

Research Article

The Virus and Sociology: A History of an Organic Relationship

Zouhir EL BHIRI* and Brahim LABARI*

Sociologists, Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco

*Corresponding author: Zouhir EL BHIRI, Brahim LABARI, Sociologists, Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to study the hypothesis according to which the outbreak of viruses has triggered in-depth responses and research in the field of sociology. Such unprecedented interest aims at enabling the discipline to elaborate both its epistemological and methodological perspectives and therefore assert its DNA within the sphere of the so-called "hard sciences", and more particularly that of biology. The outbreak of the Corona virus pandemics has undoubtedly disrupted people's attitudes towards life, illness and death. In this context, sociology has to reconsider its views and stances towards the virus in order to provide an insightful understanding of such new crisis-related attitudes.

Keywords: *Sociology, Virus, Organicism, Positivism, Pandemic crisis*

Introduction

As a starting point, let us raise question of how sociology enables us to understand the meaning of a virus. In other words, how does sociology as an autonomous discipline contribute to thinking through and understanding virus?

Studying and dealing with Viruses is widely and traditionally believed to belong to the field of epidemiology. Any sociological attempt to embark in such a task will be a challenging and risky adventure. However, the health crisis, which is widely known as the macabre COVID-19 that has affected countries worldwide, has proved to raise great interest and appeal among scholars in sociology. A wide range of questions has been advanced and brought under study by sociologists in order to deal with issues related to prevention measures that can help combat or limit this fast spreading virus:

- How to urge people to respect both social and physical distancing.
- The various steps to take in order to reduce people's interactions to their minimum and strict level.
- Lockdown measures as a way to restrict communities' mobility.
- Obliging people to wear masks in public areas.

Within this health crisis context, due attention is also given to how people conceive of health, sickness and the idea of death. In fact, such interesting questions have to be handled from a sociological perspective. We have to admit that sociology is supposed to advance its findings about social mechanics during normal everyday life as well as during crises or urgent situations. Switching between such opposing contexts is so gratifying for the sociologist since it enables

them to observe facts within a temporality they will be able to master. Urgent situations usually compel these scholars to make compromises and work under stressing circumstances since when one "knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." [1]

Urban Areas: A Hotspot for Viruses

Relationships, bonds and ties are thought of as organic as long as they present a certain degree of intricate complexity. The epistemological complexity stems not only from the city population density and its deeply rooted individualism but also from the complexity of its labor division. That is why these areas are the first to fall under the spell of globalization phenomena for the best and for the worst. When it comes to harmful and fast spreading viruses, cities are the first to be affected since they do not enjoy enough and adequate facilities and efficient rules and regulations. Nobody lays the blame on cities lacking adequate equipments to face such unpredictable outbreaks. Nobody attributes the cause of such effects to an uncontrolled globalization. Environment scientists point out, among other factors, the dominance of air transportation because of their speed. Thus, they overshadow or even eclipse the other modes of locomotion since they consider them time-consuming. Yet, one can't deny the major role they contribute in slowing down the spread of air imported viruses such as COVID 19.

In the context of globalization, the spread of COVID 19 is accelerated because of the frequent recourse to air transportation as one of the favorite means of bringing people close to each other. Cities are also home for clustered economic activities as well as industrial districts that foster proxemics leading to an active and continuous spreading of the virus. The Italian case best illustrate such an uncontrolled propagation of the virus when the pandemic first broke out. Highly industrial and commercial areas, slaughterhouses, textile

and garment factories and mass food services are the areas that are most exposed to the heaviest rates of contamination.

The unlimited greed of capitalism for a global city and for a huge available reserve army has pushed the city to assume roles it is well prepared to. It has to host an unqualified labor force usually living in ghettos and slums lacking proper sanitation and where viruses proliferate fast. Globalized capitalism has made of profit its main creed. Therefore, global cities' ecosystems have undergone its destructive effects even if they stand as ramparts against viruses against which our immune system is not well equipped.

Rediscovering the benefits of the boundaries within a sovereign State Nation, protecting cities within the same national territory and restricting the flow of people and goods are among the major measures that most states took in order to control the spread of the virus. The implementation of such measures is a way to recognize the assets of sovereignty that both the global consensus and the different walks of liberals have denied so far. In other words, and to express it in sociological terminology related to the process of globalization, this context of health crisis has shown that the methodological nationalism has gained more ground over methodological cosmopolitanism. Yet, if we base our assessment on the increasing number of contaminated people and the resulting panic, it will be evident to presume that governments are unable to control and contain the disease and therefore protect their citizens.

