The Social Reproduction Crisis During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Barcelona: Potentialities and Limitations

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Abstract

The outbreak of the social pandemic brought to the foreground the crisis of social reproduction afflicting our societies. However, this new visibility of the importance of care work and the emergence of mutual support networks was not a sufficient condition for the politicization of the reproductive sphere to take place, contrary to what happened during the 2008 crisis. This paper aims to comprehend the reasons why such politicization did not occur by means of a case-study carried out with four focus-groups made up of representatives of mutual support networks established in Barcelona to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population. The achieved results show the limits of social reproduction theory to explain politicization theories, as it does not sufficiently acknowledge the state's agency.

Introduction

It can be said that, in the last decade, most social conflict in advanced capitalist societies and, more particularly, in Southern European countries, has taken place in the arena of social reproduction. This has taken different shapes, such as mobilizations in defence of public services, especially healthcare and education, of the pension system, of sexual and reproductive rights, of the right to housing and of the civil and labour rights of racialized people. All these kinds of conflict have revealed the existing contradiction between present-day security and neoliberal policies, on one hand, and the sustainability of life, on the other. This has come into full view in movements with a global impact like the International Women's Strike or Black Lives Matter.

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Social Reproduction

However, in the first place, we must ask ourselves about what we understand by "social reproduction". To do this, we should start out by dealing with the relations between the productive and reproductive spheres, in agreement with the Marxist tradition. For Marx, "every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction" (Marx, 1867/1977:711). This is to say that the reproduction of salaried labour is inserted within capitalist production and is made possible by the salary and biological reproduction. And yet Marx's interest was focused on the processes of surplus extraction associated with commodity production, which leaves the organization of the reproductive sphere unattended. Actually, the mainstream Marxist tradition has tended to conceive of social reproduction as the mere reproduction of the values, norms and domination structures which make the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production possible—what was systematized by Althusser (1971) as the state's ideological apparatus—and has given less importance to the reproduction of labour as flesh-and-blood human beings, a field of study on which the feminist turn in the Marxist tradition has flourished, giving rise to the theory of social reproduction. Despite some forerunners like Mary Inman (Ferguson, 2019) and her theorisation of domestic work as the pivot of the productive system, it is not until the 1960s that, at the height of the Keynesian welfare state, the issue of social reproduction is taken up again. This coincides with the emergence of several new social conflicts and movements (civil rights, feminism, pacifism, anti-colonialism, LGBTIQ + …) that take the social conflict arena out of the field of labour and reveal other modes of oppression beyond class exploitation.

The issues of domestic work and social reproduction will be dealt with by second-wave feminism in its several different trends. Thus, while liberal equality feminism thinks that domestic work and reclusion are some of the main sources of discrimination (Friedan, 1963) and advocates for the incorporation of women into the work sphere without questioning capitalism, radical feminism believes that such incorporation into wage labour does not call into question patriarchal relationships so long as women continue to perform the domestic work, which creates a situation of double-shift working that only increases their exploitation (Dixon, 1977). In fact, for these authors, patriarchy and capitalism are two separate systems of oppression and it is the former that women must focus on if they want to achieve liberation. Contrary to both these trends, Marxist feminism thinks that, even if patriarchy precedes capitalism, both occur today in a situation of mutual interdependence and, thus, it is impossible to fight against one without questioning the other. We owe one of the first theorisations of this issue to Benston (1969), for whom women's oppression is based on their exclusion from the monetary economy. However, in contrast with radical feminists, she does not believe that women's liberation implies their incorporation into productive work as well as the socialization of care work in the frame of capitalist society, but it requires the politicisation of women's performing of domestic work in the fight towards socialism.

