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Continuity, not change: The unequal catastrophe
of the Covid-19 pandemic:

Introduction to edited volume “Covid, Crisis,
Care and Change?”

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Continuity, not change: The unequal catastrophe of the Covid-19 pandemic: Introduction to edited volume “Covid, Crisis, Care and Change?”

Antonia Kupfer and Constanze Stutz

The global outbreak of the novel Sars-CoV-2 virus in 2020 pushed a highly contagious disease between people and the world. Social contacts became threatening and possibly infectious. After some hesitation, states all over the world reacted with similar measures of social distancing, lockdowns of their citizens at home and shutdowns of the service sector. As a man-made rather than a natural catastrophe, whose origins are closely connected to capitalist extractivist expansion, the Covid-19 pandemic reached every corner of the world (Wallace 2021). Eva Illouz wrote about the first months of the crisis: “Being locked in during the Corona crisis was not only associated with the loss of the public world, but also with the loss of the world itself” (Illouz 2020, translation C.S.).

While social-economic crises are a significant characteristic of democratic capitalism (see e.g. Streeck 2014), this one felt different as it exposed many people’s fundamental vulnerabilities. Additionally, the impacts hit close to home as the crisis directly affected the everyday world of the middle classes in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere. Consequently, for democratic-capitalistic societies of the Global North, the routine externalization of the devastating effects of global capitalistic expansion – i.e. the concentration or shifting of these effects *out of sight*, particularly among poor and racialized groups, and *elsewhere*, especially in the Global South – was not as easy to manage as it had been for decades. Daily routines changed for almost everyone at the same time, and yet not at the same scale. Globally and along the lines of gender, age, ‘race’ and ability, the omnipresent metaphor of Covid-19 as a magnifying glass for pre-existing social inequalities was often used to critically expose whose vulnerability counts and whose does not. Following this, social scientists pointed to the already cognitively known, but seldom affectively recognized, fact that democratic-capitalistic societies differentiate between worthy and worthless lives (e.g. Lessenich 2020a).

Tying in with scientific findings regarding how social, political and economic structures shape our everyday world, in the summer of 2020 we started working on the call for a conference entitled “Covid, Crisis, Care and Change?” which would focus on scientific findings regarding peoples’ power and ability to resist, shape and create the structures that form their everyday worlds (e.g. Bourdieu 1972). Thus, despite all ambivalences, we believed that there lay a potential for fundamental social change through the Covid-19 crisis.

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We saw evidence for this in widespread public discussions of the vast and unmistakable social inequality present across the globe, which took place to an extent unthinkable a couple of months earlier. The crisis-ridden times opened up leeway for reflection by intellectuals (e.g. Rosa 2020) on how society should be set up and how we could rebuild a more sustainable world; though none of these reflections in fact went beyond the ancient traditions of *Buen Vivir* and others. Left-wing thinkers loudly discussed the Covid-19 pandemic as a “window of opportunity for a new solidarity” (Institut für Gesellschaftsanalyse 2020: 11).

These hopes for change, for a fundamental societal shift, were partially grounded in the shared perception that the all-powerful TINA – *there is no alternative* – doctrine of neoliberal governance had crumbled, while simultaneously the importance of key professions and jobs in the health and food sectors became apparent even beyond feminist analysis (e.g. Dörre 2020a). In addition, the fundamental dependence on structures supporting the reproduction of society, in particular childcare, to set free the (female) workforce could no longer be neglected or taken for granted by elected officials. A new consciousness regarding the importance of reproduction, and our dependency on one another as well as on essential and key (or in German-speaking countries, system-relevant) occupations for the maintenance of life (see Grenz/Günster in this volume) brought about hopes for an increase not only in the recognition and value given to these occupations, but also in their remuneration (Institut für Gesellschaftsanalyse 2020).

Even the transnational feminist strike movement followed the narrative of crisis as a chance in their broadly received *Transnational Feminist Manifesto to Emerge from the Pandemic Together and Change the System*, wherein they stated:

“We call on everyone who rejects the patriarchal, exploitative, colonial, and racist violence to mobilize and join together to enrich and strengthen the global feminist struggle, because if we unite we can not only emerge from the pandemic, but we can change everything” (Transnational Feminists 2020).