The Ambivalence of the State Response to the Global Health Crisis

When confronting uncertain and urgent situations, decision makers, standing for the dominant legitimate violence holder, usually rely on a security based approach to handle and deal with such crises: (community lockdown, compulsory masks and obligatory negative COVID 19 tests for travelers). Thus, if governments proceeded with their borders control, what was the cost to pay and what were the procedures to implement above all if the main lever is held by family owned business powers? Without focusing on cosmopolitanism, this question is really worth exploring unless there is lack of data. The economic crisis following the health crisis is the worst that humanity went through. It is more likely that it has led to radical change and even to a departure from previous modes and paradigms.

Mass media have largely covered the pandemic and its subsequent effects. Yet, globalized capitalism is certainly endowed with enough resources leading to model of society. This new social configuration will be so challenging to the sociologist's gaze. The hypothesis that a wave globalism is taking shape in a world largely controlled by the world of Finance/ Financial oligarchy disdaining peoples and having conflicting attitudes towards the Nation State. Permeated with a political and ideological note, the globalist doctrine strives to impose a new terminology and make it widely understood and accepted within academic spheres. That is to say, global governance aspires to place the notion of sovereignty at the heart of a hardline neoliberal framework expressed through symbols that ends up in a kind of a global city. Hence, the apostles of globalism clearly denigrate the principle of People's Sovereignty, which is based on sovereignty by and for peoples.

The Health Crisis as a Total Social Fact

In overpopulated urban areas, domestic space has also been the focus of scholars, especially during the high pic periods of community lockdown. Large families living together in overcrowded shanties have certainly gone through hard times because of that deterioration in social relationships. The repercussions of such a hard and difficult situation can be summed up as follows:

An increase in the rate of urban domestic violence, children in distress, an increasing and chaotic feeling of apprehension about the future. In terms of skills and knowledge transmission, illiterate families have suffered the stress and the exhausting effects of distance learning.

Nevertheless, being locked down in a luxurious villa having different facilities such as a swimming pool and located in a gentrified neighborhood looks like spending an enjoyable holiday. This health crisis has clearly revealed the stark inequalities prevailing among the different walks of life in urban areas. Other level of segregation lies in the economic domain. As far as the private sector is concerned, employees were forced to non-paid holidays or even sacked. Both sexes were compelled to telecommuting. So professional life commitment tend to influence and overshadow intimate family life. For underground economy, substantial segments and groups, relying on resourcefulness have been considerably impoverished. The stakeholders involved were obsessed with this pandemic lest they should catch the virus and then contaminate their family members.

One of the other issues is related to paradigmatic considerations. That is, trying to establish an articulated link between the city, the health crisis and the process of globalization. The aim is to provide an insightful understanding of how fragile our common universe is. It is also a way to explain that our global society model is doomed to exhaustion because it is mainly based on the sacrosanct excessive human rights model. Instead, it should stand on a more pragmatic ground rather than relying on more ideological positions respecting Nature and maintaining an environmental balance. Commodification of wild animals living in jungles better illustrates human idiocy and their flagrant transgression of the natural order. It is admitted that bats are infected with viruses that belong to the family of RIBOVIRUSES known as "corona". Their shape is similar to that of a crown. According to official reports and records, this virus appeared in China on December 8th, 2019. It is argued that this pandemic is so familiar among the family of bats, which plays a major role in its transmission. This scientific fact was proved by Shi ZHENGLI, a reputed Chinese scholar in virology at the Institute of virology in Wuhan (the starting point of the virus). He declared, "There are different bats and wild animal species. The unknown viruses that we have discovered stand only for the visible part of the iceberg. To protect human beings from the upcoming epidemic of infectious diseases, we should progress in research and have a deep insight into the nature of these unknown viruses that wild animals spread in nature. Therefore, we will be able to warn people in advance and incite them to take prevention measures. If we don't study them thoroughly, we will be running the risk of suffering from further epidemics" [2]. The way people conceive of such creatures (a kind of hybrid ones with multiple virtues) living closely to them is a harbinger of a social and health cataclysm. Therefore,

sociology will have to conduct more research with more findings on human animal nature and animal humanity. The perspective according to which such a task should be achieved should take into consideration the logic of the market as well as the healthcare chaos that can lead to a kind of incestuous relations between humans and animals. To sum up, commodification of animals, environmental balance disturbance and consumerism have considerably paved the way for the virus to cross the borders.

