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## For cosmopolitan, public, and reflexive sociology

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# BVPS

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## SYMPOSIUM

### SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC

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#### **1. Sociologists and social scientists in general seem mobilized to interpret the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is sociological theory up to the challenge of understanding and explaining the phenomenon?**

I think that the kind of sociological theory capable of meeting this challenge has to be *cosmopolitan*, *public*, and *reflexive*. To understand the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to embrace what Ulrich Beck called “methodological cosmopolitanism” to investigate a multitude of networks, mechanisms, and processes through which the pandemic reverberates across national borders. At the same time, this cosmopolitan sociology has to be publicly oriented, addressing head-on the urgent matters of concern among citizens, rather than driven by discipline-specific debates that are sheltered within academic settings.

To advance such cosmopolitan and public sociology, we need to be reflexive of our own practices – namely, the very institutions, such as universities and professional associations, in which the production of our sociological knowledge is embedded. For example, in what way can we include public concerns in the process of conducting sociological research on the impacts of the pandemic? And which public(s) are to be included when the impacts of the pandemic are thoroughly transnational? To practice cosmopolitan and public sociology, then, we need to reimagine and transform the infrastructures of our own knowledge production.



In short, the pandemic has opened up a space for sociologists to accelerate the advancement of sociological theory in a cosmopolitan, public, and reflexive direction. But such advancement will be possible only if sociologists around the world increase their joint efforts to break down the barriers between national sociologies, between universities and publics, and between theory and practice.

## **2. How can your research area contribute to examining different dimensions of the phenomenon?**

Consistent with my answer to Question 1, my ongoing research project aims to contribute to rethinking the role of universities in meeting the challenges of the pandemic and other urgent global problems, such as climate change, refugee crises, and economic inequalities. Specifically, I have been examining the organizational transformations of universities in recent decades in the face of the growing commercialization and internationalization of higher education worldwide.

My motivating concern is how to protect and advance the mission of universities to produce knowledge as a global public good and serve as a focal site for critical debates in transnational public spheres. This public mission, I believe, is crucial for meeting the challenges posed by the pandemic and other global problems. My research project thus aims to identify both positive and negative effects of growing commercialization and internationalization on the public mission of universities and then explore possible policies and practices capable of harnessing the positive effects while mitigating the negative ones.

Put another way, through this research project, I aim to proceed from reflexivity to *performativity*. By better understanding the ongoing transformations of universities as the infrastructures of our knowledge production in the contemporary world, I hope to point to ways in which we can make effective interventions to steer the transformations in a more cosmopolitan and public direction. This will be an indirect but decisive contribution, in the long run, to building our collective and institutional capabilities to understand different dimensions of the pandemic and other global problems.



**3. Is the pandemic provoking deep social, political and cultural changes? Or is it speeding up trends of change already underway? If so, is it possible to glimpse the contours of post-pandemic societies?**

To be sure, the contours of post-pandemic societies depend fundamentally on how citizens, governments, corporations, and other relevant actors will mobilize to advance their competing visions for the future. Nonetheless, I suggest that the dialectic of nationalism and cosmopolitanism can help us understand the possible contours in terms of the question of *solidarity* as the basis of social integration, political inclusion, and cultural identity.

In Singapore, for example, the pandemic has demonstrated how much this global city-state depends on foreign workers in the construction sector and how poorly they were treated – these “disposable” workers were housed in crowded dormitories, which became the weakest link in Singapore’s effort to contain the pandemic. But this has also created an opening for Singaporean citizens and policymakers to seriously debate how to improve the working and living conditions of foreign nationals, consistent with the logic of cosmopolitanism that expands the scope of solidarity beyond nationality. Similar moments of cosmopolitan solidarity are incipient in other global cities that rely heavily on foreign workers.

Equally important, the pandemic has also revitalized nationalism as a source of solidarity. On the one hand, the pandemic exposed how healthcare systems in many countries were broken; in particular, the poor, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized populations have been worst affected by the pandemic and its economic ramifications, for they lack adequate medical and financial resources. On the other hand, the plight of those marginalized populations prompted citizens and policymakers to debate how to make their nations more inclusive in the pandemic-induced moments of national solidarity – “we are in this together.”

But these cosmopolitan and national moments of solidarity may well be undone by neoliberal globalism, right-wing populism, and other counterforces. This is why the contours of post-pandemic societies ultimately depend on political struggles among relevant actors, including us sociologists.



#### 4. What work(s) of Sociology or Social Sciences can help us to comprehend and dialogue about the challenges underway?

I think that the works of Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour can help us most because they illuminate the empirical, normative, and performative dimensions of the challenges underway. To begin with, Beck's theory of world risk society, as well as his methodological cosmopolitanism, enables us to comprehend the COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with other global risks, such as financial crises and geopolitical conflicts. Although it is urgent to understand the pandemic in itself, it is also essential to examine how the causes and consequences of the pandemic intersect with those of other global risks. This is because, in the spirit of Beck's cosmopolitan critical theory, the pandemic can, and should, be viewed as a major turning point in the metamorphosis of world risk society into the cosmopolitan collective capable of squarely facing global risks, the most important of which is climate change.

Similarly, Latour's writings help us put the pandemic in the context of climate change as the horizon of all global problems. Although the pandemic has devastated many people's lives and livelihoods around the world, it has also demonstrated how much the quality of air and water can improve when commute, air travel, global supply chains, and many other human footprints are reduced – "winning" the fight against the pandemic must not excuse us from suspending the fight against climate change. Equally important, Latour helps us comprehend the role of scientists and other knowledge producers in the construction and resolution of the pandemic and other global problems. He thus invites us sociologists to embrace our own performativity in assembling relevant participants, settings, and procedures for truly *cosmopolitical* dialogues on the most urgent matters of concern in the world today.

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