Pandemic Challenges to Sociology: A Review[*]

Nail Farkhatdinov
PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Fundamental Sociology, HSE University
Address: Myasnitskaya str., 20, Moscow, Russian Federation 101000
E-mail: nfarkhatdinov@hse.ru

The COVID-19 pandemic has informed the sociological agenda for almost two years now. Since the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, the mainstream sociological focus has shifted towards the ways pandemic mediates conventional research problems such as globalization and inequality, state and civil society, politics and democracy, etc. Many academic publishers are now busy producing an enormous body of sociological literature reflecting on the social and cultural meanings of COVID-19 and its implications to social life.[1] A quick check on the academic search engines reveals that almost every significant publisher is compiling a volume either written by a single sociologist, or composed of sociological essays and papers by different scholars. It seems that COVID-19 has already become a fruitful field of research that will bring books, papers, and research initiatives in the coming years. At the same time, this situation contradicts a common feeling of many academics. Editors of the already-published special issues and volumes argue that, at the beginning of the pandemic, the voices of scientists and scholars from many disciplines except for sociology's were loud enough to be taken into consideration by politicians. The feeling that sociology is missing something essential and therefore stays outside of the public debates seems to be quite common.[2] At the same time the more the govern-

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1. The most recent publication is *Pandemic Exposures: Economy and Society in the Time of Coronavirus*, edited by Didier Fassin and Marion Fourcade, published by HAU Books in December 2021. Russian research and academic fields are no exception. See, for example, *Sociology of the Pandemic: CoronaFOM Project* published by Public Opinion Foundation in 2021; it is a basic introduction tos the topic with significant references to conventional issues of public opinion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. See, for example, a special issue of *Sociologica: International Journal for Social Debate* published in 2020. In the editorial note, Elena Esposito, David Stark, and Flaminio Squazzoni ask "Where are the sociologists?" assuming that sociologists are too quiet in contrast to the voices of the experts from other disciplines. See, also, Paul R Ward's essay (A Sociology of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Commentary and Research Agenda for

ments discuss the strategies of getting out of the pandemic, the more important the role of sociologists becomes.[3]

This rising interest is not specific to the sociological field, yet it may be argued that sociological reflection comes with a delay. In this review, I would like to focus on two examples of sociological reflection on COVID-19, and suggest that now sociology is mostly busy with the documentation of the processes, discourses, and social change caused by the pandemic.

The two academic contributions differ in their structures and ideas. The first one is a single-authored volume that addresses COVID-19 and its social consequences from both the communication studies and media sociology perspective, titled *Communicating COVID-19: Everyday Life, Digital Capitalism, and Conspiracy Theories in Pandemic Times* by Christian Fuchs from the University of Westminster (UK). The second title is *Pandemic, Politics, and Society: Critical Perspectives on the COVID-19 Crisis* composed and edited by Gerard Delanty from the University of Sussex (UK). It contains 15 chapters authored by key social science scholars from the UK, the USA, France, Brazil, Chile, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The international team (including Bryan Turner, Sylvia Walby, Donatella della Porte, and others), as one may suggest, would have brought a more diverse set of perspectives; however, as the topics show in the case of COVID-19, we encounter a sort of global sociological agenda. In what follows, I will draw attention to the commonalities of these two volumes, and outline the key constraints of conventional sociological reflection.

The book by the influential critical media scholar Christian Fuchs is published as a part of the series SocietyNow which aims to provide expert snapshots of significant events and changes in contemporary social life. In this respect, *Communicating COVID-19* is a good example of the introduction to the current pandemic and its consequences. The main question is put in this way; "How have society and the ways we communicate changed in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?" (1). The response to this question is given through the exploration of everyday life and its changes due to the pandemic, of conspiracy theories that inform public perception of the virus, and the digital practices and reception of COVID-19 on the Internet.

The book begins with an outline of the beginning of the pandemic, and narrates the common knowledge available about the virus via the media. This introduction repeats the knowledge which has been widely circulated in the media during the first months of the pandemic. It works as a reminder of the social changes we have been facing, but fails to provide any additional knowledge regarding the social aspects of the pandemic.

Each chapter is supplemented with the outline of key sociological ideas and theories that may be of relevance to the research problem. For academic readers, it may seem even unnecessary (e.g., there is a fairly long exposition of what ideology is and how it relates to conspiracy theories).

