

Social Change in the Covid-19 Era: A Retrospective

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Abstract

This article offers a retrospective sociological reassessment of the COVID-19 pandemic as a case of dramatic social change (DSC), examining which transformations proved enduring, which were reversed, and how the crisis exposed the theoretical and methodological limits of sociological analysis. Drawing on the DSC framework, the paper analyses the pandemic as a large-scale disruptive event affecting social structures, institutional trust, digitalization, and social inequalities. Rather than treating the pandemic as a uniform rupture, the article emphasizes the temporal, uneven, and context-dependent character of crisis-induced transformations, showing that processes of persistence, adaptation, and reconfiguration unfolded differently across social domains. In this sense, the pandemic is interpreted not only as a catalyst for change but also as a lens through which existing structural tensions and inequalities became more visible. The article further contributes by extending the DSC framework beyond its predominantly psychological applications, demonstrating its relevance for analyzing institutional dynamics, collective identities, and crisis governance from a sociological perspective. At the methodological level, it engages with critiques of linear explanatory models, arguing that global crises such as COVID-19 are better understood as non-linear, co-evolving processes characterized by interdependencies, feedback loops, and temporal variability. By situating the pandemic within a broader context of polycrisis, the paper highlights the need for multi-level, flexible, and reflexive sociological approaches capable of capturing complex and unstable forms of social change.

Keywords: Social change; COVID-19; Sociology; Interdisciplinary research; Crisis situation.

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1 Introduction

This article offers a retrospective sociological reassessment of the COVID-19 pandemic as a case of dramatic social change, asking which transformations proved enduring, which were reversed, and what the pandemic revealed about sociology's theoretical and methodological preparedness for large-scale crises. Drawing on the framework of Dramatic Social Change (DSC), it analyses the pandemic as a catalyst for rapid societal transformation, focusing on its effects on social structures, institutional trust, digitalization, and social inequalities. At the same time, it reflects on the methodological and theoretical challenges of studying crises through a sociological lens. Rather than presenting detailed empirical findings, the analysis builds on extensive research conducted during the pandemic — including survey studies, institutional analyses, secondary evaluations of crisis-related databases, and observations of online social dynamics (Markova, 2021) — to advance a theoretical and methodological reflection on sociology's capacity to address complex transformations under conditions of polycrisis (Siirilä & Salonen, 2024).

Sociology, with its holistic traditions since Weber and Durkheim, offers a distinctive perspective on global crises, linking macro-level social structures (such as institutions or policies) with micro-level individual experiences (such as personal reactions and social interactions). Sociological theories and methods explore not only medical and economic consequences, but also the evolving dynamics of social order, identity, and collective action (Mishra et al., 2024). By analyzing the responses of different social groups, sociology sheds light on structural inequalities and societal shifts exacerbated by crises, as well as on the social construction of “catastrophic” thresholds (Folkers, 2021). The pandemic has exposed the ambivalent effects of crisis management: anti-epidemic measures intensified existing inequalities while contributing to broader social harms, including mental health challenges and increased domestic violence (Zinn, 2020). At the same time, research practices were subject to critical re-evaluation, as traditional methods, particularly survey research, were adapted under conditions of restricted physical interaction (Kennedy et al., 2022; Markova et al., 2023; Roychowdhury et al., 2022; Labora González & Fernández-Vilas, 2024; Bergmann et al., 2024; Scherpenzeel et al., 2020). These developments underscored the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in understanding a complex global event marked by significant cross-national variation (Deflem, 2022).

As Burawoy (2021, p. 552) observes, “Sociology flourishes through critical dialogues”, and as societies evolve in the aftermath of the pandemic, the discipline is called upon to reassess its theoretical assumptions and methodological practices. The pandemic has not only generated new empirical questions but has also exposed the need for more reflexive and adaptive frameworks capable of addressing both immediate disruptions and longer-term transformations. In this context, the article engages with broader debates on how sociological analysis can better account for complex and evolving forms of social change.

