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Is Foucault turning in his grave? Reflections on the pandemic

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*Alex Afouxenidis**

Is Foucault turning in his grave? Reflections on the pandemic

Keywords: *Covid-19, Greece, lockdown, pandemic, sociological theory*

INTRODUCTION

At the moment of writing this the price of petrol fell to -37$/barrel. These are strange times indeed when you're wishing for petrol prices to go up!

I don't feel so – sociologically - imaginative right now. Maybe it's because I was never really *that* imaginative or simply because current times have depleted any imagination I might have had. And by ''current times'' I mean the whole decade – from the economic meltdown of 2009-10, to the refugee crisis of 2015-16 (which is still on), to the current pandemic crisis.

So, I am setting out my ideas in the short presentation that follows from the standpoint of profound confusion (but not *fear*): in general, in my view, the most fundamental question is where are we heading? The point that I'm really trying to make is that this pandemic brought forward the intricacies of complex socio-economic systems coupled by their shortcomings and inadequacies.

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THREE MAIN (SOCIOLOGICAL) AREAS TO CONSIDER

There are three main areas which concern me. Before I proceed I must say that my overall disposition has always been rather bleak.

The first is related to the nature and functionality of the health services and the welfare state. In many so called western countries, welfare systems showed signs of inability to cope with such a crisis. That is the main reason why in some countries (such as Greece, for example) you got extreme lockdown measures. There is, apparently, no other way to prevent a ‘‘meltdown’’ of the health system. I think that just after the economic crisis of the 1970s, most governments used the ‘‘tool’’ of fiscal policy to limit public expenditure on health and welfare. Therefore, this sort of practice has been going for so many years that it has become ‘‘second nature’’ to the way we view welfare. It is not enough just to demand more money into the system, the culture of understanding what welfare is all about has to be changed. The practices of fiscal tightening went hand in hand with the ideologies of free markets and *individual* empowerment with respect to decisions made by people regarding services. The idea of *collective action* to prevent bad health became insignificant and as a consequence governments did not prioritize it anymore.

That conservative agenda was highly disturbing. But it has now been shattered. Governments have asked us to *collectively* respond to this. The question is will the system revert back to its usual old ways once the crisis is over? And what is our role as public intellectuals and academics in challenging the system and shifting the debate? I don’t really know the answer to that to be honest.

A second area of (re)consideration has to do with the nature of the political system and the state. The nationalist agenda has been on the rise for some time and it remains quite strong even during current times. The political systems across the globe have basically tried to protect themselves from collapsing by using two tried and tested techniques: a) provide as little information as possible and try to show that ‘‘we’’ are in control and b) isolate the population, i.e. a generalized lockdown (e.g. see #StayAtHome and its variations across the world). It is a classic case of what we may call the ‘‘disciplinary’’ societal system and we need to look no further than the classic writings of, say, Foucault, Weber and Marx regarding the power of the state (in this case it also concerns the power of the *therapeutic* state). It’s just incredible that whole chunks of theory came back to me as reality more than ever before: the

theory of bureaucracy, the knowledge/power complex, the critique of utilitarianism and classical liberalism, and so forth.

I understand that ideologies have been essentially de-constructed over the past few years and that political institutions and political parties have been structurally altered. And I also understand that these shifts in political cultures have left spaces for new types of (cultural) politics to flourish such as the politics and the movements related to identity. But on the other hand, significant issues regarding gender, race, inequality, poverty, etc. have not been successfully met by these new groups. I am older now and really disappointed with the way progressive politics and ideas seem to have retreated globally. Just recently (13th of April 2020) I read recently that in the USA, Sanders has endorsed Biden's campaign. This was to be expected but for me it was yet another indication of the increasing weakening of a fresh political agenda. And in Greece after the last elections 9 months ago, the country is run by the conservative Right not only on a national level but also at the level of local government. To put it simply, every layer of government is run by conservatives. This means that the people, who during the economic crisis of the early 2010s, drastically reduced expenditure to the public sector and to the health services, are back in power. It remains to be seen whether they are willing and capable of bringing about a new and coherent plan to shift the economy and society out of the upcoming crisis.

A third point which I was thinking about concerns the increasingly changing nature of work globally. So, we've had huge ''structural'', as they call them, adjustments in employment coupled by grand changes in technology over the past thirty years at least. They have had a profound effect on how people understand ''work'' and especially the relationship between new technologies and work. Economies have moved towards part-time and sub-contracted jobs and that has probably meant that the meanings connected to the overall idea of ''work'' have changed. In this crisis, many of us with the necessary means worked from home. Was it productive? What have we learned from this? And on a collective level what does it mean for people and organizations?

LOCKDOWN: 35 DAYS AND COUNTING

As we've been on lockdown for a more than a month the above considerations – which were initial – are fading away. I am not sure if I would've ever put them on paper if not for attempting to just have even a short reminder of current times. I

thought that if nothing else at least I will have a short account of my ideas and feelings during this crisis. As I see it there are quite a few shortcomings regarding academic work. Primarily it is not possible to really concentrate and do some work for a variety of reasons. For example, you have to play the role of school teacher to your children and that takes a significant amount of time and energy. You cannot have a ‘‘normal’’ conversation with other colleagues about stuff. And I noticed that people’s reaction to this has been, quite often, to either retreat completely or somehow refuse that we are living in abnormal times.

