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Reactionary health politics and medical sociology

Medical sociology has championed patient expertise, and the growing involvement of patient experiences in shaping healthcare. At the same time, we have explored corporate interests, medical elites and boundary-work, critically engaging with techno-optimism and advocating for responsible innovation.

This presentation considers how these key pillars of our field intersect with reactionary health politics since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly its digital and populist dimensions. I explore the rise of reactionary politics and how it is shaping health knowledge, provision and uptake. I examine how medical sociology can respond to these developments, reflecting on how our critical tools can be mobilised in support of and against reactionary health politics.

Focusing on reactionary politics and innovative health technologies of fertility tracking, polygenic risk scoring of embryos, and mRNA vaccines, I trace some key qualities of reactionary health agendas, including with respect to digital media, inequality, maternity, democracy and scientific institutions. I consider how lay expertise, knowledge democratisation and the sociology of biomedical knowledge—especially the formation of “truths”—relate to these dynamics.

I end by reflecting on how we react to reactionary health politics. I consider how seeking progressive influence or countering misinformation online can reinforce polarisation and elide legitimate concerns about institutions, elites, risks and meaning-making in medical science. I ask what this means for medical sociology and our research agendas, especially our capacity to promote equitable futures and our work in digital spaces.