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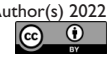

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Social reproduction and pandemic neoliberalism: Planetary crises and the reorganisation of life, work and death

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Abstract

This article portrays the COVID-19 pandemic as a planetary crisis of capitalist life and analyses it through the feminist political economy lens of social reproduction. Celebrating the plurality and distinctiveness of social reproduction theorisations, the article deploys three approaches to map the contours of the present conjuncture; namely Social Reproduction Theory, Early Social Reproduction Analyses and Raced Social Reproduction approaches. These provide key complementary insights over the planetary crisis and reorganisation of life, work and death triggered by the pandemic. Through the compounded insights of social reproduction theorisations, the article argues that the pandemic does not represent a crisis of neoliberalism. Rather, it represents its outcome, and deepening of its logics, an argument which is substantiated by exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the reproductive architecture of neoliberal capitalism; on the world of work; and on racialised processes manufacturing different kinds of surplus subjects. In conclusion, the article discusses the political implications of this social reproduction-centred reading of the pandemic for a progressive post-pandemic politics to move beyond pandemic neoliberalism.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, crisis of capitalist life, early social reproduction analyses, feminist political economy, gender and racial inequality, health and education, pandemic neoliberalism, raced social reproduction approaches, social reproduction theory, surplus subjects

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been read by some commentators as possibly signalling the demise of neoliberalism, defined as the contemporary phase of capitalist accumulation dominating the

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world economy since the 1970s (see Saad-Filho, 2020). Indeed, historically, epochal health crises escalated changes in phases of capitalist accumulation. Black Plague accelerated the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Bailey, 2021; Russell and Parker, 2020). Deadly diseases worked as amplifying chambers of profound economic crises, as in the case of Spanish Flu or Ebola, whose effects magnified the impact of colonial domination and structural adjustment, respectively (Chhun, 2020; Kentikelenis et al., 2015; Spinney, 2018). However, the pandemic does not represent a crisis of neoliberalism; rather, it represents both its outcome and the deepening of its logics. This does not mean that we cannot talk about a crisis at all, on the contrary; but it does means that we need to reflect on what are the central aspects of this crisis, and for whom.

Adopting a feminist political economy lens and drawing on previous reflections (Mezzadri, 2020; Mezzadri et al., 2021; Stevano et al., 2021b), this article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic should be understood as a *systemic* crisis of social reproduction – that is a crisis of capitalist *life*. While it has turned into a temporary crisis for neoliberal capitalism, particularly in the early pandemic phase and due to the rise of what I called the problem of 'unexploitability'– the inability to exploit the labour-power of a significant share of the population – it has not been a crisis for all and has not undermined the core working principles of neoliberalism. It is not a case that the pandemic, whose deadly effects were amplified by neoliberalism, generated a hike in the incomes of the super-rich; a fall in income for labouring classes; and a deepening of economic, social and existential inequalities – also through novel channels of 'vaccine apartheid' (e.g. Ghosh, 2021). I call this massive amplification of key neoliberal logics witnessed throughout the unravelling of the pandemic as 'pandemic neoliberalism'.

So, how can the crisis of capitalist life witnessed under pandemic neoliberalism be characterised? This article portraits it as a compounded planetary crisis and reorganisation of social reproduction along three axes, related respectively to the governance of reproductive sectors; the world of work; and the racialised manufacturing of surplus subjects. The crises and processes of reorganisation taking place along such axes are explored drawing from three corresponding theoretical lenses centred on social reproduction. While often misrepresented as homogenous, social reproduction approaches are based on distinct frameworks and focus on varied aspects of life of/in capitalism. Celebrating the distinctiveness of their contributions, I show here that they provide different powerful entry points into an analysis of the effects of the pandemic on capitalist life, and shed light on different key processes and outcomes.

The first framework deployed to explore the effects of the pandemic is Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), inspired by the work of Bhattacharya (2017), Fraser (2014) and Ferguson (2019) among others. Developed relatively recently but inspired by earlier work by Vogel (1983), this framework focuses its attention on the 'business of life'. It proposes what can be defined as a feminist exploration of the reproductive architecture and governance of capitalism. SRT provides key insights both into the role of neoliberalism in shaping pandemic outcomes and in the ways in which it has been reinforced – not weakened – by the pandemic. The second social reproduction framework I use to interrogate the pandemic draws from Early Social Reproduction Analyses (ESRA) and early debates on domestic labour, housework and wagelessness, led by feminist scholars and activists like Dalla Costa and James (1972), Fortunati (1981), Mies (1986), Hensman (1977) and Federici (2004). This framework, whose original elaboration traces back to the 1970s, is crucial to analyse the effects of the pandemic on the world of work (Stevano et al., 2021b), the problematic dichotomy between productive and reproductive work and new troubling work distinctions. The third framework deployed here to read the pandemic crisis and the reproductive reorganisation it generated stresses the links between social reproduction and racial capitalism, processes of racialisation, othering and dying. It centres the attention on the ultimate reproductive question under capitalism; that is who dies from it. It draws from recent work by Bhattacharyya (2018) while

reaching out to earlier analyses on necropolitics, indenture and social death by Mbembe (2003), Reddock (1994), Li (2010) and Patterson (1982) among others. Informed by recent work on race and markets (Tilley and Shilliam, 2018), I refer to this approach as Race Social Reproduction (RSR).

By combining these frameworks, and proposing an analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic as a planetary crisis and reorganisation of capitalist life – of life-sustaining sectors, work and death – this analysis also pieces together the elements that characterise neoliberalism in its 'pandemic' phase. In this light, while it illustrates the effectiveness of the theoretical lens of social reproduction in capturing key features of the present crisis, it also demonstrates its theoretical purchase in explaining the mechanisms of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, and of capitalism more broadly. It should be noted that the three axes and theoretical lenses of social reproduction chosen here to explore the present moment represent at once the social perimeters and limitations of the narrative, which can be further integrated by future work on different reproductive axes (for instance, ecology).

The next section presents the three distinct theoretical lenses of social reproduction deployed here. The following three sections expand on each, illustrating their insights and complementarities in sketching aspects of the crisis and current phase of pandemic neoliberalism. The conclusions of the article reflect on the political implications of the analysis, for a progressive post-pandemic politics that can move us away from pandemic neoliberalism. The article supports its arguments by drawing on a vast review of sources on COVID-19 collected through a process of 'cyber-fieldwork' (Sinha, 2021) carried out in lockdown.[1]

Social reproduction theorisations for COVID times

One of the best visual sketches of the role the COVID-19 pandemic played in revealing the features of neoliberal capitalism is evoked by Taylor (2020), author of *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Taylor, 2016), who in March 2020 wrote in the *The New Yorker*: '*American life has been suddenly and dramatically upended, and when things are turned upside down, the bottom is brought to the surface, and exposed to the light*'. Arguably, this process has hit lives across the whole world economy. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the entire capitalist system by dis-organising and re-organising production, labour and livelihoods (Zanoni, 2021), life and death. Overall, the pandemic has functioned as a sort of magnifying glass – both revealing and amplifying the vulnerabilities and inequalities characterising capitalist life under neoliberalism.

Since its onset, COVID-19 triggered a global crisis like no others before by suddenly halting exploitation; conflating productive and reproductive time; and quickly triggering large-scale death, whose management has further revealed the extent of contemporary inequality (Mezzadri, 2020). Given the attack waged by the pandemic on capitalist life, I argue, the Marxist Feminist lens of social reproduction is particularly well suited to explain the different angles and implications of the crisis, its trajectory and its implications. A term linked to Karl Marx's analysis of the 'social process of reproduction' entailing the societal regeneration of the worker (Cammack, 2020; Gimenez, 2018), social reproduction has been then reappropriated and developed theoretically by radical feminist scholarship including Marxist feminist analyses (Federici, 2019). These aim at breaking the productivist boundaries of classical Marxism while still working within the remit of its political economy. They rely on different definitions of social reproduction, either placing emphasis on processes of societal regeneration or stressing links between paid/productive and unpaid/reproductive labour. Some useful definitions propose a synthesis (e.g. Katz, 2001) and identify social reproduction as comprising the structures, practices, activities and realms aimed at the daily and intergenerational regeneration of life *and* capitalist relations. This is the definition adopted here; one stressing the role social reproduction plays in both making life and capitalism.

Notwithstanding their common tropes, Marxist feminist social reproduction approaches vary considerably and so do their contributions. One influential approach is Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), which elaborates a Marxist feminist analysis of capitalist governance and explores the reproductive architecture of capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2019; Fraser, 2014; see also synergies with Bakker, 2007). It primarily focuses on 'societal reproduction' (Laslett and Brenner, 1989) and explores how neoliberal capitalism has restructured life-making sectors like health or education and their (paid) labour relations. In particular, Nancy Fraser's work (2017) on 'regimes of social reproduction' has helped tracing the processes of commodification and commercialisation of reproductive sectors characterising the neoliberal era and waging an attack against care and communities.

A different approach is theorised by Early Social Reproduction Analyses (ESRA). Predating SRT and linked to the so-called housework debate of the 1970s, ESRA focussed on labour-power, the labour process, and the links between productive and reproductive work (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Fortunati, 1981; Hensman, 1977; Mies, 1986). It stressed the value-producing nature of reproductive labour and expanded the social perimeters of exploitation to include wageless activities and subjects. Contemporary iterations of these approaches expand their reach to the informal economy and/or agrarian systems (Mezzadri, 2019, 2021; Naidu and Ossome, 2016).

A third novel set of contributions, today interrogate social reproduction through a primary lens set on racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018), along lines compatible with Achille Mbembe's theorisation of 'necropolitics', earlier explorations of social reproduction stressing its distinct organisation under conditions of slave and indenture labour (e.g. Reddock, 1994), and analyses exploring questions of 'social death' (Patterson, 1982). They stress the exposure of racialised people to greatly depleting processes of work across the history of capitalism, and how they may be made into surplus labour and/or surplus populations. Their focus on depletion connect with gendered analyses of capitalism highlighting 'depletion through social reproduction' (Bedford and Rai, 2010; Rai et al., 2014). Learning from recent work on 'Raced Markets' by Lisa Tilley and Robbie Shilliam, who explore the materiality of race in the neoliberal period in the United States and Europe, I refer to this body of work as Raced Social Reproduction (RSR) analyses.

I argue and illustrate in this article that these three lines of contribution centred on social reproduction provide distinct yet complementary vantage points on the current COVID-19 pandemic and offer us novel ways to understand capitalism as a complex reproductive relation. First, building on SRT, I deploy Fraser's (2017) conceptualisations of 'regimes of social reproduction' to contextualise the crisis in the socio-economic trajectory of neoliberalism and its attack against care sectors. Secondly, drawing from ESRA and their more contemporary avatars, I reflect on Federici's (2004) take on the body as a capitalist 'machine' to analyse the labour inequalities escalated by the (highly selective) conflation of production and social reproduction triggered by COVID-19 lockdowns. I also discuss the rise of the problematic category of 'essential work' (Gago and Mason-Deese, 2021; Stevano et al., 2021a). Thirdly, learning from RSR analyses and starting with Bhattacharyya's (2018) *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, I reflect on the making and 'letting die' (Li, 2010; Mbembe, 2003) of surplus populations during the pandemic and on the political and 'social' mechanisms of death (Patterson, 1982).

Altogether, I argue, the three lenses of SRT, ESRA and RSR capture distinctive yet complementary features of the planetary crisis of capitalist life triggered by COVID-19, and unveil different processes of intensification of neoliberal logics shaping pandemic neoliberalism – in relation to the governance of life-making sectors; the restructuring of the world of work; and the racialised processes manufacturing different kinds of surplus subjects. The following section explores the (re) organisation of reproductive sectors and the role neoliberalism played in amplifying the crisis. It

also illustrates how, in turn, the pandemic further deepened neoliberal reproductive logics precipitating the move to pandemic neoliberalism. The lens of SRT guides us in unveiling these processes.

SRT, the neoliberal reproductive regime and pandemic capitalism

In an essay contributing to Tithi Bhattacharya's edited collection *Social Reproduction Theory*, Fraser (2017) sketches a periodisation schema of capitalism through the prism of social reproduction. In this schema, each phase of capitalism is sustained by a 'regime of social reproduction'. Capitalist crises appear as crises of social reproduction, as production and reproduction are fundamentally intertwined. In short, crises of capital should always be seen as crises of capitalist life. Arguably, both the Social Structure of Accumulation School (SSA) and Regulation Theory have tried to engaged with the complex matrix of social relations and institutions governing capitalism, either through a focus on capital's social structures or its mode of regulation (Baglioni and Mezzadri, 2020). However, they have mostly remained a literature of capital in line with Marx's own early characterisation. Instead, by re-centring the analysis on 'life-making activities' (Bhattacharya in Jaffe, 2020), *Social Reproduction Theory* provides a feminist theory of capitalist governance by exploring the social relations dominating across those sectors central to 'societal reproduction' (Laslett and Brenner, 1989).

Indeed, the regime of social reproduction dominating the neoliberal capitalist phase, to which Fraser dedicates considerable space in her analysis, bears enormous responsibility for the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated and impacted life-sustaining sectors. Since the 1970s, neoliberal policies triggered a systematic de-concentration of resources in the public sector. They eroded public expenditure in reproductive sectors of the economy and promoted their privatisation. They relentlessly promoted capital-friendly policies whilst simultaneously eroding labour rights. Neoliberalism has been already defined as the 'labour-unfriendly regime' (Lerche, 2007). It should also be defined as the 'life-unfriendly regime' as it has systematically marketized social reproduction whilst producing a chronic 'crisis of care' (Bakker and Gill, 2019; Fraser, 2017) with varying effects across the world economy (e.g. Bargawi et al., 2021, on Palestine).

Neoliberal policies of structural adjustment and austerity eroded the welfare state and re-crafted 'the social' in the image of capital. They swell the ranks of the informal proletariat in the Global South (e.g. Meagher on Sub-Saharan Africa, 2016; Portes and Hoffman on Latin America, 2003; Srivastava on India, 2019) and generated a rising gig-economy 'precariat' in the Global North (Standing, 2014). They restructured social reproduction in profound ways. Labour informalisation and precarisation unravelled against a wider background of erosion of the family wage model in western economies (Cooper, 2017) and the entry of armies of women into labour markets based on greatly disadvantageous wage differentials (Folbre, 1986) and word-wide (yet selective and focussed on low-wage sectors) processes of feminisation of employment (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Coupled with the retreat of the neoliberal slim state from welfare and care provisions, these processes pushed the neoliberal family towards marketized reproductive services. These processes varied across the world, yet, some compatible logics can be identified.

Folbre (1986) has shown the quick pace of marketisation of home-making activities in the United States since the 1980s. In the last five decades, the regeneration and deepening of the North-South divide sustained by neoliberalism has spatially organised the marketisation of reproduction according to the dominant logics of supply-chain capitalism dominating commodity production. This also responded to the needs of a working class experiencing declining wages, and who therefore had to resolve the reproductive question cheaply. The rise and exponential expansion of Global Care Chains (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002), where domestic and care work

reorganised along transnational householding processes (Winders and Smith, 2019), represents one of the pillars of the neoliberal reproductive regime.[2] Across the Global South processes of outsourcing of reproductive labour were always well established. They further deepened during the neoliberal phase (e.g. Grover et al., 2018, on India), also accompanied by the reprivatisation of social provisions and services (e.g. Mullings, 2009, on Jamaica).

The marketisation of life is evident in education and health services. Some – like hospitals and clinics – are directly organised according to the logics of Global Care Chain. Others have seen a massive rise of private providers. Pillinger and Yeates (2019) map the insourcing of migrant nursing staff from the Global South to the United Kingdom; a process aimed at reducing the costs of the British overstretched National Healthcare System (NHS) after multiple rounds of neoliberal spending cuts. The inflow of nurses from various parts of Africa significantly weakened the regional healthcare capacity of healthcare labour-exporting countries, triggering processes of demobilisation of reproductive knowledge and/or unequal reproductive exchange (Valiani, 2012). Education, on the other hand, is also increasingly dominated by private-public partnerships. In the Global South, this is often the case for primary and secondary education (Languille, 2017). Also in the Global North, the commodification of education – and of childhood – starts in early years (Ferguson, 2017), promoting visions of childhood as 'accumulation', or indeed 'waste' (Katz, 2021). In the UK, early years schooling provisions – nurseries in particular – are privatised, financialised and characterised by the presence of global operators (Lloyd and Penn, 2013; Simon et al., 2022). Privatisation is central to higher education, where colleges now act as businesses rather than reproductive sectors. During the pandemic, UK universities behaved as cunning real estate businesses, with some securing rents from students whilst trying keeping them locked in halls of residence. The Guardian shared outrageous images of Manchester students clashing with University security personnel to break free from this form at privatised segregation (Wall, 2020).

COVID-19 hit the planet when the neoliberal social reproduction regime sketched above was deeply entrenched into the management of life-making activities (Bhattacharya in Jaffe, 2020). Research shows that the producing practices of massive farming conglomerates emerged during neoliberalism were central to the global spread of COVID-19. Davis (2005) warned us about a future of pandemic influenza already in *The Monster at our Door*. Updating his narrative in *The Monster Entered* (Davis, 2020), he stressed the need to understand viral diseases like COVID-19 as 'plagues of capitalism'. In fact, as also argued – and forensically substantiated – by Wallace (2016), *Big Farms Make Big Flu*. Or, as put by Akram-Lodhi (2021: 7), there are patterns of 'co-morbidity between COVID-19 and the capitalist world food system'.

Even setting aside the eco-epidemiological aspects of this crisis or past ones (on this, see Quammen, 2013; Wallace, 2020), it is evident how the socio-economic reorganisation of social reproduction under neoliberalism has played a central role in escalating the lethal aspects of COVID-19. First, decades of neoliberal privatisation and co-production in healthcare service provision against a backdrop of systemic cuts to public expenditure meant that healthcare systems were hit by the crisis in their weakest moment. Gianella et al. (2021), explain how even countries with high growth rates like Peru could be severely hit by the pandemic due to fragmented healthcare systems dominated by public-private partnerships (PPPs). However, since the crisis hit, the World Bank have seized the opportunity to further 'turbo-charge' the private-led neoliberal development model and channel a significant share of COVID-19 relief funds – in excess of $8 billions – to private actors and financial intermediaries, further deepening the reach of PPPs in health provision (Dimakou et al., 2021) despite clear evidence of their limitations (e.g. Bayliss and Van Waeyenberge, 2018). Indeed, despite the major role played by neoliberalism in weakening life-sustaining sectors and exacerbating the catastrophic effects of COVID-19, the economic 'cure' to

fix the crisis seems based on more of the same. We are not overcoming neoliberalism, we have merely moved into its 'pandemic' phase.

Arguably, the whole global trading and production system promoted by neoliberalism amplified the health thread posed by COVID-19, showing the links between trade, health and the circulation of essential goods (Mair, 2020; Trommer, 2021). When the pandemic hit, very few could actually manufacture life-saving Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Also PPE shortages epitomise the fragility of neoliberal global supply chain capitalism and the weaknesses of its reproductive regime. Neoliberal capitalism was unprepared for the compelling return of use-values as crucial for both survival and profit making. Since then, many garment factories in Asia converted to PPE production, making up some of the losses occurred from halted export orders that generated massive workers' layouts; a process producing new forms of labour abuse (Mezzadri and Ruwanpura, 2020). On the other hand, the whole world of work was hit by COVID-19 and the measures to contain it. ESRA analyse enable us to analyse these processes whilst identifying the role that neoliberalism played in shaping them, before and during the pandemic phase.

A pandemic of informal and essential work: ESRA, labour dualisms and value

Besides revealing the shortcomings of decades of neoliberal policies on the societal architecture of life-re/generation and care, the pandemic has abruptly revealed the fictitious nature of old and new dichotomies compartmentalising productive and non-productive/reproductive work, times and temporalities. Moreover, it has exposed the centrality of reproductive work and realms to sustain both life and processes of value generation. These insights are central to ESRA (e.g. Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Fortunati, 1981; Mies, 1986; Picchio, 1992), which hence provide a second key theoretical lens to analyse the current conjuncture. In particular, the pandemic seems to have validated Silvia Federici's observation that 'the labouring body' is the first 'machine' invented by capitalism. Its sudden 'removal' from the capitalist system has immediately jammed the whole functioning of our economy and life (Mezzadri, 2020). Tellingly, Federici refers to the 'labouring body' and not merely 'labour-power', as Karl Marx would have. The labouring body, central to all things produced and processes regenerated under capitalism, is greatly differentiated. If labour-power is a concept that may be 'abstracted', its 'container' – the worker – cannot and explain how exploitation may manifest in different 'forms' (Banaji, 2010) and intersectional ways (Folbre, 2020).

The global process of labour informalisation characterising the neoliberal era is made of exponential processes of differentiation of the labouring body. These are co-constituted by complex trajectories of racialisation and gendering of labour forces and other forms of labour segmentation based on structural oppression and amplifying wage differentials (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; Jha et al., 2017; Mezzadri, 2017). Life sustaining work in particular is extremely racialised, gendered and performed by migrants or minorities who have shouldered the externalisation of reproductive costs escalated during the neoliberal phase. The specific ways in which these processes unfold depends on complex regional socio-economies histories. The pandemic, as a magnifying glass, has further exposed the great social differentiation of the labouring body. Moreover, blurring the line between 'the productive' and 'the reproductive', it has laid bare the centrality of the latter in sustaining both life and processes of value extraction.

During the first phase of lockdown, when millions supposedly turn into 'new' homeworkers overnight, many observers noted how the collapse of a neat spatial separation between profit-making and life-making activities signalled a key impact of COVID-19 on the world of work. This process was clearly uneven, however. According to estimates produced by Berg et al. (2020), when

the crisis hit, around 30% of North American and Western European workers were in occupations that could allow home-based work, as opposed to only 6% of sub-Saharan African and 8% of South Asian workers. In the Global North, the rise in home-based work has shown the dynamic interrelatedness between money-earning labouring processes and the necessary reproductive activities, realms, arrangements and relations that not only sustains them, by making labour-surplus extraction possible in the first place, but that also contribute to shape and structure exploitation rates. The conflation between productive and reproductive time produced a further intensification of labour and work across the work/life continuum. Mediated by various technological platforms, it is generating an intensification of workforce surveillance whilst at home (Rodriguez and Windwehr, 2020). Further expanding the reach of the gig-economy, this process is re-organising our own reproductive spaces as workplaces subject to monitoring and control. It is manufacturing a novel 'dormitory' labour regimes (Pun and Smith, 2007) by subordinating reproductive temporalities to Just in Time (JIT) productive needs (Andrijasevic, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, in many countries, including the United States (Cajner et al., 2020) and United Kingdom (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020), the squeeze hit women workers particularly harshly. Multi-countries studies indicate that women are more likely than men to lose permanently their jobs due to the pandemic (Dang and Nguyen, 2021). In the United Kingdom, women lost their jobs both due to COVID-19 and to the increased burden of domestic and care responsibilities. After the first lockdown, the government committed to the re-opening of the male-dominated construction and manufacturing sectors (Gender Research Group, 2020). In the same period, the majority – over 70% – of women workers' furlough applications were rejected (Topping, 2020).

In the Global South, where the interrelatedness of productive and reproductive work was already dominant due to vast informal employment (Mezzadri, 2021), COVID-19 did not necessarily boost homeworking rates. However, it reinforced the role reproductive realms play in sustaining capitalist life and cope with employment crises (Agarwal, 2021). Waves of labour retrenchment, expulsions and displacement hit the Global South following lockdown measures with outcomes varying based on the complex work and life trajectories of 'classes of labour' (Bernstein, 2007) or 'working people' (Shivji, 2017). These include informal wageworkers, petty commodity producers and people engaged in agricultural livelihoods for self-consumption and whose role in the circuit of capital is disputed (Bernstein, 2007; Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2020; Ossome, 2021).