A step further in this same line of thought is found in autonomist Marxist feminists like Federici (1974, 2012), Dalla Costa and James (1975) and, later, Mies (1999), who theorise about the role of domestic, invisible, non-recognized work in the reproduction of labour and their production of surplus, as opposed to Benston. They understand the family as the "social factory" where, not only is use-value produced, but also the merchandise that labour constitutes (Dalla Costa,1975). To make this possible, a naturalized attribution of care and docility to women's character and psyche is needed. In this sense, they argue that

Marxism and organized labour have not considered the fact that it is thanks to non-wage labour that wage-labour exploitation can take place. Mies (1999) adds, thanks to her non-Eurocentric outlook, that, behind the sexual division of labour as well as behind the international division of labour, there are non-capitalist "colonized" spaces (women, othered peoples, and nature) which do not refer us to the conflict between capital and wage labour, but between capital and life.

Italian autonomists launched the Wages for Housework movement, since they think that neither double-shift work, nor household technological appliances, nor services enabling work-life conciliation are really liberating. Thus, the fight for a domestic salary is not considered a demand as much as a political perspective, one that makes it possible to visualize domestic work and reject the idea that only the struggle against capital is feasible in the face of wage labour and advanced technologies. Carrasco Bengoa (2017) points to the Italian autonomists' approach as the starting point of feminist economics, advocating for the inclusion of domestic work in the national accounts (Benería & Stimpson, 1987) and developing the proposal of a "broadened circular flow of income" which visualizes, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, the mass of unpaid reproductive work and links it to the system of production (Picchio, 1992).

Nevertheless, all three feminist approaches will be targeted by the criticism of black feminisms for failing to include racialization in their analyses, as well as the experiences of black women, for whom the household could be a secure space in the face of the conditions of slave-labour exploitation in plantations and domestic service. Davis (1981) criticises the existing separation and the dependency of the reproductive and productive spheres, as she makes it clear that the separation between the capitalist economic sphere which enables profit accumulation and the old domestic economy is a defining trait of capitalist modernity. Thus, domestic labour cannot be integrated as a central element of capitalist production, but as a precondition for it to be possible. Davis specifies, though, that the reality of housewives is only a partial reality, a symbol of economic prosperity which is only enjoyed by rising social classes, and it excludes the reality of black women working under the coercion of slavery. With this argument, Davis criticised the proposal of creating a domestic salary, and she believed that the only significant steps to put an end to domestic slavery are the socialization of domestic work and, finally, the socialist proposal. With this, she took up critically part of Benston's arguments (1969). Later on, Davis's theories were further developed by intersectionality theorists (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) to account for the fact that the intersection of the different axes of inequality (gender, race, class, sexual orientation) gives rise to different specific forms of oppression.

The Theory of Social Reproduction

Social reproduction theory (SRT) emerges within the contemporary feminist movement to build an explanatory model capable of incorporating the different debates we have just sketched. Its first version can be attributed to Vogel (1983), for whom both commodity production and labour reproduction take place in an integrated system in such a way that the unpaid domestic labour performed in households is needed for the reproduction of labour and for the realization of surplus, although, from the capitalist standpoint, it is regarded as devalued, unproductive work. And yet, in contrast to previous authors, Vogel herself does not concentrate on the study of households and domestic labour as spaces of oppression, but on the interaction between them and capital (Ferguson, 2020).

Nevertheless, Vogel's proposal does not find a fruitful field of debate because of the crisis afflicting Marxist theory at her time. Thus, her proposals would only resound thirty years later in the works of Arruzza (2013), Bhattacharya (2017), Fraser (2016), and Ferguson (2019). For these authors, SRT does not only mean the development of an integrated theory accounting for the importance of labour linked to reproduction, but also a tool for the analysis of new forms of social conflict in social reproduction spaces and a political strategy for the renewal of the feminist movement based on the proposal of a Feminism for the 99% (Arruzza et al., 2019) and the creation of new repertoires of contention such as the Women's Strike.

