
Debate

The Social Reproduction of Pandemic Surplus Populations and Global Development Narratives on Inequality and Informal Labour

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a reading of the COVID-19 crisis through a social reproduction lens, with a focus on the restructuring of reproductive sectors, the world of work and the generation of differentiated surplus populations, and considers the implications of this reading for global development debates on inequality and informal labour. Learning from the pandemic and the social reproduction of the surplus populations it generated, the analysis argues that debates on inequality should be re-centred on its existential nature and its embeddedness in social oppression, and that labour relations should be considered as key reproducers of inequality. It also argues that informal labour should be increasingly understood as playing the reproductive role of 'global housework' in contemporary capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

The direct health threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic may be partially subsiding, but its socio-economic effects on world capitalism are likely to be long-lasting. The pandemic has not signalled a crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Saad-Filho, 2021) but rather a compounded crisis of capitalist life, significantly restructuring social reproduction (Mezzadri, 2022). It has had a profound impact on global development, with some arguing it has erased 30 years of poverty reduction efforts (Sumner et al., 2020). Indeed, COVID-19

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has reorganized world inequalities; revealed the centrality of social relations and identities in shaping them; and confirmed the key reproductive role that informal — unpaid or poorly paid — labour relations may play in sustaining life during times of emergency. Given the centrality of inequality and informality in global development narratives, an analysis of the pandemic through the lens of social reproduction can very productively contribute to development theories in/for the post-pandemic phase.

With this ambitious agenda in mind, in this article I explore the pandemic through the theoretical lens of social reproduction by focusing on the restructuring of reproductive sectors, the world of work and the generation of surplus populations, and discuss the implications for understandings of inequality and labour informality. While I deploy insights from distinct social reproduction frameworks, including social reproduction theory (SRT), I will draw with particular emphasis from early social reproduction analyses (ESRA) and raced social reproduction approaches (RSR), given the key insights they offer to the study of inequality and informality. The work of Nancy Fraser (2017), Silvia Federici (2004) and Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) forms the backbone of this theoretical framework, although the reflections on surplus populations also reach out to the concepts of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) and ‘social death’ (Patterson, 1982/2018).

My exploration of the surplus-making trajectories that emerged during the pandemic will engage with the work of Tania Li, and with the relation between surplus subjects, global capitalism and development. Indeed, during this pandemic we witnessed ‘letting die’ (Li, 2010) on a planetary scale never seen before. Yet, none of the distinct surplus-making processes I identify should be understood as generating subjects redundant to capitalism. Whilst epitomizing the most brutal aspect of the crisis of social reproduction shaped by COVID-19, these surplus-making processes fulfilled key economic, political and/or performative reproductive functions in the regeneration of global capitalism. Based on this understanding of surplus populations as always inextricably necessary to capitalism, this analysis calls for a re-centring of debates on inequality on its existential nature rather than income manifestations (Therborn, 2013), with reproductive sectors and labour markets — and their gendered and racialized outcomes — as primary vectors for its regeneration. Moreover, it suggests the need to increasingly recognize informal labour as performing the role of the ‘global housework’ of world capitalism.

The article is structured as follows. The next section analyses the COVID-19 pandemic as a compounded crisis of social reproduction restructuring life and work. The following section explores the trajectories of ‘letting die’ that emerged from the pandemic and the surplus populations they generated. The article then turns to a discussion of the implications of this social reproduction-centred reading of COVID-19 for debates on inequality and labour informality, before the final section concludes and discusses the implications of the analysis.

NEOLIBERALISM, COVID-19 AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION CRISES OF LIFE AND WORK

Since its onset in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a substantial reorganization of key aspects of socio-economic life across the world economy. The sudden removal of labour from its ‘productive consumption’ by the capitalist system abruptly validated Karl Marx’s theorization of exploitation as the maker of all value. Yet, the pandemic has not turned into a sustained crisis of neoliberal capitalism. The early economic disruption was temporary and eventually socialized in ways that left the working principles of neoliberalism intact (Saad-Filho, 2021). In fact, rather than a crisis of neoliberal capitalism, I argue that the pandemic is better understood as a compounded crisis of capitalist life, that can be productively analysed through the feminist political economy lens of *social reproduction*. A concept developed by Marx with reference to the regeneration of societal capitalist relations, it was reclaimed by feminist scholars and stretched to include entangled processes of regeneration of life *and* capitalist relations (Bhattacharya, 2017; Cammack, 2020; Federici, 2019; Katz, 2001).

