Special Issue Combining Safety and Equity in the Post-Covid City: New Trends between Local Policies and Bottom-Up Practices

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

Guest editors

Gabriele Manella
Madalena Corte-Real

Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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FUORI LUOGO MEETING

Gabriele Manella, Madalena Corte-Real[1]

Old and New Problems after Covid-19: Having a Look at the US cities. A Talk with Ray Hutchison

Ray Hutchison is Professor of Sociology, faculty advisor for Urban Studies and Director of the Hmong Studies Center at the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay.
He grew up in Nashville, Tennessee and received the B.A. in Sociology from Harpur College at the State University of New York-Binghamton and the M.A. and the Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago. His areas of research and teaching include urban studies, street gangs, race and ethnicity, and immigration.
He is the editor of the SAGE Encyclopedia of Urban Studies, series editor of Research in Urban Sociology (Emerald Press), and editor of a new monograph series in urban sociology for Anthem Press (UK).
Some of his most famous books are *The Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* (co-edited with Bruce Haynes), *New Urban Sociology* (with Mark Gottdiener, 2nd and following editions) and *Suburbanization and Global Society* (co-edited with Mark Clapson).

QUESTION: *You paid a lot of attention on the Chicago School tools and their heritage (Chicago was part of your education as you were student there) as well as on the New Urban Sociology (you co-edited a book about). Is there any aspect/concept of these approaches that can be particularly useful to understand the post-covid city?*

ANSWER: With respect to our general discussion of Covid-19, the first thing that comes to mind is that a number of edited collections were published about what would happen to the city after 9/11. I don't know if that was specifically just in the United States or if there was also some discussion of this in Europe as well. There was a discussion that this was the end of tall buildings, that no one would even want to work in a tall building again, and that there would be no more skyscrapers built. Obviously, that's not what happened, so I was thinking in terms of how we respond to events like this. That's not really an exact parallel, but I think in some sense it informs a background here to how we think about these things and sometimes it goes to sensational ideas.
I would first want to point out that the reason for writing a good deal of these several overviews of the Chicago School was a concern that I had just simply in reading some of the published work that there were a lot of errors, and misconceptions about the Chicago School. This is certainly not something I thought of when I was in Graduate School – that I would ever end up writing about that sort of thing – but it was in large part to correct and rethink what others had already written, and published.
New Urban Sociology and you mentioned something about co-writing the book. I think it's important to note that the first edition was written solely by Mark Gottdiener. He then asked if I would work on the revision for the second edition. That came about because a year or two before that, I had asked him to write an article on Marxist urban sociology for the Research in Urban Sociology series. So that was a nice opportunity being asked to work on that revision and we did a number of them after that. I remember thinking this and saying this, that one of the things I wanted to do in the second edition was to bring the idea of social class into what Mark had written in the textbook. I don't know if that sounds strange or not, but it was just clear to me that and in part because of what he had written about Marxist urban sociology in the earlier edited work as well, that this wasn't coming into what he had called the New Urban Sociology. His emphasis was on Lefebvre and the discussion of social space. I wanted to go back to the New

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Urban Sociology of the 1960s and 1970s, kind of the European approach which took Lefebvre and the whole discussion of social class very seriously and applied it. That's not something we have ever done in urban sociology in the United States, so my idea there was to highlight in particular some things that would come to us from Marxist studies that had not been part of that. At one ASA (American Sociological Association) conference, in fact, Saskia Sassen came up to me and asked what we meant by the new urban sociology. I think that my response was something about wanting to bring Marx into urban sociology, which would make it more akin to the original new urban sociology from Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. I don't think she was very satisfied with my answer on that, and clearly it was not exactly the same as the European concept of new urban sociology. There have been several good things that she has written and Sharon Zukin as well on what happened to the new urban sociology, and I think that's important to take a look at.
In terms of the post Covid city, I think it was very obvious in the United States, and I imagine this was the case in European cities as well: Gabriele, you and I wrote the article focusing on actually nursing homes as a place of transmission for Covid-19. I think in the United States it was very clear that there were very important social class differences in who was being impacted, and I am not certain at all that a lot of this has actually gotten out into further literature.
One of the communities most affected by Covid-19 was immigrant workers, probably a lot of them undocumented workers in packing industries across the country. Those were considered essential industries and had to remain open. They provide a nice wet environment, people working very close to one another. Here in Wisconsin, a number of packing plants had multiple workers who died from Covid. Tending to have larger families and living in cramped quarters as well would mean that it would be transmitted within the family much more than the case for people in other work environments, I suppose. That hinges a little bit here on social class and migration and the use of workers and the "essential industries" as they were described.
What I really thought about with Covid-19 was colleagues of mine that I knew living in different places around the country, and in particular in New York City living in apartment buildings and not having the luxury that those of us living in smaller communities would have of having a yard around us. We are separated and isolated and all that from even the people who live right next door and so being in contact with others was much less of an issue, I think, in smaller communities. Only if you went to the store for things would that became an issue as opposed to living in apartment buildings. Thinking about my colleagues from other universities, that does not necessarily involve poor housing or even crowded housing, but still you would have to go in right through a lobby and upstairs where other people are there and that would be disconcerting. But then you get into the areas with what we might think of as tenement housing from some earlier decades, with crowded housing and households with marginal incomes. And perhaps working in the essential industries as well and coming back into an environment with lots of large family and possibilities of transmission.
So that moves us into the next question about inequalities and vulnerabilities that I think just became obvious to those of us who wanted to look at those things.

