

Developing Economics

A Critical Perspective On Development Economics

COVID-19 / FEMINIST ECONOMICS / INFORMALITY / LABOR / SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

A crisis like no other: social reproduction and the regeneration of capitalist life during the COVID-19 pandemic

□ APRIL 20, 2020 APRIL 17, 2020

□ ALEMEZZADRI

□ 6 COMMENTS



Back to work!

As the COVID-19 health crisis deepens, it looks increasingly clear that the short-term collapse [\[4\]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/08/the-2008-financial-crisis-will-be-seen-as-a-dry-run-for-covid-19-cataclysm) global output (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/08/the-2008-financial-crisis-will-be-seen-as-a-dry-run-for-covid-19-cataclysm>) is likely to exceed that of any recession in the last 150 years – that is, in the entire history of capitalism. The ILO estimates that the crisis will lead to the destruction of 195 million jobs (<https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the->

[ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_740893/lang--en/index.htm%E2%80%8B?fbclid=IwAR2nQU7L8YS1rA1gGgc8jSrrY4a1rFPB2ipy2kiRqZKtf3a-rgkiZGwpQ88](https://www.developingeconomics.org/newsroom/news/WCMS_740893/lang--en/index.htm%E2%80%8B?fbclid=IwAR2nQU7L8YS1rA1gGgc8jSrrY4a1rFPB2ipy2kiRqZKtf3a-rgkiZGwpQ88)

Hence, after discussing at length the epidemiology of the COVID-19 pandemic, media attention is now increasingly focused on how to restart the global economic engine. We may still be mourning our dead, but time seems to have come to discuss how we guarantee economic survival that, under capitalism, is based on production and work. Here in the UK, from where I am writing this piece, getting ‘Britain back to work’ is becoming the new mantra for the government, even if its own leader is still recovering from the virus. Similar concerns are debated across the world, as the pandemic has by now clearly turned from a planetary health threat into a planetary economic threat. Yet, getting the world ‘back to work’ ain’t no easy endeavour, whilst maintaining social distancing. Global capitalism is based on social interactions. In fact, its global phase has aimed at erasing social distancing, not just between working people but also between countries, markets, commodities and consumers. But at present, the way in which we are used to regenerate life under capitalism would literally kill us, and this is no small point in explaining the impasse of the COVID-19 crisis. It should be the starting point to analyse it. Ultimately, before turning into a crisis of production, the current pandemic has created a systemic crisis of social reproduction. As argued by Tithi Bhattacharya, the pandemic has shown the centrality of life-making activities (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya) for the working of capitalism. Moreover, it has also shown the value of care (<https://discoversociety.org/2020/04/01/take-care-no-but-really-gender-labour-and-care-in-times-of-crisis/>), as well as the stark ‘care inequalities’ experienced by different communities and individuals across the globe. By all means, this is a reproductive crisis like no other before.

The pandemic as a crisis of social reproduction

The feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has observed how capitalism, in its different phases, has always been sustained by distinct regimes of social reproduction (<https://newleftreview.org/issues/II100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>); that is, a set of reproductive social relations and institutions able to regenerate capitalist life across its varied historical moment. For instance, across much of the western world, the neoliberal global phase has seen the rise of a commodified, market-based regime of social reproduction – although, as the pandemic is clearly showing, the threat to life this actually poses varies significantly with the actual national health system in place, with great differences between, say, privatised health system in the US and public provision-based systems in European countries like Italy, Germany, or France. The rise and establishment of the neoliberal reproductive regime has not only be instrumental to the development of the neoliberal production model – with the massive entry, for instance, of women into labour markets – rather, it has been co-constitutive of it. It follows that the present crisis is not ‘just’ a crisis of production; it is a far deeper crisis of social reproduction. Capitalist crises have always resulted in the emergence of new regimes of social reproduction. However, this is an extraordinary crisis, as in order to protect life we basically need to undermine its very economic base, with no alternative yet in sight. This is why calls for people to go ‘back to work’ fail to clarify how this would happen. This crisis is unique for at least three factors: namely, the inability to exploit, the conflation of paid-work and reproductive time, and the reality and politics of large-scale death.

