

From Pandemic to Conflict(s)

Global Health Under Attack

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Abstract

This article aims at critically addressing – from a sociological and psychological perspective – some data (and opinions) related to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic in Western countries. These effects, which were completely negative for the entire European population, have been particularly painful for some social groups, causing many problems related to global health that are far from being absorbed in the short term. While a period of “relief” and reintroduction to normality would have been necessary, the international community has been hit by another serious trauma: the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which resulted in very serious effects on global health as well.

Keywords

Covid-19, European population, conflicts, social groups.

1. Covid: Which Destiny? Global Data to Date: Cautions and Approximations

Until April 21, 2022, according to public data shown by international organizations, people infected by the Covid-19 virus would have been 507,390,109; the dead ones 6,234,286; the cured ones 459,729,315.

It is therefore the most serious modern pandemic so far recorded after the so called “Spanish” flu pandemic of the years following the First World War. However, these data must be observed with great caution since for several reasons they can only be considered indicative.

Reasons of internal politics, for instance. The People’s Republic of China, after a few months from the beginning of

the pandemic, decided to stop providing data on infections, healings and deaths. Other countries have provided data that cannot be considered reliable for internal political reasons as well. The difficulties of some countries in recording pandemic data, especially in non-urban areas of certain African, Asian, and Latin American countries, are well known. Indeed, there has been a substantial diversity in the

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classification of Covid-19 as the leading cause of death, by individual countries. The same substantial diversity can be observed within some countries when local health authorities have established the classification criteria.

2. The Divides Crossing the Social Areas

The waves of the pandemic that have followed one another so far have brought with them (or, in some cases, have deepened) certain rifts in the social body in almost all the European countries.

Let's give a thorough look.

3. Young – Elderly people

This divide represents the most important one. Many young people, in all European countries, have been persuaded that Covid was an “old man's disease”.

When interviewed, in most of the cases they always have said: “Covid? That's the disease of the old people”. In this regard it has to be considered that a good part of the European media has reinforced their belief thus leading to three consequences.

First. Many young people have neglected the standard

precautions prescribed by health and administrative authorities. This mostly happened during major events (concerts, shows, raves) but also in school and after school meetings and with friends (outings, parties).

Second. Many young people seem to be totally unprepared for the possibility of new pandemics or the resumption of Covid.

Third. A good part of intergenerational solidarity has represented up to now one of the strong glues of the social body¹. As a result of these and other reasons, however, a certain intolerance towards the elderly has emerged in the context of social media and television, in some European countries more than in others. The consequence has been a blaming attitude, which has led to proposals for ghettoization such as: “Why this general imprisonment to protect ‘them?’”, “Could not restrictive measures be established only for them while we young people continue our normal life?”.

The danger of this fracture has also been noticed by the European Union which created a special project “Generations against isolation and Covid” aiming to unite generations

that have diverged from each other.

4. Affluent – Poor People

The gap between affluent and poor people has created a double divide in the collective culture.

There is no doubt that the difference between the different classes influenced how they managed to deal with the effects of the pandemic affecting their respective economic conditions, and it should be added that this is more evident in certain types of consumption.

The measures deliberated in many nations to help the social groups most affected by the crisis (including the so-called “ristori” decrees in Italy) have only partially succeeded in reducing the devastating effects of the phenomenon. While in many cases there has been a progressive impoverishment, in others the situation has remained fairly stable and in a few cases there has even been an “enrichment” with the consequence that the inequalities of economic resources – and therefore of lifestyles – have definitely increased. Furthermore, this “objective” gap has taken on a more “subjective” value since it is associated with the perception of a growing

distance between those who can afford health care and those who cannot, between those who can recover and those who cannot, between the *haves* and the *have-nots* of our time.

This vision should be further investigated to highlight the link between some health determinants and the strongly negative attitude towards pandemic prevention through vaccine and virus treatment². The idea that Covid-19 essentially affected “the poor” has found a partial confirmation in pandemic trends in some less wealthy areas such as Latin America or the Indian subcontinent.

But the most serious cost of the pandemic – in terms of loss of life in absolute values – has so far been paid by Europe and the United States.