Even though social reproduction is present in all social formations, it is in capitalist societies that it is characterised by devaluation and its subordination to the goal of value accumulation. SRT is based on a broadened notion of social reproduction which is not limited to unpaid domestic labour but includes care work as well as the work carried out in healthcare policies, pension policies, in schools, hospitals, in the field of catering, and in that of community work, i.e., all those spheres ensuring the sustainability of life. Additionally, they point out that all such jobs are mostly carried out by a feminine, migrant workforce in conditions of precariousness and progressive commoditization, which makes it possible to analyse how the different axes of oppression such as gender, race or social class contribute to its configuration.

In this sense, SRT stands out due to its inclusion of the state among the elements of analysis required to understand social reproduction. Thus, in each regime of capitalist accumulation, we see a different response to the socio-reproductive contradiction of capitalism (Fraser, 2022). In the theoretical frame of SRT, the state's role in the reproduction of the workforce is considered both in its regulatory dimension (establishment of legal frameworks) and in its role as provider (implementation of public policies and provision of facilities such as schools, hospitals and retirement homes). In connection with this, people's different access to public services or to common goods such as water or energy, an access which is dependent on state action, contributes to the emergence of different levels within the workforce (Arruzza & Bhattacharya, 2020). Thus, in the period of development of the Keynesian welfare state, large parts of social reproduction became internalized by the state, while in the current regime of globalized financial capitalism we are witnessing the commoditization of social reproduction and its devolution to the domestic, family sphere (Fraser, 2022), a fact which only intensifies the present crisis of care.

Presently, we are experiencing a crisis of social reproduction which, together with the environmental crisis, the economic and financial crises, and the political crisis, makes up a global crisis of capitalism (Fraser, 2018). This crisis has only become more acute with the austerity policies implemented in response to the 2008 economic-financial crisis, policies which have affected the sphere of state-provided services and have decimated the income of the most vulnerable households, subject to a debt economy (Caffentzis, 2018). This situation has contributed to the increasing commodification of care work, which is mostly performed in precarious conditions by migrant women from the global South, creating global chains of care (Hochschild, 2000).

For capitalism, oriented towards capital accumulation as it is, this kind of work is not valuable as it is not aimed at the production of merchandises, although it is the work that makes it possible to sustain life and constitutes a condition of possibility for its own existence. Thus, the contradiction between the interests of capital and the sustainability of life becomes exacerbated and this kind of work becomes a space for resistance and conflict.

However, as all those same authors point out, we are not dealing with a finished theory, but a concept under construction, continuously formulated and reformulated. One of the

relevant questions—and the one which constitutes the central axis of this paper—concerns the relationship between social reproduction and the spheres of provision. For Brenner and Laslett (1989), social reproduction takes place in three main spheres: the family, the public institutions representing the state, and the market. To this tripartite vision, some authors—like Adelantado (2000)—add a fourth element: the relational or communitarian sphere. The relationships among these spheres are not free of conflicts. It is in the non-commoditized areas where the normative and ontological principles defying the logic of capital develop and, against the values of growth, efficiency, and meritocracy, put forward the new values of care, solidarity, shared responsibility, environmental protection, non-dominance relationships, and intergenerational justice (Fraser, 2014).

COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic meant a break in the developmental logic of social reproduction. The freezing of productive activities and lockdown and social distancing measures imposed in most countries brought to the foreground the importance of reproductive work (Bahn, Cohen & van der Meulen Rodger, 2020). In fact, most of the work that was deemed essential was linked to the sphere of reproduction: healthcare, catering or care. However, such visibility, beyond an increase in social spending, did not imply any improvement of working conditions or a renewed approach to social policies. All countries prioritized a biomedical and securitarian approach to the socio-sanitary crisis, neglecting numerous social needs (Fraser, 2022). Therefore, it was the most vulnerable sections of the populations (low-income households, children, migrant and dependent people) who, once again, were worst affected by the crisis, having their access to care providers limited at a time when this was needed the most.