Unexploitability

First, the present crisis precludes the possibility for capitalist exploitation on a large scale. The infamous motto that under capitalism, ‘it is better being exploited than not’ has never made more sense than it does now. When the majority on earth secure their livelihood by selling their labour power, the impossibility to do so threatens life itself, even if spared by COVID-19. Moreover, crucially, during past crises, capital managed to socialise economic losses by dumping them onto workers, the state, or both. This is what has happened during the 2008 crisis, when western banks were de facto bailed out by national governments, whilst workers – across both the Global North and

South – were left to bear the brunt of the economic downturn; the luckiest by paying higher taxes against lower real wages and facing deep cuts in public services, and the less lucky losing their jobs entirely and possibly their (sub-prime mortgaged) homes. In the present crisis, capital cannot yet turn its crisis into a crisis of labour. Thousands of factories are shut entirely, and the production of most non-essential goods and services has halted in many countries. Both employers and workers ought to withdraw simultaneously from the market and literally go back home. Never before in the history of capitalism did we have a crisis where no resources were originally destroyed, physically or financially – for instance, there was no war, nor initial market crash, although obviously markets are now reacting – yet the economic collapse felt so totalizing. This is what you get when you remove exploitation from a global system feeding on it to survive. The pandemic has irrefutably shown the centrality of human labour to the production of all value. As argued by [Silvia Federici](https://www.pmpress.org/blog/2019/09/15/silvia-federici-on-witch-hunts-body-politics-rituals-of-resistance/) (<https://www.pmpress.org/blog/2019/09/15/silvia-federici-on-witch-hunts-body-politics-rituals-of-resistance/>), the human body and labour-power it contains is the greatest machine ever ‘invented’ by capitalism.

Ironically, in its inability to exploit and overcome its current crisis of reproduction, capital is turning social reproduction itself into a new commodity and political frontier, to find new sources of profit and electoral consensus. So, in the UK, [the production of much needed ventilators seems delayed](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/uk-scrap-plans-to-buy-thousands-of-bluesky-ventilators-coronavirus?fbclid=IwAR0LnJe0KoLOgZoY94IVe_Ue-HKqBHjubOKLA4nLVcf7GKe83BN7ce-m7hg) (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/uk-scrap-plans-to-buy-thousands-of-bluesky-ventilators-coronavirus?fbclid=IwAR0LnJe0KoLOgZoY94IVe_Ue-HKqBHjubOKLA4nLVcf7GKe83BN7ce-m7hg) by government’s attempts to pick and choose which producers should land procurement contracts. In the US, [Trump’s promotion](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/trumps-promotion-hydroxychloroquine-is-almost-certainly-about-politics-not-profits/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/trumps-promotion-hydroxychloroquine-is-almost-certainly-about-politics-not-profits/>) of hydroxychloroquine as an effective COVID-19 cure – despite thin scientific evidence – aims at quickly appeasing the public to open-up the economy again. Crucially, this economic and political game is played against the life-saving efforts of reproductive workers; particularly health workers who, worldwide, in the UK, the US, Italy, Iran, India, and elsewhere, lack much needed protective equipment.

Conflation between paid-work and reproductive time

The second factor that makes this crisis unique is the imposed conflation of paid-work and reproductive time. In effect, this is already a feature of [informal employment in large swathes of the Global South](https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/on-the-value-of-social-reproduction) (<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/on-the-value-of-social-reproduction>), where people’s homes often host a huge variety of economic activities destined to domestic and even international markets. However, the ways in which this conflation has accelerated and scaled up for a massive percentage of the world’s population under COVID-19 lockdowns is unprecedented. Imposed lockdowns have further exposed the stark socio-economic inequalities of the capitalist world we live in. In fact, as we are all told again and again to stay at home, the first most conspicuous inequality emerging is that hitting those who do not have a home at all or not within easy reach. Dramatic images of [American homeless in Las Vegas](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/us/las-vegas-coronavirus-homeless-parking-lot.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/us/las-vegas-coronavirus-homeless-parking-lot.html>) spatially separated in parking lots or [India’s millions migrant workers](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/migrant-workers-continue-march-home/article31186975.ece) (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/migrant-workers-continue-march-home/article31186975.ece>) walking back to their villages due to the cancellation of public transport and the eviction from industrial hamlets show that the message ‘stay at home’ hardly produces universal outcomes. And even those supposedly lucky enough to have a home to retreat to may face greatly different challenges. Whilst the western media over-reports middle class struggles of juggling paid-work and home-schooling the kids – I myself as a privileged academic fit the bill here – many have in fact already lost their jobs. Others may be stuck in dangerous domestic environments – [rates of domestic violence](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>) have skyrocketed worldwide during the pandemic – or simply in inhospitably small [homes](https://anarchiststudies.noblogs.org/article-covid-19-and-social-reproduction/) (<https://anarchiststudies.noblogs.org/article-covid-19-and-social-reproduction/>) where