Focusing on social reproduction captures why the crisis could not ‘undo’ neoliberalism — namely, because the reproductive architecture of neoliberal capitalism was central to the unravelling of the crisis and massively amplified its implications. Contributing to SRT (Bhattacharya, 2017), Nancy Fraser (2017) explains how the neoliberal ‘regime of social reproduction’ is driven by the marketization and progressive financialization of care and reproductive sectors (see also Folbre, 2020), in contexts of shrinking state provisions and labour informalization. Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the global South and austerity measures in the global North produced ‘care gaps’ that were filled with the commercialization of care and domestic activities, both in households and reproductive sectors (Mezzadri, 2022). This commercialization shapes global care chains (GCCs), transnational circuits outsourcing the care question to gendered, migrant and racialized reproductive labour.¹

As ‘care crises’ have become a distinctive feature of neoliberal capitalism (Fraser, 2017; see also Lombardozzi, 2021 on Uzbekistan; Bargawi et al., 2021 on Palestine), their resolution has increasingly relied on finance, extending its reach to all domains of social life. Working class households in the global North rely heavily on debt (LeBaron, 2010; Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage, 2017; Roberts, 2016). In the global South, the poor are incorporated into finance through microcredit (Hosseini, 2016), the collateralization of social policy programmes (Lavinias, 2018), and/or pro-poor digital finance (Natile, 2020). This over-exposure of life to financial risk is triggering a process of financialization of social reproduction in which debt shapes

1. See Yeates and Pillinger (2019) on the UK; Valiani (2012) on reproductive labour emigration from Africa; and Grover et al. (2018) on India.

or reinforces gendered and racialized violence (Bhandar, 2018; Gago and Caballero, 2020; Taylor, 2019).

Financialization has also reorganized reproductive sectors like healthcare and education through public–private partnerships (PPPs), mainstreamed by the World Bank as key instruments to fill public financing gaps, despite evidence of detrimental effects (Bayliss and Van Waeyenberge, 2018; Bayliss et al., 2017; Languille, 2017). PPPs have facilitated the entry of large corporate capital into education, from early-years to the university sector (e.g. Languille, 2020; Simon et al., 2022). The healthcare sector, crucial for the delivery of Social Development Goal 3 on good health and well-being, is identified as a key area of growth of ‘tradable assets’ for global financial investors, in a context of public divestment (Hunter and Murray, 2020: 1263). These processes have amplified massively the lethal impact of COVID-19. Countries or regions over-exposed to privatization and financialization of healthcare systems or key health services endured higher death tolls (see Corsi et al., 2021 on Italy; Gianella et al., 2021 on Peru; Pilkington, 2020 on the US). Despite this evidence, the cure proposed by the World Bank is more neoliberal healthcare, given that over half of its COVID relief fund was channelled to private financial operators (Dimakou et al., 2020).

A second feature of the compounded crisis of capitalist life escalated by the pandemic is the massive transformations of the world of work, along lines well captured by early social reproduction analyses, concerned with value, reproductive work and labour fragmentation. If at its onset the pandemic validated Marx’s theorization of labour as central to all processes of value making, it also confirmed Silvia Federici’s (2004) argument that the labouring body is the first ‘machine’ invented by capitalism. The ‘invention’ of the capitalist body at work implied a hierarchy of activities seen as generating or not generating value (see Fortunati, 1981), with reproductive work confined to the home and devalued as unpaid (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Mies, 1986) in a process of accumulation of differences and fractures within the working class (Federici, 2004; Picchio, 1992). Validating Federici’s insights, the pandemic has revealed the fictitious, contingent nature of the separation between ‘productive’ and reproductive work for processes of value generation (Mezzadri, 2019).² It abruptly restructured productive/reproductive labour divides and reconfigured the role of households within them (Ossome, 2020; Stevano et al., 2021b), deepening gendered processes of depletion through social reproduction (Rai et al., 2014). Reconstructions varied based on regional labour relations. Regions with higher degrees of informal employment, including traditional homework, were less able to in-source work into homes, while areas where formal professional services were widespread — mostly in the global North — saw a quick rise

2. This fiction is also regenerated in statistics, which exclude vast number of reproductive activities from the computation of what constitutes employment (see Naidu and Ossome, 2016).

of ‘pandemic homework’, as one third of jobs could be in-sourced in homes, allowing people to shield (Berg et al., 2020).

Workers whose labour was deemed ‘essential’ to social reproduction during the pandemic — including health workers, but also food, transport and logistics workers, among others — were unable to shield and reorganize their labour as homework. This new labour dichotomy between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ work is also problematic. It varies according to regional economic systems, regimes of care, and the structural power in employment (Stevano et al., 2021a). It may imply the intensification of labour and surveillance of workers deemed ‘essential’ — further escalating the myth of the ‘indefatigable body’ (Abdelrahman, 2022) — and an erosion of labour rights for the ‘non-essential’ (Bergfeld and Farris, 2020; Gago and Mason-Deese, 2021).³ Moreover, it further amplifies gender, racial and mobility-based divisions within the working class, given the massive over-representation of women, racialized and migrant workers in essential work. Ultimately, the pandemic has also further exposed the many distinct ‘forms of exploitation’ (Banaji, 2010) the labouring body is exposed to, based on social traits and unequal access to labour markets, and the structural inconsistency of how work is valued or indeed devalued.

Highly precarious essential workers have been exposed to compounded health and financial risks whilst carrying out work that sustains capitalist life in times of emergency. Their parable is a good starting point to reflect on the link between labour, capitalism and processes that manufacture surplus populations. In fact, the pandemic has generated or amplified different surplus-making trajectories, ranging from the restructuring of the reserve army of labour to the management and politics of large-scale death (Mezzadri, 2022). Racialisation has played a remarkable role in co-constituting all these trajectories, and analyses combining social reproduction and racial capitalism are particularly well geared to capture their features and implications for global development.

