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Continuity, not Change: The unequal Catastrophe of the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Introduction

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. 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 (1991) 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.

‘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 1991: 354).

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: 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 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.

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).

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 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. Governments 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

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.