



**The Sociology of Pandemics:
Agenda for a Sociologist in Post-COVID-19
Era**

Social Sciences Research
Nnamdi Azikiwe
University, Awka Nigeria

Endurance Uzobo*¹ and Woyengitari Imbazi²

¹⁻²Department of Sociology, Niger Delta University, Nigeria

enduzobo@gmail.com, endurance.uzobo@ndu.edu.ng (*Correspondence Author*)

Abstract

Global outbreak of crises often creates social changes that members of the society are challenged with in terms of adaptation and coping mechanism. However, no doubt the gainsaying that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has created some uprising in society today. Thus, this commentary focuses on some of the pertinent emerging social issues that have arisen after the coronavirus pandemic and the successions of the pandemic waves. This paper believed that a sociological insight is a vital tool for planning after the COVID-19 crises, alongside medical and logistic expertise. Consequently, looking at the pandemic from just a biomedical perspective will only reveal half of the story as the biomedical will neglect the symbolic dimension of how pandemics become social reality. On this note, this commentary discussed the important contributions the discipline of Sociology can make in understanding the global Coronavirus pandemic. In discussing the direct contributions of sociology to COVID-19, the debate in this commentary addressed four(4) key issues namely; (1) uncovering and identifying the social components of the pandemic; (2) observing and examining the manners in which institutional systems and members of society have managed the pandemic outbreak and its different waves; (3) investigating the level of public trust on Covid-19 protocol measures put in place by government and (4) to analyse the method on how the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to set a new world order.

Keywords: *COVID-19, new world order, public trust, social distancing, sociology of pandemics*

Introduction

Recently, Mr Reno Omokiri a former aide to President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria twitted:

If you are applying to a university to read classics, political science, humanities, library science, sociology; you are clinging to the past. You are like a man buying a video cassette recorder. No matter how much you pass, are still the past (Omokiri, 2020).

The above tweet might have been born out of sheer ignorance about what sociologists do, or the fact that in the Nigerian society, everybody does jobs that were formerly reserved for sociologists and other social researchers. Though, this issue is not peculiar to the disciplines in the social sciences alone; the situation seems to be worst among them. What is more shocking was the fact that Mr Omokiri made this tweet at the time coronavirus is raving the world and the concept of social distancing which is a coinage from sociology seems to be a household concept. While this commentary is not born out of the need to respond to Mr Omokiri, the aim of this paper is, however, to illustrate the importance of sociology in times of pandemic crises.

There is a tendency for people who do not understand several discourses relating to social issues to assert that sociology has nothing to say about pandemics and emerging infectious diseases. Accordingly, it is believed that the study of pandemics is exclusively reserved for microbiologists, virologists, and practitioners in public health. Such notions simply betray a basic lack of understanding of how medicine and medical institutions work. First and foremost, these sets of people forget that the health institution is a social institution. It was on this ground that the biomedical definition of health as “the absence of disease and functional fitness” was criticised.

By implication, health practitioners operate within social organisations where there is

bound to be social interactions between the stakeholders of health (Dingwall, Hoffman & Staniland, 2013). Sociologists give an important perspective regarding the make-up and functions of society. Therefore, a sociological insight is also a vital tool for planning in crises, alongside medical and logistic expertise. Consequently, looking at pandemic from just a biomedical perspective will only reveal half of the story as the biomedical will neglect the symbolic dimension of how pandemics become social reality (Pfister, 2020).

Again, the way societies perceive and understand the spread of viruses is not reducible to the ontological reality of the virus but follows instead a social logic. The moment when a viral pandemic becomes a social reality in the global world, it turns into a calamity to the point at which it upsets underestimated reality. Furthermore, emerging illnesses are sources of unsteadiness, vulnerability and even emergencies which can make obvious highlights of the social order to become opaque to social investigation. As societies react to these difficulties, features that we have underestimated have become evident. Briefly, our reality regarding human sciences becomes bizarre. This is at the centre of the commitment made by the sociological imagination to strategy and practice, of seeing how social courses of action can, and should, change when biological conditions change.

Strong's (1990) article on 'Epidemic Psychology' had previously succinctly explored the relevance of sociological study to new and emerging diseases and proposed adoption of a sociological insight in investigating societal responses to these threats. In his words:

"This essay is a first attempt at a general sociological statement on the striking problem that large, fatal epidemics seem to present to social order; on the waves of fear, panic, stigma, moralising and calls to action that seem to characterise the immediate reaction ... Societies are caught up in an extraordinary emotional maelstrom which seems, at least for a

time, to be beyond anyone's immediate control. Moreover, since this strange state presents such an immediate threat, actual or potential, to public order, it can also powerfully influence the size, timing and shape of the social and political response in many other areas affected by the epidemic" (Strong, 1990: 249).