In such feminist approaches, hopes for a fundamental societal shift and a long-term social transformation were tied into traditional material feminist knowledge by pointing to how the pandemic dynamic is revealing the fundamental contradiction between profit-making and life-making that lies at the core of capitalism (Marxist Feminist Collective 2020). Once tangible, a window of opportunity could emerge to transform the capitalist relation between production and reproduction, which subordinates people’s lives to the accumulation of profit. As feminist scholars and activists placed their hopes in emerging social struggles and strikes about social reproduction for life-making in contrast to profit-making (Arruzza 2020), they renewed a historically well-known link between crisis and (hopes for) social change.

1 Theoretical perspective: Gramsci's distinction between organic and conjunctural crises

To examine times of crisis and social change through social and cultural analysis, it is necessary to qualify the crisis at hand and with that the chances for change. In fact, the question of how to define social change altogether is a founding and fundamental sociological issue (e.g. Popitz 2010 [1957/58]) and has been addressed by classic theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Parsons on a more macro-sociological level, and by Simmel, Mead and Homans on a more micro-sociological level. While targeting different levels of society and starting from different conceptions of human beings and epistemes (for an overview, see Strasser/Randall 1979), at the core of the question of social change is the tension between the two mutually constituting and yet distinct phenomena of continuity and dynamism.

For our purpose of examining the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we have selected Antonio Gramsci's (1971 [1932-34]) focus on crisis as a motor of change. Gramsci's concept serves our purpose, because the level of society he was targeting corresponds with the level of the current Covid-19 pandemic.¹ According to Randall and Strasser (1979: 227, translation A.K.):

“most types of sociological theories of social change traditionally aimed to grasp the reasons for large-scale social upheaval [gesellschaftliche Umwälzungen] and to describe the most important processes of transformation. In recent decades (...), social scientists receded from “grand theories” and targeted the description of singular processes in which change manifested at small and large scales.”

This change of emphasis went along with a stronger inclusion of the effects of societal conditions on groups and individuals, and additionally a stronger focus on the contribution of individuals to the initiation of change (see *ibid.*) – a description we assign Gramsci's concept to. Further criteria for selecting Gramsci's approach are that we share his conception of human beings as not determined by economic structures, and his general episteme of finding ways to fight fascism and proceed towards a society with common ownership. In recent research, Gramsci's concept has, for instance, been applied to interpret the significance of the 2007/8 financial crisis (e.g. Scherrer 2011).

Gramsci distinguished between crises of different scales. He argued that conjunctural crises can be processed and controlled through minor adjustments in the exercise of power, and can be analysed by criticizing policy in detail, on a daily basis, linked to small groups of leaders and the immediate people in power. Organic crises, on the other hand, are profound upheavals. They require

1 Dörre (2020) also utilizes Gramsci's concept, without saying so explicitly, by qualifying the Covid-19 pandemic as an organic change.

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“societal-historical critique” addressing large groups beyond the immediate responsible and leading personnel (see Gramsci 1996: 1556). In organic crises, the social connection between the means of production and way of life,² of the economy and politics itself, also falls into crisis: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci 1971: 276).

Following Gramsci,

“The mistake many commit in political-historical analyses consists in missing the correct relation between the organic and the conjunctural: as a result, either one depicts causes as acting directly, which are actually acting indirectly, or one asserts that the direct causes are the only acting causes; in the one case, there is an excess of “economism” or doctrinaire pedantry, in the other, an excess of “ideologism”; in the one case, the mechanical causes are overestimated, in the other the “voluntaristic” and individual element is emphasized” (Gramsci 1996 [1932-34]: 1557, translation A.K.).

Gramsci indicates that the distinction between organic and conjunctural motions needs to be applied to different types of situations if analyses of power relations are to take place. On top of this, Gramsci conceptualizes organic and conjunctural crises not as distinct categories, but dialectically. Though as he admits, “To determine precisely the dialectic between the two types of movement and thus of the research is difficult” (ibid.). In our analysis, we argue mainly that the abundance of recent and current changes are not powerful enough to be qualified as indirect causes, and thus cannot lead to an organic change. Our arguments are backed with empirical data to the extent that it is already available.