This article contributes to these debates in three related ways. First, it extends the theory of Dramatic Social Change (hereafter: DSC) beyond its predominantly psychological applications by demonstrating its relevance for analyzing institutional transformations, collective identities, and crisis governance within a sociological framework. Second, it emphasizes the temporal and uneven character of crisis-induced transformations, showing that the pandemic did not produce uniform or irreversible change, but rather a combination of persistence, adaptation, and reconfiguration across different contexts. Third, it highlights the methodological implications of studying large-scale crises, arguing for the need to move beyond linear explana-

tory models towards more flexible, multi-level, and mixed-method approaches capable of capturing the complexity and variability of social processes in conditions of polycrisis.

2 Applying Dramatic Social Change Theory: The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Case Study

Social change is a central research problem in sociology, with evolving explanatory approaches — ranging from economic and class oppositions as key drivers (Marx, 1909) and change as an adaptive process (Durkheim, 1933) to the role of ideas and institutions in shaping societal transformation (Weber, 1922). Sociologists have also examined structural adjustments to maintain social equilibrium (Parsons, 1964), while more recent approaches explore the impact of digitalization, social networks, and globalization (Castells, 1996; Perrons, 2004; Yordanova, 2022). Against this background, the COVID-19 pandemic can be problematized as a case of dramatic social change, offering insights into how societies react to, adapt to, and are transformed by large-scale crises. According to the theory of DSC, such crises challenge existing structures, norms, and values, leading to shifts in societal dynamics and power relations (Szeleenyi, 2015). The pandemic not only accelerated existing inequalities but also exposed vulnerabilities in global systems, prompting debates on how societies should reorganize in response to these disruptions. From a sociological perspective, it highlighted the malleability of social institutions and demonstrated how crisis events can reshape social behavior. Governments, institutions, and communities were compelled to confront long-standing social, economic, and political contradictions that were previously downplayed or ignored. For example, the intensification of economic inequality amplified demands for social justice, while political and social responses to public health measures revealed deep fractures within societal cohesion (Krastev, 2020).

The pandemic can be understood not only as a catalyst for change but also as a mirror reflecting the structural shortcomings of contemporary societies. It has drawn attention to persistent issues such as the fragility of public health systems, declining political trust, and vulnerabilities within the global economic order. While initial responses often produced temporary adjustments, the longer-term social effects have proven uneven and remain subject to ongoing reassessment. The rapid global spread of COVID-19 has led some scholars to attribute its diffusion to the dynamics of globalization (Jeanne et al., 2023; Volkov, 2022). However, it remains an open question whether the pandemic signals a shift towards a more deglobalized world, or rather a reconfiguration of globalization itself. In earlier work, I suggested that globalization may be evolving into a new phase shaped by digital transformation and the increasing dominance of big data and capital (Markova, 2021). From this perspective, the pandemic invites comparison with other large-scale disruptive events, such as the collapse of the socialist bloc (Petkova, 2003; Machonin, 1993; Sztompka, 2004), the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or the Arab Spring uprisings (Tarkhani & Biygautane, 2022). It also raises the question of whether such crises mobilize collective emotions, such as anger, despair, and humiliation, that can further intensify processes of social change. Shifts in collective identities, increasing polarization, declining institutional trust, and the erosion of community cohesion are particularly salient in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, macro- and middle-range sociological theories may benefit from engagement with the DSC framework, especially given that sociology has not traditionally centered on individuals as primary drivers of social change, nor fully explored how such transformations are experienced at the level of everyday life (Rogers, 2003).

A range of theoretical frameworks has been developed to analyze large-scale societal transformations. Jessop's (2015) critical realist symptomatology emphasizes that crises should be understood not as isolated events, but as manifestations of deeper structural contradictions. Freedon (2017) offers a historical conceptualization of "crisis", tracing its evolution from a decisive turning point to a more diffuse and overextended concept in contemporary discourse. Archer's (2020 & 2021) Morphogenetic Approach provides a framework for understanding how social structures and cultural systems, through their interaction with human agency, give rise to both gradual transformations and sudden ruptures, emphasizing the nonlinear and cumulative nature of social change. These perspectives provide important complementary insights. However, the DSC model developed by de la Sablonnière (2013) offers a particularly useful framework for analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic, as it captures both the rapidity and the depth of crisis-induced transformations in social norms, collective identities, and perceptions of continuity.

