

LIFE AFTER THE VIRUS: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN A POST PANDEMIC WORLD

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Not just another capitalist crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just another health or economic crisis. It is fundamentally a crisis of social reproduction and care work. Hospitals and care facilities are being pushed to the brink by those affected by the virus. Reproductive work in homes and communities is being stretched to its limits, with women once again carrying the load. In dependent territories and in the peripheries of big cities around the world, community networks for the provision of water, food, childcare and other basic needs are being put to the test, often overrun with millions at risk. What is at stake now is how we take care of each other and how we attend to the fact that we are fragile beings. Life on the planet as we know it is on the brink of radical transformation. Rosa Luxemburg's question still applies: will we turn this into a time for revolution, or will we be unable to stop it from falling into a new barbarism?

This is the first full blown pandemic provoked by the uncontrolled development of capitalist-patriarchal-racist relations of production. We cannot grasp its meaning unless we understand it as a crisis coming from the contradictions within the current system of social production and reproduction. [The virus is the result of the displacement of animals from their natural home, the destruction of plants and the hoarding of animals for food production in unhealthy environments.](#) This has also resulted from a way of living that crowds people into megalopolises, stuffed in subways and buses, confined in factories, offices, schools and prisons. This is all caused by the annihilation of nature's metabolism in capital's expanded reproduction as the dominant social relation. Social reproduction has become increasingly mediated by commodification and abstract labour. In a world mystified around the twin spectre of money and value, care work is being strained to its bare limits.

The political economy of disease

Capitalism as we know it is undergoing what will probably be a transcendental change. The current COVID-19 pandemic is the latest development of its [civilization crisis](#), with ripple effects across the world. It expresses the total breakdown of a world that has forgotten that the reproduction of life is always at its centre – whether capital recognizes it or not. The 2008 crisis was a premonition of the crisis of the Capitalocene: the geological era of the domination of capital is now coming to terms with Earth.

Hidden at the center of this crisis is social reproduction. The demolition of capital comes with increasing pressures on care and reproductive work. Besides the direct impacts of the health side of the crisis, families are at pains to strengthen their networks of support as their home economies implode. The privatization, restructuring, and financialization of life, work and the public sector has weakened the ability of families and communities to handle the increasing stress coming from labour markets during the pandemic.

In this situation, women are the labourers of last resort. The devaluation of labour outside the home translates into an increasing superexploitation of care and reproductive labour which is un(der)paid and unrecognized. As the lockdown sets in, women tend to receive most of the increased load in online homeschooling, childcare and community organizing. They also face increasing patriarchal violence as many are forced into quarantine with violent partners. It is women who pay the higher price of foodstuffs as they sort out survival in increasingly hostile conditions. Now we realize the cost of the destruction of community networks by commodification and the key role of political imagination in women-led systems of support.

We are all Keynesians again

Progressive or conservative, leftwing or rightwing, the discourse of battle against the virus translates into policies of war Keynesianism. Massive government interventions including an expansive monetary policy and cash transfers and subsidies have become part of the new economic policy toolbox.

Austerity is a word that has been erased from discourses across the political spectrum. Nation states are giving out fiscal resources and expanding their deficits faster than they can register the monetary outlays as they attempt to stop the unavoidable: an economic crash of unforeseen magnitude.

Massive safety nets, some (taking the form of an emergency Universal Basic Income), consolidate new forms of precarity that have increased under the veil

of home-office and online work. Labouring 24/7 becomes the new normal for many employees, while wage cuts and layoffs proliferate as the crisis deepens. In this crisis there is a brutal impact on women and/or migrants who work, precariously for the most part, precisely in those activities that are being crushed (e.g. care work, sales and tourism).

In many countries, states are now partially or completely paying wages or expenditures such as rents for workers in the private sector. Thus, the capitalist state is now directly subsidizing capitalist profits, with falling wages and employment only partially compensated by these transfers. At the same time, the multiplication of apps and online technologies, implemented without regulation or political debate, spread into our lives as new means of superexploitation and supervision. Dependent states and societies are accelerating an entrance *par force* into the business of platform capitalism. This is not the realization of the [dream of UBI plus general automatization of production](#), but a new road downhill for the masses.

In Latin America, and other regions in the Global South, the pandemic has become the perfect excuse for increasing social control, especially in ‘hotspots’ in popular neighborhoods. Self-organized social reproduction and care work are at the heart of social insurrection at the borders. It is in these territories that working people organize together in order to attend to their own reproduction blended with wider struggles for social change. Conveniently for the capitalist state, the crisis disrupts this circulation of resistance at the centre of life.

Meanwhile, state intervention is becoming once again an instrument for the deactivation of collective organization. In this general crisis the dependent capitalist state reactualizes its most repressive side. Security forces have regained control of the streets and social movements have been stymied in Chile, Hong Kong, Lebanon and Haiti. Struggles against adjustments in social security and wages, as well as mega mining and femicides, have been driven underground as mandatory quarantine bans open mass mobilizations.

Formal democracy has all but lost its essence, particularly in Latin America. Political debate and political participation have been suspended or moved online. Meanwhile, political organizing on the ground continues to be a fundamental part of social reproduction work, falling on the backs of women leaderships, often concealed behind patriarchal patronage within movements themselves.

Political imagination to find a popular way out of this crisis

Do we have to choose between saving the economy and our health? Should we favor life against production? Are these even the relevant questions for today? This crisis is, most of all, a crisis of care and reproduction or, in other words, a crisis of life or death. There is no economy (capital) without the care of its most precious commodity: our living fire.

The pandemic and its ensuing crisis have put into the fore the need for a revolution in the organization of the provision of the fundamental activities of care and reproduction. This is not to keep capitalism working, but to bring about its collapse. We need to turn the crisis of care into a crisis that points beyond capital.

The eco-feminist movement has long put reproductive work at the centre of its most radical praxis. As the Capitalocene cracks, social movements need to push forth the need for a radical transformation in social organization. Less work, more pay, less consumption and less senseless destruction of our environment, more free time and more social cooperation without the mediation of capital by means of money: all are key to the constitution of a new social articulation that places at its centre the reproduction of life free from alienation and violence.

The question is not just to destroy all mediations. We need to struggle to create new forms of social labour where we control these mediations. With social reproduction and care work at the center of policies, people can and must create new institutions. [We cannot stop with a Green New Deal that puts the capitalist state in the middle \(or on top\) of popular organization.](#) On the contrary, what we need the most is to forge a process of political recomposition of the working classes [in order to build a new anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist commons.](#) This commoning will provide us with novel forms of living together, working together, in balance with nature. Social movements, people organized on the ground and on their living territories, have long developed alternatives to capitalist organization of reproduction and care – see, for example, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Kurdish women, the ‘Piqueteras’ in Argentina. We need to put these practices on the front line of the debate for radical transformation. Collectives are part of the solution, while capital and its state are clearly part of the problem.