

Intergenerational justice, climate change and health

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1. The main global causes of ill health are identified as socio-economic inequality, the effects of climate change and armed conflict, the latest MedAct conference in London was told (Rogers 2015).

None of these causes is directly about healthcare, but instead they concern the economics of social inequality, the geophysics of climate change, and the politics of armed conflict.

These major causes increase the global demand for healthcare aid to deal with severe injuries (and civilian women and children are especially vulnerable to armed attacks), infections (Ebola, Zika), malnutrition, forced migration, and the effects of famine, floods, earthquakes and severe poverty and destitution.

States vulnerable to extreme weather and to conflict tend to have younger populations, and therefore high numbers of children. As is well known, young children are at highest risk of succumbing to injuries, disease, extreme heat and cold, of being swept away by floods, or lost during emergency journeys. Short and long term and life-long effects are most severe for them, such as each year when an estimated half a million children go blind, simply for lack of vitamin A.

While poverty can especially harm the youngest generations, extreme wealth tends to advantage the aged. The average age of billionaires is over 60. The median age in the UK is 41, in Syria it is estimated at 21, in Uganda and Gaza 15 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2177.html>). Yet news reports seldom convey when wars are waged largely against children and young people.

Such wars destroy hopes of establishing an educated workforce in future, when essential infrastructure is destroyed (schools, piped water and electricity, law and order to combat corruption, enough older workers to train and support younger ones and to pass on culture and peaceful traditions). The intergenerational interdependence and transferring on which peace and prosperity depend are broken, a most serious and lasting legacy of present wars that sow the seeds of future violent chaos.

A major new concern for medical charities is the seemingly deliberate bombing of their hospitals in war zones, and not only by rebel armies but by state armies too, the US and NATO as well as Russia. This breaks the most ratified treaties of all in international law, the Geneva Conventions. There is rising chaos in so many present-future concerns.

2. Theories of neoliberalism and rising chaos

The historian Philip Mirowski (2014) suggested a three stage neoliberal strategy.

- 1) Scepticism and denial, such as of problems of climate change or of extreme

poverty. 2) If really pressed, offer temporary solutions, usually in terms of markets, such as carbon trading or biofuels for climate change, and for financial crises there are quantitative easing, bank bail-outs and austerities. When state-funded services fail, install costly new layers of inspection. The tactics all work together like Russian doll shells (2014: 348). The 'solutions' do not reduce the problems, confusions or turmoil but increase them, intentionally so, Mirowski contends (2014: 340).

These two stages work as delays. They allow time until 3) entrepreneurs and genius scientists can devise spectacular solutions to the problem. These emerge from the omniscient market, such as geo-engineering to resolve climate change. However to Mirowski, neoliberal denial serves the further purpose of 'proving' that everything - nature, societies, individuals, states - are all chaotic, complex, unpredictable and prone to crises. The greater the natural and social upheaval and confusion, the more one single thing stands out as the only superhuman, omniscient, reliable constant. That is price or exchange value.

The price economy may or may not bring justice and prosperity for all. But everyone has to learn to rely on price, and not on such false gods as science, democracy, judicial review or rational debate. Everything possible must be done to free the market, and ward off the dangers of regulation and accountability or any other interference with free price.

So neoliberal denials promote a confusing, foggy, agnostic, anxious doubt, which distracts public attention away from critical understanding, and away from calls for urgent action on global warming, chaotic markets and unjust inequalities that waste lives. Measurements, such as collapsing ice shelves or collapsing banks, seem scarcely reliable or significant.

Neoliberal denials exploit fashions for scepticism, postmodernism, nihilism, and they allow delay while the market works in slow, inscrutable ways. Reasonable urgent precautions and predictions are dismissed as 'lacking in evidence' - which concerns about the future do inevitably lack.

At stage two, temporary solutions include agnostic diversions to encourage avid anxious consumerism, entertaining but ineffective public protests (Occupy), 'marketing' and PR to flatter and dupe the public and 'alternative' entertaining politicians who flirt with faux rebellion (Mirowski 2014, 139-47; Morozov 2014)

Meanwhile the free market grows in power (TTIP, corporate control over all government departments), suspending all rule-governed activity, 'judicial or democratic accountability' or 'serious inquiry and critical discourse'. All become mirages in the agnostic fog (Mirowski 2014, 358, 365). Lifestyles are sold, as substitutes for real lived and political experience.

The dreams of stage 3 distract natural scientists into promoting hopeless diversions, while temperatures continue to rise and effective greener remedies are neglected. Even if the enormous funds could be found for geo-engineering, and the results could work, and could produce more benefits than harms, they will almost certainly not develop at the speed and scale necessary to prevent global warming above 2° (Lohman 2006; Lohmann *et al.* 2013; Klein 2014; Magdoff and Foster 2011).