Like Thucydides (when he was writing about war), I am caught up in a tangle of contradictions. How is it possible to narrate various events sequentially without missing the essence of what’s been going on? Watching the news has been remarkable though. Especially in Greece where there is no alternative to the government’s narrative. Because Greece has had fewer deaths and a slower rate of increase in confirmed cases, the government is having a go at attempting to build a case that it is in absolute control and that it is very well prepared. One way that the media is capitalizing on is that it continuously compares Greece to countries that have had very high rates of contagion, such as Italy and Spain. There is never any mention of countries that have lower rates, fewer deaths, better overall response, etc. However, as in other countries, the Greek government did not immediately take action. The first known covid-19 case was reported on the 26th of February and the government quarantined the population on the 16th of March when there were at least 228 confirmed cases by that time.

I think that in general, initially governments resisted to the idea that it can happen to ‘‘us’’, in the civilized ‘‘west’’. They were frivolous and showed a sort of sublime arrogance. After about a month (and considering the shocking events in Italy, Spain and the UK), I noticed that the impact of the disease in Europe is spread very unevenly.

If you look at the available numbers, *generally*, there are two main groups of countries. One group is where you got thousands of cases and deaths (Italy were it first appeared, but also Spain, the UK, Germany, France, Belgium and Holland). Another group has had a lower rate of contagion and it concerns countries such as Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, etc. In other words, the Balkans and countries to the east of Europe. I think that economic geography is important here. To a certain extent, these two groups reflect and represent the economic mosaic of Europe

consisting of both the highly networked economies of the north and west and the less networked societies of the south and east.

JUST A REMINDER: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IS STILL GOING ON

I will never forget the past decade. In 2011-12 my salary was reduced by almost 30% overnight and my institution's budget was diminished. If I do not have a funded project I may have to buy printer paper and other such consumables myself. I cannot easily travel and exchange ideas with the international research community and I do not have access to current academic literature. Sometimes if I want to do some research which does not fall under the auspices of large funding, I have to self-finance it. Other times, I have to self-finance going to international conferences because there is no budget allocation on the part of my institution. If I do all these things I get no particular recognition, but I maybe be feeling fine with myself. If I do not do them, I may get criticized for not doing my job and do badly in evaluations. At least I am tenured.

Changes have been cataclysmic and yet I am (still) asked to be super energized in order to satisfy other colleagues, the government, the self-appointed ''positional authorities'' and experts, regarding the need to become ''more productive'' in order to continue to exist. Currently, the only acceptable type of social scientist is one who does everything: research, be it primary or secondary, funded or unfunded (best if one does it all that at the same time), article production, administrative work, going to -usually pointless- meetings, etc.

However, the system is telling us that we are not really relevant. Nobody will ever seriously listen as sociology is continuously discredited. Just a few days ago the Ministry of Education announced its intent to remove "sociology" from the school curriculum and replace it with Latin.

As it happens every time there is a crisis, we get a significant number of ''individual authorities'' and government agencies which play the ''crisis'' card to either advance their own self-interest and careers, or to make far reaching decisions affecting the lives of thousands of people. During the previous economic crisis these people were mainly economists and ''technocrats'', now it is the medical establishment. History is also re-invented. ''Now'' is different than ''before''. And ''now'' is not the time to argue on anything regarding pluralism or fairness, or civil rights and open government. In between the ''moral mission'', the opinionated power

elite, the ‘‘experts’’ and so forth, the - critical - sociologist is at best exploited and at worst totally isolated.

The rest of the so called academics and ‘‘intellectuals’’ do as they have always done: they have power on their side and they set the agenda. They are, however, social conservatives and are everywhere within the academic system. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, there are persistent continuities. There are habits, discourses, long traditions, prejudices, hierarchies, differences and controversies. Contemporary Greek political culture is in *denial* of all that. For the sociologist travelling in between and unpacking these cultural traits it maybe both enabling and engaging. By doing it you enable yourself and possibly (a few) others towards mapping a strategy of resistance. What’s still interesting is the operation of the main, dominant culture. And what’s even more important is how one sets to think outside the box in order to generate cultural reconstitution.

WHAT’S THE ‘‘NEW’’ AGENDA THEN?

New ideas cannot flourish within an ‘‘old’’ environment. To be able to shift the agenda towards alternatives is quite a significant task given the current environment inside and outside conservative ‘‘academia’’ in Greece (and elsewhere I suppose). As I sit here writing this piece I can only consider a few fragments of what could the constituent parts of such a sociological agenda be. It will certainly have to include *fresh theoretical perspectives* which means that sociology requires a whole *new set of assumptions* about the world. And if the current decade is to be taken seriously under consideration, a number of themes have to be re-examined. For example, the issue of politics, power and social control requires urgent attention. Similarly, economic sociology and the global system have to be put back on the main agenda of research and theory.

Subsequently, I would consider the following ten main thematic areas as a basis upon which sociology can be re-invented:

- The role of politicians and of political system(s) in managing crises.
- The widening gaps in social, economic and political inequality.
- The shifting nature of the global fiscal and monetary system.
- A new agenda on individual and collective human rights.
- Issues of safety and security in the increasingly authoritarian democratic state.

- Climate change and the environment catalysts of rapid domestic and global re-constitutions.
- New varieties of socialization and the role of the internet.
- Re-imagining the social in ‘‘urbanism’’. Buildings and streets as empty shells. The ‘‘home’’ as a last refuge.
- Re-thinking methodology and technique in research. Learning from other social sciences.
- Re-framing the role of ‘‘academics’’ and ‘‘scientists’’ in times of crisis.

However, at the moment, I’m just content with the fact that we are all in good health. I have to go back to being a parent, a teacher, a friend, a husband and if there is still time I may also be a social scientist. Thinking will never stop, I hope, and the debate is on. I really wish we can all keep some of these ideas in our heads and minds so that we can talk about them face to face very soon.