‘LETTING DIE’ IN THE PANDEMIC: RACE, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND SURPLUS POPULATIONS

Besides massively restructuring life and work, COVID-19 has also re-centred the attention on a key yet often forgotten question in political economy, that is, who dies from global capitalism? In analyses of global development, this question has been rightly linked to debates on surplus populations. According to Tania Li (2010, 2017) global development is entangled with processes of ‘letting die’ which are progressing at a stealthy pace: ‘Letting die is not an apocalypse. It is not a media event, like a

3. In the UK, the metaphor of the ‘COVID-19 frontline’ enabled the intensification of key workers’ labour (Farris et al., 2021).

massacre, an earthquake, or a famine that kills large numbers in a compressed period of time. Nor is it a Malthusian problem of inadequate global food supply. It is a stealthy violence that consigns large numbers of people to lead short and limited lives' (Li, 2010: 67).

Undoubtedly, the stealthy violence of 'letting die' is intimately entangled with the global development process. The implementation of SAPs, the dispossession of Indigenous communities due to land grabbing, or the penetration of corporate capital in rural areas — in Indonesia, Li and Semedi (2021) define it as 'corporate occupation' — involve different forms of violence against varied communities. Accumulation is always a violent process, embedded in and amplifying social difference. As shown once again by Silvia Federici (2004) in *Caliban and the Witch*, it is a gendered and racialized process resulting in multiple trajectories of social and economic exclusion and entailing the destruction of specific bodies. The burning of thousands of women as witches during feudalism was instrumental to the early development of capitalist relations in Europe (on contemporary witch-hunts, see Kelkar and Nathan, 2020). Along comparable lines, slavery and the dispossession of Indigenous and racialized communities during settler colonialism in North America were central to the development of modern property relations (Bhandar, 2018), with race still mobilized for dispossession in present times (Taylor, 2019). Indeed, over-exposure to violence and death, mediated by racialization, structures the 'afterlife' of slavery (Hartman, 2007).⁴ It also structures the afterlife of colonialism, still epitomized by gaps in life expectancy between large swathes of the global South and the global North, notwithstanding important outliers (Freeman et al., 2020), and between the rich and the poor globally (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2018).

If 'who dies' from and who is 'let die' in global capitalism is entangled with the global process of accumulation and its racial and gender features, it is also entangled with social reproduction. It is the ultimate reproductive question. Opening the way to raced social reproduction approaches (RSR), in her book *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018: 52) explores the linkages between race, racial capitalism and social reproduction.⁵ First, reflecting on Cedric Robinson's (1983) legacy in *Black Marxism*, Bhattacharyya notes how the invisibilization of distinct forms of reproductive labour always articulated with racialized forms of economic categorization, with key implications for health and life expectancy. In fact, both Black feminist contributions to the study of slavery (e.g. Dadzie, 2021; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Morgan, 2004) and gendered analyses of indenture (e.g. Reddock, 1994) highlight how the devaluation of reproductive work was a crucial aspect of slave and racialized colonial systems of

4. We can find examples both in the global North and global South, which include the US prison-industrial complex (Gilmore, 2007) and the minerals-energy complex in South Africa (Wilson, 2011).

5. I draw here from Tilley and Shilliam's (2018) work on 'raced' markets.

production, as mediated by the productivity needs of the plantation. Gendered reproductive violence entailed high mortality rates. Second, reaching out to Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics', Bhattacharyya also highlights how race and the reproductive burden mediate the 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe, 2003), and leave given communities liable to becoming surplus populations. Notably, different groups can be manufactured into surplus populations, or 'let die', along a variety of axes — literally, economically, or socially. Indeed, 'social death', which Orlando Patterson (1982/2018) in his historical analysis of slavery theorizes as the process of exclusion from socio-political rights, is a key aspect of how people can be made 'redundant', in ways which also entail over-exposure to health threats. Arguably, this over-exposure remains a key feature of racialized and gendered labour regimes across the global South to date (see O'Laughlin, 2013 on the 'production of affliction' in Southern Africa).⁶

As a magnifying glass, the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated processes of 'letting die' which manufactured distinct types of surplus populations, with racial inequality undeniably central to these processes, as mediating the possibilities and conditions of social reproduction. In fact, learning from the RSR approach described above, which extends understandings of surplus life beyond its classic political economy remit to account for different processes of 'dying', we can identify three distinct surplus populations generated by the pandemic. The first quite literally consists of the dead. COVID-19 has so far claimed over 6 million lives,⁷ with the highest number of casualties in the United States, Brazil, India, Mexico, Russian Federation, Peru, UK, Indonesia, Italy, Iran, Colombia and France, notwithstanding differences in data collection (Simonsen and Viboud, 2021).⁸ In countries like the US and the UK, pandemic death is clearly racialized (Golestaneh et al., 2020; Sandset, 2021), with medical associations agreeing that these patterns could not be explained by co-morbidity alone (e.g. The Health Foundation, 2020). Across the global South, the link between racialization and mortality is trickier to analyse. This is because attention to racialization features less prominently in data collection, despite the significant presence of ethnic minorities in many countries.⁹ Yet, evidence still suggests that excess deaths due to COVID-19 were largest in the regions of South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (Wang et al., 2022). It also suggests that poor working classes — where ethnic minorities are

6. Social reproduction emerges as a key terrain for the extraction of labour surplus from racialized labour regimes (see also Mezzadri, 2019).