3 The individualist disciplines economics and psychology dominate public debate. Sociologists have the breadth, theories and history to challenge neoliberalism

Ruth Levitas (2013) believes that sociology uniquely understands the matrix of

all social and natural interactions. John Urry (2011) contends that only sociology can integrate the many disciplines relevant to climate change into coherent forward-thinking analysis, which might avert the dystopian catastrophes he foresees.

However, much sociology sets explicit or implicit vetoes, barriers and dualisms such as: not to refer to morality or politics or economics; not to compare between possibly better or worse experiences, when these are supposed to be understood each in their own incomparable context; not to search for prior causes or predict later effects, as if studies are set outside time: people may be presented as if fixed into certain beliefs and behaviours of unclear origins or alternatives, although these entities may actually change swiftly and unexpectedly en masse (use of mobile phones being one of countless examples).

This timeless analysis mirrors superficial 24/7 news short-term concern with events rather than analysis.

Ingenious analyses of interacting behaviours and beliefs, discourses and displays, associations and implications may be inconclusive.

It is as if research tracks and records countless falling objects and possible interactions between them, but avoids looking for the invisible cause of the falling – gravity.

Another analogy is efforts to mop up a flooded kitchen floor while the floods keep rising, but to ignore the tap from which the floods flow.

And too often, short-term mainstream research about the 'adult' world ignores children, and research with children ignores the 'adult' political world.

Against all the privatising in recent decades, research has instead largely become nationalised, controlled by government departments and research councils, and compliant to their demands. The Report by the Campaign for Social Science (2015, 6) ignored economic structural inequalities, and instead volunteered to promote profits and markets, and to smooth any opposition to neoliberalism in public values and attitudes, such as to genetically modified crops or shale gas extraction (as John Holwood (2015) commented).

Thousands of the highly specialised localised sociological studies published each year may seldom be connected into more general analysis. Are today's presentations at this welcome wedding of the medical and climate change sociologies, a little like confetti, scattered around before we leave to continue with our usual separate pressing tasks? Is that the best use of this meeting? And whose interests might be served by a fragmented inconclusive sociology?

4. If sociologists could reach some consensus, these are a few ways in which we could critically inform public opinion and debate.

Work to combine positivism and interpretivism and common ground between the social and natural sciences.

Follow the time-space-cause triad, the sequence of 1) identifying causes of problems, 2) selecting appropriate interventions, 3) assessing larger outcomes in relation to one another and to the larger societal analysis, and 4) transformative change including future-orientated work.

Reconnect the four interacting levels/planes of being human: physical bodies in material relations with nature; interpersonal relations; social structures; inner person-political being. The four planes offer ways to organise analysis of widely diverse areas of social-natural human life.

Powerful groups prefer to omit stage 1. For example, governments decide how to manage migrants or whether to bomb rebel forces. They seldom look back to search for possible prior causes for migrants' and rebels' unrest. Blame may then more easily be transferred onto oppressed individuals' reactions and away from structural causes, which could be benefitting vested interests – such as the financial and petro-chemical and arms corporations behind the major causes of global ill health.

Avoid adding to endless confusing public information and debate that overwhelms the news about global medical and climate change problems, and attend to clear social science analysis to position, evaluate and explain the data in relation to powerful underlying social, economic and political causal processes.

Highlight the social significance when reality is so often reduced into words, things into thoughts. For example, the current greatest threat to health is debated in terms of spin and point-scoring between political opponents, ignoring the actual horrors posed. Little is said on how Trident is a uniquely terrifying deterrent.

If the 48 missiles from only one Trident submarine were fired, then over 10 million people could be killed by the explosive force, the heat, extensive fires and collapsing buildings, by short and long term effects of radiation, contaminated water, land and food. Millions more people would be injured, their resistance to disease lowered, while essential services would be destroyed.

Smoke and soot rising to the higher atmosphere would cause a nuclear winter, with up to a 3° C drop in global average temperature, and years of lost harvests across an entire hemisphere (Webber 2013). Fatalities would be even higher if missiles were fired at dense slum cities, which tend to have much younger average populations.

5. Social scientists could keep alerting the public to six questions.

How did we arrive at where we are now – what were the complex multiple causes and powerful influences?

Whose interests are mainly being served?

What are the real daily effects on the groups affected?

What is likely to happen if present trends continue?

How can social justice between generations and the informed interests of the majority be promoted (the goals)?

What might be the best ways forward, possible remedies and alternatives, and potential means of promoting them, to reduce the problems and alter the dangerous trends?

This would work towards Michael Burawoy's (2004) public sociology: 'as mirror and conscience of society, sociology must define, promote and inform public debate about deepening class and racial inequalities, new gender regimes, environmental degradation, market fundamentalism, state and non-state violence'. We would aim to speak to media audiences, policy makers, silenced minorities, social movements.

Burawoy sees local, global, and national public sociology stimulating debate; it inspires and revitalizes our discipline. Theory and research give legitimacy, direction, and substance to public sociology and the critical imagination, exposes the gap between what is and what could be. It infuses values into public sociology to remind us that the world could be different."

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