The solution to an organic crisis depends on whether a renewal of leadership can succeed in modernizing capitalism as a whole, or whether forces are formed for an emancipatory transformation (Becker et al. 2013). While it seemed at first as if the pandemic could bring about an organic crisis, the in-depth analysis presented in the chapters collected in this edited volume shows that democratic-capitalist industrialized countries have (so far) succeeded in dealing with the crisis with known means. However, some crises take decades to unfold, and we are currently unable to know how long the Covid-19 pandemic will endure. Additionally, a definition of its length would require and include clear measures and the establishment of criteria – themselves subject to societal analysis and thus dispute. Therefore, with this collection of chapters

2 A phenomenon that was discussed in the years shortly before the emergence of Covid-19, through reference to Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* published in 1944 (see e.g. the 2019 regional congress of the German Sociological Association).

and our own analysis, we offer a preliminary contribution to the ongoing multifaceted and global discussion on the societal significance of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the following, we will examine and develop our argument first for the area of production and labour, then with a focus on the health sector, characterized as it is by largely low-paid care work, followed by an analysis of the area of reproduction and unpaid care work. In all three parts, we place a special focus on state regulations through the lens of Gramsci's categories of organic and conjunctural crises. Though we begin with a global perspective, we will then mainly make our arguments with reference to Germany, due to the accessibility of sources – though several of our observations are also true for other countries.

2 No organic change in the area of production, service and labour

State regulations in the area of production, service and labour could be sorted into those that restrict capitalist market mechanisms on the one hand and those that support such mechanisms on the other. During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we can observe both at the same time, at the national and international level. Restrictive state regulations that shut down production operations and halted various services evoked hopes for change, as outlined above. While writing this introduction, a global corporate tax of a maximum of 15% was issued by the G20 (OECD 2021). Since the G20's formation in 1999 as a response to several economic crises, the 19 alternating governments of the wealthiest nations in the world, plus the EU, have never before ruled for such a strong restriction to capitalist market mechanisms. While the ruling evoked strong critique of being far too small to trigger an organic change, we might nevertheless observe indirect effects in the future that could induce some change. As a snapshot in time, we detect slight change in the power relations between the national and the corporate level on a global scale.

Across Europe, the closure of national borders in response to the pandemic, which impeded the commute of carers, harvest hands, contractors, craftsmen and workmen from Eastern European countries to work in private households and care homes, in agriculture, the meat industry and in construction, resulted in the (temporary) shutdown of many exploitative businesses in Western European countries. But already the second area of state restrictions, those consisting of shutdowns of mainly small enterprises and public organizations and institutions in the leisure and service sector, such as restaurants, cafés, pubs, shops, hairdressers, nail care and massage studios, theatres, cinemas and sports

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grounds, as well as public administration services such as the administration offices for citizens, was regarded with ambivalence: physical distancing was necessary to keep infections low, but was ineffective as long as people travelled in packed buses and underground trains to and from workplaces in shop floors, open-plan offices, and storehouses etc., which remained in operation. This distinction made clear that the state's priority was to keep businesses running while putting people's needs for leisure, culture and socializing last. Later on in the unfolding pandemic, as infection numbers maintained high levels, a juridical act in Germany (SARS-COV-2 Arbeitsschutzverordnung) mandating working from home wherever possible was issued for a limited time; at the time of writing this text, it has currently been prolonged. Mandatory home office was and still is fought by many employers, even though it saves costs for office rents, among other benefits. Many employees without care responsibilities for others enjoy working at home, while others simply survive by doing so, balancing working and taking care of their children or sick and elderly relatives at the same time.

We now turn to the second type of state regulation that we introduced above: regulations *supporting* production, services and labour. Worldwide, large sums of tax money and future debt have passed through legislation. For example, in spring 2021, the Biden administration passed the "American Rescue Plan" consisting of US\$350 billion in emergency funding, of which parts are for economic relief and are directed to the assistance of small businesses. After weeks of discussion, the EU passed the €750 billion "NextGenerationEU" program, a seven-year instrument for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic (EU 2021). China had already started before the pandemic to systematically support its public and private economy with significant investment programs (such as its global infrastructure "Belt and Road Initiative" adopted in 2013, aimed at enlarging China's income, influence and recognition worldwide). For many countries, creating their own supply chains is one of the central aims – an important lesson learned from the pandemic. In Germany, large sums of money in the form of subventions have gone to large corporations both outside (e.g. €9 billion to the German airline Lufthansa) and within the health sector.