QUESTION: *Yes, exactly. You already mentioned about inequalities regarding people who are more vulnerable in professional terms and living in overcrowded housing …*

ANSWER: Yeah, I mean, so that answer does talk about some specific inequalities that are present in large cities in general, with obvious differences between neighbourhoods and the larger apartments as opposed to crowded apartments … whether that's accelerated things or had any impact on Covid.
I haven't heard any discussions about how we need to prepare for the future, despite this idea that there may be another pandemic that is brewing out there and will be hitting us in the next year or two, I would imagine the same things happening in terms of the groups of persons and areas that might be most affected.

QUESTION: *When we prepared these questions, we also had in mind the book "Bologna dopo la pandemia. Impatto territoriale e scenari futuri (edited by M. Castrignanò and T. Rimondi): it was a study on the impact of Covid-19 in that metropolitan area. The authors found a relatively good economic resilience and recovery from the pandemic crisis. Some inequalities accelerated however, and the increase of several fragility forms is probably the biggest political and social challenge now.*

ANSWER: One thing about Covid-19 – that I thought a lot about because of families and colleagues and how they responded to the events – I have thought of this in the United States in the terms of a lack of civic awareness or civic education. It's kind of like «I don't want to be vaccinated and so I'm not going to and I don't care about the rest of you».
I don't know how common that was across Europe. I know that there was opposition to required vaccinations in some countries, but here in the United States there was a tremendous political divide and I don't know how aware people in other areas of the world would be of that (with respect to Covid).
It does fit into our current polarization of Trump people and non-Trump people. If you look at some of the data on this, this sort of opposition to Covid both at the time and then even at the current time as well, that was a real marker which political party you were associated with or supported.
So, I see that as greatly increasing that divide here in the Us, the events of the pandemic. Was that the case in Europe as well?

QUESTION: *In Portugal, people were clearly in favour of vaccination. We think it was one of the most successful cases. As regards Italy, we have some anti-vaccine groups but probably not so strong and not so many as in the United States. In other words, also in Italy the clear majority of people were available to be vaccinated, possibly also because it was the first European country affected by Covid-19 and many people were very scared of what happened.*
As regard the acceleration of inequalities, we would like to mention the William Wilson's seminal work «The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy». Wilson stressed the combination of cultural and structural aspects in the concentration of urban poverty. As you know, he focused on part of the African American working-class in the inner city neighbourhoods of Chicago. Do you think that a part of migrants can be considered as the "truly disadvantaged" of our post Covid cities? Or do you think this label can be used for any other minority or for anyone else?

ANSWER: If I'm going to talk about «The Truly Disadvantaged», I'd want to take a step back, and say that we should look at the book before that, «The Declining Significance of Race» to fully understand Wilson's argument. My take away from both of these, but particularly from «The Declining Significance of Race» because it's been overlooked a lot, is the idea that our social policies have been based on racial categories, but the people who are most disadvantaged are the poor and that cuts across racial lines. The basic point he is making is that if you are African American and you are well educated and you have a good job that pays well and you can live in very good neighbourhoods, you are not part of the truly disadvantaged. If you are poor, white and struggling to get by and living in a poor neighbourhood, you are truly disadvantaged but our social policies do not connect up with, I think, the truly disadvantaged in that sense.
So who are the truly disadvantaged? I asked a question that I actually had more to think about because obviously we do have the neighbourhoods in large cities that still are points where there is the large concentration of poor African American families and as he was pointing out in the earlier work as well, that's been highlighted by or accentuated by the fact that many African American families have moved out of the central city when they can afford to and into other areas. So we do have these areas that are left behind and I would imagine we'd say mostly minority populations in those circumstances.

The other truly disadvantaged, at some level (this does really fit into urban sociology but I'm certain, it must), are our rural communities in the United States. One of the areas that I've been doing field research is in East Tennessee and we have one county there that well over half of the population is on disability and more of 2/3 of the population are below the poverty line and receiving various government benefits. That's a population that has very few opportunities. They are isolated. They are not in urban areas, but they confront many of the things we would talk about for the disadvantaged in cities or in suburbs. Because we also need to think, of course in the United States, of the change in the inner ring suburbs, as we refer to them, older industrial suburbs and those areas which have seen tremendous population loss, but also change of population and the figures, I think now, a third of the poor in the United States live in cities, a third live in suburbs, a third live in rural areas.