Fuchs follows the tradition of critical social theory and science as revealed in the way he explains the emergence of the pandemic. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic as "a natural disaster", he says "it has not been caused but conditioned by global capitalism and agricultural capitalism that has turned land into commodities and capitalist means of production so that a loss of biodiversity and animal habitat has brought wild animals such as bats that transmit diseases to humans into closer contact with humans" (263). He applies this framework to his social imagination near the end of his book, and constructs a utopian future with the communication industry being nationalized.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the book serves only as an introduction to the sociological or communication studies agendas in the pandemic era. As a part of the study of everyday life changes, Fuchs reflects on how the pandemic informed the transformation of space and time and communication strategies, although his findings seem to be obvious for those who have experienced the pandemic restrictions, at least in the countries with governments that have introduced restrictions. For example, Fuchs argues that social distancing does not mean a breach of sociality and communication; instead, communication should now be treated as being mediated by a regulated distance. One more example from the same section on everyday life follows the transformations of the home from a private place to a workspace needing to be reorganized due to the high number of people who should stay at home at the same time and for long periods of time. Some readers may feel tired of the same facts being communicated via mass media, the Internet, and now academic publications, yet I would say that it is still important to document these and other shifting practices. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that the speed of social change can vary; some novelties can take months and years to become a solid practice, while others live for a short moment and then become difficult and even impossible to recollect. Therefore, even the generalized descriptions as given by Fuchs in his volume become a valuable source and foundation for the collective memory and future research.[4]

The most promising parts of the book relate to the empirical study of conspiracy theories. Fuchs begins with the suggestion that COVID-19 has brought fear, and the situation has become fertile ground for a range of fake news about the pandemic, its origin, and vaccines. Populist governments and the far-right, as Fuchs describes, took advantage of the situation to promote conspiracy theories and claim an individual way of dealing with the pandemic. The closing chapter is dedicated to Donald Trump's behavior on social networks. Fuchs explores the tweets and the reaction to them using critical discourse analysis of the topics from Trump's Twitter account (vaccines and autism, the Chinese origin of the virus, etc.) in detail. It should be noted that the analysis was reduced to the

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4. Detailed ethnographic studies would serve this goal better, and at some point, will complement this kind of description.

critical assessment of Trump's statements by providing scientific evidence and then showing their falseness.

The collection *Pandemic, Politics, and Society*, edited by Gerard Delanty, is a different contribution to the field of the sociology of COVID-19. While Christian Fuchs is more concerned with how COVID-19 has become a topic of communication, Delanty focuses on the political implications of the pandemic. His approach does not deal with the pandemic itself and does not study its many aspects. Instead, it looks at the foundational problems of social life via the prism of COVID-19. These problems include social order and control, digitalization, globalization, inequality, knowledge distribution, democracy and political representation, justice, etc. The book is organized in three sections: (1) Politics, Experts and the State, (2) Globalization, History, and the Future, and (3) The Social and Alternatives. In what follows, I will review some of the contributions published in these sections.

In the Introduction, Delanty, himself being a social theory scholar with a clear research focus on the political dimension of social life, calls for the necessity of a historical context for understanding the COVID-19 pandemic. He notes that "the longer perspective of history reveals that we are always between an epidemic or a pandemic." This means that pandemics are not something that intervenes in social order, it is a significant part of it. "They are not a departure from normal life, but increasingly a part of normal life" (7). What makes the current pandemic specific as compared to previous ones is its global dimension. Scholars argue that the pandemic of COVID-19 is a unique event when people experienced similar fears and uncertainty at the same time in various places. Despite its global scale, the pandemic took its practical form depending on what the national measures were. Some countries introduced social distancing, while others additionally closed public places, etc. In this regard, the range of possible options is wide.

The first section is devoted mostly to political issues. Since the current situation is characterized by uncertainty and risk, there is room for the reconfiguration of accepted social, cultural, and political distinctions. In his opening essay, Claus Offe provides a rigid and detailed analysis of how the population is being divided under the conditions of the pandemic (into groups of actually infected, or have tested positively, etc.). This new social division depends on the testing capacity of the political entity, and therefore, according to Offe, defines a specific epistemic regime, that is, a regime of knowing. Consequently, restricting measures depend on the regime in action. Implementing specific measures are intertwined with both the economic and political interests of various agents, and what Offe describes as passions, i.e., fear. Thus, the key controversy of the pandemic policy emerges. On the one hand, the measures introduced are expected to save lives and keep the population safe, and it requires tough decisions on the part of the government. On the other hand, these measures may potentially lead to more crucial damage in the future, and this goes in conflict with the different types of fears, interests, and normative considerations[5] of what the state should do, and how to respond to COVID-19.

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5. The normative dimension of life seems to be the key research issue within the current pandemic, yet it has not been discussed specifically in the volumes under consideration; see the volume edited by Werner

Stephen Turner suggests a slightly different focus on the political dimension of the crisis and, beginning with Giorgio Agamben's arguments, draws attention to the inter-relation of the three key agents of the state, the experts, and the public. The experts are those who can justify the implementation of restricting measures since they possess the legitimate status and authority. In his chapter, Turner addresses the role of each part in the crises, and tracks the transformation of the relations using the evidence from the USA. Through the analysis of the experts' failures, he shows both the conflicts between the state and the expert communities and the loss of trust because of the peculiarities of the current situation. What is left is a pure political action required by the emergency. A similar argument on the relation of science and politics is outlined by Jan Zielonka who argues that, during the pandemic, the conflicting interests of these fields have become apparent, and have challenged democratic principles in general.