De la Sablonnière's (2017) typology of social change — distinguishing stability, inertia, gradual change, and dramatic change — provides a valuable basis for interpreting the pandemic as a large-scale, rapid, and disruptive event that challenges societal equilibrium and prompts the reconfiguration of social roles and values. DSC refers to a form of societal transformation that affects everyday life, has global reach, and impacts all major social institutions (de la Sablonnière et al., 2013). At the same time, this typology requires critical reflection, particularly regarding the distinction between stability and inertia, which may be better understood as transitional states within broader processes of gradual or dramatic change. Clarifying these distinctions is essential for both theoretical and practical reasons. Misinterpreting a situation of inertia as a dramatic change, or vice versa, may lead to inadequate or ineffective policy responses. For example, if a society was characterized by inertia but treated analytically as undergoing DSC, this could result in misdiagnosis and inappropriate interventions. Conversely, if conditions of dramatic change were interpreted as stability, negative effects might be amplified and opportunities for effective long-term recovery overlooked.

Table 1 presents the four key dimensions of DSC as conceptualized by de la Sablonnière et al. (2013), including the disruption of social norms, threats to identity, perceptions of collective threat, and the loss of collective continuity. Analyzing the pandemic through this framework highlights the extent to which it disrupted social structures and challenged established patterns of social organization. Rather than fully restoring pre-pandemic conditions, the post-pandemic period has been characterized by uneven processes of adaptation, partial recovery, and ongoing transformation (Table 1). This interpretation aligns with arguments that the pandemic should be understood not as a simple failure of coordination, but as a consequence of the high level of systemic interconnectedness characteristic of modern societies, where disruptions in one domain rapidly propagate across others (Esposito, 2020).

DSC occurs when all four characteristics are present simultaneously, signaling a fundamental shift in the organization and functioning of society following a large-scale, rapid, and pervasive event. Such transformations should not be interpreted as inherently positive or negative, but as complex and ambivalent processes that redistribute opportunities and constraints across social groups. While some groups may gain advantages, others may experience losses in status, security, or rights. From a long-term perspective, these transformations are multidimensional and often contradictory. As illustrated by Yordanova (2019, p. 24), social change in post-socialist Bulgaria involved both development and regression, driven by profound structural shifts in the organization of everyday life: "From 1988 to 2009, both positive and negative changes occurred in the Time Budget of the population [...] These changes were caused by sig-

nificant structural shifts [...] and by radical transformations in human activities”. This example underscores the importance of analyzing dramatic social change as a complex and uneven process rather than a linear trajectory of progress.

Table 1. DSC characteristics and the case of COVID-19 pandemic; adapted from de la Sablonnière (2017)

Dimension	Definition	COVID-19
1. Rate and scope of change	Speed and scope of the event's collective impact.	Rapid global spread with pervasive effects across all sectors of society, though with significant variations in impact and response across countries.
2. Rupture of social structures	A break with the past, requiring the reorganization of core societal institutions.	Extensive transformation of social institutions, including school closures, the creation of new types of health facilities, changes in institutional organization and use, and the emergence of new pandemic-related structures (e.g. operational and vaccination headquarters, electronic vaccination systems, health passports). Digitalization expanded as a key mode of work and education.
3. Rupture of normative structures	Break with the past through the disruption of established behavioral patterns in pursuit of collective goals.	Widespread behavioral changes (e.g. mask-wearing, physical distancing), new norms of social interaction, intensified intergroup tensions, and evolving forms of family and social relations.
4. Threat to cultural identity	Threat to the coherence of shared beliefs, values, and social norms within a group.	Shifts in values and attitudes, with vaccination and antibodies emerging as markers of safety and social legitimacy, alongside behavioral changes (e.g. avoidance of physical contact, prioritization of health over established social norms, and forms of health-related stigma).

The attempt to integrate the DSC model into a sociological framework is informed by empirical observations collected during the pandemic, which reveal dynamics consistent with the four dimensions of dramatic change. In particular, shifts in institutional trust, transformations in normative behaviors, and threats to group identities — observed through survey and institutional studies — offer critical illustrations that enrich the theoretical discussion. Although detailed empirical analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, these findings serve as important reference points for reinterpreting the DSC model from a sociological perspective and exploring its relevance for analyzing societal crises.

