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Special section: Emotions and relational approaches: Simmel's legacy and contemporary challenges

Towards a sociology of emergency. Epidemics, biorisks, and the society of the Coronavirus

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the social agenda has been shaped by a continuous chain of potentially forthcoming future emergencies. Imagined, projected, and expected emergencies and crises have affected political and scientific agendas and redefined the pre-planning for risks at a local, national, and global level. Whilst most of these emergencies took place largely on an imaginary stage and never materialised – at least not with significant effects on global society – the COVID-19 pandemic finally made real the imaginary that had been expected and projected for over a decade. This article claims that within the context of an emergency in the making and the consequent social, economic, political, and material crises, sociology and social analysis need to assume new responsibilities by providing answers and perspective to those social developments that are direct and indirect results of the social and material conditions of a society of emergency. In a world in which the reality of emergencies has started to outrun the prevention of risks, a sociology of emergency is not only a useful but a necessary step in the development of social theory. We suggest that a redefinition of some of those concepts and ideas that marked the sociological agenda of risk society becomes unavoidable. We argue also that reconnection with those issues that had been discarded from the conceptual framework of a society of risk has become absolutely necessary.

Keywords

risk; emergency; imaginaries; future; COVID-19; pandemic

Hacia una sociología de emergencia. Epidemias, biorriesgos y la sociedad del coronavirus

Resumen

Durante la última década, la agenda social ha sido moldeada por toda una serie de posibles emergencias futuras. Las emergencias y crisis imaginadas, proyectadas y previstas han afectado a las agendas políticas y científicas y han redefinido la planificación previa de riesgos a escala local, nacional y global. Aunque la mayoría de estas emergencias tuvieron lugar en gran medida en un escenario imaginario y nunca se materializaron, al menos no con efectos significativos en la sociedad global, la pandemia de la COVID-19 finalmente hizo realidad la ficción que se había conformado y proyectado durante más de una década. Este artículo afirma que, dentro del contexto de una emergencia en ciernes y sus consiguientes crisis sociales, económicas, políticas y materiales, la sociología y el análisis social deben asumir nuevas responsabilidades, y proporcionar respuestas y perspectiva a aquellos sucesos de índole social que sean resultados directos e indirectos de las condiciones sociales y materiales de una sociedad de emergencia. En un mundo en el que la realidad de las emergencias ha comenzado a superar la prevención de riesgos, una sociología de emergencia no solo es un paso útil, sino también necesario en el desarrollo de la teoría social. Consideramos que la redefinición de algunos de esos conceptos e ideas que marcaron la agenda sociológica de la sociedad de riesgo es inevitable. También argumentamos que la vuelta a esos problemas que se habían apartado del marco conceptual de una sociedad de riesgo se ha vuelto imprescindible.

Palabras clave

riesgo; emergencia; imaginarios; futuro; COVID-19; pandemia

Introduction

Over the last decade, the social agenda has been shaped by a continuous chain of potentially forthcoming future emergencies. Imagined, projected, and expected emergencies and crises have not only marked the contents of cultural products, such as films and series (Cantó-Milà & González-Balletbó, 2019), they have also affected political and scientific agendas and redefined the pre-planning for risks at a local, national, and global level (Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero, 2008; Collier & Lakoff, 2015).

Whilst most of these emergencies took place largely on an imaginary stage, and never materialised - at least not with significant effects on global society - the COVID-19 pandemic finally made real the imaginary that had been expected and projected for over a decade: a dangerous, quickly scalable bio-emergency in the form of a highly contagious disease that could travel easily around the globe and affect a significant portion of the world population. COVID-19 turned the *Pandemic Perhaps* (Caduff, 2015) into the pandemic that happens to be.

By turning potential scenarios into feasible experiences, COVID-19 has transformed social and political risk prevention policies from hypotheticals to be aware of into realities to put into action. It has turned a politics of preparedness (Lakoff, 2017) and prevention (Rose, 2005) from a socio-political mechanism into a real policy of emergency. It has turned individuals from all segments of society into relevant agents for the social management of COVID-19. It has turned the society of risk into a society of emergency.

Within the context of an emergency in the making and the consequent social, economic, political, and material crises, sociology and social analysis need to assume new responsibilities by providing answers and perspective to those social developments that are direct and indirect results of the social and material conditions of COVID-19 as a global human emergency. In a world in which the reality of emergencies has started to outrun the prevention of risks,

a sociology of emergency is not only a useful but a necessary step in the development of social theory.