Even If we consider the losses in terms of percentage of the population, among the most affected, immediately after some Latin American countries such as Brazil and Peru, we find European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria³.

5. Cultural Divide

What everyone assists to is that in the course of the

pandemic a real and deep cultural divide has been created that is also practical, as in the case of the one between those who own the technological tools (and know how to use them) and those who do not have them (or do not know how to use them proficiently). Although the measures of isolation and containment have affected everyone, it was the poorest groups who suffered the most, especially as regards social relations, economics and employment.

Only the ones who had a minimum of technological knowledge were able to attend webinars, listen to online conferences and concerts or make virtual visits to museums, experiences that only the richest groups could afford. Only the ability to access the Internet or e-mail has allowed some groups to maintain contact with their world and overcome confinement.

Even more relevant were the consequences of the digital divide at work and in the economy.

While the privileged with mental agility, competence and economic means to use technology could evidently switch to smart working, with much greater effectiveness and

productivity, or benefit from distance learning in school, the “others” found themselves doubly penalized under all points of view.

6. Population – Health Authorities

In many countries, the gap among population/citizens/administrators on the one hand and administration/government/health authorities on the other has deepened.

The reasons can be sought in the many uncertainties and consequent differences of opinion within the medical and administrative class (on the origin of the virus and its possible treatments, on the adoption of preventive measures such as physical and social distancing or the use of gloves and masks, on the effectiveness of different vaccines and vaccination strategies)⁴.

Perhaps this is why the authorities that handled the pandemic in its early stages adopted health strategies for which they were held accountable (even if their responsibility was not theirs alone) and which were not fully accepted by the public.

But whatever the reasons, the deepening of this gap has sparked anti-government

protests. Regardless of their validity, these protests had as a common basis the unease for social and economic situations and the tendency to “take advantage” of every occasion, more or less contingent, to express it.

The phenomenon of protests by anti-Covid skeptics against government initiatives started in France with the demonstrations of the so-called *gilets jaunes* and multiplied in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Spain⁵).

While it is true that the ultra-right managed to hegemonize much of these protests, it would still be too easy to label them as mere right-wing demonstrations.

On the contrary, they represented rather the renewal of a form of intolerance, an “anarchist” intolerance that has always been present in many European countries (and sometimes even in the United States of America) with respect to any form of standardization by the “authority”. These anti-Covid measures (lockdowns, mandatory vaccinations for health care workers, etc.) have sometimes been perceived by the masses as highly restrictive of personal freedom and pro-

tests have often ended up taking a “conspiratorial” turn.

This conspiracy perspective was ready to see in Covid-19 the perfect opportunity for the government to implement initiatives designed with the sole intent of imposing unnecessary regulations. In other cases it was also seen as a way to bind the will of citizens, in particular with the mandatory need for the so-called “Green pass”. Even worse was the theory of an international machination conceived and carried out by ultra-powerful and evil groups.

For many conspiracists, Soros was the ultimate evil *par excellence*. In this case, the confluence of an antisemitic component rationally unrelated to the pandemic problem, shows how many of these events can be traced back to the “extra-political” sphere, rather than to policy-specific sectors.

It is reasonable to predict that all these divides will not fail to bring consequences in the global health of European society in the near future as well.

7. The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Mental Health

The Covid-19 pandemic has had severe consequences on

mental health of populations across the globe. From the early stages of the pandemic, there has been a dire need for counseling and psychotherapy related to the conditions of lockdown, resulting in isolation, loneliness, and lack of social connectedness, as well as dealing with fear of death and grief after losing loved ones due to the disease. Since the beginning of the pandemic, psychologists have also provided assistance to healthcare personnel and other essential workers who have been reporting high levels of stress, strain, and burnout. In the United States, among 20,000 healthcare workers surveyed between May and October 2020, 43% were suffering from work overload, 38% reported anxiety and depression, and 49% felt burned out⁶. Similar impact on mental health has been reported in other countries, for example in Spain⁷ and in Italy⁸.

