

You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.  
Angela Davis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A quote found on one of many posters featuring Angela Davis.

Angela Davis recently said of the year 1968 (I am recalling from memory), “We thought the revolution was going to happen at any time. We really did. We were sure of it.”

This was during a plenary session, “A World on Fire: Remembering 1968 and Looking to the Future,” at the 2019 National Women’s Studies Association Conference. The other panelists, Rabab Abdulhadi, Bernardine Dohrn, Ericka Huggins, and Madonna Thunder Hawk, all smiled and nodded in agreement. Remembering where I was in 1968, I smiled and nodded as well.

I was a member of the counterculture back in those days, living in the mountains of New Mexico, cooking on a wood stove, and getting water from a well. Being a young, relatively privileged white woman, the revolution that I foresaw may have been somewhat different. We envisioned a world where the United States did not wage war on small countries like Vietnam or Cuba and where racism was but an ugly memory. We believed in a world of primitive communism, eschewing everything

“plastic” and celebrating everything that was “natural.” This revolution was something we believed in, and like the black women activists on the panel in 2019, I had been sure that it was just around the corner.

We were right that things were going to change, but we were so wrong about what that change would be. Instead of peace and love and an end to militarism and racism, what eventually

emerged was the onslaught of neoliberalism, increased militarization and racism, and a backlash against much of what the women’s movement and the civil rights movement had accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

Today we are at another conjuncture: a deadly pandemic with no end in sight has brought into sharp focus a fragile and globalized economy, a frayed or non-existent social safety net for the vast majority of people, and a deep, worldwide economic recession. This has

been accompanied by what feels like an exponential increase in violence against women and people of color all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Is now finally the time for a revolution? What sort of revolution will it be? Is revolution even the right concept? Perhaps Arundhati Roy’s (2020) description is more apt. She writes that the pandemic has opened a portal between this world and the next. It is one that we can walk through while

<sup>2</sup> This did not happen overnight; it is the conjuncture of profound changes in the world economy, including rising oil prices, the Third World debt crisis, and the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreements, which have enabled neoliberals to roll back progressive gains and gut social protections.

<sup>3</sup> This violence manifests itself in different ways depending on specific geographic locations, cultural landscapes, and political regimes. For example, in the United States it is the cruel economic exploitation, cultural oppression, and wanton murder and imprisonment of black people; in India it is in the brutal treatment of migrants, Muslims, and Dalits; in Kashmir it is the cruel repression of indigenous Kashmiris; in Israel it is in the murderous apartheid regime being imposed on Palestinians; while in Brazil it is the ecological destruction of habitats that support indigenous peoples and in neoliberal policies that choke the life out of Brazil’s poorest classes. These are only a few examples among many.

## **The Other Side of the Portal: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Social Reproduction**

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“dragging the carcasses of prejudice and hatred,” or it is one that we can walk through with little or no baggage, “ready to imagine another world.” To realize on the other side of the portal a world freed from the carcasses of prejudice and hatred requires that we put social reproduction at the center.

### Social Reproduction

As longtime readers of *Rethinking Marxism* undoubtedly know, social reproduction refers to the reproduction of people and, in addition to biological reproduction, consists of the many quotidian activities—cooking, cleaning, child-care, eldercare, and care for the community and the environment—that provide the necessary foundation for human life and labor. It is comprised of both affective and material labor and is often performed without pay. As Nancy Fraser (2016) explains, it is indispensable to society, and without it there could be no culture, no economy, and no political organization. A society that systematically undermines social reproduction cannot endure for long.

The relationship between social reproduction and production is dialectical: just as social reproduction is essential to production, production is likewise necessary for social reproduction. This is to state the obvious. It is interesting, though, that under a capitalist economic system, they stand in contradiction to one another. Fraser (2016) articulates it in this way: social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation while, at the same time, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation destabilizes the same processes of social

reproduction upon which it relies. Similarly, Tithi Bhattacharya (2020) points out that despite its dependence on social reproduction, which she calls life making, capitalists are reluctant to spend any portion of their profits on processes that sustain and maintain life. This at least partially explains why care work is devalued or unpaid and why institutions such as schools and hospitals are privatized or underfunded.

This contradiction can be historically traced in the West to the violent transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, when women were confined to the supposedly noneconomic domestic sphere and the work they did there was devalued, even though the reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and daily, was essential to capitalism. This devaluation, along with notions that women had a natural proclivity for such work, reduced wages and added to capitalist profits (Federici 2004). This also entailed a sex/gender system in which women were subordinate to men. The contradiction so described becomes crisis when capital’s drive to expanded accumulation becomes unmoored from its social bases. In these cases, the logic of production overrides that of social reproduction, which destabilizes the very processes on which capital depends. In “destroying its own conditions of possibility, capital’s accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail” (Fraser 2016, 103).