We suggest that, within the context of transformation from risk to emergency, a redefinition of some of those concepts and ideas that marked the sociological agenda of risk society becomes unavoidable. We argue also that a reconnection with those issues that had been discarded from the conceptual framework of a society of risk has become absolutely necessary.

1. From a sociology of redistribution to a sociology of risk

In the late 80s, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1999) in particular introduced the idea that sociology needed to adjust to the changed social, material and historical conditions of the 20th century and therefore integrate new perspectives to allow sociologists to engage with the new challenges of a globalised world. According to both, sociology should no longer ignore the new conditions influencing principal dynamics of society and stop focusing primarily on questions of redistribution and problems of unequal access to resources. Influenced by the work of Virilio (1986) on nuclear weapons, the scenarios of the later cold war reflected upon in the works of Baudrillard (1994) and the risks deriving from industrialisation and technological development, especially after the 1986 accident at the nuclear plant of Chernobyl, Beck (1987) and Giddens (1999) developed a sociology that would be able to analyse the great challenges of the late 20th century.

According to both, the scripts of a (Marxist) materialist sociology, foremost responding to the developments of modernisation and industrialisation, required revision. Within the context of late modern society, questions related to redistribution, the consequent structuring into different social classes and other problems related to an economy built on steady development lose relevancy.

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They argued that another type of problem, distinguishable from those of the 19th and early 20th century in terms of dimension and dynamics, moves into the foreground of the social agenda in later modernity: risks. Risks are those almost invisible, hard-to-measure challenges to the lives of people around the globe that result mainly from quick and intense forms of techno-scientific development. Risks affect all individuals, institutions and, therefore, society on a global scale and provoke indivisible and potentially unequal effects on different local contexts and environments that are not necessarily in accordance with economic and material differences. As risks affect each and every one in society, they render necessary a shift in the focus of social analysis from questions of unequal possession to general affection.

Because of the complexity of the causes of risks and the long periods until their impacts might become visible, hypothetically significant outcomes and potential differences are difficult to foresee or take care of and cause a wide series of socio-political consequences that demand more agile and flexible political and scientific analysis and planning with multiple scenarios for potential outcomes that need to be managed simultaneously. Within this context, it becomes pertinent to prepare for a potentially risky future.

Beck and Giddens argued that the future orientation of politics and social measures and the missing transparency of risks in the present inspire new debates about potential risks and their outcomes and throw scientific results and political measures into question. Consequently, the social understanding of risk-concerning politics becomes increasingly diverse and debates turn from being based on objective data to being based on personal impressions. The emotionalization of politics is one consequence that has been discussed in current literature (Jupp, E., Pykett, J., & Smith, F. M., 2017; Richards, B., 2007, Ahmed, 2013)

Late modern risks are partially caused by accelerated, global, socially disembedding developments that may but must not lead to negative future consequences and introduce a new problem of analysis, as much as a new temporal orientation of main social challenges.

A risk concerns a problem that has not yet arrived at its full consequences, and is, therefore, still in the process of becoming. As a social form of engaging with the future, the fundamental character of risk lies in its future orientation. Dealing with risks as a new fundamental social problem therefore has far-reaching consequences in terms of social analysis. A sociology focussing on unequal distribution treats the present as a consequence of the past; distribution deals with those types of problems that link insufficient access to resources and capital to a consequence of pre-existing structural conditions. A sociology of risk deals with a problem that is not yet fully there but rather that lies in a near future. The present turns into a moment in which we need to care for and engage with a potential future. The temporal dimension of the focus of attention in a society of risk renders a scientific approach to dealing with them potentially speculative. Risks leave space for speculations regarding impacts and effects, which increases the importance of imaginaries of different social agents (and their analysis) (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015).

A sociology of risk cannot stop at material concerns related to social class or social milieus but must engage with much more abstract, quite often invisible challenges that might not have yet occurred but that potentially influence society. Following this logic of Beck and Giddens, one arrives at a conclusion with respect to the responsibility of social science as a discipline.

When the main problems of society are no longer related to the matter of the survival of some individuals as a consequence of the enrichment of others, but turns into a question of the survival of humanity as a whole, and when the object of analysis for a critical social analysis is no longer bound to social conditions but to potential outcomes, social science as a discipline needs to focus on the ways society is affected by those potential outcomes and risks and how those risks are managed.

2. Freedom and regulation

It has been four decades since Foucault gave his lectures on the Birth of Biopolitics at the College de France. In his famous seminars (Foucault, Davidson & Burchell, 2008), he elaborated on the transformation of the relations of power in society, along with the changes that social governance underwent during modernity. According to Foucault, the first phase of modernity had been marked by the politics of the discipline, by a specific form of exercising power, in which the governed are continuously controlled and, if necessary, punished for actions that do not comply with established social norms. Practices and techniques of punishment result in exclusion from everyday social life and a kind of treatment of non-normative behaviour that allows for reincorporation into society, once treatment is complete.

In later modernity, the techniques of governance changed, partly due to the rising complexity of the social and the speed of potentially threatening events and partly because of the increasing logics of economical thought within society. Late modern governance, according to Foucault, is based on an incarnation of the power of the discipline and disciplinary institutions within the self. Individuals have begun to integrate an evaluating gaze into their judgement of the self and of others. Such an integrated, self-directed normative gaze upon the self allows for a new form of governance in which governing institutions must punish less and the self can act with relative freedom because it applies all the relevant rules that enable society to function.

In late modernity, governance no longer needs to take freedom away from those individuals who do not comply or who question institutions of power. Governance means producing freedom in such a way that people follow voluntarily already-created paths and decide to comply because they believe that it is best for them and that it is a good investment (Bröckling, 2013) into their self and/or into their future (Cantó Milà & Seebach, 2015). In fact, the freedom to decide and to choose between different possibilities and the forms of regulation via these freedoms is crucial to late modern forms of governance. This is where Foucault's approach meets with the perspectives of Beck and Giddens. A politics of risk leaves relative freedom to its citizens while simultaneously managing them through intensive work with their bodies and futures. Under the conditions of increased self-management and a focus on future risk, imbalances and inequalities in the present become either irrelevant or responsibilities of the self to be resolved.

It is obvious that under the conditions of the modernity that Foucault pictured, the future had a new and important role to play in the regulation of society. When there is a certain freedom to decide what, when and how to act and to take action, there must be also an opening of possibilities concerning the future that enables people to take decisions. Under these circumstances, power can no longer

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concern solely the regulation of different forms of the present. It can no longer have merely the various “real” actual deviations from norms as an object of intervention. As the field of uncertain horizons of the future suddenly becomes a crucial component in individual and collective decision-making and action-taking processes, it must become the field through which the governance of society and its individuals is exercised.

We discover, therefore, an interesting contradiction in later modernity. Governance in the phase of risk society allows individuals more space to realise their freedom, but they are managed much more intensively through their bodies and the mechanisms of power applied by themselves.

3. From a sociology of risk to a sociology of emergency

We claim that within social developments during the 21st century, we have gone a step further. The new world order and its speed does not allow us to suspend or withhold the immediate effects of risks. It has also complicated long-term action plans that do not consider various scenarios and changes alongside their implementation.

Rather than preventing risks and dealing with speculative outcomes in varying future scenarios, society has been caught up in managing ongoing emergencies whilst simultaneously preparing for the next. Social life has become a chain of emergencies that have happened, are happening or are about to happen. A sociology of emergency must respond to the social conditions that derive from a society in which the social and political agenda is marked by ongoing uncertainty, adaptation and reorganisation.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have observed important changes in society. Bio-emergencies in particular have begun to condition society and influence late modern forms of politics. Bio-emergencies are phenomena that potentially threaten life and/or the survival of society as a whole.

9/11, Fukushima, COVID-19, and more recently a potentially global war in the midst of Europe, have doubtlessly provided evidence that we no longer live in a world in which only potential risks mark the social agenda. We have entered a world of forthcoming emergencies, in which what might potentially occur cannot be easily avoided, and in which a forthcoming risk turns immediately into a threat, and then into an emergency, partly because of the effects of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013), partly because of shortened risk vectors (Virilio, 1986), and partly because the occurrence of risks is no longer bound to questions of space but is relative to matters of time (Baumann, 2013).