In the face of a state devoting all its efforts to offering a response to the healthcare emergency and an almost paralyzed market, care work was left again in the hands of families, who were also the ones enduring the epidemic. However, mutual support networks and groups emerged to take care of the most vulnerable members of the population, for whom family solidarity was inadequate or non-existing. Such networks and groups originated in the already existing social fabric of voluntary associations and in activist networks organized during the previous cycle of social contention (antiracist, feminist, or housing-rights movements). The aim of these initiatives was to cater for the needs of the most vulnerable and stigmatized groups of the city population, who suffered the worst socio-sanitary effects of the pandemic, and their actions included distribution of food, provision of care for the elderly, home assistance, provision of emotional support, and face mask making.

According to SRT, it might have been expected for the pandemic to set off a process of conflict around social reproduction, grounded on the newly acquired relevance of essential jobs, the visibility of care work and the creation of self-organized networks. Nevertheless, despite all these favourable conditions, such politicization never occurred, at least in Southern European states. Thus, we think it is relevant to ask ourselves about what conditions prevented this politicization in societies displaying a high potential for mobilization and with a significant amount of mutual aid networks based on past instances, like the *Indignados* movement in 2011–2014 or the cycle of struggles for independence in Catalonia in 2012–2019 (Bernat Molina & Whyte, 2019, Camps & Di Nella, 2020),

The aim of this paper is to analyse the potentialities and the limits associated with the process of gestation of self-managed social initiatives by different self-organized movements and social networks in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of

Barcelona. We intend to analyse how these networks emerged in a context marked by lock-down and social isolation measures, and what relations were established between such networks, households, the market, and public institutions, considering that all these four elements are typically present in both the productive and reproductive spheres. At the same time, we shall inquire into why the pandemic did not become an opportunity for the politicization of the issue of social reproduction, something which seemed obvious given the emergency of catering for the social, economic, and healthcare needs of, above all, the most 'vulnerable' people in our society.

Methods

To carry out our research, we relied on a qualitative exploratory design based on a case-study of the mutual support networks organized during the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of Barcelona. Although case-studies have been deemed unsuitable for the purpose of deriving inferences by the positivist tradition, post-positivist authors like Stake (1994) and Yin (2009) have showed that they can be valid to derive analytical generalizations, especially when the case under examination is incorporated into the research design and negative cases are also studied (Flyvberg, 2006).

Data were collected from four focus groups made up of representatives of different organizations and social groups related to such networks. Focus group discussions took place in the months of October, November, and December 2022, and they were between 90 and 120 min long. All group sessions were carried out in the premises of the University of Barcelona, and participants were duly informed of the aim of the research and the data processing techniques, and they signed an informed consent form approved by the Bioethics Committee at the University of Barcelona.

The selection of participants was done by intentional snowball sampling based on the following criteria: (1) participants must have had an active role in a mutual aid network or group organized during the pandemic to assist vulnerable people, excluding organizations whose activities take place in the social third sector; (2) selected participants had to be representative of the geographical (neighbourhoods) and sectorial (social groups) diversity of mutual support networks; (3) they had to reflect their diversity of ages, genders and origins. Field work was carried out in the months of October, November and December 2022, with the focus groups congregating eighteen participants related to mutual support networks in seven neighbourhoods in Barcelona: one support network for Sub-Saharan peddlers; two support networks for domestic workers; one network of support to people in situations of mental distress; two movements for the right to housing; an organization for the denunciation of police abuse; a support network for elderly pensioners; two popular-education venues (one for adults and one for children); a cooperative; and a delivery riders' union. Finally, focus-group discussions were transcribed and analysed with thematic content analysis techniques combining a mixed deductive-inductive approach.

Results

The focus groups revealed that, during the lockdown period, both geographical and sectorial solidarity and mutual support networks were established, and these played a key role to guarantee and cater for the needs of those households worst affected socially by

the pandemic. Their actions were mostly aimed at households formed by the most vulnerable social groups (low-income households, elderly people, single-parent families) and at those whose income came from the sectors which were most affected by lockdown measures, namely: hotel and catering businesses, peddling, care, and domestic work—which, in the main, employ women and people of migrant origin.