survival, rather than combining paid-work and housework is the real challenge. Unsurprisingly, lockdown experiences are highly classed, gendered and racialised, and testify to the fact that we are not in this together. We have hardly ever been under capitalism. The lockdown itself is only possible because it is exclusionary; confined indoors, but hardly growing our own food or self-satisfying our own necessities, we can only subsist thanks to warehouse, postal and delivery workers, farmers and food chain workers. Many of these key workers hardly make the minimum wage, yet they are ensuring our own reproduction during lockdowns.

The tragedy and politics of large-scale death

The third, yet perhaps most defining and terrible indicator of how this crisis differs from anything we have seen before is death, its rates and its politics. This is a unique crisis of social reproduction as it is – literally – to die for. True, global capitalism has always showed disregard for the life of the working majority. Black slaves were routinely worked to death (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/opinion/sugar-land-texas-graves-slavery.html>) and industrial workers lived short lives (<https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/IndustrialRevolutionandtheStandardofLiving.html>) and developed many illnesses. Yet, this is the first planetary pandemic we experienced in the age of globalized capitalism – despite the many similarities, the far deadlier Spanish flu of 1918 supposedly took place in a far less interconnected and less medically advanced world (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/05/1918-flu-pandemic-coronavirus-drug-trials-scientists-treatments-evidence>) – where large-scale annihilation seems to be hitting across classes. I mean, Boris Johnson got it, right? However, high death rates have not erased the ugliness of the class divide in access to health. Even more so than during business as usual, the necropolitics of capitalism during this pandemic (<https://africasacountry.com/2020/04/the-necropolitics-of-covid-19>) establishes who lives and who dies. In the US, for instance, black people are far more likely to die (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/its-a-racial-justice-issue-black-americans-are-dying-in-greater-numbers-from-covid-19>) of COVID-19. They are poorer and sicker than the rest of the US population, more likely to have diabetes, hypertension, or heart-disease – all dangerous comorbidities – and to be turned away from hospitals for lacking private health insurance. The debate on pre-existing health conditions itself has been exclusionary, ableist and ageist. On the other hand, neoliberal care only interprets the right to live as the survival of the fittest and most ‘deserving’. High rates of death among older people were presented as unavoidable and due to pre-existing health conditions rather than the virus’ effects. But a senior citizen hit by a car whilst crossing the road does not die of old age, even if walking slowly. The thing is, the lack of life-saving ventilators and hospital beds in many countries has produced a number of Hobbesian policies. In the UK, some GP practices have gone as far as openly suggesting DNR (do not resuscitate) orders to working age autistic people (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-52217868>) or to sick children (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8211323/Boy-11-cancer-patients-parents-asked-sign-DNR-forms.html>). In the scramble for life, homo homini lupus. Across the world, this unevenness in access to healthcare is matched by an exacerbation of existential inequalities. Across the Global South, evidence suggests that hunger and hardship, rather than the pandemic itself, risk killing thousands. For millions of Indian workers in the informal economy (<https://booksandideas.net/The-Covid-19-Crisis-in-India.html>), making a living during the pandemic will be impossible. The pandemic is also reinforcing caste discrimination, and Dalit households have been attacked (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8211323/Boy-11-cancer-patients-parents-asked-sign-DNR-forms.html>) for supposedly not following government advice over lockdown rules. In Kenya, the closure of informal markets (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-affect-informal-workers-insights-from-kenya-134151>) can result in large-scale poverty and food stock going to waste. Concerns over informal livelihoods are also raised in Latin America (<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/south-america-the-spread-of-covid-19-must-be-analysed-through-class-lines-raising-concern-for-those-working-in-the-informal-economy>) where,

ironically, essential services in slums are presently guaranteed by local drug-lords and criminal gangs, who also enforce local lockdown (<https://www.ft.com/content/aaef1591-2fc5-4e6f-ab84-0e83b5a146ca>) to reduce death rates among 'their' poor.

A New World, or new nightmare?