General population has also suffered mental health consequences due to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data⁹, adults in the United States have reported anxiety and depression at rates about 4 times higher between April 2020 and August

2021 than the rates reported in 2019. Asian Americans, young adults, males, and parents with children at home seemed to be impacted even more than other subgroups. The pandemic has also resulted in much higher levels of stress compared with the previous years. Annually, the American Psychological Association conducts the “Stress in America” survey. According to the latest data, the effects of the Covid-19 related stress consist of multiple daily struggles, unhealthy behavior changes, poor decision-making, and a general sense of uncertainty. 63% of participants in the survey reported feeling stressed due to uncertainty about what the next few months would be like, and 49% believed that the Covid-19 pandemic has made planning their future seem impossible¹⁰.

In order to understand the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health, Boden and colleagues¹¹ have identified and classified the pandemic stressors, including exposure to the virus, media, and death. Firstly, anxiety and distress can easily result from the threat of being infected with the Covid-19 due to physical exposure to an individual who was or feared to be infect-

ed. Secondly, media exposure has been known to increase the perception of threats, loss and deprivation, according to Garfin and colleagues¹². Thirdly, witnessing or receiving news about the death of a family member, friends, colleagues, or patients increases the risks of depression, traumatic stress and complicated grief. According to Wallace and colleagues¹³ (2020), coping with the death and the dying condition has become more challenging during the pandemic due to their suddenness and unexpectedness but also because of difficulties in communicating prior to death and limitations to social support and mourning rituals.

So where are we today, considering the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic? A growing body of research has been dedicated to the topic of vaccination, especially in terms of vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, conspiracy theories, or even using psychological tools to help patients overcome their injection fear. On the other hand, organizational psychology has been researching and identifying best practices for workers’ wellbeing, strategies to overcome and prevent burn-out and stress, and support

mental health of employees in general, while assisting organizations in understanding how to navigate change with agility and flexibility. Social psychologists have emphasized how the Covid-19 pandemic brought up even more inequalities in our societies. For example, it has been found that couples were falling back into traditional gender roles when managing responsibilities during the pandemic¹⁴. In fact, according to the International Labour Organization¹⁵, on a world scale, women’s employment dropped by 4.2% between 2019 and 2020, compared with 3% for men. Furthermore, developmental psychologists who focus on children and adolescents, have also noted severe mental health consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Minors have been facing trauma because of the loss of family members or/and caregivers, as well as daily anxiety about the virus, changes in their home environment, remote learning, unpredictable routines, and health concerns¹⁶.

8. Post-pandemic Forecasts

The post-Covid society cannot be prefigured from an exclusively sociological point of view precisely because it is a reticular society. A more comprehensive

and interdisciplinary analysis of the entire network is needed, with both a political contribution and a contribution from social psychology. Thus, some open questions remain.

The transformations that have taken place will only be temporary or will they permanently mark our society?

What will be the impact on global health of the post-Covid-19 era?

Will the long crisis create new opportunities?

Does the growing fear of authoritarianism have its own rational justification?

Today, only a few questions can be answered by provisional and fragmentary responses.

As for the “new normal”, according to Adli Najam, a Pakistani intellectual who teaches at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, there will never be a return to the past.

Ahmad Bhat, of the European Respiratory Society – ERS, believes that the habits acquired during the long period of crisis will be maintained.

It is reasonable indeed to assume that many of the innovations related to “smart working” (e.g. remote meetings), thanks their practicality, economy and effectiveness, will be

maintained and become part of current practice.

The effects of the pandemic on the Global Health of European society are very articulated and affect the research, the health care organization, and the distribution of medical and nursing staff.

9. Research

Significant resources from Foundations and public-private partnerships by Covid-19 are being studied.

Funds that under different circumstances could have been employed to medical and biological research in other areas.

10. Healthcare Organization

Millions of Europeans had their health calendar been postponed and a significant number of surgical interventions and specialist visits were considered non-urgent.

Many departments that had intrinsic validity have been dislodged, sometimes abruptly, to make room for the Covid-19 intensive care units.

11. Health Personnel

The pandemic resulted in the detection of relevant short-

ages in the amount of medical and nursing personnel.

These deficiencies, in most cases completely unsuspected by public opinion, were also reported in non-European countries and only the political sphere can take the appropriate decisions to solve the problem.

According to the most accredited opinions, the improvement in the global health of the European post-Covid society could only come from a general rethinking of health logistics, new investments in training, the timely acquisition of medical and nursing personnel, and from a more integrated vision at the European Union level¹⁷.