The main issue is no longer about knowing where a life-threatening event might occur, but about preparing for the moment when it will occur. Under these more pressing social conditions, the rules of the social game have begun to open up for a process of continuous change with huge social and material consequences while simultaneously limiting individual freedom. When the apriority conditions of society are under continuous threat (Cantó-Milà, 2015) and reciprocal actions and effects (Simmel, 2009) are redefined without stable frameworks and social forms that provide order to the most fragile social relationships, social life as we know it begins to crumble.

Governance in this context can no longer build on the free decisions of individuals to do what is right, but rather must return to a limitation of such freedom in order to manage and control the flux of people and so of risks. This does not mean that governance reverts to an archaic model, but rather that it combines the techniques of biopolitics with an interventionist strategy of the discipline and a much more visible intervention in social relations and social life.

Society has changed in times of COVID-19. This is less because COVID-19 is a dangerous disease that spread around the globe (we have seen such phenomena before, such as in the case of Spanish Flu) but because it has challenged our social imaginary of continuous progress and redefined our conceptualisation of a global society, showing us that we are no longer in control of the rules of our social universe and that social life can very easily turn from a system of order, with clear rules and a certain security about potential tomorrows, into a poker game in which the next card dealt might put everything that we believe to be certain at risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how emergencies can turn potential differences into material realities. Having observed the consequences of COVID-19 – rising unemployment, work conditions for those in blue-collar jobs, the impossibility of escaping devastating economic effects in individual households – there should be no doubt that the consequences of risks affect and are affected by existing and resulting imbalances in redistribution. Beck was wrong to think that the era of a sociology of unequal redistribution were over. Quite the contrary: the effects might have become even stronger, but the conditions that afforded most social members in the west a more or less sustainable lifestyle made the impact of inequalities a little less visible.

Today we observe again how the differences in which emergencies impact on society align with the differences of material conditions of individuals, neighbourhoods and regions, dividing those that can adapt quickly and comfortably to potential changes in lifestyle, work habits and even temporary scarcity of necessary products from those who are forced to continue even if their life might come under threat. The series *L'Effondrement (The Collapse)* gave the postmodern consumer a glimpse of an idea of the realness of such material differences. There is no doubt that bio-emergencies affect everyone (Beck, 1992), but there is also no doubt that it makes a difference under what conditions individuals, families, and communities have to deal with these potential outcomes.

We also perceive with much more clarity the possible meaning and result of globalisation and the consequent globalisation of risks and emergencies. Whilst the globalisation of social problems in the earlier stages of modernity (Polanyi, 1944) provided us with a way to keep the immediate experience of consequences of material differences at a distance, and so to create an imaginary of a temporal irrelevance of material inequalities, the current crises and emergencies have demonstrated how such forgotten and invisible differences backfire and influence in times of emergency for everyone on the planet.

COVID-19 has taught us a lesson about who we are as a global society. Not only have we felt globalised during the pandemic as a consequence of alien and alienating structural effects – we have become global citizens sharing certain experimental conditions with everyone else and we have been affected by the disastrous effects of inadequate investments and care for others whom we felt to be far away. COVID-19 has demonstrated that we need to create new ways of managing complex risks and emergencies, in which

every single individual turns into a relevant player and in which, accordingly, the needs and requirements of each and every one turn into factors of the successful or unsuccessful management of emergencies.

4. The sociology of emergency

The events of the COVID-19 pandemic redirect the reflection of this article towards the topic of this special section. We are in urgent need of a new type of sociology: one of emergency. Whilst a sociology of risk is widely established and serves well to cover some of the most challenging questions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a sociology of emergency cannot stop at the hypothetical level of 'what happens if', but must explain 'what happens when'. Particularly in times of immediate crisis, a sociology that engages critically and empirically with the social and material consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is more than necessary. By focusing on these material factors, we are taught important lessons about the way society works, how we work as social beings and what we need and expect from ourselves, others and institutions that exist in order to represent us.

In their article, Mendez and Tirado (2021) discuss the visual representations of the sick in a range of media during the 2014 Ebola crisis. Chosen frames and visual depictions of the bio-emergency that mainly affected Central and West Africa do not merely indicate the important role of structures of power in the way diseases are represented, but also how pre-existing unequal material and social conditions have a structuring effect on the experience, perceptions and discourses of a bio-emergency. As is pointed out in the article, the images chosen not only portray the Ebola epidemic, but also humanise and dehumanise various social agents in pre-existing stereotypes and imaginaries of the western privileged in contrast to the African deprived. Results from focus group discussions show how the visual representation of epidemics might contribute to prejudices and to the deepening of pre-existing inequalities. This fits with findings discussed by Seebach, *et al.* (2016), in which preconceived imaginaries of the hygiene of migrants influence their depiction in the media and how social and media imaginaries contribute to collective perceptions and consequent reactions to "potentially risky others".