7. See the World Health Organization website: <https://covid19.who.int/>

8. In India, official data may underestimate the real death toll, especially among the poor (Banaji and Gupta, 2021).

9. Notably, 'racialized' is *not* a synonym for 'non-white'. It marks experiences of socio-economic marginalization based on race and/or belonging to a discriminated-against ethnic minority. In fact, its conflation with 'non-white' limits explorations of how racial inequality structures socio-economic outcomes in vast parts of the global South.

over-represented — have been more exposed to the risk of infection and death through labour. In India, for instance, Dalit sanitation workers who ‘worked the pandemic’ died in great number (Salve and Jungari, 2020). Here, the pandemic also reinforced racist, classist and casteist discourses constructing low-caste and non-Hindu bodies as polluting and dangerous (Banerjee et al., 2022), magnifying India’s existing necropolitics, which entails high health risk and exposure to violence for these communities (Chakraborty, 2021).

Labouring is central to the making of the ‘secondary pandemic’ shaped by lockdown measures put in place to contain transmission, which also involved exposure to health risk and death for many, structuring the second surplus-making trajectory amplified by COVID-19. The surplus population magnified by this ‘secondary pandemic’ is the classic one in political economy — what Marx referred to as the ‘reserve army of labour’. The pandemic has massively expanded the reproductive functions of the reserve army, and exponentially multiplied the number of workers deemed ‘essential’ (see Stevano et al., 2021a) and called on to sustain the regeneration of life whilst middle and upper classes across the world could shelter in their homes. This reproductive reserve army of labour was greatly racialized and, despite its centrality, highly disposable. It recalls what Ken Kawashima (2005) defines as ‘indispensably disposable’; namely, a form of contingent labour simultaneously essential and in excess (Kawashima and Walker, 2021; Walker and Kawashima, 2018). High death rates among this reproductive reserve army — such as nurses in the UK (Mitchell, 2021), or uber drivers in Brazil (Antunes, 2021) — speak of the porosity of the boundary between these two pandemic surplus populations. As argued by Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018), there are ‘multiple surplus-labour techniques sitting in between annihilation and the reproduction of the reserve army’.

The third surplus population amplified by the pandemic includes those already inhabiting liminal and precarious socio-economic spaces and pushed to the margins of contemporary global development processes. These include people involved in occupations marginalized in debates on employment; mobile populations locked in spaces of exception; or populations under long-term military occupation. The neo-Malthusian discourses unleashed by the pandemic further magnified their political and social exclusion, namely, their ‘social death’. Examples include sex workers, systematically excluded from rescue packages (Lam, 2020; Namubiro et al., 2020; UNAIDS, 2020); Palestinians in occupied territories (Holmes and Balousha, 2021; Moss and Majadle, 2020); prison populations excluded from early vaccination programmes (Siva, 2020); migrants crossing the Mediterranean and locked in rescue and asylum centres without access to basic health provisions (Guadagno, 2020). In the UK doctors were even instructed to issue ‘do not resuscitate’ orders for disabled people, including healthy autistic adults (Mezzadri, 2022).

Notably, through the social reproduction lens explored here, none of the surplus populations identified exist outside the remit of neoliberal capitalism, but rather epitomize the outcomes of its pandemic phase (Mezzadri, 2022). Moreover, they all had clear (re)productive functions in the neoliberal pandemic phase.¹⁰ The reserve army of reproductive, ‘indispensably disposable’ workers regenerated capitalist life during the pandemic. Even those who faced death, literally or socially, carried out key reproductive performative or ordering roles, in relation to the control of populations during lockdowns, the legitimization of rising state powers to enforce emergency measures, or the social ordering of people into those ‘who count’ and those who don’t. As highlighted by critical migration scholars, the ‘spectacle of death’ and ‘the scene of rescue’ (Tazzioli, 2019) always reinforce power relations and bordering at varied levels (Novak, 2017; Tudor and Ticktin, 2021). In fact, this spectacle also boosted corporate accumulation in the global health sector, with countries racing to hoard vaccines in ways that reinforced global health inequalities and promoted ‘vaccine apartheid’ (Ghosh, 2021; Jomo, 2021).

This social reproduction-centred reading of the pandemic and the surplus populations it generated bears implications for key narratives of global development. First, the greatly unequal impact of the pandemic on reproductive sectors, health outcomes and rates of death — including social death — and their relation to trajectories of racialization and/or exclusion calls for debates on inequality to be re-embedded within its existential nature. Secondly, the swelling of the reserve army of precarious, ‘indispensably disposable’ essential workers who regenerated life during the pandemic enables us to derive some significant lessons on the role informal labour plays in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. The remainder of this article explores these implications, starting with the debate on inequality.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT, SURPLUS POPULATIONS AND THE EXISTENTIAL NATURE OF INEQUALITY

The social reproduction framework proposed above to explore the compounded impact of the COVID-19 crisis captures the inequalities produced or amplified in the last three years, in ways that strongly centre their existential nature and links with social oppression. These links are not yet systematically explored in narratives and debates of global development, particularly in relation to debates on race and racialization, which are still too marginally addressed by the discipline (Pailey, 2020; Wilson, 2012, 2017). Learning from the pandemic can be an important moment of reckoning in this respect, and an opportunity to move beyond economicist

10. For an earlier debate on the possible productive functions of surplus populations, see Smith (2011).

representations, adding to the important evolutions the debate has already gone through in the last two decades.

In its early origins in development economics — starting with Kuznets' work in 1955 — the debate on inequality mainly focused on income distribution and its relation to economic growth. In fact, this development debate remained dominated by binary thinking for some time, mainly trying to capture the relation between these two variables. Yet, approaches varied regarding the nature of their correlation (Cramer, 2000). Simon Kuznets (1955) modelled this correlation as characterized by an inverted-U relation: positive at first, given the unequal outcome triggered by the process of economic modernization, and negative once growth progressed and reached a turning point. In fact, for Kaldor (1955), this positive correlation was productive at the early stages of development as, supposedly, owners of capital had a higher propensity to save and invest.

Following the 'lost decade of development' shaped by the debt crisis and characterized by the implementation of SAPs, the correlation between income distribution and growth was re-theorized as not only negative, but also hampering growth itself. Economic models varied. They included capital-market imperfection theories, which reversed Kaldorian assumptions, and argued that in unequal societies the lack of access to credit by the poor would undermine growth and investment (e.g. Alesina and Perotti, 1993). They also included median voter theories, which forecast low investment in unequal societies as the outcome of redistributive political demands of the median voter (e.g. Persson and Tabellini, 1994). Other economic models focused on the social instability and conflict sparked by inequality, leading to economic losses (Cramer, 2003). Focusing on the virtuous cycle of growth-cum-distribution instead, human capital theories celebrated how low-income inequality and investment in education made a successful recipe for export-led growth (Birdsall et al., 1995). All these theories were based on selective evidence and could not be generalized. Moreover, they relied on problematic data and methodology. The GINI coefficient, deployed to measure inequality, only captured the mean of income distribution but not its extremes, concealing the most unequal aspects of distributions (Palma, 2011).¹¹

Against this history of binary thinking, the last decade has returned the study of inequality to classic political economy, and its centrality in capitalism, with contributions by Thomas Piketty (2014), Gabriel Palma (2011) and Branko Milanovic (2016), among others. Classic political economists

11. Capital-market imperfection models did not work in very low-growth countries (Corina, 2004). Median-voter theories assumed electoral democracy and did not account for Hirschman's 'tunnel effect'. Social instability and conflicts models could not explain why inequality led to violence only in some settings (Cramer, 2000). Human capital theories drew on selected readings of the East Asian experience, not accounting for the role gender inequality played in the export-led period (Seguino, 2000).

were not concerned with interpersonal inequality, but functional inequality — namely, inequality between production factors or forces — was key to their theorizations (Milanovic, 2020). Inequality was central to Malthus's obsession with population control and Ricardo's theory of land scarcity. It was endogenously generated in Marx's analysis of capitalism as a system based on labour exploitation and tending towards capital accumulation. Building on these insights, Piketty (2014) analyses the patrimonial tendency of contemporary capitalism as a system where returns to capital are higher than the rate of growth.¹² Palma (2011) identifies centrifugal forces in the extreme deciles and centripetal forces in the middle of income distributions across countries. Both analyses show that 'it is all about the share of the rich' and 'what they choose to do with it' (Palma, 2019).¹³ Focusing on global income distribution, Milanovic (2016) maps the convergence between average incomes globally, driven by middle classes in fast-growing economies, whilst also acknowledging income polarization towards the top class.¹⁴

While these contributions have returned the study of inequality to political economy, they have remained centred on income and wealth. And even those who identify class as a key engine in the reproduction of inequality (e.g. Palma, 2011, 2019) do not explore how social oppression — of gender, race, caste and so on — mediates class outcomes, giving rise to sticky forms of 'horizontal' (Stewart, 2016) and 'intersecting' inequality (Kabeer, 2016; Perrons, 2014; Seguino, 2021).¹⁵ Yet, it is exactly the co-constitution of class *through* social oppression — of gender, race and/or sexuality — which was so abruptly exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other processes also regenerating and augmenting unequal outcomes beyond the polarization of incomes alone. In fact, through the lens of social reproduction deployed here to analyse the present conjuncture, income polarization appears as one of the final outcomes of far broader structural processes regenerating inequality as part of different surplus-making trajectories. The analysis of the surplus populations generated by the pandemic, who experienced the brunt of inequality in all its brutal, necropolitical force, suggest that it is what Goran Therborn (2013) defined as

12. Working with a neoclassical framework, Piketty does not place exploitation as the engine of inequality like Marx — although his book compellingly opens with the Marikana massacre of Black mine workers in South Africa — yet he does place the concentration of capital at the heart of the question of inequality.