The new opportunities arising from the exit from the pandemic crisis have been widely emphasized by several authors and they are undoubtedly linked to a better general use of information technologies.

For companies, these new opportunities are mainly indicated in innovation and development, and in a new relationship with the environment, also with regard to climate change and energy production. This future seems to be accompanied by the fear of a new “authoritarian democracy”,

with its new rules that cannot be explained or controlled. Igor Grossman and Oliver Twardus of the University of California have clearly expressed the relationship between the post-Covid situation and a possible emergent authoritarianism¹⁸.

In this field European public communication has made multiple mistakes, thus damaging the image of many Institutions and men statesmen¹⁹.

12. New Real Powers

The long periods of isolation, combined with the spread of unverified information and the rise of irrational fears, have led to the rise of new real “strong powers” which in the post-Covid period have largely replaced traditional powers. The three main ones are:

1. The power of social networks and social media, and the economic and financial level of the digital platforms do not seem easy to control, nor it is circumscribable without an adequate mechanism within the European Union.

Social media combines professional improvisation and the absence of any ethical foundation.

The increasing medias’ weight is a natural conse-

quence of the collapse of traditional journalism. The concept of public opinion is shrunken and impoverished by social media once again after the advent of the myriad television channels. By now, there are many small “public-private opinions” which tend to be structured with the sectarian characteristics of total self-referentiality²⁰.

When we speak about the power of new technologists, we especially mean those who deal with cybersecurity. Therefore, they perceive themselves as guardians, custodians, but also referees. This power is even less circumscribable from outside. Social media instead of news or images, operate immaterial objects, unknown to the majority of people.

Though, there is nothing magical or irrational about them, they are hardly accessible, and ensure that technologists constitute a new caste: they are admired, with considerable financial means, and close relations with the world of finance, the secret services and the police.

2. The power of hope. It is the power of those who manage the production and disposal of vaccines and medicines

while establishing their characteristics, prices and conditions of distribution.

This power of hope has grown exponentially with the pandemic, and the leaders of these enterprises have treated heads of state and government on an equal footing, taking part in decisions that have charted the fate of entire human groups.

3. These new powers interact with the great techno-digital powers.

Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft now dominate the expectations economy and have now replaced for levels of capitalization and revenues the *big names* in the oil or automotive sectors.

Some private for-profit subjects, which at first glance would therefore be defined as companies, have taken on an absolutely different subjectivity on the international scene.

Partly as a result of the pandemic, they have formed public-private partnerships, established foundations and negotiated with state institutions and international organizations.

By their very nature, the new powers and techno-digital ones, which have now become

“techno-financial”, do not seem to need to carry out lobbying in defense of their interests, leaving the “small powers” with the task of carrying out lobbying initiatives with European and national institutions.

13. Winners and losers

Among the great winners of the Covid period are distance learning, electronic commerce as a whole and online sales, smart working (i.e., bureaucratic and professional work done from home). Globally, therefore, the victory of the “immaterial” over the material. But it should be noted that all this virtualization of relationships also has a profoundly de-socializing effect on the social body. Basically, everyday life lacks work colleagues, schoolmates, “my bar’s friends”, “my peers”, and “that little store where I used to stop and chat with the owner and the other customers”.

All those informal groups that, from Norway to Gibraltar, contribute to the characteristics of European society. How much these informal ties were – and are – important had been ascertained at the time with business research, which had established that the time spent by employees chat-

ting in “coffee breaks” was positively offset by the strengthening of ties.

Interpersonal relationships – and consequently a sense of group – belonging to the company. It’s no coincidence that business consultants today are developing techniques and solutions to develop “group belonging” in the era of smart working.

Significant, however, in the era of the pandemic, is also the victory of the disvalue of “secrecy”.

A tool dredged up from medieval darkness, which has defeated the postmodern value of transparency. But paradoxically in an antinomian way: the dissemination of information and private news about citizens prevails over a privacy that increasingly appears to be respected only in a formal way. A kind of chatter or gossip institutionalized through “traceability”.

