

The Theory isn't dead: A Classical Sociological Gaze of Covid-19

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Abstract

One of the most basic but arduous questions confronting sociology scholars and students around the world today is, "Do we still need to talk about the classical sociological theorists?" However, the fundamental premise of classical sociologists has made pivotal their requirement in today's world. The world faces the crisis of COVID-19, which has been responsible for many deaths, suffering and upending of lives. This paper contextualized some of the fundamental assumptions of selected classical sociological scholars, namely Comte, Spencer and Simmel, to examine the spread and implications of COVID-19 that has been characterized as a pandemic. The paper focuses on how their social scientific lens are useful in explaining the pandemic, threatening the traditional ways of life and institutions worldwide. The dominant stance is that COVID-19 disrupts the social order, which is a fundamental discourse in the writings of classical sociologists. The outbreak has caused human, economic, social crises, and thereby creating social instability. At the same time, individuals struggle for power and agency in the face of the "devastating" lockdown. The manifest social conflict reflects in the state measures during the COVID-19 with emerging social resistance. While there is a scramble for vaccines and cure, social solidarity and equity, another stance in the writings of the classical and contemporary sociologists could be an effective panacea to resolving the COVID-19 crisis and any future pandemic.

Keywords: Classical sociology, COVID-19, Disruption, Social order

Introduction

Classical sociology has been described as the systematic study of society and social life that emerged in the earliest period of the 19th century's social upheavals in Europe (Cockerham, 2014). The disorder that emanated from the 19th century's social upheaval was responsible for the quest by classical scholars for social order, which eventually led to the establishment of sociology as a scientific discipline (Misztal, 2013). The fundamental tenet of classical sociological theory is that modern societies are consequences of transforming traditional societies (Allan, 2005). The concern is to study interactions, patterns, social events, and more importantly, to propound a theory that would explain why things work in a particular way (Amzat & Maigari, 2020). Classical sociological approaches have two aspects, namely, describing the changes that take place or that have taken place and provision of how to explain the society at a particular time and place (Izquierdo & Minguéz, 2003). In this case, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in France; Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) in England, and George Simmel (1858-1918) in Germany have proffered approaches that attempt to describe the divergent position of social forces that evolve in society at various places, times, to actors and results.

Comte propounded his scientific perspective called "positivism," or "positive philosophy," to understand and explain social order (Alakwe, 2017). Also, Spencer popularized sociology with his evolutionary view (Pearce, 2010) and Simmel contributed to the field with his notion of smaller-scale such as individual action and interaction (Johnson, 2008). The three classical scholars have contributed mainly to the development of the sociological theory, and their respective contributions have been regarded as relevant in explaining contemporary issues. Hence, the theory is not dead. Their respective contributions propelled the need to adopt and adapt their fundamental assumptions to examine the current global health pandemic. First and foremost, it is vital to examine what the current global health challenge is; who are vulnerable, and what the preventive measures are.

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that started in Wuhan, China (Russell et al., 2020; Amzat et al., 2020). Those who are infected with the coronavirus are said to mainly experience fever, cough and respiratory illness (Lu & Shi, 2020). When young people are infected, many times, they recover without any special treatment (Singhal, 2020). However, older people, especially those with underlying medical problems such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease, are more likely to have serious health challenges (He,

Deng & Li, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has suggested ways to prevent and reduce the rate at which the deadly disease continues to cascade to all parts of the world. WHO has been updating and informing people what causes the disease, how it spreads, preventive measures (such as handwashing with soap, using sanitizer that is alcohol based frequently, and the need not touch the face (Sohrabi et al., 2020).

The coronavirus virus spreads basically through having contact with those who are infected (Gostic et al., 2020). This occurs especially having contact with their cough, sneezing, with some drops of their saliva and discharge from their nose (Sudan & Goswami, 2020). From the 31st December, 2019 to 28th May 2020, WHO has recorded all over the world, 5,803,099 cases of COVID-19; 357,691 deaths and 2,508,591 recovered (WHO, 2020). At the initial phase of the advent of the COVID 19, WHO warned that there are no vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. It later provided information on the development of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. There are various new vaccines and clinical trials ongoing to evaluate potential treatments. The WHO provides updated information on the clinical findings, but encourages physical and social distancing, staying at home and regular handwashing. The pandemic has caused enormous distortion, disruption, and calamities to human relationships, social order, and economic livelihood (Wen et al., 2020). This paper selected classical sociologists' epistemological assumptions of Comte, Spencer and Simmel to analyse COVID-19.

A Classical Sociological Gaze of COVID-19

The deliberate attempt to make relevant the classical sociological theory to understand the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the entire world precipitated the selection of classical scholars (namely: Auguste Comte (1798-1857); Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and George Simmel (1858-1918)) who have contributed immensely to the development of sociological theory. Their contributions have not been seen as relevant to the classical realm but also applicable to contemporary issues. The paper presented the fundamental principles of these scholars and besides, employed the principles to analyse the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comte: COVID-19 as Social Disruption

The term sociology was said to have been coined by Comte in 1839, and he modelled it after the "hard science" (Comte, 1896; Hedlund, 2011). His work had an immeasurable influence on contemporary sociological theorists (Pickering, 2003). He was of the view that sociology should be scientific in

understanding and explaining the social disorder or anarchy that pervaded French society, and he propounded his scientific philosophy called “positivism” or “positive philosophy” (Comte & Durkheim, 2013). He was of the view that understanding and explanation of social order should include the notion that it is not possible to return to the Middle Ages because advances in science and industry have made that to be impossible (Latour, 2000). This is further reiterated in his assertion that in seeking an explanation of laws of social life, the concern should be with social statics (which refers to the existing social structures) and social dynamics (which refers to the social change). However, the latter is seen as more important than the former (Ritzer, 2008). This implied that Comte is more concerned about social change and is more or less a natural evolution of human society that would make things better. In his evolutionary theory, this is referred to as the law of the three stages. He identified three intellectual stages, namely: theological, metaphysical, and positive stages through which the minds, individuals, groups, science, societies, and world have gone throughout its history. The theological was characterized by belief in the religious figures, supernatural powers, and that God creates the social and physical world. The metaphysical stage was characterized by the belief in “nature” as an explanation for everything and not God or gods. The positivistic or scientific stage is the final stage, characterized by the belief in science (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017).

Comte believed that focusing on intellectual disorder is the best way to understand the cause of social disorder (Gattone, 2006). This is because social disorder could be traced to the previous idea systems, namely the theological and the metaphysical, that remained relevant in the positivistic or scientific age. It is when positivistic reaches the highest peak that social disorder will cease to exist, and what is required to achieve this feat is intellectual change. Comte, in his emphasis, also places much importance on the role of consensus in human society to attain social order. He also elucidates the need for sociologists to use observation, experimentation, and comparative historical analysis. These perspectives are relevant and applicable in our contemporary societies (Ritzer, 2008).

Comte asserted that it is not possible to return to the Middle Ages due to the advances in science and industrialization. His concern about social change may be likened to the current challenges of COVID-19. The pandemic has taken a longer time than anyone could anticipate, thereby causing so much disruption and distortion to the social and economic life of humanity. There was apprehensiveness that before the scientists could eventually develop cures and vaccines for the disease, people worldwide would have suffered

the severe implications of the pandemic. The suggestive precaution (such as social distancing and staying at home) tends to place more strains on the fragile social order worldwide. The world has started witnessing the breakdown of social order due to the prolonged lockdown in many countries, which was enacted to enforce the stay-at-home order. Comte argued that change is more or less a natural evolution of human society that would make things better. COVID-19 is a disease, but it should be regarded as a form of change that puts the world at the pace of natural evolution. It is pertinent for the World Health Organization to provide guidelines on how people can live with the virus. Staying at home and social distancing have continued witnessing failure in every part of the world because it has put humanities under a constrained lifestyle. The demonstration by American citizens on the killing of George Floyd by some policemen on 27th and 28th of May, 2020; the South Africa citizen attack on supermarkets, looting and stealing around April, 2020; the Nigeria burglaries, especially Lagos and Kano state during the period of lockdown are but few of social disorder around the world during the lockdown. Comte stated that focusing on intellectual disorder is the best way to understand the cause of the social disorder. This implied that how to mitigate social disorder such as the feelings of subjugation, discrimination, and impoverishment should preoccupy the minds of those in government rather than the continuous emphasis on lockdown.

Similarly, there is the assertion of Comte that social disorder could be traced to the previous idea systems, namely the theological stage (which is characterized by the belief in God) and the metaphysical stage (which is characterized by belief in nature) that remained relevant in the positivistic or scientific age. Despite the surge of the COVID-19, socio-cultural and religious myths persist. This implies that the traditional inclination, sometimes different from biomedical norms, is still very much in the subconscious of people. It may take a while before the scientific recommendations have much impact on people's beliefs. Then finally, the issue of consensus mentioned by Comte is also significant in the analysis of COVID-19. When there is consensus among the countries that constitute the World Health Organization, much progress can be made to fight against the COVID-19. There is no room to have any condescending attitude towards a particular nation or continent. The solution, a cure and vaccine, when discovered in any part of the world, should be given due consideration to end the COVID-19. There have been some claims reiterating some solutions to the COVID 19 novel disease (Ayodeji et al., 2020). Therefore, there is no reason why the "herbal" or traditional cures should not be given due consideration.

Spencer: COVID-19 and the Survival of the Fittest

Spencer is regarded as having a similar influence on the development of sociological theory (Ritzer, 2008). However, he differs in his view of social change. Spencer was more of a social Darwinist in his evolutionary perspective (Spencer, 1851, 1864, 1876; Stewart, 2011). He argued that social life should evolve without external interference. For him, society has been growing progressively, and there is no need for external interference that might distort or disrupt human progress (Weikart, 2009). He believed that similar to other animals and plants, social institutions and social structures would adapt positively and progressively to the social environment they belong (Henry & Stephens, 2013). Spencer coined the term “survival of the fittest,” which is synonymous with Darwin’s “process of natural selection” (Spencer, 1872). The principle relates that if there is no external disruption, those who are “fit” would survive and multiply in the society while those who are ‘unfit’ would wither away (see Darwin, 2010; Duncan, 2013). His idea of the evolution of society was that society is progressing toward an ideal or perfect moral state, and this should be regarded as the process of adaptive upgrading for the entire world (Claeys, 2000). Spencer’s evolutionary assumption stated that society moves from simple to compound, doubly-compound and trebly-compound societies or militant to industrial societies (Hossain & Mustari, 2012). Spencer borrowed the concept of “organism” from biology and coined “organismic analogy,” implying that, like a biological organism, society consists of various interrelated and interdependent parts (Rumney, 2017). It implied that each of the parts functions for the survival of each part and the entire whole. Therefore, society as a system works together for the functioning of the entire whole. However, Spencer has been criticized for suggesting an idea of survival of the fittest that posed a threat to the meliorism, which is dear to the earliest British sociologists (Ritzer, 2008).

Spencer’s perspective portrays some of the apparent situations in the current surge of COVID-19 pandemic. His evolutionary perspective represents the apparent easing of lockdown all over the world. Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and other countries severely affected by the pandemic are relaxing the lockdown. However, the cure or vaccines to the novel disease are still being developed. This depicted that the challenges of staying at home enforced via lockdown are manifesting on the social and economic order of society. Many countries have no other option than to accept that social institutions and social structures will adapt positively and progressively to the social environment they belong. People have to learn how to live with the virus. The consequences of locking people at home

would be direr to the social order than allowing people to learn how to leave with the virus. COVID-19 is a pandemic; however, it has become apparent that the principle of “survival of the fittest” or “process of natural selection” is gradually manifesting. The obvious is that without external disruption, those who are “fit” would definitely survive the virus and subsequently multiply in society. At the same time, many of those who are “unfit,” whose immunity has been compromised by chronic conditions, might certainly wither away.

