

Editorial

[sagvari.bence@tk.hu] (Computational Social Science—Research Center for Educational and Network Studies, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest; Corvinus University of Budapest)

[karsaim@ceu.edu] (Department of Network and Data Science, Central European University, Vienna; Alfréd Rényi Institute of Mathematics, Budapest)

[koltai.julia@tk.hu] (Computational Social Science—Research Center for Educational and Network Studies, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest; Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University; Department of Network and Data Science, Central European University, Vienna)

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered many aspects of how societies function, with both fundamental short-term and very likely long-term effects. The massive disruptions to normal life, the introduction of social distancing measures, the dramatic reduction of in-person interactions, and the hibernation of economic life have been collective experiences of hundreds of millions of people all over the world. Both citizens and scientists found themselves involved in an unprecedented social experiment (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020) nations have locked down, and individuals have socially isolated for the collective good. We find ourselves involved in an unprecedented social experiment. This living laboratory is ripe for sociological analysis. In this introductory article, we provide a broad sociology of Covid-19, paying attention to the production of pandemics and the creation of vulnerabilities. We acknowledge the dystopian elements of the pandemic: it will provide opportunities for ‘disaster capitalists’ to profit, it will enhance certain forms of surveillance, and it will impact some constituencies far more negatively than others (here we pay particular attention to the pandemic’s gendered consequences).

After the initial closures, it quickly became clear that the epidemic would have profound social consequences. In several parts of life, people had to accommodate to rules previously unknown (Connell, 2020; French & Monahan, 2020; Zinn, 2021) and though some sociological ideas circulate in public discussions, disciplinary sociology has had little influence. Internal discussions have mostly been conventional, and familiar sociological theory and methodology seem inadequate to this situation. Taking the viewpoint of the virus helps to shift perspective on a historical moment where a deadly threat is enabled by megacities, mass air travel, callous and corrupt regimes, and the undermining of public services. In this conjuncture sociology, with other social sciences, is under threat. But we can contribute to responses that mobilize community resources to deal with a social/biological crisis, and prepare for the others that will certainly come.¹ New life situations began to emerge in which earlier norms and behaviours

1 Connell (2020).

were challenged, while the new ones had yet to crystallize and needed to stand the test of time in pandemic. Moreover, not all of these norms have yet been clarified: although decisions at the country or continental level determine people's behaviour, these arrangements are not supported by an overwhelming majority of people. Social divisions have quickly emerged between different groups in societies: those who support or oppose the wearing of a mask, those who support lockdowns with border closures and those who support less restrictions and protection of free travel, and recently between anti-vaxxers and pro-vaxxers (Harrison, 2020). The relationship and interactions between these groups depend heavily on the history and current values in different countries and societies, but the deepening and multifaceted nature of the divide is undeniable.

Inequalities increased at all levels: some countries appeared more exposed than others, simply because of their geographical proximity, or economic and social connections to the first epicentres of the virus, and depending on the state of the healthcare system (Evenhuis et al., 2021) alongside a rise in economic and spatial inequalities in many advanced economies. The Covid-19 pandemic looks set to further amplify these problems. This Editorial begins by discussing the scale of the productivity slowdown and of the widening inequalities that have emerged, particularly with regard to their spatial dimension: that is how the uneven and slow development of productivity and rise in inequalities have played out across and within regions and cities. It then briefly considers underlying factors that lie behind these trends, including financialisation / financial globalization, the diminishing role of organised labour, segmentation of the labour market favouring workers who play a key role in financialisation, together with the increasing polarisation within societies according to skill and, crucially, the impact of changing industrial composition particularly as it relates to the rise of the high-tech sectors. The Editorial then examines in what ways the slowdown of productivity and widening of economic and spatial inequalities, may be interrelated, and questions the notion of any efficiency-equity trade-off. Lastly, it considers whether the 'inclusive growth' agenda can potentially reconcile the two ambitions of improving productivity performance and lessening inequalities, reflecting on what inclusive growth could mean, and what it could imply in terms of policy. Thus far, it appears that an inclusive growth agenda has only gained some traction at the subnational level, which seems to reflect – at least in part – attempts by cities and regions to address gaps in policy left by national governments.² Later, unequal access to different vaccine supplies and various government regulations have further increased the inequalities between and within countries. The strategy of governments, their ability to rely on their institutions, people's overall level of trust and their willingness to comply with the new regulations have all proved to be factors, which largely determined the spread of the epidemic and its immediate health and economic impact (Clark, 2020; McFadden, 2020; Sibley, 2020). On the country level, decision-makers were heavily burdened to decrease the negative effects of the epidemic and balance between indirect economic and direct human losses. Ability to foresight and to model certain scenarios created desperate demand for information and fresh data from all levels of the state, and its citizens and businesses – that further widened the gap between governments functioning better and worse (Bol, 2021). The level of openness and transparency by governments in publishing honest information on public health status also affected the potential spread of misinformation (Larson, 2020; Romer, 2020).

Furthermore, inequalities are not unique to the international level. Vulnerable groups everywhere could find themselves in an increasingly worse situation than before (Fraser,

² Evenhuis et al. (2021).