Another area of state financial support is the public money going into the development of vaccines. The pharmaceutical industry is an area where states' interrelation with and dependency on companies becomes highly visible. Gov-

ernments have spent large amounts of public funds on the development of vaccines.³ Private companies were the main recipients of public research and development (R&D) investments.⁴ The US was the first country to carry out the government purchase of Covid-19 vaccines, realized in the second quarter of 2020, while the EU started in the third quarter of 2020 and realized more in the fourth quarter of the year through multilateral purchases (EU 2021).

After several developed vaccines were approved extraordinarily quickly, both the Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines experienced delays in delivery. Although it had been agreed upon and paid for in advance that vaccine production companies would start production before receiving clearance from the European Medicines Agency (EMA), they did not. A fierce discussion involving accusations and responsibilities erupted, accompanied by the opacity⁵ of contracts between governments, multilateral organizations and private companies. Governments' dependency on companies became obvious, and in the public media the image of slow and foolish politicians prevailed over images of unable and/or profit-greedy companies, with the European Commission president apologizing for having been too confident about receiving the ordered vaccines.⁶

Furthermore, no concerted efforts were made to ensure that the vaccines would be affordable and accessible the world over. During a World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in January 2020, the EU, UK and US denied the request of less wealthy countries to release the patents on the vaccines, at least temporarily. Instead, we are witnessing a rise in "vaccine nationalism" (Rutschman 2021: 183). In May 2021, China, Russia and the US declared their support for patent waivers, though the European Commission and the UK are still holding back (Nature 2021).

Turning from the global economy to employment figures, we observe that "Globally and across all regions and country income groups, women have been affected by employment loss to a greater extent than men" (ILO 2021: 9). In 2020, the global employment loss for women was 5% and for men 3.9% (ibid.); this greater burden of job loss among women is despite the fact that the overall rate of male employment exceeds the overall rate of female employment. In

3 According to the Global Health Centre (2021), the US is on top, having spent US\$2,289 million in 2020, followed by Germany with US\$1,507 million, the United Kingdom with US\$500 million and the EU with US\$327 million.

4 Janssen (owned by Johnson & Johnson) received US\$1,028 million in public funding, followed by Moderna with US\$955 million, BioNTech/Pfizer with US\$800 million, and CureVac with US\$726 million.

5 Although AstraZeneca agreed at the end of January 2021 to publish its contract with the European Commission, large parts have been blacked out.

6 A lawsuit initiated by the European Commission against AstraZeneca was finally settled in September 2021, with a stricter formulation regarding vaccine delivery commitments as well as a regulation on rebates in case of delays; though it is yet to be seen whether this will lead to any significant change.

contrast to previous economic recessions, the European Parliament has used the term “*she*-cession” to grasp the enormous economic impact of the pandemic on women, because

“the governmental measures to halt the pandemic have had the most indirect impact on the economic sectors in which women tend to be overrepresented – i.e. gastronomy, hospitality, retail, care, domestic work” (European Parliament 2021: 10).

“Indirect impact” here refers to lockdowns in these areas to prevent the spread of the virus. While this policy measure is comprehensible, it is important to note its gendered impact.

In light of the documented gender inequality in employment – the gender pay gap was at 18% in Germany in 2020 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021a) – the often-praised German short-time work allowances require closer examination. Without doubt, this Keynesian measure saved millions of employees from redundancy. It was especially effective as it kicked in as soon as a minimum of 10 per cent of a company’s workforce were affected by the lack of work (Bundesregierung 2020). The largest share of short-time work allowances was thus handed out to the catering and hotel industry. Instead of collecting negative working hours first, the short-time work allowances can be received immediately. Contract workers are also eligible for these short-time work allowances. The employers’ share of social insurance contributions through short-time work allowances are fully reimbursed by the Federal Employment Agency, and thus redistributed to the taxpayer. Short-time work allowances are, however, only paid to companies that employ employees with social security, thus so-called “mini-jobbers”, who can only earn up to €450 per month (and are thus exempt from tax and social security contributions), are excluded. In 2019, 61% of mini-jobbers were women (WSI 2021).

The ease with which the government coalition of conservatives and social democrats dismissed its prior policy of austerity to prevent further debt evoked hopes for policy change. According to Dräger (2021), state debts could remain low in times of economic growth given that interest rates remained relatively low; at the time of writing, interest rates are even negative, so that Germany may benefit from its debts. Large-scale state financial support in pandemic times is also being targeted with more urgency to induce and participate in economic green growth to promote a reduction in CO₂ emissions (Krebs 2021). However, some federal German states are already starting to cut their budgets and activists demanding “system change not climate change” accuse government policies of green washing.