The first characteristic of DSC is the speed at which an event unfolds, but it must be considered together with its scope. A rapid event with a localized impact cannot be classified as dramatic social change within this typology. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, both its

speed and global reach are essential for understanding its effects. For example, although the Ebola outbreak spread rapidly, its impact remained geographically limited. By contrast, the cyclical nature of COVID-19, characterized by recurring waves of infection, subjected societies to sustained pressure and required continuous adaptation.

In Bulgaria, the initial wave was followed by a temporary period of relative stability in the summer of 2020, while subsequent waves revealed the crisis's persistence and shifting nature. Periods of mobilization alternated with phases of relaxation, often leading to declining vigilance and reduced compliance with public health measures. Over time, skepticism increased, and fatigue became more pronounced among those directly involved in managing the crisis, including healthcare workers, teachers, employees, and parents. Uncertainty regarding future developments, combined with evolving vaccination strategies, further complicated societal responses. These dynamics suggest not a complete rupture with the past, but a sustained process of disruption and adaptation that has reshaped behavioral, economic, and political practices.

The second characteristic of the DSC model concerns the rupture of social structures. The pandemic triggered widespread protest movements, often centered on the defense of individual rights in response to restrictive public health measures. Described as a "battleground" (Pleyers, 2020), these tensions reflected broader conflicts over governance, legitimacy, and social order. While such protests initially emerged in local contexts, they often escalated into larger demonstrations and, in some cases, confrontation with authorities. The economic consequences of lockdowns and increased public spending further contributed to social tensions, raising questions about the sustainability of welfare systems and the future of social policy. In a broader perspective, the pandemic highlighted the fragility and adaptability of social structures, as well as their embeddedness in wider processes of polycrisis. Rather than producing uniform outcomes, these transformations unfolded unevenly across societies, reinforcing the need for careful sociological analysis of institutional change.

The third characteristic of DSC involves the disconnection of normative structures. While social structures operate primarily at the macro level, normative structures concern micro-level processes, including individual norms and everyday practices (de la Sablonnière, 2017). This limitation is particularly relevant given that widely used epidemic models rarely incorporate the structured and heterogeneous nature of social networks, thereby overlooking how specific interaction patterns shape both contagion dynamics and social responses (Manzo, 2020). During the pandemic, behaviors that deviated from public health measures were frequently framed as socially irresponsible or even dangerous, and were subject to various forms of sanction, ranging from legal penalties to social disapproval. In Bulgaria, for example, non-compliance with anti-epidemic measures could result in civil sanctions, while restrictions on mobility and social contact altered everyday practices worldwide. It is worth noting that Novak Djokovic's decision to refuse the COVID-19 vaccination resulted in the revocation of his visa by Australian authorities, thereby preventing his participation in the 2022 Australian Open (Brook et al., 2022).

Normative tensions were further intensified by inconsistencies and fluctuations in public health directives, which sometimes generated uncertainty and weakened trust in institutions (Eurofound, 2022; Yaddanapudi et al., 2024). These dynamics highlight the complex relationship between regulation, compliance, and legitimacy in crisis conditions. The pandemic also contributed to the reconfiguration of social roles. For instance, teachers were required to rapidly adapt to digital forms of instruction, acquiring new competencies while restructuring their professional practices. Similarly, students and families experienced significant changes, including increased reliance on digital technologies and shifting expectations regarding educa-

tion and care. The pandemic has led to significant socio-economic changes in everyday life, which have been institutionalized through new norms applying universally to all citizens (European Parliament, 2023; Łukowiak, 2023). This prompts the question of whether social roles will be permanently altered by all future global crises, such as the pandemic.

The expansion of home-based learning illustrates the ambivalent consequences of these transformations. While digitalization facilitated continuity in education and enhanced access to online resources, it also exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack adequate technological resources. The absence of in-person interaction affected both learning outcomes and social development, while teachers faced increased demands and uneven institutional support (Betthäuser et al., 2024). In addition, school closures intensified unpaid labor within households, as parents assumed greater responsibility for supporting children's education (Yordanova & Markova, 2023).

The fourth characteristic of DSC concerns threats to cultural identity. Crises may challenge shared values and norms, creating uncertainty about group belonging and collective meaning (de la Sablonnière et al., 2016).