13. Palma (2011, 2019) operationalizes his approach into the 'Palma Index'. This shows how countries with a higher polarization of resources at the top have a more squeezed and larger bottom of the distribution. Median deciles — middle classes — seem to command similar shares of income.

14. And a reduction of global poverty at the bottom, using conservative poverty lines (for a critique, see Hickel, 2019).

15. Piketty's recent (2020) attempt to link social oppression to the formation of inequality regimes still relegates it to the realm of 'ideology', obscuring the role it plays in accumulation (Shah and Lerche, 2021).

‘existential inequality’ that shapes socio-economic outcomes, and not vice versa.

The neoliberal regime of social reproduction massively amplified these existential inequalities, as clearly delineated by racialized patterns of illness and death in some parts of the global economy, deeply discriminatory access to healthcare in others, or neo-colonial unequal access to vaccines globally. Across former settler colonial states, the neoliberal healthcare system has worked as a deadly reproducer of inequality and active manufacturer of surplus lives, given the astonishingly higher rates of death of non-white populations registered. The profound coloniality surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine discourse has culminated with suggestions of experimentation on those African regions already lacking masks, hospitals and intensive care (Binagwaho et al., 2021). The ongoing unevenness in access to vaccines and their higher price in poorer regions (Ghosh, 2021) speak to the ways in which global healthcare has turned into a key site of accumulation (Dimakou et al., 2020; Hunter and Murray, 2020), tracing novel routes for global inequality.

The expansion and restructuring of the reserve army of labour during the pandemic to include rising numbers and types of essential ‘indispensably disposable’ reproductive workers who are racialized, migratory and/or ‘othered’ in different ways also suggests the necessity to explore class, in its co-constitution with social oppression, not only as a *receiver* of inequality (as in traditional studies on inequality concerned with income shares) but as a *reproducer* of inequality, attuned with feminist takes on Marxian exploitation. As already is the case in relation to health outcomes, the direction of travel in our analysis must be to stress the origins of inequality in our profoundly different existential exposure to death and risk, including through work. Finally, if narratives of global development want to meaningfully grapple with the existential nature of inequality, they need to reflect on their silences on certain populations, as these silences speak loudly about their income bias. The third type of surplus populations identified in this article, those sharing a liminal status, seem so far entirely absent from inequality debates in global development, which remain anchored to old modernizing tropes, rather than broader concerns with social justice. In fact, a re-focusing of inequality debates towards social justice is what could finally lead to a process of radical re-imagination of the *real* big questions of global development, away from the narrow economic concerns of catching-up economics, which seem increasingly out of tune with the pressing political debates of our times. Movements across the globe — from Black Lives Matters to NiUnaMenos and the Women Strike, from Indigenous movements against land grabbing to Extinction Rebellion — are identifying what the real big questions are, and an engagement with their call may be a more meaningful catching-up process to focus on.

RE-THEORIZING INFORMAL LABOUR AS THE ‘GLOBAL HOUSEWORK’ OF WORLD CAPITALISM

Whilst indicating the need to re-centre the study of inequality on its existential nature and to stress the key role played by labour in regenerating it, the social reproduction analysis of the pandemic and its surplus populations developed here also provides insights into labour informality. In a world where labour informality has become the norm rather than the exception, some have questioned the explicatory relevance of this term (Rosaldo, 2021). Yet, the recognition of the life-sustaining role labour informality played during the pandemic — both in its articulation with ‘essential work’ and the making of surplus populations — opens the way to novel theoretical and policy directions.

Traditionally, the informal economy has been explicitly or implicitly linked to debates on surplus populations, including those framed around Marx’s understanding of the reserve army of labour. In fact, one could argue that since the 1970s, the ‘informal sector debate’ (Hart, 1973) has been the object of competing understandings of surplus populations. In the early 1970s’ conceptualization by the ILO, the so-called ‘marginalization thesis’, informality was conceived as resulting from the exclusion of large swathes of rural populations who, whilst expelled from the agricultural sector, could not access the new industrial jobs generated by import substituting industrialization (Moser, 1978; Rakowski, 1994). In this conceptualization, ‘informals’ were those failing to realize Arthur Lewis’s grand vision of an employment shift from the traditional agricultural sector to the rising modern industrial sector in global South economies going through the process of capitalist penetration. They were a surplus population stuck in the limbo between the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern, between agriculture and industrial production.

Arguably, these understandings of the informal economy as somehow linked to surplus life were also repropounded in different guises in subsequent legalist or structuralist analyses. The legalist reading of the informal economy, epitomized by the work of Hernando de Soto (1989), attributed its resilience and regeneration to undesirable legal mercantilist interventions. In this narrative, Adam Smith’s invisible hand was substituted by the clutches of an unwieldy state too heavily involved in the economy and pushing economic agents underground by suffocating their entrepreneurial spirit. In this romanticized vision of ‘another path’ to growth, compatible with post-Fordist theorizations of a ‘second industrial divide’ (Piore and Sabel, 1984), informal agents were reconceptualized as everyday heroes fighting against regulatory adversity. Also in this case, they were in effect conceived as a surplus population, one generated by state over-regulation.

Diametrically opposite to the legalist approach, but also rejecting marginalist explanations, the structural school centred on the work of Castells and Portes (1989) stressed the structural connections between

formal and informal activities, realms and relations, and the functional role of informality in sustaining late industrialization. This reading of informality opened up important reflections on the nature of late proletarianization in the global South. For example, Portes and Hoffman (2003) analysed the links between labour informalization and proletarianization in Latin America, following SAPs. Kate Meagher (1995, 2016) analysed the nature of labour informalization in sub-Saharan Africa, first exploring its links to petty informal services and then mapping its connection with youth unemployment in the region. Drawing primarily on India, Martha Chen's (2012) work on 'classing' — and gendering — the informal economy shows its bottom-heavy composition and embeddedness in proletarianization. In fact, in India, informal work and petty commodity production are the backbone of India's capitalism (Harriss-White, 2014), which relies on footloose labour engaged in different forms of labour circulation (Bremen, 2013).

Many of these analyses drew from earlier agrarian debates on interlocked modes of exploitation in the countryside (such as Bhaduri, 1986; Bharadwaj, 1974; Srivastava, 1989), understanding rural surplus populations as generated by multiple processes of adverse incorporation into circuits of production, work, trade and credit. Marx's conceptualization of *relative* surplus population (RSP) as the industrial reserve army of labour is central to several of these analyses. For instance, Jairus Banaji (2010) shows the embeddedness of informal 'unfree' labour in capitalism, and its connection to processes of circulation shaped by merchant capital. Henry Bernstein (2007) understands labour informalization as the process of contemporary proletarianization generating varied 'classes of labour' not necessarily dispossessed from land. More recent analyses stress the role of neoliberalism in expanding the RSP. In Indonesia, according to Habibi and Juliawan (2018), this was due to the neoliberal disconnection between domestic agricultural development and industrialization — what Bernstein (2004) called the 'agrarian question of labour'.

Informal labour, as critically linked to RSP, is indeed central to accumulation. It also materially or discursively shapes labour subjectivities, which can be more or less 'revolutionary', as first argued by Frantz Fanon (1963/2001), while increasingly subject to the threat of turning into 'surplus humanity' (Davis, 2006). In concrete terms, informal labour subjectivity gives rise to very varied forms of working class consciousness and modalities of organizing, ranging from the informal trade unionism of organizations like the Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA) to social movements centred on social identity (Agarwala, 2013). These processes are context-specific and are informed by the anti-poverty programmes rolled out by post-colonial states. In fact, as argued by Kalyan Sanyal (2007), the poverty-alleviating programmes enforced by many post-colonial states worked as regimes of governmentality defusing the revolutionary potential of informal labour as a surplus population. Crudely put, they might place Marx's RSP in a perpetual stand-by mode.

If global development narratives of labour informality centred on surplus populations have analysed the exclusionary, regulatory, structural and subjective roles informal labour may play in capitalism, they have yet to fully explore its socially reproductive role in the regeneration of capitalist life. Instead, the pandemic has abruptly unveiled this role as many different forms of informal labour turned into activities essential for our survival. In the pandemic phase, labour informality hardly appeared as the outcome of a ‘needs economy’ (Sanyal, 2007; see RoyChowdhury, 2021 for a critique of this point); rather it emerged as the ‘economy *for* needs’ as it fulfilled compelling life-sustaining functions. It was left to the surplus population of informal labour to work the system when others did not or could not. It was left to the surplus population of informal labour to absorb economic shocks, regenerating life whilst subsidizing world capitalism. It revealed the inner workings of the ‘social factory’ of world capitalism, where care is always naturalized as non-bearer of value despite its centrality in co-constituting it (Federici, 2004).

Across the world economy, as care workers saw a ballooning of their responsibilities, with women recalled in their millions into the world of unpaid domestic and care work in homes (Stevano et al., 2021b), informal workers took a massive hit due to lockdown measures disrupting global and domestic labour markets and supply chains (Bremner, 2020; Kesar et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021; Tejani and Fukuda-Parr, 2021). Both types of workers guaranteed survival and socialized many of the costs of the pandemic — a process greatly gendered and racialized. In India, Bina Agarwal (2021) has documented how the work of solidarity or community economies (see Hossein and Christabell, 2022) sustained local populations’ basic needs, for instance through the setting-up of collective kitchens, as in Kerala. In Latin America, across countries including Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, México, Perú and Venezuela, informal *economías populares* internalized the tremendous costs of the pandemic (CLACSO, 2021) heightened by the neoliberal policies of national governments (Gianella et al., 2021), and embraced the collective provision of basic services to precarious urban and rural populations marginalized by state rescue packages. In various parts of Africa, similar patterns of state failure, lucidly mapped by Lyn Ossome (2020) in relation to Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and South Africa, also magnified informal workers’ vulnerability whilst amplifying their reproductive role in sustaining life during the pandemic crisis. Women food vendors, for instance, whilst hardly banking on their recognition as essential workers during COVID-19 in cities like Accra, Durban and Nakuru, continued selling food through capillary informal distribution systems (Boatang-Pobee et al., 2021). In effect, informal employment — also in countries of the global North, in its regional avatar as gig-work performed by a highly vulnerable ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2014) — covered key reproductive functions, already discussed in illustrations of essential work as a highly racialized form of pandemic ‘indispensably disposable’ employment.