When it comes to explaining the emergence of these networks, most of the participants refer to the city's associative and cooperative tradition and to the venues for fighting and resistance deriving from the 15 M movement. In this sense, they mentioned the movement for public transport, the movement for the right to housing—made up of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH or Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca) and tenants' unions— antiracist groups, cooperatives of social and solidarity economy, the Catalan pro-independence left, groups offering legal assistance, and the feminist movement, which fostered the 8 M feminist strikes and thrust the issue of care into the centre of the debate.

> Our experience doesn't start 'cause we found some neighbours that we knew and [said] let's create something… No, no. Our network comes up because there was a 15M ten years ago; there was a Nazi venue in the area I can't remember how long ago, and this drove many people in the neighbourhood to get organized against it… […] So, it's good to know that the network did not come up only because there was a need, but [its emergence] can be explained by the fact that there was previous work done by many people who were involved in social movements. (Mutual Support Network. Focus Group 1)

Our focus groups show that all these groups developed different strategies to establish solidarity and care networks through the provision of goods and services that were not being covered by the state or the market. For instance, geographical community networks were organized in order to manufacture face masks; to collect and distribute food; to cater for the needs of the most vulnerable households; to organize activities on balconies and so generate spaces for neighbours' gathering; to assist elderly people in the purchase of food or take them to healthcare services; to do small home repairs; to provide school support; to create mutual support and neighbours' chat groups; to create support groups for young people; and to collect donations and buy food for needy households. Sectorial mutual support networks were organized to generate meeting spaces for emotional assistance to people afflicted by mental distress; to translate news concerning the restrictions and the pandemic situation for migrants with problems understanding the language; to provide material support to social groups that had lost their source of income and were not entitled to state subsidies, like domestic workers and peddlers; to set up internet access points to overcome the digital gap; and to press the city council and other organizations so that they would take into consideration ethical clauses when putting food distribution services out to tender during lockdown. Entities concerned with the right to housing helped and negotiated moratoria on home rents with landlords and landladies, as well as assisted with the allocation of premises. Finally, legal-assistance groups had a key role in advising people about their rights in the face of mobility restrictions, in denouncing violations of the right to demonstrate, and in reporting abusive administrative penalties.

The aim of all these groups was basically to help vulnerable individuals and cater for needs that were not covered by the municipal administration or the state. This led most activist groups to ponder whether they should perform social welfare functions or act as mutual support networks helping only the people involved with them. Also, they raised the issue of whether their priority should be to provide relief for the population or to come

up with new ways of empowering it. However, all focus groups agreed that, in the end, the relief function was prioritized in response to the urgency of the socio-sanitary crisis.

> We think that welfarism is not the solution, but there were so many people in need that, finally, given the existing situation, we decided… well, we're going to do this… For, on top of it, they were migrant women who had no other networks but ours, they knew us and that was it […] Our contradiction was to perform welfarism, and what we learned was to confirm what we've always thought about self-management: the importance that we ladies self-organize because, otherwise, no other entity was going to come and fix our problems. (Support Network for Domestic Workers. Focus Group 1)

In this sense, the main aim of the relief actions carried out by these mutual support networks was to respond to the collapse of the basic welfare system, housing services, and even the pharmaceutical sector, which failed to supply basic protection equipment, such as face masks or personal protective equipment, to face up to the pandemic.

> Face masks were sewn up after an order by the Granollers town council. We knew how to do the production and we could make them. They asked us to do it because it was a time when we were already aware that there was a problem with the material. We could hear the call by some doctors who said they lacked material even to get changed and they used the same gowns they'd used the day before […] We summoned our experienced mates and more or less forty people showed up, and we got to produce about 15,000 pieces of equipment, including gowns, masks and caps. And we distributed all that to hospitals, associations, and people in need, because it wasn't easy to find face masks at that time, and many people wanted to buy them, but you went to the pharmacy and there were none. (Support Network for Sub-Saharan Peddlers. Focus Group 1)