Naturally, travel, the tourism-hotel cluster and retail sales take on themselves the negative consequences for many important sectors of the economy and employment. What we say is not on the economic side but on the psychological one. Interpersonal relations, public communica-

tion, in particular the communication of health authorities, are also defeated²¹.

The debate that has developed in the scientific world, with sometimes spectacular implications, has also compromised in a certain sense the image of the medical-biological sciences²².

The question remains whether European society and its ruling class have learned anything from the harsh lessons of Covid, and whether they will be able to respond more effectively to possible new emergencies.

14. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the new stress of global health

While the European and world population were slowly recovering from the heavy legacy of Covid-19 and planning for a difficult post-Covid, a new traumatic event occurred. On the night of February 23-24, 2022, the Russian Federation, after declaring that it would not conduct any war actions against Ukraine, decided to undertake a “special military operation” on Ukrainian territory, with deployment of large contingents of men and means, and began a series of aerial bombardments on the

capital and several cities on Ukrainian territory. The intertwining issues in this new Russian-Ukrainian conflict are extremely numerous. As in almost all modern conflicts, military strategy and human rights, geopolitics and minority rights, power politics and international law, ideology and public communication, economic policy and anthropology are intertwined and, in the practical case, they may be antinomial to each other. It is not our task as social researchers to analyze them here, nor to make predictions about the outcome of this war, but some general considerations are necessary. The events of the war, and the decisions taken at the political level by European capitals as sanctions against the Russian Federation, have and even more will have a profound influence on global health, in particular:

1. Food sector.
2. Energy sector and environmental choices.
3. Immigration and refugee reception.

14.1. *Food sector*

Taking into account that before the conflict Ukraine was one of the largest producers

and exporters of wheat in the world and that this year sowing and harvesting will not be able to take place normally, it is possible that some importing countries will have to face to serious food shortages.

14.2. *Energy sector*

The decisions taken by western governments to reduce up to block imports of gas and oil from the Russian Federation have already made their effect felt not only on Russia but also on the same countries which decided them, raising the prices of many raw materials, and therefore affecting the choices of final consumers. With the immediate consequence to constitute an important part of the inflationary phenomenon that is hitting Europe hard. The decision to diversify sources of gas and oil imports has been a necessary consequence for many western countries, but public opinion has not failed to note how some of these producer countries that are now seen as “alternative” are politically linked to the Russian Federation for example Algeria and some African countries. The orientation towards nuclear energy – already abandoned by Italy since 1987 – does not

appear to be a global solution. Renewable energies, i.e. solar and wind power, are much more accredited, also from an environmental and global health standpoint. But even in this case, in order to be of international importance, decisions would require European political unity and significant economic investment, and also some time before becoming operative.

The problem triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has overshadowed the correct concerns that many European countries had about the environmental damage caused by an economy that relied too much on fossil fuels. All the projects to achieve a *green* economy in Europe, and to face the climate challenge, have been postponed. And this can be considered another serious “collateral damage” caused to global health by the current conflict.

14.3. *Immigration*

Following the conflict there have already been large movements of Ukrainian population who left their country to enter the territory of the European Union²³, in particular toward Poland, Romania, Moldova, also with the intention to later

reach other countries such as Germany, France, Italy, USA, Canada, Israel. As to the number of refugees, it is extremely difficult to make a precise global calculation, and even more difficult to formulate hypotheses on possible new population exoduses.

Such a large demographic movement has the capacity to disrupt the European “post-Covid” period under the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural profile. But we cannot overlook the potential consequences in terms of global health, taking into

account both the low rate of vaccination of the Ukrainian population and their habit of living in very different climatic conditions.

The attitude of many European countries – in particular Poland, which had expressed extreme opposition to accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa – has been completely reversed in the case of Ukrainian refugees. According to a poll, 92% of Poles are in favor of accepting Ukrainian refugees²⁴. In this case, there were probably deep anthropological affinities that

determined at a social level a desire not only not to reject refugees, but “to take care of them”. However, not dissimilar percentages are found for Germany (90%), and Italy (89%), while France stops at 80%, substantially confirming the opinion expressed a few days earlier in another poll 79%²⁵.

A question remains, however, as to how much this economic burden of reception and insertion/integration can weigh on the economy of individual countries, especially in the long term, without the Union taking charge.

Notes

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