Today is one of those times.

Fraser (2016) rightly points out that this contradiction manifests in different ways depending on the historically specific form of capitalist accumulation, and thus it is resolved in differ-

ent ways. In the United States, the doctrine of *separate spheres* was the mechanism during the liberal capitalism of the nineteenth century; the *family wage* was seen as the solution during the postwar era of state-managed capitalism; while the *two-earner family* has been the answer during the present era of financialized neoliberal capitalism. While all three of these resolutions allowed capitalist accumulation to continue, they required a society stratified by class, gender, geography, and race. During the liberal era, elite white women could retain their roles as the “angel in the house” only because of the labor done by racially marked women and men in the factories and on the sugar and cotton plantations in the New World.

In the postwar era of managed capitalism, the family wage was intended to support the breadwinner/caretaker model of the family; however, in practice it applied only to the white male “aristocracy of labor.”

Most recently, the two-earner family regime in the Global North has been sustained by the recruitment of women into the labor force, the relocation of manufacturing to the low-wage regions of the world, and the disinvestment in social-welfare programs by both the state and the corporate sector. To this let me add that, as women have entered the paid labor force, they have done so on a highly unequal footing. Those who are relatively affluent are able to use some of their income to purchase the domestic services no longer produced in the home, and these services are provided mainly by poor

women from minority, working-class, or immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, the availability of relatively cheap food, clothing, and other commodities necessary to sustain this latter group of workers can be attributed in no small part to the feminized labor force working in the Global South export-production factories (Barker and Kuiper 2014).

The two-earner regime is also characterized by financialization and debt. Debt is the tool by which global financial institutions are able to pressure states to slash social spending. Adequate nutrition, education, healthcare, and infrastructure take a back seat to the interests of the

financial class. Debt is also a disciplinary mechanism that functions to maintain a relatively docile and compliant labor force (Lazzarato 2011). With the shift in manufacturing from the Global North to the Global South,

and with the subsequent replacement of unionized industrial employment with low-waged, precarious, service work, real wages have fallen and many people have relied on consumer credit to maintain their standard of living (Barker, Bergeron, and Feiner, forthcoming). Thus, when the pandemic struck, it struck a world already in crisis, a world in which the conditions necessary to maintain life had become increasingly precarious, and this precarity proved conducive to the way the crisis was subsequently handled (perhaps mishandled is a better word).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The scale of precarity ranges from the gig economy in the industrialized world to the refugee camps and internment centers on the borders of Europe and the United States. This short essay focuses on the industrialized world and on the United States in particular.

## A Different Sort of Crisis

The crisis of social reproduction that the pandemic has wrought is different from previous crises because the usual resolutions cannot work as they once did. They cannot work because stopping a highly contagious disease requires, among other things, isolating those who are contagious from the rest of the population. This is not graduate-level epidemiology; it is something that people have understood at least since the Black Death devastated Europe. But here is the rub: due to the fact that potentially contagious people may remain symptom free for up to fourteen days, the scale of isolation required has had a devastating effect on capitalist accumulation. It really does come down to a tradeoff between profits and human life. As Alessandra Mezzadri (2020) puts it, in order to stop the pandemic, we need to undermine its economic base. Capitalists are not able to socialize economic losses by shifting them onto workers, the state, or both, in the way they did in response to the 2008 financial crisis. Today, with thousands of factories shut entirely and the production of most nonessential goods and services halted in many countries, capital cannot turn this into a labor crisis. As a matter of principle, it would be better if both employers and workers would withdraw from the market and stay at home.

David Ruccio (2020) voices similar sentiments in his insightful commentary on the statistical calculation of the U.S. unemployment rate and Trump's ham-fisted defense of its apparent decrease. Why, Ruccio asks, should we be celebrating this when the pandemic is still far from over? Instead, workers should be paid to

stay home rather than being forced to choose between selling their ability to work and receiving unemployment benefits that are inadequate at best, or unavailable at worst. This is not something to be applauded.

Indeed. Although the “stay at home” message is, at the end of the day, the best solution to stopping the pandemic, it is not feasible for everyone in our currently globalized, industrialized economy. Our livelihoods and our abilities to maintain life depend on supply chains remaining open, farmers growing and harvesting our food, retail outlets offering that food for sale, factories manufacturing our medicines and medical equipment, and health-care workers providing much-needed services.

