

## The social and human sciences and the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract** *This paper addresses the challenges the social and human sciences face in the COVID-19 epidemic/pandemic. This review refers only to a few aspects, approaching the so-called Ginzburg evidential paradigm by stating that “reality is opaque; there are privileged areas – signs, indications – that make us decipher it”. In general, research in the social and human sciences focused on the health crisis is fundamental: First statement: both in the disease spread period and the post-pandemic period. Second statement: the epidemic is not restricted to a viral event.*

**Key words** *Social and human sciences, COVID-19, Epidemic*

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Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic topic, even extracting it from the social and human sciences perspective, has become a significant challenge.

The ABRASCO alert is thus resumed (22/04/2020):

*By enacting Ordinance 1.122 on 19/03/2020, the Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovations, and Communications (MCTIC) presented its priorities for research projects, technology development, and innovations (2020-2023) focusing only on technologies and innovation. However, Ordinance 1.329 of 27/03/2020 amended the previous decree and recognized the “essential and cross-sectional nature of its research projects [in humanities and social sciences]”. However, this recognition does not translate into an act, as seen in the call for “Research to fight against COVID-19, its consequences, and other severe acute respiratory syndromes”. **This call does not include themes or research lines that consider investigating the aspects mentioned above (emphasis added).***

It points out that this type of exclusion can have extremely severe consequences for an adequate understanding of the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Brazilian State will not be able to formulate public policies and implement actions to mitigate and repair the damage caused by this pandemic<sup>1</sup> based on incomplete, imprecise, or even mistaken analyses.

The theme became challenging because this observation triggered and escalated a movement by social and humanities scientists in several countries, including Brazil, in scientific production. Particularizing sociology, in one of the first Brazilian essays on the subject, Marzochi<sup>2</sup> states:

*The emergence of COVID-19, taken as a new global ecological event, far from calling into question the foundations of classical sociology, reveals how relevant these are to understanding the pandemic and guiding behaviors. The quick spread of a probably animal-borne virus – like so many others – among human populations in an urban and cosmopolitan environment leads us to revive some fundamental sociological concepts, such as **social fact, social totality, collective consciousness, collective and sensitive representations, symbolic and imaginary, human duality, total social fact, and indistinction between nature and culture** (emphasis added).*

We should remember that the issue was not unknown to health sociologists. In 2013, Dingwall, Hoffman, and Staniland<sup>3</sup> asked: *Why a Sociology of Pandemics?* In a thematic issue of the *Sociology of Health & Illness*, the authors summarize that:

*Infectious diseases have reemerged as a threat to public health in an increasingly globalized era, adding transnational stakeholders and national and local government traditional stakeholders. [...] Collaborators investigated **the social construction of new and reemerging diseases; the development of surveillance systems; public health governance; the impact of scientific/technical modalities on uncertainty and risk; the interaction of infectious diseases; public health and national security concerns, and public and media responses.** The case studies broadly span North America, Europe, and Asia and set new agendas for medical sociologists and public health policy-makers (emphasis added).*

Among us, Grissotti's<sup>4</sup> detailed commentary concludes that *diagnosis, risk exposure information, and treatment increasingly rely on socio-anthropological factors. Therefore, through their peculiar theoretical and methodological tools, sociologists and anthropologists often manage to explain particular epidemiological patterns and help build an awareness of the interdependence required for global health governance.*

It is, therefore, a matter of drawing interfaces for a knowledge that is not limited to a natural history of the pandemic, of the utmost relevance, without a doubt (at this stage, the new Delta strain, considered the most infectious, will require further basic investigations), yet incomplete, especially in the pre-vaccine production stage, when protection measures were of a social and hygienist nature.

This review refers only to some aspects, approaching the so-called **evidential paradigm** of Ginzburg<sup>5</sup> when stating that *“reality is opaque; there are privileged areas – signs, indications – that make us decipher it”*.

In 2020, historians, economists, geographers, and sociologists gathered to produce a set of papers on the most diverse aspects of the pandemic, noting that *The term “pandemic” has definitely entered our current vocabulary. Although the word did not specifically designate a disease in Greek (“pan” = all + “demos” = people), it indicated the events significant for all the people*<sup>6</sup>. Among the topics: diseases in urban areas, the meningitis epidemic during the military dictatorship in São Paulo in the 1890s, and in 2020: epidemics, confrontations, reproduction of inequalities, stories that epidemics tell us, and solidarity as a political struggle tool.

In general, research in the social and human sciences focused on the health crisis is crucial both in the disease spread and the post-pan-

demic period. Second statement: the epidemic is not restricted to a viral event. Chronologically, the first records in the Brazilian press date from January 2020 (news in the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* on January 13).

A survey in the PubMed database<sup>7</sup>, on July 14, 2021, records the following results: COVID-19 and Social Sciences – 19,648; Anthropology – 992; Political Sciences – 1,237; Sociology – 9,580. Ninety-three systematic reviews were detected with different themes: impact of isolation, mental health, suicide, anxiety, loneliness, vulnerability

(gender, race, and social class), phobia and fear, and stigmatization.

As previously reported, an exhaustive study was not intended here. Undoubtedly, this type of study should be conducted by targeting a comprehensive and systematized perspective.

In 2007, in the article “*La grippe, une menace éternelle*”, Barry, Hessel, and Gualde<sup>8</sup> wrote: *Knowing the history of influenza, a relatively well-known millenary disease, is vital to try to anticipate the onset of the next pandemic*. If we cannot avoid COVID-19, we must be prepared for the future.

### Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Prof. Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo for her suggestion and to CNPq – Proc.303924/2019-5.

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Article submitted 05/09/2021

Approved 05/10/2021

Final version submitted 07/10/2021

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Chief editors: Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo, Romeu Gomes, Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva