Discovering Society in a Global Age

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As different countries take measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, much is being revealed about the nature of different forms of society. In some it is revealed as strong, in others weak, and in others a fatalism about the lack of society. As sociologists we do not lack analyses and approaches to understanding and explaining the risk of natural disasters like the present Covid-19 pandemic. Ulrich Beck established decades back (*Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, 1992) that the organisation of industrial society had created immanent risks that were inadequately understood and weakly responded to. Climate heating bears out his prophetic relevance. New contagious viruses belong to a warmer, wetter world. Floods, desertification, extreme temperatures, and now plague herald the threat of human extinction. It is no longer such a step towards the posthuman, the realization that we are not the sole lifeform and that we exist by virtue of symbiotic relationships with other life forms, viruses and bacteria in particular.

Anthony Giddens has expounded on the way we as individuals live with, adapt and re-create the social in our relationships and identities, even when the world is running out of control (*Runaway World* 2000). Peter Hennessy the contemporary historian opined that we would divide history up between the pre- and post-corona virus eras (BBC Radio 4 WorldatOne 17 March). Irwin Stelzer, the economist, opined in the Sunday Times on 15 March that the risks were small and the reality negligible. Time will tell. Giddens suggests we need an alertness to how things change in ways that are unpredictable yet offer us some kind of agency.

Re-phrasing Hennessey perhaps we will refer to the *old* economy – the monoliths of airlines, airports, transport, the tourist industry, energy companies, office employment, shoppings malls – in short, our need to do everything large and en masse. The business models may dissolve with mothballing and our appetites and tastes become re-defined. Communication technology has been given a pivotal position in finding out who is in distress, who is in need, who has to stay where as networks are analysed in real time, and where resources need to be deployed. We are forced to stay at home so maybe let's refashion this into a new form of sociability. Neoliberal economic strictures are being bent out of shape as hyper-Keynesianism kicks in, both opening up debate in new ways as well as running economies in new ways.

The leading theorist on risk is of course Mary Douglas. In her collection of essays *Risk and Blame* (1994) she wrote that "moderns follow a line of reasoning from effects back to material causes" and "primitives a line from misfortune to spiritual beings". In advanced societies we have lost the habit of acculturating ourselves to what nature throws at us, and we are still living according to the maxim of world mastery – the ambivalent inheritance of modernity as Max Weber saw it. Unlike small group and tribal societies we can no longer distinguish between

purity and danger and the necessary rituals that develop to culturally contain these. We do have handwashing, the talisman of purity, but the danger is invisible and unknowable. We lack an adequate cultural representation of danger.

Robert Paine in his review of *Risk and Blame* notes: "Douglas's argument is that all of us -tribal or industrial- *politicize* misfortune." In Douglas's words "the political use of natural dangers is a habit with ourselves as well as with others". In the UK, many blame Boris Johnson's government for adopting an initial strategy of so-called "herd-immunity". In America, President Trump tries to shift the blame onto the Chinese and away from himself. The anthropological point, universalised, is that where there is risk there is blame – or rather, the attribution of blame as providing a material cause. From a post-human perspective, we are, in fact, blaming ourselves, our own industrial civilization.

Another of Douglas's insights was to note that we are bad at recognizing risks. We invest our subjective agency with the ability to discount and dodge oncoming risks, minimizing their extent and approach. The perception of subjective risk, though, is sociologically determined. Speaking over the last few days to self-employed trades people – builders, craftspersons, and labourers – they tend to play down the risks. Their livelihood is on the line, and their line of work anyway involve dangers which cannot always be avoided. Academics, in what Mary Douglas called their "Hotel Kwilu" (the tourist hotel in the bush where residents are protected behind large windows from danger), may well overplay the meaning and significance of risk. The media are susceptible to amplifying risk and creating dysfunctional panic. Social media may well turn out to be the social agency through which a sense of control is obtained – knowing what to do and where the dangers lie. Equally, internet trolls and partisan social media are able to, and will, generate mayhem and hurt.

Douglas's position in her book with Aaron Wildavsky (*Risk and Culture*, 1982) brought the cultural anthropology of tribes to the analysis of advanced societies. The obvious problem in such a transfer is the complexity and differentiation of advanced societies. Overall, the defining of risk, both its covering up and accentuation, is determined by the organisation of society. For example, states dependent on the mass use of cars, trucks and motorways will, or used to, tolerate considerable carnage from accidents. The same population is also hyper-sensitive to food additives. Social psychologists can explain the perception of risk, but Douglas was aiming higher for a general cultural theory.

Her theorizing is Durkheimian. It may be feasible to treat the mortality statistics from Covid-19 in the same way as Durkheim analysed suicide statistics. There are, at this moment in the pandemic, striking differences in the mortality rates with Singapore and Taiwan achieving a very low fatality rate while Lombardy has been overwhelmed by – initially – an unrecognised danger. In the UK the prime minister warned of high rates of fatality, almost as an inevitability. As with suicidogenic currents, there is a social determination at work. The UK government's attitude is determined by a deeper utilitarian philosophy that lives can be traded in terms of outcomes – however those might be assessed. Asian governments influenced by a neo-Confucian philosophy see it as an ethical failure not to have saved lives, whatever is happening.

South Korea, evidenced by their impressive Foreign Minister, sees the epidemic as a challenge to their highly prized civil society – and openness, transparency and high tech are prioritised. Television pictures of pilgrims protesting at the closure of the holy shrines of Qom in Iran testify to a religiosity that abnegates the body. Worldviews are different and determinative.

Investigating these differences could well follow the theoretical design of grids and groups, that Douglas and colleagues developed in the 1980s. Group is the substance and degree of solidarity, and grid is the salience of the imposition of rules and regulations. This gives a 2×2 table and four types of society:

1. Low group sense and few regulations producing a risk-taking market environment. Neo-cons have aggressively expanded this form of society especially in the Anglosphere – to a degree that would have shocked Douglas. Individuals have to take risks as a lifestyle necessity and in the absence of society-based insurance schemes they also have to bear the risk of failure. Douglas was not an economist, but rational expectations theory, which dominates contemporary economics, ran with this conception of how society ought to be "organised".

2. High group sense with rejection of rules. This is the world of sects and elective communities closed against the wider world and its rules and norms. These societies are risk averse in the sense that they desire stable security. Inward looking religious sects are greatly at risk to virus contagion, unless they make a collective decision to disband temporarily.

3. High group sense and high grid salience. Germany's combination of corporatist groups and Ordoliberalism is an exemplar. Citizens make their own choices in an environment which is stabilised, ideally on a permanent basis. Public administration is prized, as is occupational expertise and career. Government, at all levels, is not denigrated, as is the neo-con version of new public management that seeks market solutions for everything. The People's Republic of China also belongs in this box, though presuming a similarity to Germany is a bit of a stretch. Douglas labelled this box "hierarchical" which is not a very satsifactory descriptor. It would be better to describe Chinese society as possessing a high collective consciousness.

4. Low group sense and high grid salience. This is a society of anomic individuals with no strong social bonds living a fatalistic existence, often in hierarchical societies. These include theocracies and populist polities with plebiscitary leaders.

I have pushed Douglas group/grid schema more in the direction of political economy, giving it I think greater contemporary relevance – and also picking up trends that have accelerated since her original formulation in the early 1980s. It requires further work to become a more valid research framework. Her main point, to note, was to address the *societal* determination of risk attitudes. Through this framework it should be possible to identify the likely policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and civic responses and initiatives.

Martin Albrow (*The Global Age*, 1996) would remind us the pandemic will also drive the furtherance of global society as a new consciousness forms in the face of common danger. The original purposes of planetary security organisations – the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Health Organization – need to be rediscovered and given the resources and authority they require to fulfil those purposes.

Against this, Mary Douglas saw attitudes cemented in a cultural configuration that are hard to break out of, because they are formative of the way we see ourselves and organize our societies. Closed national societies with different structural configurations resist the need to create new and urgent cooperative platforms. Douglas did, however, allow for "surprise" as an agent of change. Let's hope she's right.

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