The workers involved in these activities are essential workers: they are the ones whose labor makes both production and social reproduction possible. My fear is that, rather than a solution that recognizes, valorizes, and properly rewards these workers, we are going back to a de facto forced-labor regime. Many people, especially those in the “gig” economy with already high debt burdens, are being forced to work under risky and potentially fatal conditions. People with already high levels of consumer debt and little savings (numerous studies have documented this) are left with little or no bargaining power or room to resist. Capitalism has never been known for its benevolent attitude toward the health and safety of labor. Things haven't changed.

Here I am thinking of the workers in potentially harmful situations ranging from the custodians and health-care workers in hospitals and med-

ical centers, to grocery store clerks, to Amazon warehouse workers, to migrant workers harvesting our fruits and vegetables, to those working in the meatpacking plants. What we are seeing is not extra care and extra cash remuneration for these people but rather a callous disregard for their personal health and safety. Profits trump people. Pun intended.

Caring for children is another key part of social reproduction. Who is minding the children? The old solution of commodified and outsourced care isn't working. The solution for that portion of the population fortunate enough to work from home is that parents and guardians must take up the slack, all the while holding down a full-time job. We know that this work is falling disproportionately on women, and that has its own set of problems. What the effects will be on the children from such enforced isolation is outside my area of expertise, but I suspect it won't be good. For the essential workers, however, the stay-at-home solution is not feasible. Although some childcare centers are open and some funds (largely inadequate) have been allocated by the federal government to help offset the costs to families, the solution for many is a matter of informal arrangements relying on families and friends. Childcare provisions in the United States were insufficient before the pandemic, and things are even worse now.

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Here let me reiterate that, although the privileged few are able to greatly minimize the risk of infection, they do not entirely escape its consequences. If those who are fortunate enough to be able to work from home happen to have children, they must become full-time caretakers, playmates, and teachers. Again, this is a huge burden that falls disproportionately on women's shoulders. A burden that is even heavier on single-parent households. While this conflation of paid work with reproductive work is a private problem now, it will become over time a social problem. Children need other children, and parents need a break. Neither of these are forthcoming now.

### Navigating the Portal

So where do we go from here? We know how to fight the pandemic: social isolation when possible, contact tracing, masking, and increased testing. Many countries have slowed down the pace of the virus, and New Zealand has nearly eliminated it entirely. In the United States, however, the numbers go up on a daily basis, and the stark divide between those entitled to life and those whose lives are treated as disposable remains entrenched. As has been the case in previous capitalist regimes, one part of the population is able to remain relatively safe and comfortable while another part bears the risks and hardships.

Nowhere is this put into stark relief more than



<sup>5</sup> Sadly, this phenomenon is not confined only to the United States but is also found in countries like Germany.

<sup>6</sup> It is questionable whether he actually had the authority to do so, but nonetheless, this authority is what he claimed (Hemel 2020).

in the Trump administration's executive order to reopen meatpacking plants in the Midwest. Meatpacking and meat-processing plants are among the riskiest places for COVID-19 transmission. Workers are crowded together and must communicate amid the deafening drum of industrial machinery (Bromage 2020).<sup>5</sup> When the meatpacking plants began to close in March as a result of a disturbing rise in COVID-19 cases, the result was a shortage of beef, pork, and chicken. Trump responded by issuing an executive order declaring them essential services and effectively requiring them to reopen, and the executives at the top were only too happy to comply.<sup>6</sup> They, after all, are not the ones risking their lives on the plant floors. That risk fell on the workers: poor black and brown people, migrants both documented and undocumented, and people with felony convictions with few employment opportunities. Of course, workers resist, but they have little leverage.

Consider, for example, the House of Raeford chicken-processing plant in South Carolina, one of the Southern states where the number of COVID-19 cases is surging. It is also a state that is home to a large number of meatpacking and meat-processing plants, especially chicken and turkey, important anchors of the state's farm economy. On 7 May it was reported that twelve workers from the House of Raeford plant had been fired after protesting for better pay and working conditions. Mind you, they did not walk off the job; they simply marched on the sidewalk outside the factory carrying placards and signs. In the words of one worker (quoted in Bland 2020), "Our health conditions are not adequate ... There's no spacing. It's not sanitary and

we're overworked and underpaid." The company's only response was to say that they had not been promised hazard pay. At that point in time, there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19. The company did, however, issue face masks and plexiglass barriers, and it encouraged workers to social distance "when possible"—something that is impossible when working on the line. Later, on 1 June, it was reported that, despite the measures taken, cases of COVID-19 were beginning to be discovered among these workers (Fretwell 2020).