Ultimately, from the point of view of the social reproduction of pandemic surplus populations, informal labour could never appear more central to *life* under capitalism, and to the resolution of capitalist crises. Read through social reproduction, the relative surplus populations inhabiting the vast world of labour informality acquire a renewed centrality in sustaining, regenerating and reproducing life in pandemic times. They perform a role extraordinarily compatible with that of domestic and/or care work in capitalism, just on a massively amplified global scale. The informal economy is emerging from this pandemic as the ‘global housework’ of capitalism, and these insights into the essential nature of its reproductive contributions should guide future debates on the possible policies needed in its support. These should include but also exceed debates on basic income, as they primarily need to start from the recognition of how the ‘informal labours of social reproduction’ (Mezzadri, 2021) set the foundations for all other forms of productive work. In fact, they should primarily centre on the struggles of informal workers everywhere, for example, in rising new networks like EAST (Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational), composed of women, migrant workers and activists and born out of the struggles for social reproduction triggered by the pandemic crisis in Eastern and Central Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on social reproduction analyses concerned with the reorganization of life, work and the generation of surplus populations, this article has proposed a reading of the COVID-19 pandemic as a compounded crisis of capitalist life and has discussed the implications for two key debates in global development studies: inequality and informal labour. First, learning from the pandemic and the social reproduction of the surplus populations it generated (which exceed those captured by analyses merely centred on accumulation) the analysis argues that debates on inequality should be re-centred on its existential nature and its embeddedness in social oppression. It also argues that labour markets should be considered as both receivers and key reproducers of inequality. Second, analysing the role informal labour played in regenerating capitalist life in the pandemic, the analysis suggests that informal labour increasingly serves as the ‘global housework’ of world capitalism. The narrative has drawn with particular emphasis on the analyses of Nancy Fraser (2017), Silvia Federici (2004) and Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018), whilst also learning from the concepts of ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe, 2003) and ‘social death’ (Patterson, 1982/2018).

In emphasizing processes of ‘life making’ at work in capitalism’s pandemic phase, this study has placed race and processes of racialization at the heart of the analysis. The pandemic has augmented the compelling case for addressing their impact and embeddedness in processes of global development (Wilson, 2012), and ‘de-centring the “white gaze” of development’

(Pailey, 2020). I argue that these processes were central, albeit in different ways across the world economy, to the generation of surplus populations which were ‘let die’ and/or experienced ‘death’ in different literal, social and political ways. Whilst racialization plays out substantially differently in the global South and the global North — and indeed within each bloc of this increasingly problematic categorization — it was still central to the ways in which different cohorts of people were exposed to becoming ‘surplus’ during the pandemic, whether through magnified exposure to infection and death, through labour, or through material or discursive exclusion from rescue. Based on the observation of the centrality of social oppression in the making of pandemic surplus populations, this analysis builds the case to re-centre the debate on inequality on its existential nature, as entangled with global histories of colonialism, patriarchy and racial capitalism, and their necropolitics. It also builds the case for setting labour — as co-constituted by racialized and gendered processes — as a key maker of our unequal world.

This analysis of the social reproduction of pandemic surplus populations also sheds further light on labour debates, specifically by exposing the reproductive function informal labour covers in world capitalism. Debates on labour informality have always grappled with theories of surplus populations more successfully than those on inequality, due to their connection to theorizations of the reserve army of labour. Yet, the emphasis has generally been on its links to accumulation, proletarianization, or on its implications for labour politics. Instead, the pandemic has seen this surplus population of expanding informal labour — deeply gendered and racialized — sustaining life and guaranteeing social reproduction, becoming ‘essential’ yet expendable: in other words, ‘indispensably disposable’. Often unpaid or poorly paid, yet sustaining the complex edifice of social reproduction during the pandemic, informal labour has played the role of ‘global housework’ in world capitalism, namely, generating value whilst being systematically devalued and depleted.

The recognition of the reproductive role that informal labour plays in capitalism can provide fruitful avenues to recalibrate policy priorities towards the ‘caring economy’ (Kaur and Rai, 2021). This agenda must include reclaiming reproductive sectors in the form of public provisions by the state and systematic campaigning in favour of informal workers in different corners of the world economy. It should also consider lobbying for essential care-work wages; not only basic income disbursements, already widely discussed, but also what feminist activists have called *self-determination income* (Morini, 2021), recognizing the economic contributions of care and reproductive work (Heintz et al., 2021). Perhaps, as hoped by Arundhati Roy (2020), the pandemic can be a ‘portal’ to a different type of vision for our planet. However, this vision can only be realized by reclaiming global narratives in ways that highlight the plight and fights of those who are more harshly hit by crises, whilst continuing to regenerate life as those crises unfold.

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