The Virus, Possible Lessons for Sociology

Our social world universe is so intricate and complex, especially when it suffers from a pandemic. Any attempt to approach it solely from the perspective based on human encroaching on animal territory will be oversimplifying and even incomplete. Instead, the CORONA virus should be dealt with according to a sociological perspective that can reflect and reveal human weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Our planet is continuously threatened by the irresponsible egoistic short-term actions of its inhabitants. Because of its omnipotence, The Corona virus, a kind of influenza that has not revealed all its secrets yet, can reach our unconsciousness and dominate our daily talks and interactions. It can also make us more worried about an uncertain future. In short, this unexpected intruder has broken out in the daily life of communities all over the world. It has acquired a global dimension through compulsory lockdowns and quarantines and the surprisingly high number of deaths it has caused.

Few observers and researchers were able to fully understand the initial scenario of the pandemic outbreak as we can infer from the parts included in a diagnosing prospective report. At the core of it lies the complexity that characterizes the practice of our "living together". A situation that is so difficult to grasp as is the case for most of the conclusions delivered by the regularly established report of "the World in thirty years 'time". Such reports are one of the American central Intelligence Agency favorite activities. Empirically speaking, the virus is undoubtedly devastating since it causes both physical and psychological sufferings. It also provides regular signals about the unhealthy state of our societies via alerts that reflect the sense of life and History. The context of the pandemic as a morbid event has intensely contributed to our body and soul lockdown.

Quarantine, Lockdown or containment: macabre terms that have popped up out of the dictionary and that show how both our body and spirit have been got hold of. Discipline, manipulation and restricting people mobility by exposing them to containment areas are examples of what Michel Foucault called quarantine corollaries. Yet, the lesson to learn as previous experiences usually have shown is that the threat of a surprisingly unexpected virus is a reminder of an ontological and existential fragility. Broadly speaking, what does the virus mean?

In the next part, we will attempt to provide a sociological interpretation of the virus, considered as an intruder, without having to revisit laboratories and medical bodies or agencies. Taking into account the scope of the present paper, our analysis will be more cursory. As its founding father, Emile DURKHEIM strongly believed that sociology is similar to human body. That is to say, it is considered as a holistic whole based on a kind of solidarity among its members.

Functionalism and "organicism" are theories that view social entities as organic and akin to living bodies. The core idea is that the social order and its interconnected functioning modes derive from the biological model. Before his death, DURKHEIM published his famous book on *The Rules of the Sociological Method* where he largely drew on C. Bernard's findings included in his manual "Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine" [3]. In doing so, the French sociologist wanted to show that experiments are the basis on which this new emerging social science stands. According to this perspective, every pathology is a threat to the stability of a society. To make the difference between the normal and the pathological, DURKHEIM stated, "For societies and individuals, health is good and desirable. Illness is harmful and should be avoided. Inherent to social facts themselves, the choice of objective criteria will enable us to scientifically distinguish between health and disease throughout the different scales of social phenomena. Science can improve practical and field studies without departing from its own method" [4].

Conclusion

The virus is the intruder that nobody wishes to have at home. Yet, we end up by getting used to it. It bursts into an organism willing to set its members apart. Apart from the anatomy of a sick body, the social impacts of the virus are so frightening: a series of continuous social dramas deteriorated social bonds, the crumbling of family foundations, the collapse of the civilization based on that relative human serenity etc. That was DURKHEIM's obsession even if he recognized the regular occurrence of all the ills that affect society. Suicide, a crime that he considers as a normal social fact, will not increase without resulting in a general impotence. The virus, as a sign that every society is subject to irregular functioning, causes anomie. This breakdown in social values and order reveals how difficult it is for institutions to assume their roles in improving the destiny of Humanity. A curious sociological premonition: during the uncertain lockdown periods, solidarity has gained more ground after having been stifled by a hegemonic world economy that promotes egoistic individualism. The virus is that intruder that nobody accepts, but once at home and looming around, everyone ends up getting used to it!

A large number of essays have stressed the fact the colonial experience would not have been possible if the colonized States had been resistant enough. Standing against the colonial virus becomes inert when a society suffers from social ills and divisions. Once compared to [5] forged the concept of "colonisability" to justify and reinforce this assertion. Due to its invisible nature, the virus mutates and attacks in a surprising and unpredictable way. It can take new forms. So, sociologists are expected to bring it under study in order to be able to provide an insightful knowledge and understanding of its propagation. The General Mc ARTHUR once said "It's too late. These are the two words used to sum up lost battles." [6]

What about if sociologists become crises experts?

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