According to Sarah Rich of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the only effective solution is to keep workers on the line further apart, which will slow down the line and decrease the number of chickens processed (Fretwell 2020). Thus far, this has not been done. Nor has the possibility even been entertained. Even more troubling was the governor's only comment on the situation, which was to say that the House of Raeford was a fine corporate citizen and doing all that it could do. No, governor, they are not doing all that they can do. Far from it. Now, let me mention here, that this plant is not located in a rural, less densely populated part of the state; quite the contrary, it is two miles from the state capitol building, which is adjacent to the University of South Carolina and three miles from my house. At the time that I am writing this (it may change of course), the University is planning on opening for the fall semester and plans to welcome around 30,000 students back in mid-August.<sup>7</sup> The lives of the workers at the House of Raeford plant are not radically separate from the lives of these students, nor from the rest of us living in this area. When they become infected, we poten-

<sup>7</sup> This is an estimate. In the latest reported data, the campus had a total enrollment of 35,364 students, including graduate and professional students. President Robert Caslen has publicly stated that he expects total enrollments to be down anywhere from 10 to 15 percent in the fall 2020 semester ("South Carolina at a Glance" 2020).

tially become infected as well. As I said above, it's not Ph.D.-level epidemiology.

For me this sums up in a nutshell the importance of replacing “me” thinking with “us” thinking. We know that the old blood-soaked and well-trodden neoliberal approach will lead to an exponential increase in death and suffering. This is a story as old as capitalism. Forcing people to go back to work under clearly perilous conditions without *genuinely* adequate protection will only spread the contagion, leading to *more* shutdowns. This is generally presented as a choice between fighting the pandemic and opening the economy. It is a false dichotomy. The economy cannot reopen without adequate measures to control the pandemic. The health of people and the health of the economy are not separate.

### Conclusion: From Me to Us; From the Few to the Many

On a political level, sometimes, things feel overwhelming. But on a personal level, it's simple. Wear the damn mask, and practice social distancing. Our health and well-being depend on the health and well-being of others. Sadly, despite the surge in cases, both social and print media (and not only that from the American South) are filled with narratives of individual choice, constitutional liberties, and completely unscientific and ill-informed speculations on the medical dangers of masks. It has been well established that when I wear a mask, it protects

you. When you wear a mask, it protects me. It is a simple matter of reciprocity and the recognition that we do not exist as isolated individuals but rather as interdependent members of a social collective. Why are the principles of reciprocity and mutual care, which are the basis of other social formations, seemingly so absent in the globalized postindustrial society of the United States? What can we do to center those principles here and now?

Wanda Vrasti (2015), writing in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, suggested that we were witnessing a failure of imagination. That is, a

failure to imagine an alternative to the widespread belief that, despite evidence to the contrary, capitalist market relations are the best, the most rational, way of organizing society. However, people today are questioning that belief and are eager for alterna-

tives. Vrasti argues that, in order to combat the isolation and fractures imposed by capitalism and to create sustainable cultures of resistance, it is necessary to put social reproduction at the center, realizing that social reproduction and production are not radically separate. I would also add that such a culture must necessarily be antiracist and pro-environmental as well.<sup>8</sup> The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and its offshoot, Black Lives Matter, is an excellent example. In describing themselves, the M4BL states that they center the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized black people, including those who are trans, queer, women, femmes,

<sup>8</sup> Internationally, we know that there are communities today in which the principles of neoliberalism are neither hegemonic nor ascendant. The Zapatistas in Mexico and movements around Buen Vivir in Latin America and Eco-Ubuntu in South Africa are just three examples. They have in common a desire to decolonize their communities and organize economies not around the quest for capitalist accumulation but around the need for adequate provisioning and an equitable distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity (Barker, Bergeron, and Feiner, forthcoming).

the currently and formerly incarcerated, immigrants, disabled, working class, and poor. One of their goals is the creation of a multiracial coalition that will “develop a collective strategy and shared practice” that, in addition to including the voices of the above, will include “climate justice, feminist, anti-war/anti-imperialist, and economic justice forces” (Movement for Black Lives 2020).

Today, our task as activists, artists, and intellectuals must be to envision, and thus participate in, the creation of a world on the other side of the portal, a world that is antiracist, antisexist, and pro-environmentalist. Moreover, interventions at this conjuncture must not only adequately account for the structural and intersecting aspects of capitalism, racism, and sexism but must also reach out to people on an affective level as well. This requires the work not only of scholars, policy makers, and activists but also of artists of all stripes and persuasions. And most of all, it requires that those who are privileged by virtue of our skin color, education, and other markers of social capital actually make the effort to listen and valorize the voices of people on the margins. It is only in this way that we can hope to realize the vision articulated by Tithi Bhattacharya (2020): “That life and life-making become the basis of social organization, to the flourishing of the many rather than the prosperity of the few.”

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