2020). Differences in health condition and in access to health care became more apparent than ever. Students from disadvantaged families did not have the appropriate technical background for distance learning, many people lost their jobs because they were strongly linked to industries that collapsed within weeks. Work conditions were not equal in all remaining sectors either: not everyone could convert to home office and avoid personal contacts: those working in the health sector and those who simply could not afford not to go to their workplace were more exposed to the virus. But even for the most privileged, life did not remain as it was. Many families struggled with the blurring boundaries of work and home life during the period of lockdown. Inequalities within the family increased, mostly at the expense of women (Carlson et al., 2020; Fodor et al., 2021; Shafer et al., 2020).

Solidarity, trust in other people and also in institutions has become one of the key issues. From the very outbreak of the pandemic the contagion of the virus depends heavily on the behaviour of other people; trust in colleagues, family members or friends is crucial (Elcheroth, 2020). The same dilemma exists at the national level: how much trust people have in governments, in various institutions, whether they are taking the right and effective measures for the welfare of the citizens (Seale, 2020). Events of the pandemic – especially in its early phase – have brought to the surface exceptional manifestations of human solidarity and civil courage. The collective hardship, the common threats and experiences have led to the mobilisation of communities. However, these solidarity reserves are being depleted as we are entering the consecutive waves of the pandemic all over the world.

The same applies to trust in science and the scientific community. As a consequence, science has globally found itself in a troubled situation: there was an unprecedented instant need for novel information and data, and also an insatiable hunger for guidance in understanding the current situation. Unfortunately, such real-time diagnosis usually contradicts the logic of how scientific knowledge is generated. Researchers all over the world experienced an unparalleled demand for their work and expertise. There was, however, an exceptional situation in which members of the public not only waited with bated breath for the new scientific results to be praised. Expertise, too, was ‘under attack’, making scientists vulnerable to being discredited, declared responsible, and exposed to anger and frustration about the lockdowns. That manifested in the process of experiential challenge (see Brubaker’s article in this issue) which refers to the gap between what people know from common sense and personal experience, and what people know about from expert models and projections.

From a purely scientific perspective, and despite the inevitable challenges, the current epidemic is also providing an opportunity for the social sciences to focus on innovations in their methodologies (e.g. to overcome the physical barriers created by lockdowns, or to simply speed up the data collection phase due to the pressure on providing quick results), to search for suitable theoretical frames in understanding the current changes, or even to elaborate new theories.

In a matter of just a few months, describing and interpreting social processes related to COVID-19 have become one of the most frequent issues in social science journals. According to our own calculations and based on data from the Scopus abstract and citation database, already in 2020, about 4 per cent of all journal articles published in the domain of social sciences referred to the pandemic in their abstracts or keywords. That figure has almost doubled to 7 per cent in the first ten months of 2021, and it is reasonable to assume that we may witness further increase in numbers, as many research are just in midst of their data collection phase or before submission. History of science has probably never seen such a rapid focus on a single cause that had an impact on literally every aspect of life.

If we take a quick look at the topics (keywords) of the published pandemic-related articles, apart from their evident diversity, they also seem to be clustered around just a few major areas of research. In general, they include most topics we briefly covered in this editorial and in the papers published in this special issue: characteristics of (online) education and its consequences, challenges to public health systems, proliferation of mental health problems, issues related to phenomena such as resilience, trust and leadership. There were numerous attempts to provide an overview of fundamental trends (and challenges for social sciences) triggered by the pandemic (Alexander & Smith, 2020; Connell, 2020; Langley, 2021; Miguel Ferreira & Serpa, 2020; Muldoon et al., 2021) narrative, and cultural performance.³ Though the COVID-19 epidemic is a social disaster as much as a medical one, and though some sociological ideas circulate in public discussions, disciplinary sociology has had little influence. Internal discussions have mostly been conventional, and familiar sociological theory and methodology seem inadequate to this situation. Taking the viewpoint of the virus helps to shift perspective on a historical moment where a deadly threat is enabled by megacities, mass air travel, callous and corrupt regimes, and the undermining of public services. In this conjuncture sociology, with other social sciences, is under threat. But we can contribute to responses that mobilize community resources to deal with a social/biological crisis, and prepare for the others that will certainly come.⁴ However, it is clear that we are still in the middle of an unfolding story, and the time is not yet ripe for major summaries.

The idea of this special issue first emerged in the early months of the epidemic, in the summer of 2020. Our aim was to seek out for research, from the widest range of social sciences, that examined the acute social, economic and political consequences of the coronavirus epidemic. To our honest surprise, we received a large number of responses to our call in a very short time. It became clear from the very first moment of the epidemic that social scientists from diverse fields began to intensively apply existing theories, collect and analyse data on the profound impacts of the epidemic. Therefore, this special issue includes several theoretical and empirical papers that are organized into four distinct blocks, each representing a different angle in studying the effects of the pandemic.

The first section is on politics, and in particular on the response of populist politics to the epidemic. It is built around Rogers Brubaker's re-published paper and explores the *Paradoxes of populism during the pandemic*.⁵ The second section of the Thematic Issue is devoted to system-level reflections on the pandemic. The third block – with the largest number of articles – includes case studies that provide insights to the micro-level changes and challenges that became manifest in several aspects of our lives. These micro-trends unfold the manifold problems and challenges the pandemic caused in society, and thus offer insights to people's everyday life and struggles in this extreme period.

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³ Alexander & Smith (2020).

⁴ Connell (2020).

⁵ Brubaker (2021).

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