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### **Feminism, the Pandemic, and What Comes Next**

Lucía Cavallero and Verónica Gago / April 21, 2020 /

Covid-19 (<https://ctjournal.org/category/covid-19/>).

TRANSLATED BY LIZ MASON-DEESE



It is impossible to trivialize the images of pain that have been circulating for weeks. Across the planet, the virus has accelerated our comprehension of neoliberalism's deadly mechanisms, the operation of its power over bodies. We could say that there is nothing new about this. Neoliberalism has shown that it can coexist perfectly with death machines, such as those at work in refugee camps and at borders, to name the most brutal examples. But now the virus, which does not discriminate by class or passport, has shown neoliberal life to be a spectacle that we watch online, accompanied by a necropolitical body count rising in real time. There are two arguments that do not convince us: a quick death certificate for capitalism and, as a counterpoint, the insistence that the pandemic confirms capitalism's totalitarian control over life.

Building on our practice in the Argentine feminist movement, we want to ask what struggles have led to neoliberalism's current crisis of legitimacy, to identify the fields that are opened today by the crisis, and thus, to ask what is at stake in possible ways out of the crisis? We want to use the interpretative keys produced by feminism to understand the future that is being made right now. Because, can anyone imagine what this pandemic would look like without the politicization of care, without activism to recognize reproductive tasks and value the infrastructure of invisible labor, without the denunciation of public and private indebtedness, without the force of anti-extractivist struggles defending territories from being looted by corporations?

## **1. Quarantining Finance**

As the number of bodies infected by the virus rose, stock markets around the world started falling. Once again, finance shows that it depends on labor power to take hold of value. The pro-austerity governments of Europe turned a corner and directed resources to emergency social services, but in ways that reinforced nationalist or securitarian overtones. In Argentina, the emergency delayed debt renegotiations with the IMF, while the IMF itself, along with the World Bank, called for debt forgiveness for certain countries to alleviate the effects of the pandemic. However, this does not resolve the problem of public and private indebtedness. Rather, it points to the *need to expand the financial quarantine beyond the pandemic*. One week before the first case of coronavirus was reported in Argentina, feminists marched

with a banner stating “The debt is owed to us” and “We want to be alive, free, and debt free!” These slogans illustrate the diagnostic that has now become common sense: that capital exploits our precarious lives whether or not we receive a wage.

We know that one possibility at stake in this crisis at the global level is a relaunching of private debt as a way of supplementing incomes that are too low to pay rent. These debts will accumulate as payments are missed due to increases in the price of food and basic services. We know a new cycle of debt was proposed as a “solution” to revive consumption in Europe and the United States after the 2008 crisis. How can we make it so that this “way out” is not an option this time?

Responding to the specific demands of social movements, several governments have postponed payments on personal loans or mortgages, suspended evictions, and provided extraordinary incomes for the quarantine. However, the question remains: what will happen when these measures are relaxed, and above all, when they do not suffice to stop people from going into debt to make it through the crisis? A dispute over the use and amount of social spending emerges. Legitimized as extraordinary due to the health emergency, these expenditures cannot be isolated as exceptional measures, but are the beginning of an urgently necessary reorganization of the use of public funds and the reorientation of the tax structure.

We know that social subsidies or welfare payments, which seem to be mere monetary transfers, are overlaid with moral values that legitimize or delegitimize forms of life. From the cliché that assistance rewards laziness (a claim originating in the eighteenth century) to gender mandates reinforced with budget cuts, we can see what population is selected to bear the brunt of deprivation and punishment. Now, faced with the global suspension of austerity as an emergency measure, there is a dispute over how to politically determine who receives assistance and how to make sure that assistance is not only temporary.

The battle over the public is nothing other than the battle over the redistribution of wealth. The collapse is being contained by health care workers, and by grassroots popular networks and organizations that do everything from producing face masks to distributing food.

Here a conception of work is also at stake, a debate over who produces value and what forms of life deserve to be assisted, cared for, and valued. Demands for a basic income, a universal income, a care income, and what, in general, we can understand as a “feminist wage” are also inscribed in this debate. In order to be effective, these measures must be seen as inseparable from the expansion of public services.

## 2. The Domestic as a Laboratory of Capital

The decision by some governments to delay the declaration of stay-at-home measures and to mock the severity of the pandemic demonstrate diverse political scenarios. There are some leaders who, in a performance of decadent virility, wagered on a social Malthusianism with catastrophic consequences—as we have seen in the United States and Great Britain, and as is now announced for Brazil and India. Each of these responses can be understood as a particular conjunction between a neoliberalism that refuses to die and fascist forms that come to save it. There are other leaders who have cut back on safety measures for workers—as in Chile and Ecuador, or, up to a certain point, Italy. In Argentina, on the other hand, the government has taken early public health measures and economic actions to contain the effects of the pandemic, in the context of a country whose health system has been devastated by years of neoliberal policies.

On the other hand, as feminist analyses have insisted, there are different forms of quarantine, differentiated by gender, class, and race. Furthermore, not everyone can stay at home, and, for many, confinement implies sexist abuse and violence. Thus the complex implications of global and generalized health measures are revealed from below. This allows us to see how struggles for housing are interconnected with and complicated by denunciations of increases in sexist violence. The record number of complaints of abuse and femicides during the quarantine demonstrates something that we had already diagnosed: the *implosion of households*, true battlegrounds for many women, lesbians, *travestis*, and trans persons who had experimented with tactics of fleeing and now, due to the virus, spend twenty-four hours a day with their abusers. The feminist *ruidazo*, or noise-making protest, held on March 30<sup>th</sup> in Argentina gave a sound to that silent violence. Pots were banged in the alleyways of slums, on balconies, and in patios, as people invented new forms of protest to show that the quarantine is not synonymous with isolation. Because a site of real estate speculation or sexist violence cannot be a home, when this pandemic

is over a horizon will remain in the struggle for access to housing, and we will face a deeper question: where, how, and with whom do we want to live? What does it mean to produce a feminist spatiality that, while problematizing the stay at home orders proposed by governments, does more than propose the construction of shelters as the sole solution to sexist violence? Here the question is also reiterated: why is the “home” synonymous with the heterosexual nuclear family? It was, after all, in homes that twelve femicides occurred in the first ten days of the quarantine. The feminist critique of the idealization of domestic space as safe space is now visible to all.