QUESTION: *The next question might be somehow also related with what you were saying. This issue of the attraction to leave the densified areas during the pandemic and to go to rural areas and minor cities and also this opportunity now from working from home that has been increasing also since the Covid-19 pandemic. Do you do you think that this trend might prevail and that this might be an opportunity also for rural areas and minor cities?*

ANSWER: I am wondering if this was the case in Europe as well. We read a lot about families living in cities who were buying suburban housing and moving out there or in larger cities. I think a lot of this was focused on New York City, moving to smaller towns, rural communities, if they could afford to do that to escape whatever they thought was happening there in the cities. I haven't seen anything that talks about, the degree to which that did happen, the extent of it, like numbers of persons but it does strike me as similar to Boccaccio and the plagues of the Middle Ages.

We have had a lot of discussion recently about the return to work. People working from home and how this was sort of either required or kind of standard during the pandemic and then all of these discussions that have been really big here in the States of people not wanting to go back to work and refusing to go to work under the previous conditions: "no, you have to give me benefits", "no, you have to increase my pay"… Kind of interesting to think of that as a possible effect of the pandemic.

There are often news and articles about companies trying to require their workers to come back to the office spaces. Which I think is interesting is that also goes against what we would have heard at the beginning of the pandemic (and similar to the discussion of 9/11) that people aren't going to want to be in these office spaces any longer and those traditional office spaces were all going to go away. That may well be, those spaces are being redesigned, but we'll need to wait a while to see how that all partials out, I suppose.

QUESTION: *We also have a final question about some positive effects of the pandemic. When we talked about it we had in mind the lockdown period in particular. It was not very long in Italy if compared to other countries, but we had a two months lockdown and what happened is that we had several manifestations of solidarity at the neighbourhood level. In some way the neighbourhood dimension emerged again as a solidarity strategy against the pandemic.*

ANSWER: We saw videos from Italy of people on balconies singing arias for their neighbours…

QUESTION: *Yes, that's a very clear, a very famous example of what happened, at least in the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. Do you think this impression of solidarity was very short in time in some way? Because the impression we have is that this trend is going to decrease relatively rapidly…, I don't know what you can see in the U.S. cities. So the question is a consideration of this rebirth of solidarity.*

ANSWER: That's the trend, increased solidarity because of the emergency that we all confront? Going back a bit here, work environment and these other things, I would say that something very noticeable for our university, my work environment, and I've heard similar accounts from other schools as well. A number of people really have not returned, they are still working at home as much as possible, it's noticeable. There's nobody around, the offices are vacant, people aren't coming in and visiting with others as they would have before. The buildings basically look empty, so I think that we kind of got into the habit of, we didn't need to be in that workplace to begin with. Part of this is obviously online, there is not necessarily a really good reason to have to be in the office. You can do any research you want to do with your computer at home and to whatever degree we have this... Well, we in the United States we have this big population problem sort of this big demographic change so that we have a declining younger population. The numbers of people graduating from high school has rapidly declined in recent years and is not expected to increase for a while. I guess we have pretty good data on that: students who are in junior high now, four years later will be graduating and maybe going to college and that sort of thing. Students now are very used to online instruction, and I think probably our online programs are growing more than in class teaching and that has a big effect on students, the experiences they have, a lot of them will talk about not having, a real college experience although they don't have the college experience from their background to be able to, I guess, fully digest all that. My sense of pandemic and the response is not that it increased solidarity in any measure at all. That may have been the case in some neighbourhoods in some areas in larger cities. I could see that happening if you take those examples from Italy or other European cities with particular architecture and proximity of people, that's completely different than it is in essentially any American city outside of New York City.
Again, what I get a sense of here is an increased polarization along political lines. That the pandemic became a measure of whether you are going to believe the government, if you're going to believe science, if you think it's effective at all, you know, to wear masks that became a huge issue in the Us to the degree that we had workers in stores who were trying to get customers to put on masks [and they were killed by customers upset, angry, you can't make me do that, that's the sensational example]. None of this did much to increase solidarity or making people come together in the sense of this is what we really need to do. I see that as the longer term kind of connections, implications…

QUESTION: *That sounds very interesting (and concerning). Well, thanks a lot, Ray, we have concluded our questions. We don't know if you want to add any final remarks...*

ANSWER: This is not a critique, but the way the questions progressed and the discussion progressed and that's more maybe me pulling it a certain way. I think by the end here we are not talking about what does urban sociology help us in understanding, the effects of Covid, which I think is the point for the journal, right? Are there theories, whatever, research, that would help us in answering any of these questions?
We do have literature on conflict and people coming together in times of crisis … so that may be the more important ideas that we would have in Sociology to apply to all of this.
My impression from the final question is that this may not be an example of where those ideas work out. We were all in danger. Well, many of us thought we were all in danger. A lot of other people didn't think anybody was in danger at all. We have people talking about only 0,001% of the population being affected by Covid and your chance of survival was 99% so it was all kind of a false narrative to begin with. That's not what you would expect if you were applying sociological theory and ideas of what might increase solidarity and those sorts of things.