

Covid-19: Social Reproduction and the Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic has shown many of us, with brutal clarity, just how quickly society can change, and what we can—and cannot—live without. It turns out that large parts of a capitalist economy can be essentially put on ice in times of crisis, while resources are redirected toward healthcare. Many things we were previously told were impossible—from freeing prisoners from jails to suspending rents and mortgages to simply giving everyone in the country a cash payment—are being done.

Tithi Bhattacharya has been thinking about what a society that was oriented toward human lives rather than the needs of the Almighty Market would look like for a while now. She's a professor of history and the director of global studies at Purdue University, the co-author of *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* [1] (which is currently available for free as an ebook from Verso Books [2]), on the editorial board of the new journal *Spectre*, and the editor of a recent book titled *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* [3]. We spoke about what social reproduction theory can teach us about the current moment, the demands that the left should be making right now, and how we can use these lessons to prevent climate catastrophe.

Sarah Jaffe: To start out, explain briefly what social reproduction theory is.

Tithi Bhattacharya: The best way to define social reproduction is the activities and institutions that are required for making life, maintaining life, and generationally replacing life. I call it “life-making” activities.

Life-making in the most direct sense is giving birth. But in order to maintain that life, we require a whole host of other activities, such as cleaning, feeding, cooking, washing clothes. There are physical institutional requirements: a house to live in; public transport to go to various places; public recreational facilities, parks, after-school programs. Schools and hospitals are some of the basic institutions that are necessary for the maintenance of life and life-making.

Those activities and institutions that are involved in this process of life-making we call social reproduction work and social reproduction institutions. But social reproduction is also a framework. It is a lens through which to look at the world around us and try to understand it. It allows us to locate the source of wealth in our society, which is both human life and human labor.

The capitalist framework or the capitalist lens is the opposite of life-making: it is thing-making or profit-making. Capitalism asks, “How many more things can we produce?” because things make profit. The consideration is not about the impact of those things on people, but to create an empire of things in which capitalism is the necromancer reigning supreme.

Most of these activities and most of the jobs in the social reproduction sector—like nursing, teaching, cleaning—are dominated by women workers. And because capitalism is a thing-making system, not a life-making system, these activities and these workers are severely undervalued. Social reproductive workers are the worst paid, they are the first to go, they face constant sexual harassment and often direct violence.

Jaffe: We are in a moment where we have ghouls like Glenn Beck saying that they would be happy to die if capitalism could keep functioning, making this all so clear [4].

Bhattacharya: The coronavirus crisis has been tragically clarifying in two respects. Firstly it has clarified what social reproduction feminists have been saying for a while, which is that care work and life-making work are the essential work of society. Right now when we are under lockdown, nobody is saying, “We need stockbrokers and investment bankers! Let’s keep those services open!” They are saying, “Let’s keep nurses working, cleaners working, garbage removal services open, food production ongoing.” Food, fuel, shelter, cleaning: these are the “essential services.”

The crisis has also tragically revealed how completely incapable capitalism is of dealing with a pandemic. It is oriented toward maximizing profit rather than maintaining life. [Capitalists argue] that the greatest victims in all this are not the countless lives that are being lost, but the bloody economy. The economy, it seems, is the most vulnerable little child that everyone from Trump to Boris Johnson is ready to protect with shining swords.

Meanwhile, the healthcare sector has been ravaged in the United States by privatization and austerity measures. People are saying that nurses have to make masks at home. I have always said that capitalism privatizes life and life-making, but I think we need to reword that after the pandemic: “Capitalism privatizes life, but it also socializes death.”

Jaffe: I wanted to talk more about the way that caring work and these other forms of social reproduction work are devalued. The governor of Pennsylvania had a literal list of life-sustaining businesses that were allowed to stay open [5]. Sanitation workers walked off the job because they don’t have protective equipment [6]. Our tendency to devalue this kind of work is affected by and, also, affects what we think of the people who do it.

Bhattacharya: Nursing homes and the assisted-care industry currently admit around 4 million people in the United States. Most of them are on Medicare. The *New York Times* recently reported that 380,000 patients die from infections every year in long-term care facilities that are often unwilling to invest in proper sanitation and health procedures [7]. These institutions play an important role in escalating epidemics. Let’s compound that with the fact that, in the United States, 27 million people have no medical coverage [8].

Nearly 90 percent of home healthcare workers and nurses’ aides in the United States are women [9]. More than 50 percent of them are women of color. I am not sure—nobody is—how many of them are undocumented. They are doubly vulnerable, to both job losses and ICE raids. On average, they earn around \$10 an hour, and they mostly have no paid sick time or health insurance. These are the women whose work is sustaining so many of the care facilities of our country.

