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(Public) Sociology in Times of Crisis – The German Corona Experience

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In the course of March this year, the [German Sociological Association](#) (DGS) began to document the substantial sociological presence in the media, gathering and presenting through its [homepage](#) the many shades of sociological contributions on the Corona-crisis. The majority of pieces are invited op-ed's and interviews in off- and online media, meaning that the media obviously believe that sociology has important things to say about the contemporary crisis.

A major issue addressed by German sociologists is the willingness of the population to act in solidarity right from the beginning of the crisis, i.e. from the moment the crisis was communicated as such through government representatives. The great sense of solidarity was noted because the majority of the population accepted the initial – strong – restrictions imposed by the state, without major protests. Solidarity is seen as the willingness to actively protect groups at risk, such as the elderly or those with diseases, by a severe 'stay at home' policy. Violations of physical distancing and quarantine, however, can be, and actually are sanctioned by the police. Another issue addressed by sociologists are hoarding practices. Especially toilet paper, flour and medical drugs have been bought in irrational amounts, as reported by the media. Sociologists ask whether such behavior is due to massive fear among the population, or might pure egoism be the motive (contradicting the diagnosis of widespread solidarity)? In their contributions, and not surprisingly, our colleagues do not quite agree on what phenomenon we are dealing with here. The multiparadigmatic nature of sociology strikes again, and no crisis can stop it. There are also, albeit perhaps (too) few, yet important contributions on care work before, during and after the global social crisis, as well as preliminary analyses on the increase of domestic violence due to the state-imposed restrictions to stay at home, many of them written by female colleagues.

Beside specific questions about current distancing and lockdown policies more general perspectives are provided by (mostly male) colleagues working in the field of general theory and diagnoses of the presence.

The intended and unintended consequences of the disruption of social life are debated against the background of different theoretical approaches such as functional differentiation or acceleration/deceleration as a signature of the current dynamics of modernity. Some contributions on the other hand focus on the possible practical impact of methodological sociological expertise when it comes to study design in the field of representative testing strategies to shed light on the percentage of infected/immune people.

Some critical sociological voices are also heard. There is strong criticism of the neoliberal commodification and commercialization of the health care system, especially in regard to austerity politics in many European and countries of the Global South, of the failure of unconditional privatization, and of the consequences of economic globalization (especially for the automobile industry which is crucial for the German economy). However, such comments are remarkably few. It seems as if sociology's expertise on sociality were more interesting than critical analysis. Important questions regarding the social dimensions of the crisis commented on by German sociology entail: How do we deal with the imposed spatial restrictions? How does being confined to private spaces change the social life? How does social inequality materialize through precisely spatial re- and prescriptions: who is allowed to stay at home, who must go out (to work), who must take risks, who is forced to give up mobility? For whom are such restrictions a loss of freedom, and to whom rather an uncanny risk? How do we socialize within social media? How do families cope with the burden of 'homeschooling', and how does this relate to inequality?

Surprisingly, so far environmental issues are hardly ever mentioned in the debate, although the increasing proximity of humans to animals is seen as one cause of the pandemic. The chance to regard the crisis as a starting point for changing our lifestyle and a different handling of natural resources is not seen - at least by the media - as an issue that could be questioned in sociology. This is despite the fact that the need for social science expertise with respect to the consequences of climate change is increasingly in demand from the political side.

Apart from these first impressions of selected media content, some sociological platforms have begun to organize sociological inputs with regard to Covid19: the online-forum [Soziopolis](#) provides a structured overview on national and international publications and the [Berlin Social Science Center](#) (WZB) organizes [series of online talks](#) on sociological perspectives of the "Corona Crisis" via ZOOM every Wednesday.

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