On the other hand, the closure of public buildings like schools, day care centres for the elderly, and adult day care centres for dependent people increased the needs and the problems of households. In this situation of neglect, solidarity networks started to get a large number of referrals from the city's social services, which even led the involved networks to demand that the municipal administration assume their responsibilities. Also, we hear of tensions in the relationship between different administrations, particularly the Barcelona city council, and several aid groups that criticized the former's will to co-opt and/or appropriate community initiatives:

> When we held our first collection of donations, which was huge and involved many participants, I don't know why it happened that people believed it was an action by the city council and, of course, our work cannot be captured by a city council, however close it is; people's work cannot be captured by it. (Neighbourhood network. Focus Group 3)

Participants also mention how community networks were useful to produce a sense of community, of mutual support and neighbours' self-organization, although these feelings failed to attract new participants or preserve the networks which emerged during lockdown over time. For example, we hear of the creation of new workspaces together with organizations with no previous collaboration history, such as religious groups and places of worship (Catholic, Evangelical and Muslim) which had an important role in catering to relief needs, but it is observed that these new collaborations and shared workspaces simply disappeared or lost their strength once lockdown was over.

A smaller group of involved people remains, but it's true that, at some point, we came to think, very positively and optimistically, that, despite all the misfortune and pain, the pandemic could show a great potential for neighbours' organization; it seemed so. But certainly, as time goes on, I have the impression that it was not a lasting evolution. (Neighbourhood network. Focus Group 4)

As for protest actions, all the focus groups agree that there was not the necessary capacity or the will to confront the state. Only a few experiences were mentioned, and these did not have much impact on public opinion. For example, in the area of housing, we hear of a rent strike at the national level, as a result of which some landlords or landladies agreed to renegotiate rents and rent-payment dates with tenants. Although the organizing entities reckon that more than 16,000 households joined the strike, the impossibility to make it visible in the streets deprived it of all conspicuousness.

We had a strike, a rent strike, where everyone got in touch with their landlords or landladies and explained to them the situation they were going through. A lot of people could not go to work because it was closed. There was plenty of anxiety, for people were very uptight. It took place in the whole Spanish territory, with over 16,000 tenants taking part. Thanks to the strike, it was possible to negotiate with the owners to pay rents gradually later. (Movement for the Right to Housing. Focus Group 2)

The only attempt at producing a joint political proposal that was mentioned in the sessions was the drafting of a Social Impact Plan as a substitute for the one proposed by the Spanish government. Several mutual support networks, alternative trade unions, and housing-rights social movements took part in its drafting. Although the plan was widely spread in social networks, it hardly had any impact on public opinion, and it did not affect the government's decisions. Among the reasons offered by the participants to account for this difficulty in reaching a common diagnosis and a shared political narrative, we find the digital gap, the screen fatigue caused by virtual communication, and the lack of spaces for face-to-face socialization. As for the importance of physical spaces as meeting places, we must highlight the remark made by the representative of the delivery riders' association, who pointed out that coordination among them was only possible at the beginning of lockdown while they were concentrated in the distribution centres, but it started to deteriorate when these face-to-face gatherings stopped.

Finally, our focus groups acknowledged the inability to generate citizen debate about the state's social action and on matters of public order management, both during lockdown and afterwards. It was mentioned that securitarian policies and police surveys took over the streets so that the imposed restrictions were abided by. Thus, the activities of mutual support networks were met with obstacles to develop due to police control. Despite this, there was no questioning of the role of the state as a guarantor of public order and social protection, as there had been in relation to the repression of the 15 M movement and, later, the pro-independence protests in Catalonia.