In sum, it is comprehensible that in pandemic times, personal services such as haircutting, nail care and massage studios, as well as cafés, restaurants and pubs, will be shut down, as these are locations where people come into direct

physical contact or get quite close to each other. Theatres, music venues, cinemas and museums were closed in order to decrease the locations of contact in general. But governments refrained from lockdowns of large corporations and companies in the production sector, despite these being locations of contact. Volkswagen, one of the major corporations in Germany's car industry, sent its employees on short-time work allowance for only about a couple of months (March to June 2020) during the first wave of the pandemic in Europe. Significantly, this was due to interruptions in the supply chain, mainly concerning microchips from China, and *not* in order to prevent infections. During the course of the pandemic, a couple of further periods of short-time work allowances at Volkswagen followed, but only for a few days, and again because of interruptions in supply chains. The decrease in delivered cars in 2020 was 15.2% compared to 2019 (Volkswagen 2021). At the end of 2020, however, an increase in car buying due to the reduction of value added tax as an incentive for consumption took place.

Volkswagen is just one example of many and serves to illustrate that there have been almost no state regulations restricting production and labour in industrial sectors in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and protect employees. Corporations suffered only from a lack of demand, and interruptions in production and supply chains, but not from any governmental restrictions, thus no organic change could be detected. In Italy and the US, at least some workers resisted by refusing to show up for work due to the risks of catching the virus (Arruza 2020), though there were no strikes of significance in Germany.⁷

By keeping the majority of companies open during the pandemic, the German government demonstrated its priority of keeping the economy running, while accepting the risk of infections at workplaces (see also Plomien/Scheele/Sproll in this volume). Only in cases where infections were obviously spread in large numbers at workplaces, such as in the meat industry, were companies shut down for a short time, and mainly migrant workers from Eastern Europe were forced to quarantine in extremely sordid and crowded flats (Friedrichsen 2020; Wagner 2020). This policy could be qualified in terms of a continuity of worker exploitation – and thus classified as conjunctural crisis management.

In the face of the third Covid-19 wave in Germany, about a year after the initial outbreak of the virus, a discussion took place about whether to close all companies that are not essential for survival for about three weeks in order to break the wave and get infections down to a manageable number. A campaign known as “ZeroCovid”, which began in December 2020 in the UK, was spread

7 In Germany, only a few protests have been expressed against this policy: a few workers from Amazon, one of the corporations that has benefitted most from the pandemic, went on strike after large numbers of workers tested positive for Covid-19 (CNBC 2020). These were small and short-lasting strikes, however, which did not lead to any change.

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to other countries in Europe by medical scientists, campaigners, trade unionists, political figures, academics and writers, and several organizations like the Feminist Strike Collective (Feministisches Streikkollektiv) Frankfurt am Main and the Federal Association of Green-Alternative University Groups (Bundesverband grün-alternativer Hochschulgruppen), who signed a petition demanding that the German government pay people to take a break in order to get the number of infections down. The campaign included the demand for a solidarity contribution paid by those with high assets and income, high-earning companies and levied on financial transactions, to cover the costs for those with no income. However, supporters of the ZeroCovid strategy were unsuccessful in convincing the government to take such action.

3 Conjunctural crisis management in the care economy

The care economy belongs to the service sector. However, since its function is arguably of greater importance than other services – in terms of providing care for people who are unable to sell their labour – we briefly examine this special area of the economy in a separate section before going on to the area of reproduction.

According to Philipp Ther (2014), neoliberalism has been the determining economic ideology in democratic-capitalistic countries for the last 40 years. As a consequence, the health care sector in Germany has been largely privatized and currently functions following the logic of profit (Dittmar/Glassner 2017). In order to reduce costs, cuts in staff are common. Until 2003, hospitals in Germany received funding according to the number of days patients stayed, independent of their needs and treatments. Since 2003, payment changed to cover the costs of treatments. Categorization in diagnosis-related groups (DRGs) occurs following the classification of the illness, the severity of the disease and the performed services (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit 2021). Since 2020, care staff is paid extra, independent of the DRG. As a consequence, patients stay for a shorter time in hospital, sometimes leaving before they have fully recovered. And while intensive care beds increased by 36% during 1991-2018, other hospital beds decreased by 25% during this period (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021b).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the health care sector became the most visible of the essential sectors (see Hintermayr in this volume). According to numbers published by the European Parliament, “76% of all health care and social care workers are women and 86% of personal care workers in health services

are women” (2021: 12). This means that women “have been systematically exposed to the virus and have dealt with an overall higher risk of contagion” (ibid.) compared to men. At the same time, the health care economy is a sector with traditionally low wages.