A vaccine or cure for the COVID-19 virus is still in the early stage of its development. Impliedly, reopening society is like the survival of the fittest game. This is consonant with his notion that society is progressing toward an ideal or perfect moral state, which signifies a process of adaptive upgrading for COVID-19. The obvious could also be seen in the continued easing of lockdown in Europe, Africa and Asia. It is also apparent that vaccination, especially in Africa, is very minimal

This bitter implication of the easing of lockdown is that people have to live with the virus. It is not totally accurate that people would, however, be left to die without state interference (Spencer’s principle of non-interference). The governments would continue to effect preventive measures and invest in the vaccine and other cures. However, individuals have to take responsibility in the form of self-protection.

The principle of survival of the fittest which was propounded by Spencer is applicable because COVID-19 preys on the weak and those with underlying conditions whose immunity have been partially compromised (Amzat et al., 2020). It systematically captured what Spencer was talking about because he adopted and adapted Darwin’s survival of the fittest to the social phenomenon. COVID 19 may seem natural, but it has taken more social dimensions than the natural occurrence. There is a kind of relative advantage to those with better immunity in consideration of COVID-19 fatalities. The power of relative power of adaptation and resistance come to play in COVID-19 casualties. While gradual reopening is inevitable for human survival (mainly for economic production and gains), it is a latent drive towards the survival of those with relative adaptation advantage or higher power of resistance.

George Simmel: COVID-19 Accentuating Social Conflict

George Simmel is a micro-sociologist who contributed to the development of interpretive perspectives (Ritzer, 2008). To Simmel, the concern of sociologists should be the forms and types of social interaction (Frisby, 2013). Simmel's views are enormous; however, emphasis shall be placed on his contribution to sociability and secrecy. Simmel's forms of social interaction are placed in a comprehensive theory of the relationship between individuals and society at large. Simmel explained the forms and types of interaction (Ritzer, 2008). The forms of relationship include exchange, super-ordination, subordination, sociability and conflict. The types of people refer to different statuses in the interactional structure, such as "competitor" and "coquette," etc. There are four basic levels of concern that have been identified in Simmel's principles (ibid.), namely as follows: the microscopic view of the psychological components of social life; the sociological components of interpersonal relationships; the structure of and changes in the socials and cultural "spirit"; and the ultimate metaphysical principles of life.

Simmel's view postulated the current challenges of the global pandemic. Social life has been greatly affected; interpersonal relationships have been replaced by virtual social interaction such as that which is obtainable on the social media. In communication, there are tremendous improvements and replacements in what used to be unpredictable and infrequent with the advent of telephone, telegraph, fax machines, etc. Contemporary life has improved more since Simmel's time with the invention of television, radio, videotape and others (ibid.).

In Simmel's contribution to sociology, he examined a particular form of interaction, which he referred to as characterized by secrecy (Marx and Muschert, 2009). Secrecy for him can be regarded as a situation where a particular person in social interaction hides information and the other seek to uncover the information (Ritzer, 2008). Simmel argued that "Our relationships thus develop upon the basis of reciprocal knowledge, and this knowledge upon the basis of actual relations; both are inextricably interwoven" (Simmel 1906/1950:309, cited in Ritzer, 2008). He believed that if a secret becomes known, it might affect relationships. However, it should be known that it is an integrated part of social relationships.

Secrets, according to Simmel, have to do with the size of the society. Secrets are easily developed and much more needed in large groups because there are substantial differences among people. However, in small groups, secrets are not needed because people are too close (Deflem, 2003).

Therefore, relationships for Simmel are not exclusively about truth, but also error and ignorance. It implied that we are bound to learn truth and error in the process of interactions. It also implied that in a relationship, nobody is on the line of absolute truth or error. People are selective in giving out information in every interaction they are involved. The COVID-19 pandemic started with doubts and perceived secrecy, generating several conspiracy theories, which ultimately reflects the need for adequate circulation of health information.