In the context of the pandemic, such threats emerged through disruptions to everyday social practices, as well as through broader processes of polarization and social differentiation. Physical distancing measures affected family relations, migration patterns, and social interaction, while vulnerable groups were sometimes stigmatized as sources of risk. For example, restrictions affecting Roma communities in several European countries illustrate how crisis management can intersect with pre-existing inequalities and processes of marginalization (Amnesty International, 2020; FRA, 2020).

Conflicts over pandemic management, including vaccination and prevention measures, often manifested in both offline and online environments, contributing to the politicization of identity and belonging. These developments suggest that the pandemic not only exposed but also intensified existing tensions related to collective identity, social cohesion, and trust.

While the COVID-19 pandemic reflects all four dimensions of DSC, the extent and durability of these transformations remain uneven. Some developments, such as the expansion of digital practices in education and work, appear to have longer-term implications, whereas others have shown partial reversal over time. Similarly, the impact on collective identity and social continuity varies across contexts, depending on factors such as institutional capacity, social resilience, and political conditions. Recognizing this variability is essential for a nuanced sociological application of the DSC framework.

This complexity is further reflected in the interplay between crisis dynamics and digital transformation processes. Social scientists have explored the link between the current coronavirus crisis and the global crisis of collective identities (Liu et al., 2021). As physical interaction became restricted, digital infrastructures enabled the continuation of economic, social, and cultural activities, albeit in altered forms. The uneven capacity of sectors to adapt to digital environments underscores the pandemic's differentiated impact across domains of social life. For example, the service sector experienced significant digital transformation, while the transport sector was profoundly reshaped by the pandemic.

Applying the DSC framework at both group and sectoral levels provides a useful perspective for analyzing these ongoing transformations. Changes in education, healthcare, and labor organization illustrate how crisis-driven adaptations may simultaneously generate innovation and reinforce inequality. Digitalization, in particular, has become a central axis of change, reshaping not only work and services but also social interaction and cultural participation.

The pandemic also prompted significant methodological adaptations within sociology.

Researchers increasingly relied on digital methods, including online surveys, virtual interviews, and digital ethnography, to study rapidly evolving social processes (O'Quinn et al., 2024). While such approaches enabled timely data collection, they also introduced new limitations, particularly in relation to the representation of vulnerable groups. For example, CAWI-based surveys conducted during the Bulgarian lockdowns provided valuable insights into coping strategies but tended to underrepresent individuals with lower socio-economic status or limited digital access (Markova & Yordanova, 2024). Overall, while the pandemic clearly illustrates the rapid disruption of social norms, the evidence regarding identity threats, collective continuity, and long-term structural change remains more context dependent. Processes of resilience and adaptation have contributed to the partial stabilization of social systems over time. A sociological application of the DSC model must therefore account for the temporality, variability, and ambivalence of crisis-induced transformations.

3 Sociology in (Post)Crisis Situations

The anti-epidemic restrictive measures introduced by the European Commission were grounded in behavioral intervention frameworks aimed at influencing individual conduct (Michie et al., 2011). On the one hand, the pandemic and its management provoked intense individual emotions, leading to rapid changes in daily behavior. On the other hand, physical distancing measures reshaped both personal and social life. This makes the study of individual responses to economic and public health measures particularly important. Emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger are associated with political attitudes and behavioral intentions, but in different ways. Fear and anger tend to be linked to support for restrictive policies aimed at containing the virus, whereas anxiety is more strongly associated with support for economic measures. Moreover, anger and anxiety, but not fear, appear to increase individuals' intentions to engage politically. These findings suggest that different dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis evoke distinct emotional responses, which in turn shape patterns of political support and action (Renström & Bäck, 2021). This also raises questions about the modeling assumptions underpinning such interventions. As Manzo (2020) demonstrates, dominant epidemiological models often abstract from the structure of social interactions, thereby favoring undifferentiated, large-scale measures over more targeted and socially differentiated forms of intervention.

Physical distancing measures have been a major driver of social change, reflecting a range of socio-psychological mechanisms, including shifts in subjective norms related to proximity and interaction, the framing of distancing as a moral obligation, the imposition of behavioral regulation, and the transformation of everyday routines (Hagger et al., 2020). These changes may have particularly significant implications for children who experienced formative stages of socialization under crisis conditions (Krastev, 2020; Pelekasis, 2021). Rather than assuming uniform outcomes, it is more appropriate to recognize that such cohorts may face increased risks of educational disadvantage, reduced social interaction, and uneven developmental trajectories. Greater reliance on digital technologies, combined with reduced physical activity, may also have implications for long-term well-being. Empirical evidence further indicates that income inequality is closely associated with educational disparities, which can weaken societal resilience and constrain recovery in post-crisis contexts.