I took some of the categories of jobs that are on the essential services list that Indiana and Pennsylvania have come up with, and I compared the wages of those essential services workers with CEO wages. The difference is astronomical. Workers in these services that we are now being told are essential—that as feminists and socialists we always knew to be essential—are getting less than \$10 an hour, while bankers are sitting at home.

During the crisis, we need to make demands like immediately instituting what I am calling “pandemic pay” for essential care workers. They are risking their lives. They need much higher wages. Invest in hospitals and medical services at once, try to nationalize private healthcare, like Spain has done. Provide child care and immediate financial assistance to everyone, especially workers who are having to go to work. And no immigration raids or deportations. This is something that stops people from accessing medical assistance—they fear going to a doctor, fearing that it might lead ICE to them. Ireland and Portugal have instituted laws extending all visas and abolishing undocumented immigration status. These are the models we need to follow.

Jaffe: One of the big outbreaks in Washington State came because nursing home workers had multiple jobs [10] and, therefore, brought the virus to multiple care homes. Not getting paid enough at one job is causing more spread of the virus.

Bhattacharya: The virus, in a way, is democratic. It has affected even Prince Charles. However, this should not fool us into believing that access to the cure will be as democratic as the virus. Like all other illnesses under capitalism, poverty and access to care will determine who lives and who dies.

It is going to have a devastating effect in my country, India. The fascist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has just ordered a twenty-one-day lockdown. All the cities have basically closed down for business. What happens to the migrant workers? Does Modi have a plan for them? No. Millions of migrant workers are literally walking across the country to go back to their native villages, lines of people walking through the streets all the way from the west to the east. Modi closed down all forms of public and private transport in order to stop them from going home because they may carry the contagion. Modi made sure, however, that Indians who lived outside of India—upper-middle-class Indians—were flown back home. There were special flights, exceptions were made to allow flights to land despite announced closures, and special visas were issued.

This is the way a number of capitalist governments of the Global South are going to deal with their poor. We are going to see the disease stalk the slums of Calcutta, Mumbai, Johannesburg, and so on. You are already hearing statements from our rulers that the virus is a way for the planet to recover, to get rid of the unwanted. This is a eugenicist call to socially cleanse the most vulnerable and the weak.

Jaffe: What it shows us is not that emissions go down without people—because most people are not dying. What it shows us is that the world is a lot healthier without so much work because people are doing—as you were saying—only the life-making work.

Bhattacharya: This argument that coronavirus is a reset button for the earth is an eco-fascist argument. What it should be is a reset button for social organization. If the virus passes and we go back to life as before, then this has taught us nothing.

Because it has become necessary to stay at home, we are able to find beauty and time to enjoy those whom we share our homes with. But we cannot forget that homes under capitalism, while they provide safety and security, are also theaters of incredible violence. Two days ago, I got an email from a local domestic violence shelter where I used to volunteer, asking if I would consider coming in again, because they anticipate a spike in cases.

My feminist comrades in Brazil, Sri Lanka, and India are all reporting the same: a spike in domestic abuse because of the pressure cooker of everybody staying in the house. We don't need social isolation. We need physical isolation and social solidarity. We cannot ignore the elderly neighbor who is living across my street; it may not be safe for them to go to the grocery store. We cannot ignore our coworker who comes to work with way too much makeup around their eyes and says that

they've hit their head on a door. We need to check in on them regularly.

People are doing this voluntarily despite our rulers doing the absolute minimum to actually encourage them. Teachers are driving by their students' houses, waving at them and saying, "It's going to be OK!" My school district, like many others, is providing meals to anyone under the age of eighteen. In my state, they are being home-delivered. This is not something the federal government or any politician has done. This is teachers and school districts deciding to do this themselves. There are brilliant acts of solidarity and love and care that are flowering in this tremendous crisis. These are our resources for hope.

Jaffe: I am wondering right now about housework, because we have a situation where a lot of these "essential" jobs that people are still doing are done by women. And the care work that those women are normally responsible for in the home is now being done by their suddenly less "essential" husbands. What perspective does that bring to some people's understanding of social reproduction work?

Bhattacharya: Joan C. Williams did an interesting study that shows that working-class men do more childcare than middle-class men. Middle-class men crow about it, while working-class men do not like to admit to it because it is women's work.

I wonder whether that taboo will be weakened. Women do nine hours more of housework than men on a weekly basis on average in the United States. That nine hours might change, but I wonder if the attitude will change. Will men become proud of holding the family together while their partners hold the world together?

Jaffe: One of the reasons men don't admit to this—as you said—is that it is women's work. A lot of the work is also racialized. A lot of the people who are doing this caring work are immigrant women, women of color.

