Pandemic Surveillance or "Pandemic of Surveillance"? – A Book Review

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1. Introduction

David Lyon has since long ago conducted sociological researches on the phenomenon of "surveillance" which characterizes the contemporary societies; yet, the fact that citizens all over the world have particularly felt the presence of this phenomenon in their everyday life during the Covid-19 Pandemic, was a scientific opportunity to further deepen the sociological approach of this theme; and this is a very first reason (among many others) to make this book very interesting to read not only by social scientists but also by bigger audiences.

The 7 chapters of this sociological work describe the trends of the pandemic surveillance (the first term reminding deadly epidemic situations such as the 14th century Black Death, or the Spanish Flu, while second term shows the use of big data in relation to public health – meaning the *systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of health-related dat*a in order to organize control methods and prevent the expansion of the disease).

The particularity of Covid-19 pandemic is that it was the first to occur in a context known as "surveillance capitalism"; the kind of surveillance which occurred was not neutral (essentially because it was –and it still is- used in ways that *challenge other essential priorities such as human rights and civil liberties*); the pandemic arrived in a context where big data was "prized" for its value in providing "solutions" and where vital activities (such as work or education) went "remote". "Social distance", mask-wearing, lock-downs and quarantine became thus commonplace almost all over the planet (giving an occasion to governments to take advantage of natural disasters or human conflicts in order to bring major changes consolidating their power) and tend *to persist into the post-pandemic world*!

The author's basic aim is to start with people and public health and not with technology, hoping to make "seeking alternatives" everyone's business (given that the pandemic has brought surveillance home; as a consequence, working, shopping, learning and entertainment at home opens the digital door to multiple monitoring by employers, stores, schools and platform companies). This is why the author describes in details the different methods raised by this "new culture" of surveillance (such as contact tracking and location tracking apps or vaccine passes) destined to "face the disease" in the same way almost all over the planet, despite the cultural differences and the variety of local legal statutes and ethics of care; in a context where ordinary people, in their effort to avoid the disease and its mortal effects, seemed willing to try many things (giving boost for surveillance surges).

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What seems sociologically important is that this book examines the use of data (which is not only application of science and technology). Data can be very useful during a pandemic crisis (as well as at other times), being vital for the understanding of reality and for the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies. What happens today is an "inundation" of data (daily fresh statistics leading to predictions) which nevertheless cannot "see" (or evaluate) everything but do represent conditions and people in specific ways (besides the really necessary information is often unavailable) although can be used as index to *determine how people are treated*. Poverty, marginalization and invisibility tend to be penalized by the pandemic and the minority groups are likely to be the worst affected: the inequalities relating to health surveillance may be thus associated with factors of technical disadvantage (such as the lack of a smartphone). Digital companies have participated in the pandemic management, fact which created liaisons with governments (affecting the sense of "democracy" and "power" in the contemporary societies, damaging civil liberties, human rights and privacy, nowadays at risk). It thus becomes crucial to understand *what is revealed and what is hidden in data handling*.

This book poses a central sociological question related to the role of science and technology (of digitalization) in modern societies. In everyday terms, the use of "digitalization" is crucial and impossible to surpass when it comes to the "social well-being" (this moto was very much used during the pandemic). As a statement it seems ok, yet, it overlooks the reality that technological potentials are not neutral, as they are "dictated" by different powers (local or transnational). It is a sociological goal to make societies "use" technology for peoples' "real flourishment" (we use the author's term) which involves the necessity to place "society" above technology; the contemporary everyday mentality is ruled by an incredible confusion which ignores the human acts behind the "technological progresses". This book, taking example of the ongoing pandemic surveillance proves that the argument of scientific and technical neutrality cannot stand because political and economic issues and interests are always above the technical means.

This work, based on the analysis of the use of digitalization during the pandemic (with many examples and facts selected all over the world) invites to reconsider the contemporary dominant idea which considers that the "digitalization" (as a kind of contemporary panacea) will solve the social problems.