Across a number of African countries, the inability of the state to sustain livelihoods was due to their highly informalised nature along the varied trajectories sketched above. As summarised by Ossome (2021), COVID-19 triggered an interventionist attempt by African states, which tried to stabilise economies through different policy measures, ranging from taxation and reorganisation of logistics (Kenya), new safety rules for informal food markets (Uganda), redistribution of rescue packages (South Africa) or intensification of control over the population (Ethiopia). However, the effectiveness of interventions was undermined by the prevailing accumulation structure in the region based on multiple informal work trajectories. In a context where rescue packages could not reach people, livelihoods were broadly sustained through the gendered division of labour centred on women's unpaid contribution beyond housework and including varied forms of what Ossome defines as non-capitalist provisioning.[3]

In India, the retrenchment, expulsion and displacement of informal workers from a vast number of productive and reproductive sectors generated a proper 21st century human exodus of 'footloose labour' (Breman, 2020), whose images were broadcasted widely on television all over the globe, showing the enlarging 'borders of the epidemic' (Kesar et al., 2021; Samaddar, 2020). Also here the gendered economy sustained livelihoods, absorbing a contraction of space, time and earnings (Guérin et al., 2021). In fact evidence suggests that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown and generalised job losses hit women more (Desai et al., 2021) and well beyond loss in earnings. It

increased their unpaid labouring burden (Agarwal, 2021). In India, this is already very significant, due to the marginalisation of a high number of homemaking activities performed by women – besides housework or carework – in national statistics (e.g. Naidu and Ossome, 2016; Rao, 2021). Evidence suggests that also in China women have more likely stayed back in rural hometowns after the Wuhan lockdown, permanently losing urban jobs (Song et al., 2021). Ultimately, across the Global South, women's unpaid care and domestic work has tangibly increased (Seck et al., 2021) and gendered social networks have further up-scaled their role as shock absorbers, internalising both individual and collective rising reproductive costs. In some cases, these processes are giving rise to new forms of gendered collective and solidarity economies, already central to like-making among working classes and racialised people in the Global South and North (Hossein, 2021). In Kerala, the Kudumbashree network set-up community kitchens providing 250,000 daily meals (Agarwal, 2021).

Notably, while revealing the fictitious nature of some labour and work dichotomies the pandemic has generated new ones, like the rise of the troubling category of 'essential work'. Undertheorised – or at least quite loosely defined – before the pandemic, this category has immediately become a central trope in debates on labour and COVID-19. It is supposed to include all those sectors crucial to the regeneration and support of life during emergency times. In fact, in this loose definition, essential work may be made to coincide with definitions of social reproduction. However, a closer look at the practice of identifying 'essential work' – and subsequently 'essential workers' – across countries reveals the problematic nature of this category. On the one hand, it confirms the embeddedness of all reproductive activities, realms and sectors in capitalist relations (Katz, 2001). On the other, however, it also sheds light on the partiality and biases of classifications which over-stress the central nature of 'societal reproduction' (Laslett and Brenner, 1989) over the more informal, capillary relations central to the ways in which we regenerate like-sustaining activities under neoliberal capitalism and its over-slim state.

As sharply summarised by Sara Stevano, Rosimina Ali and Merle Jamieson, who review and compare classifications of essential work in different countries, this category is problematic due to its great variability; its western bias, and its political nature. Evidence from Canada, England, Brazil, India, Italy, South Africa and Mozambique suggests that only a sub-set of 13 out of 53 sectors/activities are commonly classified as essential. Differences reflect economic specialisation as well as the ways in which key sectors like food and/or care are organised. So, while in Brazil mining is essential, education – including schooling – is not. And while financial services are key in the England, care is not. In South Africa care is essential, only with reference to live-in aids, probably reflecting the prevalence of care arrangements in the region. Moreover, in all countries, formal labour relations tend to be over-represented among categories of essential work, an issue that betrays the western bias of the classification, and which marginalises informal care and economic relations, and their (highly precarious) workers (Stevano et al., 2021a).

In fact, in countries where both care and food production and distribution are informalised, the classification loses its meaning entirely, despite state rhetoric (see also Ossome, 2021). Along similar lines, according to Gago and Mason-Deese (2021), in Argentina the classification of 'essential work' is justifying the super-exploitation of feminised popular economies in order to survive the crisis. Ultimately, the social perimeters of this classification are greatly politicised. Public unionised sectors, for instance, are likely to be able to benefit far more from it than other sectors. Moreover, governments may simply enlarge this category to externalise responsibilities of reorganising sectors towards employers, who may then dump them onto workers and families. The expansion of the category of essential work in the United Kingdom during the third lockdown started in January 2021 is a case in point. In these cases, as already in informalised contexts, the category 'essential work' loses both explicatory and policy meanings. Finally, the dualism between

'essential' and 'non-essential' work may impact negatively on working rights. It may justify rising surveillance practices towards workers in essential occupations whilst eroding economic and social entitlements for workers labelled as non-essential (Bergfeld and Farris, 2020).

Notably, both the old and novel patterns of labour, work and care shaped by the pandemic are experienced in highly unequal terms, despite the rhetoric of COVID-19 revealing our common 'human condition'. On the contrary, COVID-19 has revealed and reinforced the stark social, economic and existential inequalities (Therborn, 2013) in which capitalist societies are based. The reorganisation and spatial (re)allocation of our distinctly classed, gendered and racialised labouring bodies across the complex continuum of productive and reproductive labour – and within or outside categories of essential work – has exposed this inequality (Stevano et al., 2021a, 2021b). Across the world-economy, 'non-white', 'foreign' 'irregular' and/or 'othered' bodies have been over-exposed to both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. They are over-represented in poorly paid and precarious frontline essential work. This is the case for nurses, carers, cleaners and logistics workers in the United Kingdom (e.g. The Health Foundation, 2020) and United States (e.g. Powell, 2020), migrant food workers across Europe (e.g. Pencheva, 2020) or sanitation workers in India (Ravichandran, 2020). Also this process of reorganisation and amplification of uneven processes of precarisation of work and its role in hardening class, gender and racial inequalities confirms that we are still firmly into neoliberal capitalism and its reproductive regime. In fact, the relation between precarity and social oppression – and particularly its link to processes of racialisation – is the third and final aspect revealing the pandemic as a systematic crisis of capitalist life. Notably, also the governance of death and the 'making' of surplus life we have witnessed since 2020 are fully embedded into neoliberal logics and RSR analyses help us unpack these issues.

