the potential for major socio-economic change in the age of coronavirus, we can also see how this would also relate to issues of race, gender, and age because people in different ethnic groups, women, and age cohorts might be more likely to occupy different class positions and work in different sectors of the economy that are impacted differently by the virus. We will explore issues around race, gender, and age in more detail in next week's post concerned with sociology and social issues in the time of coronavirus.