In addition to the theoretical and multidisciplinary approaches discussed above, the heuristic potential of Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) is particularly relevant for analyzing global crises such as COVID-19. From the perspective of examining dramatic social change,

this approach enables the identification of underlying mechanisms through systematic comparison, the exploration of similarities and differences, and the detection of gaps, contradictions, and tensions within social processes. It also directs attention to the roles of stakeholders and institutions involved in shaping or stabilizing crisis dynamics. Rather than relying solely on macro-level analogies with past crises, Grounded Theory encourages the exploration of micro- and meso-level comparisons, drawing on cases such as SARS, Ebola, and HIV, which similarly involved behavioral and institutional transformations. However, its application in pandemic conditions is constrained by the difficulty of collecting systematically generated qualitative data during periods of restricted social interaction and heightened uncertainty. This perspective also resonates with critiques of linear explanatory models in sociology, which argue that social processes are best understood as co-evolving, non-linear systems characterized by feedback loops and interdependencies, rather than as additive causal chains (Room, 2020).

Sociology, as a complex empirical science, engages with past, present, and emerging social phenomena, while remaining attentive to the diversity of social worlds. In this context, the traditional dichotomy between holism and individualism appears increasingly limited, as explanations of social phenomena require methodological pluralism and multiple interpretative perspectives. Understanding collective structures through individual action — or vice versa — calls for a dialectical and perspectivist approach that recognizes the interdependence of actors and structures (Mihail, 2013). This orientation supports using multiple levels of analysis to capture the complexity of social dynamics, particularly in the context of global crises.

The multidimensional character of the pandemic can be more effectively addressed through a holistic methodological framework in empirical sociological research. Such an approach is conceptualized as a “general, metaparadigmatic system of scientific principles and approaches” that enables the development of integrative and flexible research designs (Chengelova, 2016, p. 125). By adopting this perspective, it becomes possible to mitigate issues of fragmentation and subjectivity while addressing the methodological limitations associated with studying dynamic and rapidly evolving forms of social change. Within this holistic perspective, methodology can be understood as a systematically constructed set of paradigmatic approaches, meta- and specific theories, methods, research procedures, and techniques required for the design, implementation, and interpretation of sociological research (Chengelova, 2016, p. 118). Complementary perspectives from the sociology of health and risk further reinforce this position, suggesting that the pandemic may be conceptualized as a “total social fact” in Maussian terms, thereby underscoring the need for comprehensive and integrative analytical approaches when studying complex crisis phenomena (Labora González & Fernández-Vilas, 2024).

While economists primarily focus on the pandemic’s financial implications, sociology offers a distinctive contribution by deepening our understanding of how economic hardship translates into social unrest and shifts in public opinion. Sociological research on public health behaviors complements epidemiological models by demonstrating how cultural values, institutional trust, and social networks shape compliance with health policies. Similarly, although both political science and sociology examine the effects of government measures, sociology provides the analytical nuance required to understand how such policies influence individual freedoms, group identities, and social cohesion.

Sociology is also well positioned to critically examine the digitalization of society and its consequences for everyday life, including retirement decisions, work–life balance, education, and job quality. When combined with computational approaches, sociological analysis can help explain how the development of artificial intelligence and the expansion of big data are

likely to reshape social relations and broader patterns of social development.

In this context, several key questions emerge regarding the role of sociology in post-crisis situations. How should sociologists approach the study of an unknown and rapidly evolving phenomenon? What additional factors must be considered when the object of analysis is global rather than local in scope? And how should sociology position itself in relation to phenomena that are simultaneously examined by other scientific disciplines? Addressing these questions requires not only robust theoretical frameworks but also appropriate empirical tools and methodological strategies for data collection and analysis.