RSR, surplus populations and reserve armies of lives

The pandemic has not only amplified and revealed the inequalities structuring work and life but also those structuring death. Analyses exploring social reproduction through the lens of processes of racialisation and informed by theories of racial capitalism provide invaluable insights into trajectories of exposure to death and surplus living, and hence are a third key lens to understand the crisis and reorganisation of capitalist life triggered by COVID-19. People can be 'let to die' along varied axes or their combinations – literally, economically and socially. As argued by Li (2010: 67) whilst reflecting on processes of dispossession across the world economy, 'letting die' is 'a stealthy violence that consigns large numbers of people to lead short and limited lives'. The current moment has illustrated with rare clarity the multiple ways in which we can be manufactured into – or destroyed as – 'surplus humanity' (Davis, 2006). Crucially, the surplus populations made by the present conjuncture may perform the act of 'dying' in relation to varied capitalist life processes and endure multiple 'expulsions' from them (Sassen, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has confirmed the extraordinary power of Mbembe's (2003) concept of *necropolitics*, showing 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe, 2003: 39). The racialisation of processes of subjugation to death set multiple lines of continuity between past and present forms of racial violence, inequality and oppression (Wilson, 2017). In former settler-colonial states like the US it structures, for instance, what Hartman (2007) called the 'afterlife of slavery', reproducing violence for black people across time. As stressed by Mbembe, the reverberation and consequences of the imperial colonial plantation do not simply continue existing in their novel contemporary avatars – like the labour regimes of global commodity chains and production networks (see Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016; Smith, 2016; Suwandi, 2019). They also live on as intimately embodied features, exposing racialised and 'othered' subjects to a

vast array of violent processes, as a condition to their very existence. Indeed, systematic (over) exposure to 'death' is always the most compelling and bare of all features of social reproduction experienced by the oppressed.

Along compatible lines, in *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, Bhattacharyya (2018) proposes a complex reflection on Cedric Robinson's concept of 'racial capitalism' developed in *Black Marxism*, and combines it with insights on social reproduction setting the basis for a novel approach focussing on Raced Social Reproduction (RSR). Whilst exploring the ways in which capital, race and racism are inextricably connected, in ways that are more co-constitutive than functional to the development of capitalism, Bhattacharyya also highlights the continuities and parallels between processes of appropriation or devaluation of reproductive labour and racialisation. Racialised subjects, Bhattacharyya argues, across past and present histories of capitalism, have been systematically dispossessed and devalued in ways compatible with processes of extraction and depletion targeting activities, sectors and realms (mis)represented as 'non-productive' yet crucial to the sustenance of capitalist life. This is a key point of contact of this RSR theorisation with both SRT and ESRA.

If the over-exposure to illness and death of racialised subjects is, like in Mbembe's *necropolitics*, a key feature of racial capitalism, through the lens of social reproduction we can also aspire to capture other axes along which surplus life can be manufactured. One is composed of processes producing what Marx called the reserve army of labour, which is hardly a static category. In fact, through the lens of RSR we can identify a continuum of surplus-making techniques at play in capitalism sitting between annihilation – or *necropolitics* – and the regeneration of the reserve army. These techniques shape multiple hierarchies of disposability crossing realms of work and life and manufacturing varied forms of social and economic redundancy (Bhattacharyya, 2018). At the outer margins of this hierarchy of disposability – where already Fanon (1963) placed the colonial lumpenproletariat – we find those abandoned to their own devices during an emergency like the one we lived since 2020. They neither experience immediate physical death nor are they included in the reserve army. Yet, they are exposed to processes of exclusion compatible with the political and 'social' death described by Patterson (1982) as experienced by slaves across the global history of mankind; the deprivation of entitlements based on lack of belonging to or exclusion from a community. The political irrelevance shaped by social death carries great risk and possibly deadly consequences. Whilst showing how the primary 'colony' of the (racialised) body has hardly been undone, COVID-19 has paved new trajectories of surplus life and death. I focus on three below.

The first surplus subjects generated by the pandemic are, literally, the dead. The necropolitical features of the current pandemic manifested in ferociously high rates of illness and death for racialised subjects across the world. In the United States, in the early phases of the pandemic, death rates for black people were three times higher than for white people (Renwick, 2020; Pilkington, 2020). Clinical studies indicate that co-morbidities alone cannot explain the sustained race gap in death rates (Golestaneh et al., 2020). Also in the United Kingdom, people of colour were overexposed to infection and death. According to national statistics collected between March and July 2020 (White and Ayoubkhani, 2020), all minorities but ethnic Chinese were exposed to higher infection and death rates. Black Caribbean males in particular – already the most discriminated against in education and employment – were almost three times more likely to die of COVID-19 than any other group. Data across the two countries is comparable despite extreme differences in health systems – privatised in the United States whilst still based on public provisioning (albeit based on privatised decentralised services) in the United Kingdom. Indeed, racism kills across different health systems.

The legacy of slavery, with its constant exposure of black bodies to risks of death, lives on in present times (Hartman, 2007). In the present pandemic conjuncture, this legacy is likely co-shaped

by many factors, ranging from poverty, greater exposure to ill-health, poor housing, and the need to keep on working in high risk occupations to make a living. These were all key factors explaining high death rates among plantation workers – both slaves and indenture workers – as well as their reproductive unfreedom (e.g. Davis on the United States, 1983; Reddock on Trinidad and Tobago, 1994). In Southern Africa, the racial features of the labour migration regime 'produced affliction' facilitating the spread of multiple diseases including HIV/AIDS (O'Laughlin, 2013, 2015).

The second type of surplus lives produced is the reserve army of the pandemic, composed of varied degrees of disposability; bodies not yet de facto annihilated but highly exploitable also during unexploitable times. Their reproductive role in the neoliberal regime is embedded in disposability. Despite this, they have also often been celebrated as 'essential' – reinforcing the problematic nature of this type of categorisation. Compelled to exit their homes and accept low wage jobs to guarantee their own reproduction, people in this category are called into a social relation making them indispensible yet entirely spendable and depletable at the same time; namely 'indispensably disposable' (Kawashima, 2005; Walker and Kawashima, 2018). If infected, they may join the dead and others will replace them, as they are part of a reserve army that can be consumed. If not, they will remain in this exceptional condition of 'essential precarity' – and continue supporting the reproductive regime of pandemic neoliberalism.

The third type of surplus lives is composed of groups socially constructed as social, economic and political 'rejects'. If many were already exposed to high degrees of discrimination and dehumanisation, during the pandemic their redundant status was magnified. Represented as neither central to paid work nor to social reproduction (in the form of, for instance, unpaid care work) despite setting the social perimeters of both processes, people in this category include the disabled, sex workers, migrants and other liminal subjects, like vulnerable members of the trans community (e.g. Rawat, 2020, on India).[4] Especially during the early phases of the pandemic, debates on disability perfectly epitomised the perils and cruelty of Malthusian approaches to 'rationally' surviving the crisis. By March 2020, family doctors in England were instructed to pressure families of disabled people, including healthy autistic adults, to sign DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) orders in case of hospitalisation. As it became clear that high COVID-19 infection rates placed a strain on the NHS, the dehumanising narrative of given people as less worthy of being saved in a context of limited resources was presented as rational choice.

Similarly, categories of workers making their livelihoods at the very margins of socially accepted occupations – like sex workers – were left out of income support and health risk minimisation policies. Across the world, sex workers have been excluded from government rescue packages. Their exposure to economic hardship has increased due to the increasing criminalisation of sex work as breaching lockdown measures (Lam, 2020). In regions where sex workers were already exposed to high health risks, these were further amplified. In Tanzania or Kenya, since the pandemic hit many sex workers had no access to necessary drugs, clinics and testing facilities (Namubiro et al., 2020; UNAIDS, 2020). Despite decades of campaigning in favour of sex workers' decriminalisation (Kotiswaran, 2016; Mac and Smith, 2018) and the centrality of sex work as a key form of reproductive labour in capitalism (Fortunati, 1981), the pandemic has pushed once again these workers into the category of the socially and economically redundant – marginal to economic and reproductive processes on which 'normal' capitalist life is based.

Finally, the pandemic has exacerbated the perils inbuilt in experiences of migration and processes of dehumanisation that liminal populations are subject to, both materially and discursively. Under pandemic neoliberalism, when migrants are not employed in precarious occupations central to economic survival, like in food production or logistics (Anderson, 2020) or other essential yet wholly disposable jobs, the state of exception in which they are legally and existentially confined (Novak, 2015) becomes amplified. It leaves them stranded – analytically and literally – at sea,

away from shores of safety. Populations living under apartheid regimes share migrants' condition of liminality. During the pandemic, the dehumanisation they are exposed to further escalated. For instance, Palestinians living under occupation were excluded from Israel's vaccination schemes despite the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in areas like Gaza (Moss and Majadle, 2020). Under conditions of danger for those 'who count' – also made unsafe by the pandemic even if safely located inside national and household borders – migrants and other liminal groups have become even more economically and reproductively irrelevant. They are excluded both from the reserve armies of labour and life, exposed to political and social death (Patterson, 1982).

Notably, also this escalation of processes of dying along manifold axes should be seen as fully embedded into neoliberal logics. If, in fact, some of the existential inequalities at the basis of the processes of racialisation described here have a long trajectory in the history of capitalism, their specific reconfigurations and lethal effects during the present conjuncture were once again – as in the case of processes of labour precarisation – amplified by the functioning mechanisms of the neoliberal reproductive regime. In fact, the widely acknowledged neo-colonial features of neoliberal capitalism, central to the contemporary reproductive manifestations of racial capitalism across the world economy (Tilley and Shilliam, 2018), are also shaping the politics of COVID-19 vaccination programmes. In rich settler-colonial economies like the United States, early immunisation benefitted wealthy classes and neighbourhoods and excluded poor racialised areas and people (Misra, 2021). On a global scale, the exclusionary politics of immunisation mediated by Big Pharma and driven by vaccine nationalism (Jomo, 2021) is shaping a complex scenario of 'vaccine apartheid' (Desai, 2021; Ghosh, 2020, 2021) now also possibly reinforced by racist tropes targeting the spread of the Omicron variant (Subramoney, 2021). Altogether, these processes are reinforcing socio-economic inequalities in the world system and further perpetuating racialised and neo-colonial disadvantages in contemporary capitalist life.

Conclusions

This article has characterised the current COVID-19 pandemic conjuncture as a crisis of capitalist life, rather than a crisis of neoliberal capitalism. The analysis argues and shows that the main principles and trends of the neoliberal era are not only deeply implicated in the ways in which the pandemic and its effects unfolded, but they have also been magnified and deepened by the pandemic, opening a phase of pandemic neoliberalism. In order to analyse the planetary and compounded features of the crisis of capitalist life opened by the pandemic, the article has deployed three complementary feminist political economy lenses centred on social reproduction. In doing so, this work celebrates the theoretical purchase of social reproduction analyses whilst also clearly delineating their different remit, vantage point and contributions.

The first theoretical lens deployed to characterise the present conjuncture as a crisis of capitalist life, and to map the rise of pandemic neoliberalism is SRT. SRT is particularly helpful in tracing changes in the reproductive architecture and governance of neoliberal capitalism and its role in magnifying COVID-19 effects in socially reproductive sectors, like health and education. By exploring the societal reproductive basis of capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017), SRT enables us to locate the present moment along the progressive development and establishment of the neoliberal reproductive regime (Fraser, 2017). Through the SRT lens, the COVID-19 crisis emerges as the outcome of decades of neoliberal productive and reproductive policies. It is not a point of rupture with neoliberalism; rather a powerful historical encounter revealing its shortcomings, the type of accumulation it promoted, and the inequalities it nurtured. The resilience of processes of privatisation of health despite the crisis – signalled for instance by patterns of expenditure for COVID-19 relief funds (e.g. Dimakou et al., 2021) clearly suggests that the crisis may be cured exactly based

on the same recipe that amplified its effects in the first place, moving neoliberalism into its 'pandemic phase'.

The second theoretical lens adopted is based on ESRA. Deconstructing false dichotomies reifying the separation between productive and reproductive labour and work, and illustrating the value-producing role of the latter, ESRA help us unpacking the impact of the pandemic of the world of work. Its emphasis on the centrality of the labouring body and its racialised and gendered features (Federici, 2004) enables us to read the COVID-19 pandemic as a moment of re-constitution and reorganisation of productive and socially reproductive labour generating new intersecting inequalities (Stevano et al., 2021b). If in some regions this reorganisation entailed a rupture of established productive and reproductive spaces and times, in others – where they already enmeshed – it escalated labour retrenchment and displacement. However, it always deepened processes of extraction of unpaid labour and value from gendered care economies (e.g. Agarwal, 2021; Ossome, 2021). ESRA theoretical lessons also help us identifying lines of continuities between old and new labour dichotomies, as the pandemic generated new problematic distinctions, like the one between essential/non-essential work (Bergfeld and Farris, 2020; Stevano et al., 2021a). Also through this second theoretical reading centred on social reproduction the COVID-19 pandemic does not emerge as a moment of rupture with neoliberalism. It deepened classed, racialised and gendered processes of labour informalisation and precarisation and the marketisation of social reproduction escalated during the neoliberal era. It also further promoted the neoliberal externalisation of reproductive costs to gendered unpaid labour.

The third lens adopted is based on what I called RSR; namely, novel social reproduction analyses explicitly embedded in theorisations of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018). RSR enables us to expose the necropolitical aspects of the inequalities sustained by global capitalism (Mbembe, 2003) while tracing the evolution in trajectories of 'letting die' and surplus living during the neoliberal phase (Li, 2010). These trajectories represent specific 'afterlives' of slavery (Hartman, 2007) that may shape death as a social experience of deprivation of political entitlements (Patterson, 1982). Learning from RSR, and analysing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the management of death and rescue, the narrative has mapped how the pandemic created multiple mechanisms of 'letting die' and surplus living. In particular, it has identified three distinct kind of pandemic surplus subjects – namely, the dead; the 'indispensably disposable' (Kawashima, 2005) reserve army; and the redundant productive/reproductive liminal subjects – and has exposed the processes of racialisation central to the making of all three. Also the deployment of this third theoretical lens suggests that we are firmly anchored in neoliberal waters. In fact, the ways in which racialisation processes still threaten many lives today remain embedded into trajectories of existential inequalities (Therborn, 2013) amplified under neoliberalism through the structuring of labour and life (Tilley and Shilliam, 2018).

Overall, a feminist political economy reading of COVID-19 centred on social reproduction frames the current conjuncture and planetary crisis as an era of pandemic neoliberalism, whose reproductive regime remains based on the marketized reproductive sectors; rampant processes of labour informalisation and precarisation along the productive/reproductive continuum; and by the pluralisation of trajectories of exclusion along axes of racialisation. We will not move out of neoliberalism merely based on the effects of this pandemic, as the way in which the latter unfolded was its direct expression and set the basis for its deepening, rather than its crisis. Changes in economic systems are never the natural expression of laws of motion or crises. They result from political demands and struggles.

So, besides providing us with new theoretical readings of the pandemic, can social reproduction approaches also guide us towards progressive post-pandemic politics? Absolutely. In fact, by denaturalising the relation between production and social reproduction in neoliberal capitalism, these approaches provide a concrete political roadmap. First, the revealed centrality of social

reproduction for the regeneration of capitalist life calls for the re-centring of political and policy priorities towards reproductive and life-supporting sectors and infrastructures, activities and realms. Against a politics of 'carelessness' (Kaur and Rai, 2021), we need a new economic metrics accounting for care (Heintz et al., 2021) and reorient investment in what the Women's Budget Group (2021) has called the 'caring economy'. This must include an expansion of public care services and a de-escalation of the process of corporate-led marketisation of key reproductive sectors, like education and health. Moreover, the key role played by unpaid and informal care labour in shouldering the social costs generated by the pandemic (e.g. Corsi et al., 2021, on Italy) calls for the need to reinvigorate feminist calls for self-determination income. In the past, this translated into campaigns for 'Wages Against Housework' (Federici, 2019). In a post pandemic world, and given the far wider social perimeters of the life-making struggles we witness, this could turn into a wider call for 'Wages Against Lifework'. This call must stretch working class politics and demands beyond productivist social perimeters, to recognise reproductive struggles – including by unpaid reproductive workers – as labour struggles and viceversa. Finally, inspired by social justice movements, from anticolonial struggles all the way to Black Lives Matters, we all need to embrace a politics of liberation exposing and rejecting the unacceptable racialised inequalities still defining our global present, and embrace an understanding of global capitalist life where slavery, colonialism and racial capitalism are not merely seen as the history of black and racialised people, but rather as the common history of all humankind. Only through these political efforts we may finally re-imagine a common political and economic future beyond pandemic neoliberalism.

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Notes

1. With Subir Sinha, I use the expression 'cyber-fieldwork' to characterise a complex process of gathering information relying on academic literature and official databases, but also blogs, op-eds, visual material, social media, news, reports and webinars held during the pandemic. The choice to include all sources is methodological and political. It aims at diversifying knowledge production, expanding representation and amplifying voices not necessarily seen as knowledge producers in the academe. It tries to showcase feminist work on social reproduction from different corners of the world and promote an inclusive politics of citation.
2. These chains also increasingly include processes of commodification of biological life and its 'products' along novel 'fertility frontiers' (e.g. Newman and Nahman, 2020; Vertommen and Barbagallo, 2021).
3. Along similar lines, Banks (2020) analyses black women's unpaid collective work in the United States.
4. During the initial phase of the pandemic they also included the sick and elderly, whose lives were repeatedly represented as spendable and less valuable.

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