

## PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY UNDER COVID – LETTER FROM AMERICA

Michael Burawoy

Preface to: *Covid-19: An Epochal Social Change* edited by Paolo Diana, Giovannipaolo Ferrari, Pietro Dommarco (Italian)

What does it mean to be a public sociologist in these times of crisis? I live in downtown Oakland, a city of half a million inhabitants on the other side of the Bay from San Francisco. Yesterday there was dancing in the streets as there was in cities across the nation. Veteran of nearly 50 years in the US Senate, former Vice-President to Barack Obama, Joe Biden was declared President elect yesterday. His running mate, Kamela Harris, Senator from California, is the first woman to be declared Vice-President Elect. She is a native of Oakland, born of immigrants from India and Jamaica, who schooled her in the civil rights movement. In June of this year, amidst the social protests that erupted around racial injustice and police brutality, Trump had called Oakland a city from hell. Now the city was taking its revenge, recalling the radicalism for which it is known, the birthplace of the Black Panthers.

For nearly a week, America sat more or less silent watching the returns as they came in, both sides paralyzed by the agony of uncertainty. Virtuoso of fake facts, Trump could deny the virus while spreading it, could deny the economic crisis while deepening it, could deny racism while promoting it, could deny global warming while accelerating it, but in the end he couldn't deny the popular vote by suppressing it.

In their celebrations, Oaklanders abandoned social distancing but not the masks, now a badge of political identity. For a moment, they could forget that over the hills lies the devastation left by some of the largest wildfires in history; that unemployment rates hit a high of 16% up from 4% and now hovering around 11%, leaving many destitute and homeless; that shops, restaurants, and small businesses have been closed, many boarded up to protect from the rage at the murder of George Floyd, the exculpation of the police officers who shot Breonna Taylor; that the Coronavirus, the true monster, had surged ahead with new national records of infections on successive days.

What can sociologists do but repeat what the newspapers, TV, social media have already said? Can we put together a bigger picture? A Democrat will sit in the White House but is there any sign of vision to cope with the cascading crises? That leaves the sociologist to advance a global understanding of the dynamics of capitalism, to decipher the potentialities of the nation state as well as the trajectory of struggles in civil society. This is the time to explore possibilities and alternatives, elaborate real utopias rather than pontificate on abstract ideals. It is also a time to reflect on the context in which we produce our knowledge as well as its reception in the wider society.

\*\*\*

The pandemic brought to life what sociologists have been describing and analyzing for decades, the deepening of inequality in all its dimensions. Now everyone can see just how encumbered are the “essential” workers upon whom we all depend – the janitors, the store attendants, the nurses, the teachers, the care workers in senior homes, agricultural workers, in short the producers who have to turn up for dangerous, unprotected and often underpaid work. The essential are often those deemed inessential – the outcasts, the dispossessed, the undocumented. At home women are more likely to take up the slack, home-schooling their children, reorganizing family life, giving up their jobs and careers. For others the second shift becomes a third and a fourth shift. We also know the people of color, black and brown, are the more likely to suffer from the virus – they are more exposed because their medical situation is more compromised, their living situation more precarious. Inmates in prisons and jails, in senior homes, and the homeless on the streets are now more firmly confined or released into society to fend for themselves.

This on the one side. At the same time many of the professionals and white collar workers are able to work from home, still secure in their salaries and pensions. At the top of society, the first stimulus package of two trillion dollars went disproportionately to shore up big corporations, such as the airlines, with a weekly \$600 supplement going to the unemployed, long since dried up. Google, Face-Book and Amazon have never had it so good, keeping the stock market afloat despite the plummeting economy. The few are making out at the expense of the many. The inequalities that sociologists have been shouting from the rooftops are now palpable and amplified. So this should be sociology’s moment. But is it? Have we been missing in action?

The systemic crises – economic, environmental, health, racial, political – fuel each other and intensify inequality. But they also disrupt the normality of everyday life – the definition of social crisis. Common sense – in its two meanings, that which we share and that which we take for granted – is shattered. We live instead in a state of anomie when the rules of daily life are continually renegotiated: to wear a mask or not, to join friends for a meal, to travel on public transport, to negotiate domesticity and paid labor. That is for those who have a choice at all. For those who suffer joblessness, crowding, eviction, sickness, the pandemic is but another irritant, just another ailment in their already precarious existence.