A major concern of government policies regarding Covid-19 pandemic management has been to ensure that hospitals do not become over-crowded and that there are sufficient beds in intensive care units for Covid-19 patients. Apart from aiming to be able to take care of Covid-19 patients, government policies have been consistently oriented towards avoiding chaos and upheaval (with its risk of inducing organic change) and averting being forced to turn down patients and practice triage. Taking into account the available number of intensive care beds is still a fixed reference in government politics, and can clearly be categorized as a measure to fix a conjunctural crisis, following the terminology of Gramsci.

Since 19th July 2021, UK prime minister Boris Johnson declared an end to all measures aimed at restricting infections, with the exception of wearing masks on the London Underground. While writing this introduction in the same month, the UK is facing shortages of staff in essential economies such as supermarkets due to millions having to stay in quarantine. It remains to be seen whether this Social Darwinian policy of ‘survival of the fittest’ will come to a halt when hospitals and elderly care centres are deserted of staff. For the time being, it appears part of Johnson’s explicit policy to call on his fellow citizens to reconcile themselves with more Covid-19 deaths. While Segato (2021) asserts that a denial of death is an outcome of the last decade’s neoliberal policies, we specifically accuse Johnson of calculating and causing deaths. In Germany, Wolfgang Schäuble, the presiding officer of the German parliament, announced in spring 2020 that the protection of life is not always the priority, initiating a fierce debate. In Brazil (see Plomien/Scheele/Sproll in this volume), people protested repeatedly against their government’s policy of rhetorically denying – and thereby increasing – the deadly risks of Covid-19.

4 Managing the conjunctural crisis in the area of reproduction and unpaid care work

IPSOS conducted an 18-country poll from 1st to 3rd May 2020 in consultation with UN Women, “which reveals that women are, indeed, taking on a lot more responsibility for household chores and care of children and family during the pandemic” (UN Women 2020). To our knowledge, in dealing with the pandemic, there is no state that did *not* take advantage of the resource of family when it comes to (child)care. Rather, it was taken for granted that parents

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would continue to work, even in times of closed childcare centres and schools. How to manage this became a problem at the family level.⁸ As a result of this position taken by the state, the general, already-existing contradiction between the organization of production and reproduction in capitalist-patriarchal societies was brought starkly to the surface. Across the 18 countries analysed in the UN Women study, women were 4% more likely than men to strongly agree that their care load had increased during the pandemic. Given that “previous research revealed that women tend to underestimate the time and energy they allocate to caring for others, while men are inclined to overestimations” (ibid.), this 4% is quite significant.

Without mainly women carrying out unpaid care and reproductive work, such capitalist-patriarchal societies would look very different, since the gendered division of labour is structurally woven into social organization. Following Kohlrausch and Zucco (2020), 54% of women and 12% of men in Germany indicated that they had taken over most of the childcare since the onset of the pandemic.⁹ This represents a continuation of the unequal distribution of childcare that already existed before the pandemic. The authors argue, however, that even a *retraditionalization*¹⁰ of the division of work between men and women could be observed, as only 60% of the sampled couples who had shared childcare equally before the Covid-19 pandemic were still practicing equal childcare arrangements during the pandemic. This share dropped to 48% among couples with a household income of less than 2000 Euros.

In November 2020, when data was collected again, 66% of the interviewed women with a child or children and in partnerships stated that they had taken on the greatest share of childcare (Hans Böckler Stiftung 2020). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that an increase in childcare responsibilities leads to a reduction of paid labour activities. Panel data from February to April 2020 from the US Current Population Survey revealed that mothers with young children had reduced their work hours four to five times more than fathers (Collins et al. 2020). In Germany, 27.1% of interviewed women had reduced their paid labour time, while this was 16.3% for the interviewed men (Hans Böckler

8 At an ad hoc group discussion we facilitated on 24th August 2021, Sylvia Walby reflected on China’s practice of offering publicly provided locations for quarantine for people with Covid-19, instead of sending them home to their family and friends. By distinguishing between individuals and households, family and household members were protected and infected individuals were cared for. This is in contrast to the policies of many countries, including Germany, where infected people were sent home, which often led to work and (child)care conflicts – in particular for women/mothers, who bear the greatest share of domestic care responsibilities.

9 Data was collected in April 2020 among 7,677 people in paid work via computer-based online interviews. The sample was built with quota following age, gender, federal state and education.

10 Dölling (2003) criticizes the use of the term *retraditionalization* as it conveys the illusion that there have been times in which childcare and household work have been divided equally among mothers and fathers.

Stiftung 2020). This unequal share is mainly a consequence of unequal wages among men and women, in which women earn less than men and couples decide that the partner with less income should reduce their working hours in order to maintain a higher overall household income.

Other studies also indicate that a larger share of women took on childcare responsibilities during the pandemic compared to men. For example, a study from the University of Mannheim which collected data on a daily basis found that in the first week of lockdown in March 2020, 49% of women took on care responsibilities alone compared to 26.5% of men (Möhring et al. 2020). In the second week, women's share increased to 52% and men's went down to 24%. In a study conducted by researchers at the German Institute of Economy (Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaft, DIW), reproductive work is differentiated into childcare and household labour. Compared to 2019, during May to July 2020 the share of household labour that was done almost exclusively by women increased by 8% and for childcare by 16% (Jessen et al. 2021).

In a persistent patriarchy (see Walby 1989; Cyba 2010), as one could describe German society, these numbers might not be surprising; they are in line with the dominant gendered division of labour. On the other hand, since more women than men are employed in essential jobs (Zoch et al. 2021) that cannot be abandoned, even in pandemic times, this could have been an opportunity for a larger share of men to take over childcare responsibilities. But it would appear that men are unwilling to take care of their children to a significant extent, and the German government is not increasing wages in essential jobs to cover family living costs. Thus, we can observe that the conjunctural crisis in unpaid reproductive and caring work (Dücker 2018) is, even under pandemic conditions, still largely managed as an additional workload by women.

As Gundula Ludwig argues in this anthology, the state deploys gendered care politics successfully as a political strategy of crisis management. Similar research findings were presented at a conference we held on 19th March 2021 by Eman Nahhas and Khwala Zoabi on female Arab students in Israel.¹¹ Strikingly, a year after the start of the pandemic in Germany, hundreds of jobs had been categorized as *essential* (see Grenz/Günster in this volume); a sign of how the government prioritizes maintaining as close to a normal economy as possible, over the reduction of infection numbers.

11 See: <https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/phil/iso/mak/covidcrisiscarechange> (accessed 11.10.2021).

5 Conclusion

Despite initial appearances and hopes, democratic-capitalist industrialized countries and their patriarchal structures have not been gravely undermined by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there are changes happening, probably the largest in the ways in which state regulations in the Global North have in a few areas – mainly in the production and paid work sector – departed somewhat from a purely neoliberal agenda and have taken a slight shift in a more Keynesian direction (as Walby 2020 argues), influencing markets and capitalism to a certain, albeit small, degree. Following Gramsci’s distinction between crises of different ranges, we argue that while global social inequalities have increased and deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic, democratic-capitalist industrialized countries have (so far) succeeded in dealing with the crisis through established modes of regulation: individual responsibility for social reproduction and the deployment of gendered care politics as a political strategy for crisis management (Lessenich 2020a; Ludwig in this volume).

As modified state regulations were able to stabilize the connection between the way of production and living, the Covid-19 crisis does not seem to condense into what Gramsci described as an organic crisis. However, even as a conjunctural crisis for democratic-capitalist industrialized countries, the Covid-19 pandemic is embedded in the crisis dynamics of the last decade, which could be grasped with Arruza’s (2014) term *living totality of social relations*, among which not only are gender, class, ‘race’, sexual orientation, citizenship and religion important, but also societal relations to nature (Kupfer forthcoming, following Carolyn Merchant). Or it could be framed as an *economic-ecological pincer crisis* (Dörre 2020, following Rosa Luxemburg), and as such can only be analysed globally.

Global social inequalities, as we have shown above, have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. After the virus had spread around the globe and sparked initial hopes for systemic change, it soon became clear that people already facing hardships, such as those living in overcrowded and/or shanty housing and working informal jobs, were much more affected than those living in large flats and houses with a secure income. Already-difficult living conditions thus became even harder (Al-Ali 2020). And while the economies of already-wealthy nations in the Global North have begun to recover steadily¹² and

12 In its April 2021 prognosis, the IMF states that “adaption to pandemic life has enabled the global economy to do well despite subdued overall mobility, leading to a stronger-than-anticipated rebound, on average, across regions” (IMF 2021: xiii). State fiscal support to help boost domestic economic recovery in the US and the EU is also contributing to this positive economic outlook. The IMF projects a growth of 6% in 2021 and 4.4% in 2022 (IMF 2021). China had already returned to its pre-Covid-19 GDP in 2020. Nevertheless, according to Gopinath, Director of Research at the IMF, growth will take place mainly in wealthy countries.

concerns raised at the beginning of the pandemic have partly vanished, there are currently more people suffering from lack of nutrition worldwide than before the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the organizational level, economic recovery in the Global North is taking place mainly in large companies operating in the gig economy, such as Google and Amazon (Karen Weise 2021). The pandemic requirement of social distancing and the avoidance of physical contact served their business model perfectly. Looking ahead, their mode of production and its contribution to the flexibilization of work is likely to spread and will eventually push out small and middle-sized companies. Other corporations outside the IT sector have also benefited in recent times, such as Mercedes Benz, which profited from a boom in combustor sales from China. And while migrant workers in the meat industry did gain slightly better working conditions through the prohibition of contract to produce a work (Werkvertrag), other precarious workers such as food deliverers are facing increased competition and pressure.

In the care economy in Germany, especially the health care sector, no major increase in public funding or staffing has yet taken place. This is even more incomprehensible given several warnings that pandemics similar to Covid-19 are likely to increase in the future due to destruction of the natural environment (McNeely 2021).¹³

At the individual level, we can see exhaustion, individualization and reduced possibilities for politicization. Stephan Lessenich (2013) argues that through the entrenching of individual responsibility as part of neoliberal governance, crisis management in times of Covid-19 has simply worked within the well-known boundaries, while the structural causes of the crisis have been neglected. Decades of neoliberal policies have led to an internalization of the norms of self-entrepreneurship (Voß/Pongratz 1989), whereby employees and workers pursue the achievement of performance standards without demanding adequate working conditions (Menz 2021). Data on sick leave show that numbers actually decreased during the pandemic (AOK BV 2020), which is in part due to people working while sick in home office (Zeit Online 2020).

In summer 2021, while writing this introduction, in many wealthy countries there is an abundance of vaccine supplies, while the majority of countries in the world are still being denied significant access. In wealthy nations, citizens are being offered incentives to take part in vaccination programs, as the overall vaccination rates remain relatively low despite widespread availability. Fur-

13 In 2021, however, the German cabinet of conservatives and social democrats did pass a budget of several million Euros for research into how hospitals and other care institutions can, in the following years, deal more efficiently and effectively with probable future pandemics, aiming at adjustments to, instead of the avoidance of, future catastrophes – a pattern that one can also observe in the way in which the German government is dealing with incidents related to climate change.

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thermore, studies on vaccination hesitancy have detected several social inequalities along the intersections of gender, ‘race’, formal educational degree and partisan preference regarding confidence, complacency and circumsppection (for the US, see Liu/Miao Li 2021; for a study looking at eight countries, see Stojanovic et al. 2021).

For real change to be achieved, collective effort is needed. Yet this is impeded by the specificity of the pandemic response mandating the avoidance of social contact. Instead, the desire to get back to ‘normality’ and life as it was before the pandemic seems to prevail and matches public policies. As we look back to the initial feminist hopes for fundamental societal change and long-term social transformation, through the stark revelation of the key contradiction between profit-making and life-making at the core of capitalism, *a possible progressive outcome of these crisis dynamics* will largely depend on political and social struggle and whether social forces are formed for an emancipatory transformation. Politicizing the structural causes of the Covid-19 pandemic, and their mediation with ecological and economic crises of the present day, seems to be a possible compass through the interregnum, where “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci 1971: 276). Not least due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial to take stock again of *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) from a global feminist perspective.

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