The growing body of research on the health, social, and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic demonstrates the increasing reliance on interdisciplinary approaches. For example, macroeconomic analyses are often conducted in conjunction with assessments of health systems (Welfens, 2020). At the same time, the rapid expansion of global datasets such as the Global Health Security Index (GHSI) and the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) reflects the demand for comparable and up-to-date data across countries. However, these developments have also raised important terminological and methodological concerns, particularly regarding the construction and interpretation of composite indices and the potential biases they entail (Lakoff, 2021; Kaiser et al., 2021).

I have previously discussed the pandemic as a transformative event within the framework of a global crisis. While the pandemic itself is driven by a virus studied by virologists and epidemiologists, and treated by medical practitioners, its management is carried out by institutions — both national and supranational — as well as by citizens. Its effects extend across all domains of public life, including politics, economics, social security, healthcare, demographics, education, and law, each typically addressed by distinct academic disciplines. However, the institutional response has often diverged from its implementation, prompting critical reflections on the evolution of governmental power in contemporary societies (Pellizzoni & Sena, 2021).

The development of the pandemic has been uneven and context-dependent, shaped by factors such as socio-demographic structures, economic conditions, the scope and effectiveness of public health measures, healthcare capacity, and cultural norms and beliefs. The pandemic unfolded in successive waves, requiring sociology to account for temporality and the intervals between crisis phases. Its global character further complicates analysis, as effects transcend national boundaries and interact across different institutional and cultural contexts.

These conditions raise important methodological challenges. Sociologists must navigate between macro-, meso-, and micro-level analyses; combine top-down and bottom-up approaches; and decide whether to prioritize static, dynamic, historical, or prospective perspectives. Applying the DSC model in this context requires attention to both the immediate disruptions and the longer-term transformations associated with the crisis. Developments such as accelerated digitalization, changes in work organization, and disruptions in global supply chains illustrate how pre-existing trends were intensified rather than entirely created by the pandemic.

From a theoretical perspective, structuralist approaches (e.g., Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Durkheim) offer valuable tools for analyzing interdependencies, institutional arrangements, and systemic regularities within the crisis. The pandemic can thus be understood as a structural disruption affecting interconnected domains of social life. Comparative analysis across different stages — pre-pandemic conditions, initial outbreak, periods of relative stabilization, and subsequent waves — further highlights the dynamic and non-linear character of these transformations. In this context, middle-range theory (Merton, 1967) remains particularly relevant, providing a bridge between abstract theoretical models and empirical analysis.

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic has exposed the limits of existing theoretical

frameworks and empirical methods. The difficulty of collecting reliable data under conditions of uncertainty has required sociology to adapt and expand its methodological repertoire. This includes greater reliance on mixed and digital methods, as well as more flexible research designs that can capture rapidly evolving social processes.

Finally, transformations in mobility patterns provide a useful lens for understanding broader social change. As Büscher and Urry (2009) suggest, multiple forms of mobility structure social life, including physical, virtual, and imaginative dimensions. During the pandemic, physical mobility — for work, leisure, migration, and family life — was significantly restricted, while the movement of goods continued, often mediated through digital infrastructures. At the same time, virtual and imagined mobilities became increasingly central, enabling social interaction, cultural participation, and communication at a distance. These shifts underscore the growing importance of digitally mediated forms of social life and point to a reconfiguration of social space that extends beyond the immediate context of the pandemic.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The diversity and adaptability of sociological theories reaffirm the discipline's capacity to critically engage with the transformations unfolding in contemporary societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a sustained and necessary reflection on changes in personal, communal, and institutional life. It has reshaped family dynamics, social interactions, and community engagement, while also exposing both the resilience and the limitations of public institutions. Understanding these transformations is essential for informing post-crisis recovery strategies and for interpreting future large-scale disruptions. At the same time, an important question remains whether the pandemic constitutes a distinct crisis or should be understood as part of an ongoing erosion and reconfiguration of collective identities.

This analysis does not seek to establish a new theoretical paradigm, such as a “post-crisis sociology” or a “sociology of the post-Corona world” (Hanafi, 2020). Rather, it contributes to ongoing debates on how global crises reshape social structures and how sociological inquiry can support societies in understanding and responding to future challenges (Ward, 2020; Berger & Krumpal, 2021).

To synthesize this retrospective review, several key dimensions emerge, highlighting the need for sociology to adapt in a post-crisis context.