For so many, life is proving impossible, so it is not surprising that many are fervent supporters of Trump. His appeal is in his lies – when he says that the virus is a hoax, or it’s turning the corner, or Obamacare is a disaster, or the economy has never been so vital; when he promises to bring order to the streets, crush Antifa, end abortion and bring white supremacy into the corridors of power. He is the heroic leader, unstoppable in making America great again. This is what so many of those 70 million voters, facing declining living standards, want to hear, so they believe him. And they are only too happy to think of the “other” as the self-satisfied professionals, the condescension of intellectuals, the lawyers, the pundits, the socialists masquerading as liberals, represented by the Democratic Party. Civil society has been mobilized on both sides; this was and will continue to be class war, a war of position Gramsci might say. It’s not going away.

Where does that leave sociologists? Whose side are we on? It would seem that we are on the side of the experts, but the ideological crisis should make us pause before we feel superior, we have to think about our own presuppositions. We may be scientists collecting facts, but we too are in denial. We too easily repress, as external to our science, what drives our sensibilities, that orient our studies. Perhaps there was a time when we could pretend to be a platform in the sky, from which we dispassionately observe the world as the astronomer observes the stars. But no longer. If the pandemic, climate change, economic crisis, and racial injustice teach us one thing it is that we are not outside the world we study. The university is no longer impervious to external pressure – the university in capitalist society endowed with a certain autonomy has become the capitalist university, mimicking the corporation, seeking revenue wherever it can be found, selling its soul to the highest bidder. Public sociology needs to ground itself in a world-view, one rooted in recognizable values, a research program that proceeds scientifically even as it declares openly its normative underpinning. As it was in the beginning, sociology has to become a moral science.

Being part of the world we study means two things: on the one hand we stabilize our science with value commitments; on the other hand it means, engaging society. As the world enters the academic sphere so the academic sphere enters society. Public engagement becomes the counterpoint to reflexivity. Such a public sociology needs to be armed with a social theory that thinks globally, that can see the nexus of the national and the global. Pandemics, climate change, economic crises do not recognize national borders, even if nation states mediate their effects. Covid-19 has led to the closure of borders, because human mobility – whether traders, business people, tourists, migrants, or refugees – so easily transmits the virus. We can no longer confine ourselves to the national let alone the local. No less important than extending geographical horizons it is necessary to extend our temporal horizons. We cannot just think of tomorrow, we have to think of the day after, the next pandemic, global warming and future economic crises. Again we can't project the future without linking it back to the present.

The unleashed market has to be contained, tamed, and subordinated to institutions that can allow us to anticipate and prepare for the future. The only institution, or set of institutions, that accomplish the extension of time horizons is the state. It has to be captured and restructured for the interests of humanity. No mean task. As Karl Polanyi warned us 80 years ago, the response of the state to the market can assume different forms, Stalinist collectivization, social democracy, New Deal or what he feared the most, fascism. Behind his populist rhetoric, Trump was busy replacing the chiefs of departments of the state with raw representatives of the corporate world, trying to turn each agency against itself, the Department of Justice against the rule of law, the Department of Labor against the interests of labor, Department of Education against public education, the Environmental Protection Agency against the environment. Arresting this project will be the greatest accomplishment of his electoral defeat. He was in danger of running capitalism into the ground – for the survival of capitalism depends on the relative autonomy of the state, to protect capitalism not just from insurgents from below but also from the narrow short-term interests of capitalists.

But it may be too late to save capitalism from the crises it generates, and whether we like it or not some other order will have to take its place. If we want to avoid an expanding fascism, socialism may be the only way forward. We have the economic and technological building blocks. But what about the politics? Liberal democracy has exhausted itself. It has been hijacked by advanced capitalism; it delivered concessions and hid capitalism's lethal character. But the concessions have evaporated and the lethality of capitalism lies exposed. Neither Democrats nor Republicans can put Humpty Dumpty back together again. In the age of pandemics and climate change together with unfolding economic crises, our last chance is to explore the original umbilical connection between socialism and democracy – vitalizing thereby the social in socialism subjugating both market and state to the collective self-organization of civil society.

November 8, 2020