But we want to go a step further and ask how capital will take advantage of this confinement to reconfigure forms of labor, modes of consumption, the parameters of income, and sex-gender relationships. More concretely, we want to ask: *are we facing a restructuring of class relations that takes the sphere of reproduction as its principle scene?*

Feminists have politicized domestic space for a long time. We have said that value is produced there, that the care that sustains life there is historically rendered invisible and necessary, that enclosure within four walls is a political order imposed by patriarchal hierarchies. Are we seeing *a transformation of capital that seeks to take advantage of this crisis by hyper-exploiting domestic space?* Could it be that the imperative to telework, from home schooling to the home office, is maximizing the demand for productivity from that home-factory that functions behind closed doors, seven days a week, with no limits to the working day? Who can ensure that after the health emergency ends these advances in labor flexibilization, which atomize workers and make them even more precarious, will be rolled back?

We ask again: what type of home are we talking about? Interiors with little space, saturated with family burdens, and that now must also be productive for jobs that until a few days ago were carried out in offices, factories, workshops, shops, schools, and universities. But domestic space also overflows individual homes: it is made up of neighborhood and community spaces that are super-exploited in the crisis, that invent networks with scarce resources, and that have warned of an emergency situation for some time now.

### **3. A Feminist Analysis of Labor as a Key to the Critique of Neoliberalism**

The quarantine amplifies the scene of social reproduction: that is, it renders visible the infrastructure that sustains collective life and the precarity that it produces. Who sustains the quarantine? All the care work, cleaning, and maintenance, and the work done within the health care system and in agriculture are *indispensable* infrastructure today. What are the criteria for declaring them as such? It is the fact that they express *capital's limit: what social life cannot do without in order to continue*. There is also a whole field of logistics and delivery driven by platform capitalism that, despite trusting in the metaphysics of algorithms and GPS, is sustained by specific bodies. Those bodies, primarily those of migrants, cross the deserted city to enable—with their exposure—the maintenance and refuge of others risking their lives to deliver food and provisions.

These types of labor are marked by features of feminized and precarious work. The tasks that historically were devalued, badly paid, unrecognized, or directly declared not to be work are today shown to be the only irreplaceable infrastructure. This is an inversion of recognition. Here communitarian labor plays a fundamental role: from community health clinics to trash pick-up, from soup kitchens to daycares, community labor, performed by social movements and grassroots organizations, has come to substitute for that which has been successively privatized, looted, and defunded. These tasks are so irreplaceable that in many neighborhoods it is impossible to conceptualize quarantine as confinement in individual homes, leading to the slogan “Stay in your neighborhood.” This collective infrastructure is the true fabric of interdependence, to which reproduction is delegated at the same time as it continues to be devalued. If this was already clear in the Third World, it is now immediately global.

The pedagogy of feminist movements in recent years has led to the recognition of these tasks, through international strikes and deepening analyses that reveal precarity as a specific economy of violence. Today that diagnosis is a headline around the world. From here, it is thus necessary to think about the global reorganization of labor—its recognition, wages, and hierarchies—during and after the pandemic. In other words, the pandemic can also be a trial run for another way of organizing labor. We cannot be naive about this. The relation of forces does not allow us to take any victory for granted. Neoliberalism's crisis of legitimacy will seek correctives that take the form of more fascism: more fear, the threat of the other as the enemy, and a paranoid elaboration of shared uncertainty.

#### 4. The Strike in Dispute, or Who Has the Power to “Stop”

The global emergency brake that the pandemic has activated seems to have produced the simulacrum of a “strike.” After the enormous international feminist strike in Latin America on International Women’s Day, this inversion of the strike, of everything’s being stopped at the global level, is still striking. Even so, the pandemic is still filled with calls to strike: calls made by home renters, by Amazon workers, by metal mechanics in Italy, by health care workers, and by students.

As the feminists of the 8M Coordinator in Chile have affirmed, what is necessary is a strike that stops all the tasks that are not essential to the reproduction of life. Without a doubt, the strike in times of coronavirus is up for dispute. On the one hand, as we have already stated, in this global “strike,” feminized labor—the tasks that we made visible through the feminist strike—is shown to be the only work that cannot be stopped. That is clearer than ever. On the other hand, however, we hear demands for a rent strike, to stop paying rents and mortgages, to refuse to pay for basic services or interest on debt. Rather than essential tasks, financial and real estate rents are what must stop extracting value and stop being sustained by promises of future austerity.

The battleground of capital against life is played out today in the dispute over what jobs are essential and should be remunerated accordingly. This implies a global reorganization of labor, as well as in our collective capacity to suspend the extraction of rents (in finance, real estate, or transnational agribusinesses responsible for ecological collapse) and to modify tax structures. This battleground is not abstract. It is composed of each struggle *in* the crisis, each concrete initiative. The challenge lies in connecting the demands that emerge from diverse territories and transforming them into a horizon for the future here and now.

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Supported by the Andrew W. Mellon  
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