As Strong as cited in (Pfister, 2020) argued, an epidemic is likely to come along with three psychosocial epidemics, each of them referring to disrupting experiences. First, an epidemic of fear and suspicion which threatens our everyday routines and structures. Hence, disruptions in these routines and structures usually become a source of instability and insecurity within society. Again, previously innocent neighbours and children become sources of threats as they could serve a medium for the transmission of the virus. This highlights the tragedy of basic human interactions as the interactions that characterised our previously serene communities can also be the interactions that expose us to a deadly virus (Wald, 2008).

At this juncture, it is expedient to ask, what important contribution can sociology make to the global Coronavirus pandemic crises? It is not difficult for those with little sociological imagination in them to notice how a sociological dimension becomes visible in the era of COVID-19 pandemic have become increasingly apparent. In discussing the direct contribution of sociology to COVID-19, most social debates and discussions have focussed on four key issues as identified by Pleyers (2020:2) namely (1) uncovering and breaking down the social components of the pandemic; (2) observing and examining the manners in which political systems and public governments have handled the emergency; (3) dissecting how the pandemic and the lockdown have profoundly affected individuals and societies, and (4) reflecting on how the crisis and the way social actors deal with it. Our discussion is therefore centred on these four issues to demonstrate how a sociological insight is needed in understanding and dealing with

the COVID-19 crises.

The Social Dimension of COVID-19

The social distribution of COVID-19 has no doubt reveal certain inequalities in the pattern of distribution. For instance, globally, it is argued that those living in the developed countries of the world are more at risk to be exposed to the virus than those in the developing countries of Africa. Also, the pattern of the pandemic has shown that the Aged, those with underlying health conditions and smokers are more likely to have a higher mortality rate than others (Hassan, et al., 2020; Williamson, et at., 2020; Clark, et al, 2020; Docherty, et al., 2020). Also, while there is no significant difference in the mortality rate between gender, figures from Nigeria indicated that men are more likely to be affected than the women (NCDC, 2020). Furthermore, Purkayastha (2020) has stated that in the United States, minority groups are far more likely to be affected by the virus. The social pattern of the virus in France has also indicated that the popular suburbs of Paris had a rise of about 72% of mortality during the first month of the nation's lockdown (Pleyers, 2020).

In the Global South, the pandemic is said to have left an estimated two billion people at risk of abject poverty. In essence, while everyone is exposed to the virus, certain social factor predisposes our exposure differently. While these social divisions have been existing, a sociological view will reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated social structure of society in recent times and make social inequality more visible especially through a class, race and gender dimensions.

Given this social dimension of the virus, it is expedient for an intersectional approach is crucial in understanding how the pandemic crisis is experienced and why across different socio-demographic and economic profiles, a trend which can best be analysed

from a sociological point of view.

Politics, Governance and International Relations

As the coronavirus continues to ravage the world, the polity has experienced several important changes that affect human relations and group behaviour. At the height of the outbreak of the pandemic, almost all countries shut their borders and airspace. The government became the main actors in controlling the spread and managing the virus.

International collaborations have suffered a serious setback as countries were in a stiff race to find a vaccine to the virus. However, in the developing countries, the major concerns have been on curtailing the spread of the virus while waiting for the scientifically advanced countries to come out with a cure. Thus, political sociologists have set their sight on analysing how different political systems and institutions are reacting to the spread of the pandemic. Beck (2009) hypothesizes that fiascos could prompt circumstances whereby 'the establishments of opportunity and vote based system are at risk for being subverted' – various governments have presented various sorts of controls and 'crisis measures' to attempt to 'flatten the curve' of the pandemic – the social, political and ethical impacts of such measures on freedom and democracy will be an on-going area of sociological research, since some measures may continue long term and others may become part of the 'new normal'. The COVID outbreak also uncovered the strengths and limitations of some national political systems. In most countries, there was a huge failure in the part of the government to mobilise her human and material resources to deal with the virus. Some countries even ignored the early warning signs and dismissed the pandemic with a wave of their hands (Pleyers, 2020).

In some developing countries, neglected health systems became apparent. Hence, most countries lost some prominent figures. For instance, in Nigeria the following persons can be mentioned;

- i. Suleiman Achimugu - Former Managing Director of the Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC)
- ii. Abba Kyari – Chief of Staff to the President
- iii. Abiola Ajimobi - A two-term governor in Nigeria’s southwestern Oyo State
- iv. Bayo Osinowo - A senator representing Lagos East Senatorial District.

Sociologist during the COVID-19 era has examined the nature and logic of government policies concerning their focus on health and/or wealth of their nation/state. Some key issues in the public domain of sociology have been on the role of government policies in tackling the pandemic (e.g., how to reduce mortality from the pandemic, how to flatten the pandemic curve, etc.). They have also beamed their searchlight on public trust in government in handling the COVID-19 crisis and their likely response to future pandemics to gain public trust. Key discussions among sociologists have also been on the political economy of COVID-19, with relevant questions focusing on how different nations have responded social inequality on wealth and health during the outbreak. Hence questions like; have the closing of business places due to the pandemic reduce spending among different income groups? have been a subject of interest to sociologists (Ward, 2020).