Few chapters follow the argument that the COVID-19 crisis has made the tendencies that were already present in European and America politics visible. Thus, the transnational emergency politics of 2020–2021 has always been executed by European authorities during the financial crisis of 2010, and today, as Jonathan White shows, it is supplemented by anti-emergency politics. One more topic constantly approached by the contributors is globalization. Scholars (e.g., Daniel Innerarity, Daniel Chernilo, and others) stress the increasing role of national borders and political authorities, and reflect on the changing relations at the national, international, local, and global levels. Yet, they do not assume de-globalization as the main tendency, calling instead for a more nuanced notion of globalization that will take the recent experience of living in a global world into account. It means "to value the cosmopolitanism of the scientific community, the strengthening of global public opinion and the advantages of digitalization precisely because we do not want these things to stop. Nervous globalization must be followed by sustainable 'glocalization'" (103). The same can be said of digitalization and the introduction of artificial intelligence. Helga Nowotny, whose paper opens the second part of the volume, describes COVID-19 as a disease of the digital age, and discusses the controversies that the ubiquity of big data and artificial intelligence causes. Digitalization as pushed forward by the pandemic is not a neutral process of transformation of all of the areas of social life via information technologies. It also comes with an increasing level of risk and uncertainty that challenges the conventional trust society has. A methodologically-similar argument is relevant to the notion of anthropocene and its relation to COVID-19, as Eva Horn argues in "COVID-19 is the Anthropocene in fast-forward".

A different approach to the COVID-19 pandemic is proposed by Bryan Turner. He returns to Max Weber's comparative study of religions and elaborates on the notion of political theology as applied to the crisis of our times. Following political philosophy, he suggests that any kind of catastrophe or disaster assumes a human response in a form of theodicies. These theodicies bring meaning, and are an essential part of making sense of uncertainty and the risk inherent to social life. Turner traces the transformation of theo-

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Gephart: Gephart W. (ed.) (2020) *In the Realm of Corona Normativities: A Momentary Snapshot of a Dynamic Discourse*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

dicy into its secular form of a sociodicy, and provides examples of critical moments in the contemporary history of the USA. Yet, with regards to the pandemic, he fails to indicate whether there is any political theology so far. Turner argues that "we no longer have the intellectual apparatus to formulate convincing and coherent vocabularies and values with which to construct meaningful responses to a catastrophe on the scale of COVID-19", and does not provide a direct answer explaining this absence.

Reflections on the political foundations of a future society continue to be raised in the chapters of the third section entitled "The Social and Alternatives". Silvia Walby reflects on social democracy as a missing element in the discussions of the future concerning the post-COVID-19 condition. Her argument is to contrast neoliberal society with social democracy as an alternative that may struggle with risks and uncertainty in a more efficient way. Sonja Avlijaš, in her contribution dedicated to the insecurities and inequalities during the pandemic, focuses on "the political economy of state sponsored security". In her analysis, she focuses on the social-care jobs that fill the security gaps which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Albena Azmanova's concluding chapter discusses the issues of inequality, the precariat, and environmental and political agendas, all in the context of the pandemic.

Academic reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by a different temporality than the typical one in "normal" times. Scholars tend to publish as quickly as possible while the pandemic evolves with a different speed. This kind of acceleration has an impact on the type of contributions. It is quite common to find existing theories and to apply them to the pandemic in order to provide an explanation of what is going on. However, there may be a fundamental problem with such a kind of sociological reflection. Conventional sociology is mostly concerned with meaning while the pandemic (at least for now) is characterized with both an absence of meaning and a high level of uncertainty and risk. In this respect, sociology has an option to go back to the ideas that are foundational for the discipline and reconsider them, e.g., ideas of normativity and political theology, among many other ideas. The second option is to focus on the detailed documentation of the transformation of social practices to conserve the feeling of acceleration and uncertainty.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that these two strategies of doing sociology in the pandemic may not have much impact on policies of dealing with COVID-19. The problem is in the temporality of any academic findings that may be of use, since advancing sociology needs time while social life changes under the pressure of both natural and political reasons.

Испытания социологии пандемией. Обзор

Наиль Фархатдинов
Старший научный сотрудник, Центр фундаментальной социологии, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»
Адрес: ул. Мясницкая, д. 20, г. Москва, Российская Федерация 101000
E-mail: nfarkhatdinov@hse.ru