Overall, unexploitability, the collapse of paid-work time as distinct from reproductive time and the tragedy and exclusionary politics of large-scale death have shaped a crisis of reproduction like no other in our recent capitalist history. There is no end in sight as yet; we can hardly imagine the grand finale. Arundhati Roy (<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>) explains that pandemics force us to think the world anew; they are a portal between an old world and a next, new era. Will we learn, will we change? Will the next regime of social reproduction adopted by capitalism be more compatible with sustaining life even during crises? One may hope so. However, current debates on potential ways out of the lockdown – based on 'herd immunity' and the issuing of immunity passports – seem to chillingly suggest a future yet again based on ever more aggressive frontiers of commodification of reproductive traits of individuals and societies, possibly triggering new socio-economic inequalities based on 'immunocapital' (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/opinion/coronavirus-immunity-passports.html?fbclid=IwAR3kBcSCMoY_dc8vYim5y5oOkYFIONmzp1G1fi7JGcJ9KpuQ5X-tU1BOtMg).

Alessandra Mezzadri (<https://developingeconomics.org/author/alemezzadri/>) is a feminist political economist based at SOAS, London, where she is Senior Lecturer in Development Studies. Her research and teaching interests focus on global commodity chains; informal labour, global labour standards and modern-slavery; feminisms in development and social reproduction approaches; and the political economy of India. She is the author of *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and Garments 'Made in India'* (CUP, 2017), and *Marx in the Field* (ed.) (Anthem, forthcoming).

Photo: Paula Kindsvoater (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Paulakindsvoater>).

6 thoughts on “A crisis like no other: social reproduction and the regeneration of capitalist life during the COVID-19 pandemic”

1. **COVID-19 Crisis from a feminist perspective: overview of different articles published** says:
APRIL 22, 2020 AT 1:39 PM

[...] A crisis like no other: social reproduction and the regeneration of capitalist life during the COVID..., Alessandra Mezzadri, 20 April 2020 [...]

[REPLY](#)

2. **Una crisi senza precedenti - L'ANTIVIRUS** says:

APRIL 26, 2020 AT 9:23 PM

[...] è stato pubblicato in inglese su Developing Economics il 20 Aprile [...]

[REPLY](#)

3. **Irrational Expectations | communists in situ** says:

APRIL 30, 2020 AT 10:11 AM

[...] of existing economic policy, the absurdly fragile economics on which it relies, and the stunted conception of the economy that underwrites [...]

[REPLY](#)

4. **Irrational Expectations – Geoff Mann (en) – production de l'immédiat** says:

MAY 5, 2020 AT 12:02 PM

[...] of existing economic policy, the absurdly fragile economics on which it relies, and the stunted conception of the economy that underwrites [...]

[REPLY](#)

5. **March & April readings – Uneven Earth** says:

MAY 6, 2020 AT 11:37 AM

[...] A crisis like no other: social reproduction and the regeneration of capitalist life during the COVID... [...]

[REPLY](#)

6. **Një krizë si asnjë tjetër | Teza 11** says:

MAY 12, 2020 AT 11:28 PM

[...] Në përgjithësi, pamundësia për shfrytëzim, kolapsi i kohës së punës me pagë si një formë e dallueshme nga puna riprodhuese, si dhe tragjedia e politikave përjashtimore të vdekjeve masive i kanë dhënë formë një krize riprodhimi si asnjëherë tjetër në historinë e kapitalizmit modern. Është shumë e vështirë të imagjinohet një grand finale, pasi kësaj krize ende nuk i duket fundi.

Arundhati Roy shpjegon se pandemitë na detyrojnë ta mendojmë botën nga e para; ato shërbejnë si një portë midis botës së vjetër dhe asaj në ardhje, fillimin e një epoke të re. A do të mësojmë prej saj, do mund të ndryshojmë? Regjimi tjetër i riprodhimit shoqëror, i cili do adoptohet nga kapitalizmi, a do mund të jetë më i prirë për të mbështetur jetën edhe përgjatë krizave? Ndokush mundet veç të shpresojë. Megjithatë debatet e tanishme mbi mënyrat e mundshme për të dalë nga shtetrrëthimi – të cilat bazohen në teorinë e “imunitetit të tufës” dhe lëshimin e pasaportave imunitare – duket se sugjerojnë me ngulm një të ardhme të bazuar në kthimin në mall në mënyrë akoma më agresive të tipareve riprodhuese të individëve dhe shoqërisë. Regjim i cili, me gjasë, do të shkaktojë pabarazi të reja ekonomike dhe sociale bazuar në ‘kapitalin imun’. [...]

[REPLY](#)