Public Trust

Key themes emanating from public trust to sociologists are on the immediate and future strain the social distancing policy will have on social isolation, social bonding, trust between close groups and social solidarity in general. Hence, the general argument is that the current social distancing policy will have long-term restrictions on social interactions. Thus, debates among sociologists have been on whether the idea of social distancing perceives other humans as carriers of risk, hence if there is a need for such

social distancing practice to continue in the future. Also, discussions are centred on if the communicable nature of the COVID-19 virus and its attendant social distancing will lead people to fear or loath others. Sociologists are also scuffling with the thoughts of if post-COVID-19 society will be more individualistic owing to the social distance policy. Another area of research interest with regards public to sociologist could be on what or who constitute the 'symbols of threat'.

Similarly, attention has also been paid to COVID-19 and immigration. Since the virus entered different countries from foreigners, will foreigners be seen as harbingers of risks? Will public perceptions about immigrants change? Will the COVID-19 pandemic change government policies about immigration? Will different risk assessment be made for immigrants from the supposedly high-risk countries? These are some of the questions that sociologist will seek to provide answers to in the nearest future.

A New World Order?

After COVID-19 pandemic what next? Is the world as we know it going to change to a new order? These are just some of the issues scholars have grappled with in recent times about the ravaging pandemic. There is no doubt that a significant aspect of the social world as we know it has already been altered including families, friendship, business activities, consumers and other important aspects of our social life. Nevertheless, social scientists are divided over the structure and nature the future will assume. While some have generally adopted an optimistic view of the world after the virus, stating that there will be fewer conflicts with closer cooperation among people and nations (Higgot, 2020) [see Figure 1], others have generally been pessimistic stating that a world with stronger competition and social conflict will emerge (Gagne, 2020). Adopting a somewhat neutral perspective, however, are those who believe that there will not be a significant alteration in the social world as we know it after the end of the

pandemic. Nonetheless, four assumptions about how the new world order will look like after the post-COVID-19 era have been postulated thus:

“Assumption 1: The world is likely to be less prosperous and much more indebted; a global recession is inevitable and a depression probable. Assumption 2: The world will be less economically open. Decreasing free trade and growing economic (and political) decoupling will be the order of the day. Assumption 3: The world will be less ideologically neoliberal. Globalisation, in its extreme Hayekian guise is over. Indeed, the world needs a major rational rethink, as opposed to an ideological rethink, if de-globalisation is to be sensibly mitigated. Assumption 4: The world is likely to be less politically free in an era of digitalisation. Increased digital surveillance will almost certainly remain after its utility in the initial battle against COVID-19 has declined”(Higgot 2020: 6)