First, theories of social change require recalibration to capture the pandemic's differentiated and uneven effects on social structures, interactions, and development. While macro-sociological frameworks provide broad explanatory perspectives, middle-range theories offer greater sensitivity to processes unfolding at the individual and community levels. The scale and complexity of crises such as the pandemic necessitate interdisciplinary approaches that connect sociology with economics, public health, and psychology. Within this dialogue, sociology retains a critical role in interpreting social change and informing policy, including in contexts such as Bulgaria, where ongoing transformations intersect with longer-term structural developments.

Second, the DSC Theory offers a useful framework for analyzing global crises such as COVID-19, given its emphasis on speed, scope, and disruptions of social and normative structures and identity. All four characteristics of DSC can be examined using mixed-methods approaches. While the DSC model has been primarily applied to psychological processes, its potential for sociological analysis remains underexplored. This study contributes to the extension of its application to institutional transformations and collective identities

in a polycrisis context. At the same time, methodological challenges remain significant, particularly regarding data collection and the increasing reliance on digital survey methods, which continue to raise questions about representation and comparability across contexts.

Third, the narrative framing the pandemic as a crisis, catastrophe, or “monstrous threat” reflects the emotional intensity of large-scale societal upheavals. Mass protests have emerged as a significant social phenomenon, even during the pandemic. Despite health concerns, people continued to protest in support of civil rights and solidarity. Although COVID-19 impacted these movements, many demonstrations had already begun before the pandemic, reflecting underlying societal tensions. Additionally, the pandemic exposed systemic flaws in public administration, deepened social inequalities, and highlighted institutional weaknesses in crisis management, further intensified by the unintended effects of public health measures. This observation resonates with arguments that contemporary societies are characterized by high levels of systemic integration, which can increase vulnerability in times of crisis and may require forms of selective de-integration to manage disruption (Esposito, 2020).

Fourth, the pandemic has exposed and amplified fractures in social solidarity and trust. In many contexts, it has deepened divisions within and between communities, highlighting the limits of individualized responses to collective problems. Changes in trust have affected governance, healthcare institutions, science, and processes of digitalization. These developments are particularly significant for societies already undergoing gradual transformations linked to globalization and digitalization, where the pandemic acted as an accelerator rather than a rupture.

Fifth, the complexity of the pandemic as a global crisis underscores the need for holistic analytical approaches that address fragmentation, subjectivity, and methodological limitations. The concept of “social distance”, widely used during the pandemic, illustrates these challenges, as it often conflated physical distancing with broader social disconnection (Romania, 2020). More broadly, debates on the “crisis of empirical sociology” predate COVID-19 and remain highly relevant, particularly in relation to digitalization and the expansion of big data (Savage & Burrows, 2007; Burrows & Savage, 2014). In a context of rapid social transformation, developing reliable composite indicators seems an impossible task without risking conceptual distortion. The development of indices requires interpretive stability, consistency, and epistemic symmetry—conditions that are rarely present during crises (Markova, 2025). These discussions emphasize the importance of methodological reflexivity and the continued relevance of triangulation as a strategy for ensuring rigor in the analysis of complex and rapidly changing social phenomena. In this context, the analysis also resonates with critiques of linear explanatory models in sociology. As Room (2020) argues, social processes are not adequately captured by additive and equilibrium-based frameworks but should instead be understood as co-evolving, non-linear systems shaped by feedback loops, path dependency, and contingent interactions. The pandemic exemplifies these dynamics, producing uneven and context-dependent transformations across social structures, norms, and identities. Interpreting such processes through the lens of dramatic social change, therefore, requires analytical frameworks capable of capturing instability, interdependence, and temporal variability.

Sixth, the pandemic has intensified existing social contradictions while also generating new lines of conflict, including tensions between different occupational groups and between vaccinated and unvaccinated populations. Rather than viewing these as entirely new divisions, they can be understood as reconfigurations of pre-existing inequalities and social boundaries. The pandemic should also be situated within the broader context of a global polycrisis, in which multiple disruptions — economic, geopolitical, and environmental — interact and reinforce

one another. This perspective highlights the need to analyze crises not as isolated events but as interconnected processes.

In this context, sociology's role lies not only in assessing the consequences of crises but in developing analytical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity, variability, and long-term implications of social change in an increasingly interconnected and unstable world.

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