The pandemic is over, and we have not said a word […] We have not demanded responsibilities to the political authorities for the killings and deaths during the pandemic, for who are really to blame for people's deaths during the pandemic. We have not demanded an explanation about the elderly people who died in nursing homes or alone in their homes, or an explanation regarding foreign people with precarious jobs, who were just chased by the police. (Neighbourhood network. Focus Group 2)

Results and Discussion

Our presentation of results has revealed three points: (1) the freezing of productive activities and the state's neglect of certain social problems led to a change in citizens' social organization, which negatively affected the most vulnerable social groups; (2) we witnessed the spontaneous emergence of mutual support networks created by groups and entities that had previously taken part in mobilizations associated with social reproduction (right to housing, popular education, community work, care work, civil and social rights of migrant and precarious populations); (3) these networks were one of the mainstays in the response to the emerging social needs, but they lacked the ability to coordinate any joint mobilization beyond sectorial demands.

According to SRT, the sphere of social reproduction is a locus of exploitation and oppression, but also a space of political struggle (Arruzza & Gawel, 2020). For this reason, the social reproduction crisis linked to the pandemic should have proved an opportunity for the activation of mobilizations for a new model of social organization of care (Arruzza, 2020; Ross, 2021; Fraser, Marino, Preti, Todeschini & Volpi, 2022). Nevertheless, as it is revealed at least in the case of Barcelona, such mobilizations never took place at a significant scale. In fact, it was reactionary counter-movements (Pleyers, 2020) that ended up capitalizing on the protests against governmental policies for tackling the pandemic, in alliance with negationist groups as well as with those sectors of productive activities which were worst affected by lockdown (Gerbaudo, 2020). Moreover, this absence of politicization of care contrasts with what happened in countries like Chile, Colombia, Brazil, India, or the USA, where the protests referred to previous mobilization cycles (Pleyers, 2020). To account for this absence of politicization, we put forward two tentative answers which came up in the results of our study: the absence of a public sphere where people meet up, and the inability to produce a joint political proposal in the face of the re-legitimization of the role of the state.

The Public Sphere

Lockdown and social distancing measures meant the temporary suspension of the public sphere, understood as a meeting place for human diversity and a *conditio sine qua non* for political life (Arendt, 1958). As it is clearly observed in our focus groups' discussions, virtualization limited the chances to meet and rendered interconnection of different demands impossible. Even if we see the importance given by the participants in the focus groups to the need to create physical meeting places (urban farms and gardens, distribution centres for delivery riders or food distribution centres), all these places became isolated from each other, and technological mediation failed to coordinate them.

Thus, virtuality, which had acted as a boost to social mobilization at other times (Bonet-Marti, 2015b), in the absence of physical meeting places, contributed to the atomization and the impossibility of building a "common we" (Han, 2013), which led to withdrawal within our communities of reference. Besides this, although our results show the existence of demands by different social groups (rent-payment moratoria, delivery riders' statutes, critiques to police's conduct against peddlers, etc.), there was not a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005) on which a joint political proposal integrating all such demands could be drawn up.

Beyond this, the easing of lockdown measures from June 2020, which enabled the return to physical meeting places, did not represent an opportunity to re-launch mobilization but, contrary to what happened in the United States (Purkayastha, 2022) or in Latin America (Blofield, Hoffmann & Llanos, 2020), it opened a demobilization period, as it is reflected in our results. In this respect, we argue that, even though the suspension of the public sphere accounts for the difficulty of extending mobilization during the lockdown period, this is not enough to explain the demobilization following the easing of measures; thus, it is also necessary to include an analysis of the process of state legitimization during the pandemic.

The State's Agency

In the Spanish case, the social reproduction crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic did not amount to a crisis of state legitimization, despite all the social shortages affecting the most vulnerable groups of the population and which solidarity and mutual support networks tried to recover (Martínez & González, 2021). In contrast with the 2008 crisis, when the state gave up its protective function with the implementation of austerity measures, which set off the global cycle of protest from 2011–2014 (Bonet-Marti, 2015a; Camps & Di Nella, 2020), in the recent sanitary crisis the state becomes re-legitimized by the exercise of its protective function, focused on the police and sanitary areas (Forman & Kohler, 2020). It was those states whose citizenry perceived were failing in their protective capacity because they were yielding to market interests (United Kingdom, Brazil, and United States) or where such capacity was used to stifle previous social unrest (India, Chile, and Colombia) that social protest was triggered after the easing of lockdown measures (Libal & Kashwan, 2020; Jiménez-Martínez, 2022). On the contrary, in those states where citizens felt protected, there was no politicization of the sphere of social reproduction, despite all the shortages that could be seen in this field (Wood, Reinhardt, Rezaee, Daryakenari & Windsor, 2022).