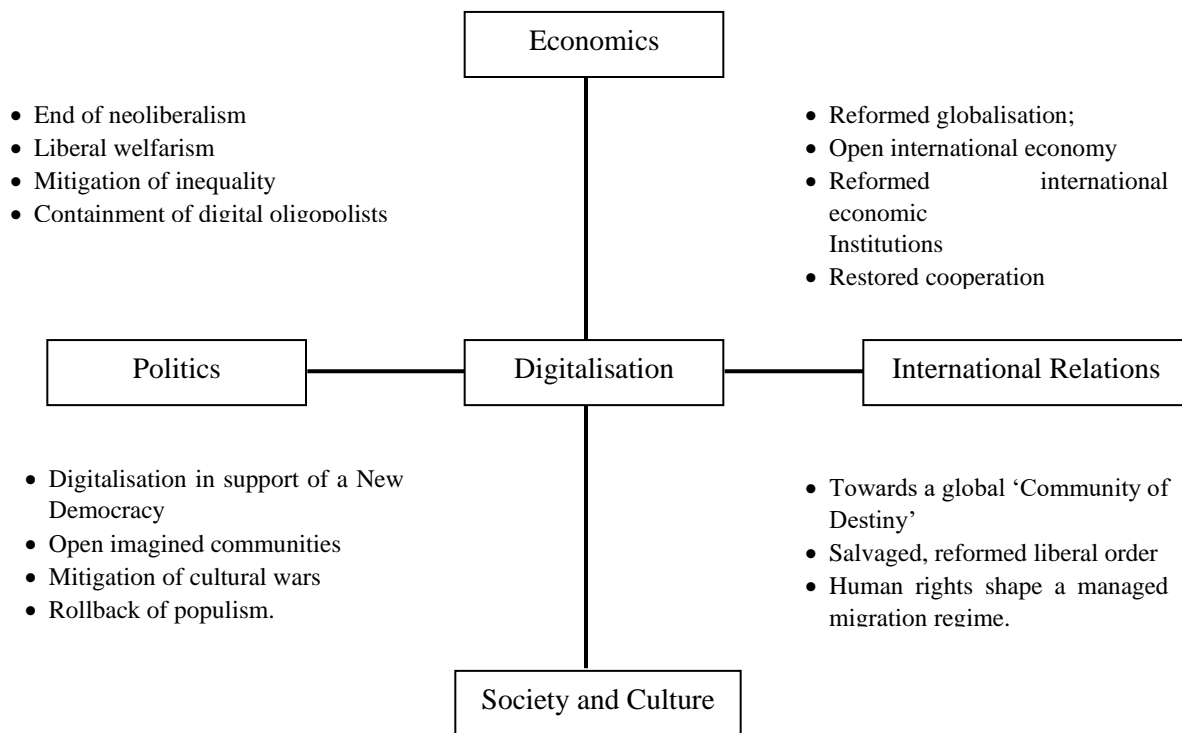


Fig. 1: The optimistic scenario of the Post-COVID-19 Order

Source: Higgot (2020).

Conclusion

Given the trend in the virus and social policies guiding the implementations of measures in curtailing the spread of the virus, this commentary is concluding by noting that a sociological insight is pertinent in first understanding the social dimension of the virus, and also new challenges and opportunities that the pandemic might present after it passes away. Thus, the sociologist might be in the best position to begin to imagine the latent effect of the pandemic and suggest new ways to integrate individuals who have been dislocated by the pandemic back to society.

References

- Clark, A., Jit, M., Warren-Gash, C., Guthrie, B., Wang, H., Mercer, S. W., Sanderson, C., McKee, M., Troeger, C., Ong, K. L., Checchi, F., Perel, P., Joseph, S., Gibbs, H. P., Banerjee, A., Eggo, R. M., & Centre for the Mathematical Modelling of Infectious Diseases COVID-19 working group (2020). Global, regional, and national estimates of the population at increased risk of severe COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions in 2020: a modelling study. *The Lancet. Global health*, 8(8), e1003–e1017. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30264-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30264-3)
- Docherty, A. B., Harrison, E. M., Green, C. A., Hardwick, H. E., Pius, R., Norman, L., Holden, K. A., Read, J. M., Dondelinger, F., Carson, G., Merson, L., Lee, J., Plotkin, D., Sigfrid, L., Halpin, S., Jackson, C., Gamble, C., Horby, P. W., Nguyen-Van-Tam, J. S., Ho, A., ... ISARIC4C investigators (2020). Features of 20 133 UK patients in hospital with covid-19 using the ISARIC WHO Clinical Characterisation Protocol: prospective observational cohort study. *BMJ (Clinical research ed.)*, 369, m1985. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1985>
- Gagne, M-R. (April, 2020). The new social order and the World after COVID-19. Irish Tech News. <https://irishtechnews.ie/new-social-order-the-world-after-covid-19/>
- Hanafi, S. (2020) Resurgent authoritarianism: The sociology of new entanglements of religions, politics, and economies. <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/conferences/world-congress/melbourne-2022>

- Hassan, Z., Hashim, M.J., & Khan, G. (2020). Population risk factors for COVID-19 deaths in Nigeria at sub-national level. *Pan African Medical Journal*. 35(2):131.10.11604/pamj.suppl.2020.35.131.25258
- Higgot, R. (2020). Three scenarios for world order after COVID-19: Can multilateral cooperation be saved? Concept Paper. DOC Research Institute
- Omokiri, R. [@renoomokiri]. (2020, September 29). #FreeLeahSharibu#RenosNuggets [Tweet]. Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/renoomokri/status/1310905923435667457>
- NCDC (2020). COVID-19 situation report weekly epidemiological Report 8. file:///C:/Users/HP/AppData/Local/Temp/An%20update%20of%20COVID-19%20outbreak%20in%20Nigeria_051220_49.pdf
- Pleyers, G. (2020). A plea for global sociology in times of the coronavirus. *ISA Digital Platform*.
- Purkayastha, B. (2020). Divided we stand – the pandemic in the US, Open Movements/Open Democracy.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/divided-we-stand-the-pandemic-in-the-us>
- Williamson, E. J., Walker, A. J., Bhaskaran, K., Bacon, S., Bates, C., Morton, C. E., Curtis, H. J., Mehrkar, A., Evans, D., Inglesby, P., Cockburn, J., McDonald, H. I., MacKenna, B., Tomlinson, L., Douglas, I. J., Rentsch, C. T., Mathur, R., Wong, A., Grieve, R.,
- Harrison, D., ... Goldacre, B. (2020). Factors associated with COVID-19-related death using Open SAFELY. *Nature*, 584(7821), 430–436. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2521-4>