Furthermore, the most fundamental social conflict is between individuals and society. Simmel (1908, 1917) recognized all forms of conflict and advanced the discussion about the functions of conflict, both positive and negative. There is a perpetual struggle to exert (societal) control on individuals, and hidden or sometimes open resistance from the individuals. The struggle generates conflicts on individual rights and the interests and “rights” of the state or community. Society serves as a cage that modifies, sanctions, and penalizes the action of individuals to extract conformity to specific standards for the “benefits of all.” The state or community assumes a form of supremacy, often expressed in utilitarian, altruistic or humanistic motives of protection. Community supremacy possesses transcendent significance in population health since the state has the mandate to effects specific preventive measures, including some coercive measures (e.g., arrest for the purposive of isolation or quarantine). This social conflict mantra underscores those individuals who are lowly parts of a greater whole (Machan, 2001). Hence, individuals struggle for power and agency in the face of “devastating” lockdown. The manifest social conflict reflects in the state measures during the COVID-19 with emerging resistance to lockdown, which impedes the right to movement and association.

Machan (2001) described the duo (of society and individual) as almost irreconcilable enemies. In emergency circumstances, some individual rights might be sacrificed to protect collective interests. This portends a micro-macro conflict which is also an unresolved issue in medical ethics (Clements, 1982). Simmel opined that this form of social conflict is necessary and healthy for human society. His notion about the necessity of conflict grants him the father of conflict functionalism in sociology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, society constrains individuals through restrictive measures for public health gains (Amzat et al., 2020). The state must promote social approval of the public health measures to mitigate the social conflict and extract conformity to meet the public health goal.

Simmel's contribution to sociology shows the relevance of classical sociology. In the current COVID-19 crisis, Simmel's view that social interaction is characterized by secrecy can be attested or likened to the rate at which people strive to hide their COVID-19 status. For example, this occurred in Nigeria, when people were informed or advised to self-isolate if they had been to any epicentre of the virus or had interaction with or exposed to any suspected case. It became apparent that people were reluctant to come out; perhaps, they were sceptical about the possible inhuman treatment in the isolation centres or the stigmatization that follows the declaration of being positive to the novel virus. In Nigeria (Kano state specifically), a COVID-19 index case refused to reveal his status to others. It was reported that he went to the mosque on Friday, where he interacted with many people and possibly infected them during the prayer session. He went to the burial in his neighbourhood; he attended a marriage event of some of his friend's children and might have shaken hands or hugged people who were not aware of his status. This particular case shot up the Kano state COVID-19 result when Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) began testing in the state. The aforementioned portends some social conflict between the state and the individual in controlling COVID-19 in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The contributions of classical sociologists have been employed to proffer explanations to various social problems. The arguments as to the relevance of the contributions of classical sociologists to contemporary issues have prompted the need to identify some selected classical sociologists to analyze the current pandemic ravaging the world. From the analysis, it became apparent that the contributions of classical sociologists are pertinent in analyzing today's world challenges. Their contributions were employed to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has been responsible for many deaths, suffering and upending of lives. The outbreak has caused human, economic, social crises and thereby distorting and disrupting the social order. The paper conceptualized and contextualized some of the fundamental assumptions of selected classical sociological scholars (namely Comte, Spence and Simmel) to examine the spread and implication of COVID-19. The paper employed the fundamental stands of the classical sociologists to analyze the coronavirus and its implication on the social life of people. The outbreak has caused human, economic, social crises, and thereby creating social instability. At the same time, individuals struggle for power and agency in the face of the "devastating" lockdown. The manifest social conflict reflects in the state measures during the COVID-19 with

emerging social resistance. Also, while there is a scramble for vaccines and cures, social solidarity and equity, another stance in the writings of the classical and contemporary sociologists, could be an effective panacea to resolving the COVID-19 crisis and any future pandemic.

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