Bhattacharya: In the United States it is racialized. In other parts of the world, for instance in India, it is still migrant women and the poorest and often lower caste. The most vulnerable of any society perform this work. Their wages and benefits reflect that.

Bhattacharya: In social reproduction terms, a lot of the tasks we need done in a given day are performed by women of color. We would not be able to eat food, walk on the streets, have our children and our elderly cared for, have our houses and hotels cleaned, without migrant women and black women doing this kind of work. This world-making work is completely unacknowledged by capitalism.

Jaffe: We are hearing a lot right now about this crisis being like a war. But economist James Meadway referred to it as the anti-wartime economy [11], because what we have to do is the opposite of war. We have to ramp down production. I hope that can bring an understanding that the work that is necessary and that will have to continue even in a radically different world is work that we have systematically undervalued for centuries rather than "the Troops" that we're so used to fetishizing.

Bhattacharya: I agree with James that production has to be ramped down. However, not all kinds of production. We should ramp up the production of medical supplies, food, and other essential life-making resources. In the United States—the richest country in the world—I have nurse friends going to work without the proper equipment.

But take, for example, online shopping. It is lovely to be able to order some clothes or shoes. But we have to remember that, even if a pair of shoes is already made, when you order them they have to

travel through various workplaces to reach your door. Think about the truck drivers who do this. Think about the people who keep truck stops open. Think about the people who clean those truck stops. If you are ordering essential medicines online, go for it. But that cute pair of shoes can probably wait.

We don't usually think of the invisible labor that lies behind those shoes. We don't think about the human beings in the production and supply chains who deliver those shoes to our door. But in these pandemic times, we have to think of those people and try to determine whether we should risk them coming into work and doing this for us. Is that a risk we want to impose on them? This is about looking at human labor rather than the product of human labor.

The second thing about the phrase "support our troops": I think we need to redefine troops entirely. Our healthcare workers, our food production workers, our cleaners, our garbage disposal workers: these are our troops! These are the people we should support. We should not think about troops as people who take life. We have to think about troops as people who give and sustain life.

Jaffe: We have been dealing for decades now with a refusal to change capitalism in order to fight climate change, and now we are seeing how quickly things can change, with distilleries and even Ford planning to switch over to making hand sanitizer or respirators. What lessons does this give us for the future fight against climate catastrophe?

Bhattacharya: Our fight for infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient. We have to fight for a change of attitude toward social organization. That is much harder than just fighting for social democratic gains. Already we know that a rise in global temperature is going to put our ability to produce food on a global level into crisis.

If not controlled, temperatures will rise so high that, in places like South Asia and Africa, outdoor farming will become impossible for much of the year, and livestock will die. Today in Delhi, where my family lives, during vast parts of the year schools have to remain closed because it is too hot, and in the winters they remain closed because of the smog.

The threat to food production is going to spiral into rising sexism and possibly violence for women across the globe, because it is women or women-identified people who are "responsible" for bringing food to the table and often for actually producing that food. And already there is a crisis of fresh drinking water all over the globe that is going to get worse.

In other words, unless we deal with climate change with the kind of urgency that we are dealing with the coronavirus today, then this pandemic will seem like a holiday compared to what is coming. Climate apocalypse will not be temporary, and many won't have the option to shelter in place.

We are now seeing the extraordinary measures capitalist states can take to deal with a crisis. The British government is taking care of 80 percent of wages for many workers. The U.S. government is planning to send checks to families. But if these kinds of measures and this emphasis on what is essential are withdrawn as soon as the crisis passes, then the climate apocalypse will come and there will be no way out of it.

After the COVID-19 crisis, capitalism will try to get back to business as usual. Fossil fuels will continue to be used. Our job is not to let the system forget.

P.S.

- Dissent. April 2, 2020:

https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2924-feminism-for-the-99>

[2] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2924-feminism-for-the-99>

[3] <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745399881/social-reproduction-theory/>

[4] <https://twitter.com/leninology/status/1242615552427864066>

[5] <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/03/what-are-life-sustaining-businesses-heres-gov-wolfs-list-of-whats-staying-open-and-what-has-to-close.html>

[6] <https://thehill.com/regulation/labor/489418-pittsburgh-sanitation-workers-walk-out-over-lack-of-protective-equipment>

[7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/health/coronavirus-nursing-homes.html>

[8] <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/number-americans-without-health-insurance-rises-1st-time-decade-n1052016>

[9] http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/16894/scotus_rules_against_female_workers

[10] <https://inthesetimes.com/article/22394/coronavirus-crisis-capitalism-covid-19-monster-mike-davis>

[11] <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/03/the-anti-wartime-economy>