This fact makes us consider the need to incorporate the debate concerning the role of the state into our analysis of the politicization of social reproduction. For SRT theorists, politicization comes up as a response to the de-valuation and commoditization of the sphere of social reproduction through a process of organization of a workforce which is often non-remunerated, racialized and generalized (Arruzza et al., 2019). In this sense, the state is perceived as a simple set of capacities: as a manager of resources linked to the sphere of social reproduction, and as a regulator of the relationships between families and markets. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the contrary, shows that the state has agency when it uses exceptional mechanisms, like the state of emergency, to redefine the images linked to protection and care, which changed from being functions performed by families and communities to being performed by the police and sanitary personnel, based on a biomedical discourse and an appeal for collective responsibility (Bernat Molina & Cutillas, 2023).

Such symbolic appropriation became manifest in the emergence of different forms of social mobilization, such as the collective applauding of healthcare personnel every evening and the display of banners on balconies, actions which were supported by the state itself (Gerbaudo, 2020). In this climate of re-legitimization, the possibility of politicization of the crisis of social reproduction by activist networks was limited, as there was not a political boundary distinguishing them from us (Mouffe, 2010). In fact, the consensus that was reached allowed the state to claim an inexistent role of promoting and accompanying

the mutual support networks that emerged, limiting and repressing its activities at the same time, especially in the case of racialized social groups.

This is why we think that the development of SRT could be improved with the incorporation of a more detailed analysis of state's agency beyond its regulative and distributive capacities. In this sense, contributions like the strategic relational approach developed by Jessop (2015), which reintroduces Poulantzas's stance (1968) on acknowledging the relative autonomy of the state, may be useful to conceptualize the state's agency beyond its condition as an instrument of economic elites or as a mere collection of capacities. In this approach, the state is conceived of as a social relation condensing past relations of forces and responding to present ones through the exercise of its authority (Jessop, 2015). The pandemic revealed that, in exceptional situations, the state could assert itself over the interests of both families and the market, to the point of symbolically appropriating the protective function in the name of the general interest and blocking politicization processes by means of consensus production, with the legitimization, in the case of COVID-19, of a combined biomedical and securitarian discourse (Eck & Hatz, 2020).

With all this, the state proved that, in Wacquant's terms (2010), its "right hand" (the repressive one) and its "left hand" (the protective one) are always intertwined. On this occasion, the state—coming from previous social and political crises that had seriously delegitimized it—developed a discourse of human safety and collective responsibility (typical of the welfare state and of progressive social struggles) in combination with a securitarian discourse (characteristic of the neoliberal state as well as of moments of reversion in social matters), which raises new challenges in the field of critical criminology to understand the functioning of the state in times of crisis.

In conclusion, our study has shown the suitability of SRT to account for the link between processes of community building, conflict and struggle, on one hand, and social reproduction and life sustainability, on the other. Also, it has made clear that such conflict demands the existence of a public sphere as a meeting place in order to develop. Finally, we think that, although SRT is a valid conceptual frame to explain how the crisis of social reproduction operated during the pandemic, its conceptualization of the state should be expanded to account for the absence of politicization processes in conditions in which, according to SRT, these should have been triggered, even though we are aware that further case-studies are needed to robustly assert this claim. In this regard, we hold that it could be helpful to complement the contributions of SRT concerning the state with other theoretical perspectives, such as those put forward by Marxist and Post-Marxist theories of the state, which analyse social reproduction not only in its material side, but also in its ideological one, and recognize the state's agency beyond its role as service provider or regulator of care relationships, particularly when such agency is deployed in both the material and symbolic fields, as it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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