Belli and Alonso (2021) discuss in their article the importance of emotions and emotional experiences during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following through with a rigorous auto-ethnography, they argue that, in addition to the spread of contagious disease, an important dimension of any pandemic is its effect on people's emotions. Fear, anxiety, and even disappointment or anger can mark different phases of citizens' response to a bio-emergency. Emotions might spill over from isolated individuals to society on a larger scale and therefore have a lasting effect on society that can be best responded to with a resilient attitude (Kazmierczak *et al.*, 2020) accompanied by politics of social and material sustainability. Partially influenced by material conditions and discursive embeddings, the emotional factor needs to be taken into account, especially in contexts in which citizens must become participatory agents in the processes of managing a bio-emergency (Cantó-Milà *et al.*, 2021).

Orbegozo and González Abrisketa (2021), like González and Vázquez (2021), focused in their articles on the different forms of communicating a bio-emergency. With emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic, Orbegozo and González Abrisketa looked especially for changes in the language of the main political reference of Spain: president Pedro Sanchez. Within their linguistic analysis of thirteen speeches from Pedro Sanchez by means of Discourse Analysis, they detected an increase in vocabulary of warfare and self-defence. The use of this vocabulary not only points to potential linguistic strategies for justifying the introduction of emergency law, but also to the transformation of a society of risk into a society of emergency in which politicians and other actors responsible for governance feel an increased necessity to respond immediately to risks and threats under extraordinary, non-quotidian conditions that suspend the rules of normal life.

In their respective articles, González and Vázquez (2021) discuss the official communication of the Spanish parliament during the COVID-19 outbreak. Their research not only indicates that political communication faced new challenges in a context of immediate emergencies, but that this communication under extreme conditions did not function as smoothly and efficiently as necessary. The results of their analysis point to a lack of preparation for emergencies under real conditions. Furthermore, it showed that a time of emergency demands other communicative measures than those in times of risk or crisis. A challenge for political institutions is not just the emergency itself, but the implementation of communication strategies that envisage continuous, regular interaction with citizens from different segments of society. Future studies in communication might need to study the redefined challenges for institutional communication in times of emergency, especially in the wider context of digitalisation and transmediality.

In their article, Vandenberghe, Graf and Gubta (2021) ponder the new conditions for society and democracy in a world in which the normal has been suspended. Along the lines of some of the arguments in this article, their research shows that in times of COVID-19, society changed into a context conditioned by ongoing emergencies. Within such a context, existing but largely invisible social and material differences began to resurface.

The methodological answer to research questions under these intensified conditions is a new analytical approach that they call disjuncture analysis. Disjuncture analysis allows for the combination of, and comparison between, different singular contexts in one and the same study. Vandenberghe, Graf and Gubta argue that by reducing complexity and singularity to a simplified common ground, we might miss important facets of the social world in times of emergency. However, treating them as separate might rob researchers of the chance to look at a bigger picture and gain a clear understanding of common challenges and shared outcomes.

Conclusions

Society in times of ongoing emergencies has changed. Recently, with COVID-19, we have entered a time in which material differences and inequalities of power have returned to the foreground of the social agenda. Emergencies do not allow us to engage in long-term preventive planning, but demand answers to urgent social questions

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in the here and now. A sociology of emergency must reflect on ongoing changes and the consequences that might result from them.

A useful sociology that engages with social analysis in times of emergency must be ready to do what science must do when it is at its best: try to look into and analyse previously unexplored topics and apply social theories in a meaningful way, in order to provide the best and most useful answers to challenging social questions without concerns about the combinability of theories.

A sociology of emergency must re-engage and revise traditional paradigms of sociology and look at social forms when they are driven towards the edge, under consideration of potential long-term effects, different available scenarios and consequent outcomes for communities with different material conditions. It is in this sense that a sociology of emergency must return to the analysis of the concrete, of individuals and of communities that are actively and passively implied and influenced by the emerging emergencies and the relationships forged between them.

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