The Sociology of Corona
The Corona pandemic has some noteworthy sociological aspects, in particular to a self-isolated sociologist looking out at the world from home.
The diffusion pattern of the virus tells us something about the highways and back streets of globalization. It started in one of the two main centres of today’s world economy, spreading from there to one neighbouring country, South Korea, but was largely held at bay in the rest of East Asia, the whole region of which has exemplified the most efficient health care organization, so far.. Then it jumped to Western Europe, which became the second epicentre of the pandemic, to be succeeded by the other world centre of the economy. While the virus has by now spread across the whole world, it is still a very uneven power. South Asia, Africa, and Latin America are still little affected, even their main urban hubs. That will probably change, but the diffusion process, including its intra-national form of economic metropolitan concentration - Milan, Madrid, Paris, London, Frankfurt, New York - shows a world pattern of globalization. It has also given the most vulnerable populations of the world a bit of a chance to prepare themselves.
The class structuration of the pandemic highlights the inequalities of the globe. It began to spread with globetrotting businessmen and middleclass holiday travellers returning from transoceanic vacations or from Alpine ski resorts infecting ordinary locals, and their own maids. True, this was not the whole picture, there were also international religious congregations – in Daegu South Korea, in Mulhouse France, most recently in Delhi India – and there were ill-timed popular gatherings, from 8 of March demonstrations to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. We don’t know yet the social profile of the dead, only their age. But a warranted hypothesis is that the sickly elderly inmates of the under-resourced, low-quality nursing homes of Bergamo, Madrid, Seattle and other places are mostly from the popular classes.
The socioeconomic consequences are already clearly class-demarcated, primarily between the secure homeworking classes of bosses and professionals, on one hand, and the risky serving classes in caring and feeding the former, and the unemployed, on the other. It is the same class divide all over the world, although the “informal” labourers and street vendors of the South are more numerous than the temporary workers and the workers for absentee platform owners in the ig economy of the North. While many small enterprises are facing bankruptcy, the giants of e-commerce are expanding – and provoking strikes against their careless management (as in Amazon warehouses and Instacart deliveries). The closing of US schools have dramatized the fact that millions of school children in the world’s richest country are dependent on a public school lunch program to get a proper meal a day.
Inequality further includes a let loose of police brutality against people of the non-upper classes. Videos of police whipping people in locked-.down cities have circulated from Latin America and India. The Peruvian government have added a special law which apriori exonerates police and military from responsibility for any “lesiones y muertes” (lesions and deaths). In the UK, the Derbyshire police has chased couples walking in the Peak National Park with drones to herd them indoors, and has miscoloured the water of a lake in order to destroy it as an attractive beauty spot (sic).
Another inequality laid bare is more promising, however. The inequality of ruling behaviour before and during the pandemic, between public “austerity”, private promotion and market trust before, and massive mobilization of new-found public resources now. Liberals of the Economist type have already started worrying that the balmy days of neoliberalism may not return after the lessons of the pandemic.