

COVID-19: Interrogating the capitalist organization of the economy and society through the pandemic

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Abstract

This editorial introduces eight papers included in this special issue on COVID-19. Together, these papers draw key theoretical and political insights for critical organization studies from the pandemic along three main lines. First, they examine how COVID-19 has denaturalized global capitalism, leading to a broad interrogation of the organization of the economy and our societies. Second, they point to how COVID-19 has unveiled the close relation between capital and the state in producing inequalities old and new, a relation that neoliberalism tends to hide from view. Third, they leverage COVID-19 to give voice to the largely female disposable workforce in the Global South on whose work global commodity flows, consumption and capital accumulation rest. We conclude by pointing to the need to address constitutive interdependencies, such as those between wage work and reproductive work, the global North and the global South, the market and the state, to name only a few. We further call for expanding traditional understandings of struggle to include a broader range of social antagonisms (e.g. for sufficient time to care, education, healthcare, housing, safe public spaces, accessible to all) as part of a theoretically and politically renewed organizational research agenda fostering solidarity.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, social reproduction, racial capitalism, global value chains, state policy, disaster capitalism, necropolitics, two-tier citizenship, disposable workers

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As we write, there is a shared sense that the COVID-19 pandemic might be behind us. The virus that ravaged the planet killing millions, sickening tens of millions and upending social and economic activity for all humanity, might be settling for more contagious yet less lethal variants, transforming into an “endemic.” It has even left the news worldwide, eclipsed by the Russian military aggression of the Ukraine. Over the past 2 years, our morale has taken multiple, divergent, and swinging directions ranging from incredulity to anxiety, terror, anger, impotence, depression, and exhaustion, but also connection, compassion, trust, hope, and at times even pride, to name only a few. These states have found expression in multiple fora, from informal (virtual) conversations to social media postings, opinion letters to newspapers, petitions, and street protests. They have also informed, more or less explicitly, a large number of publications in scientific journals across the full range of academic disciplines.

As editors, we faced early on the dilemma of whether to curate a conversation on COVID-19 within *Organization* and, if so, which format would be most meaningful for our community. Not participating in the broad discussion was never really an option, as from early on the pandemic had visibly deepened several existing fractures within and across our globalized societies and produced new ones. Ignoring these unequal effects on how we organize the economy and society as a whole would have been a betrayal of our core commitment to critical scholarship. However, we felt uncomfortable about soliciting manuscripts amidst a crisis of this magnitude. Although pain and outrage are at the very core of the scholarship we stand for, good and relevant social science is more than pain and outrage. Crafting it is a slow process that allows us to articulate what we experience into a narrative and an argument, in conversation with others. This process takes time. Especially in certain phases of the pandemic, many academics had less time as authors, reviewers, and editors. They were—and we with them—caring for themselves and others under exceptionally harsh pandemic conditions. More than ever, they were engaging in life-making, as the rest of our societies.

We ultimately decided for a dual editorial approach. On the one hand, we simply channeled the manuscripts on COVID-19 that had been submitted to *Organization* to this special issue. On the other hand, we ourselves reached out to authors with expertise on topics of organizational and political relevance that could shed light on the pandemic and its (organizational) effects and invited them to submit their work. In keeping with the journal’s spirit, in identifying them, we purposely ventured beyond organization studies, to bring other dimensions of the pandemic prominent in other social sciences into the debate. With respect for our editorial tradition, all manuscripts went through the peer-review process, allowing for the time and the conversation that we believe are essential to our academic work. This *reculer-pour-mieux-sauter* approach, taking a step back to jump farther, has resulted in this collection of eight articles that we are very proud to introduce.

Together, the contributions included here speak to three important types of relations that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore with unprecedented force. First, the pandemic has interrogated the relation between the capitalist organization of the economy and the organization of society for the reproduction of life, problematizing it for a broad audience. The stark contrast between death and misery on the one hand and grotesque levels of profit for big capital on the other hand have contributed to denaturalizing capitalism as the most desirable way to organize societies across the globe for all. Second, the pandemic has made more clearly visible what decennia of neoliberal discourse and policies have hidden: the close relation between capital and the state. The crisis revealed how state institutions are at once essential for firms and markets to keep functioning and, conversely, themselves highly dependent on these latter to operate. An emphasis on this relation sheds new light on how state policies ensuring capital accumulation reproduce inequalities. Third, disrupting the flow of global commodities, the pandemic has revealed the relation of mutual dependence between global capital and female (informal, homebased) workers in the Global South.

Capital relies on these workers to produce commodities destined for global circulation, while the workers are highly dependent on their wage work, which renders them particularly exploitable and disposable.

In what follows, we introduce the papers clustered along these three relations. We then draw some implications for how the insights from these papers inform the critical organization studies research agenda. In particular, we reflect on how their accounts of the multiple forms of resistance, micro-politics, and solidarity that emerged during the pandemic reflect the expansion of the terrain of struggles necessary to envision a post-capitalist future after COVID-19.

The not-so-happy marriage between capitalism and society in the time of COVID-19

The first three papers in this special issue deal with the changing modalities of capital accumulation under global neoliberal capitalism, which stands in a relation of constitutive contradiction with life. This contradiction became particularly visible during COVID-19. While the world was losing jobs and lives, the global stock market was outperforming itself: between March 20 2020 and January 1 2022, the S&P 500 went up 100%. Markets produced incalculable rewards for those at the top rung of the ladder, with Elon Musk's net worth now greater than the GDP of Greece, and if Jeff Bezos were a country, he would be the 50th richest nation in the world. These illustrations indicate that whatever economic pain further accrued on account of the pandemic, it was pushed down to the lower rungs of the non-investing class and to the state finances. The pandemic has particularly boosted the profits of the pharmaceutical industry producing the vaccines to mitigate the spread and severity of hospitalizations and deaths. These drugs have proved to be a bonanza for their manufacturers: in 2021, mRNA vaccines earned more revenue than any previous product in pharmaceutical history. It is estimated that in 2022, they will reap revenues in excess of \$53 billion for their manufacturers (Nolen, 2021). Needless to say, companies that make these vaccines have refused to license their manufacturing technology to any organization in the Global South, preferring to retain a proprietary lock on their products even if this choice leads to death and suffering (see Paiva and Miguel, this issue).

In this sense, "COVID capitalism" (Dale and Bhattacharya, 2020) appears as the last iteration of what has been theorized as disaster capitalism, or a capitalism thriving on the appropriation of surplus value from catastrophes (Klein, 2007). It is not solely that profit-making is prioritized over life-making, but also that public policies which might attempt to prevent catastrophes or reduce their negative effects are proactively undermined because the occurrence of catastrophes sustains capital accumulation (see Bourgeron, this issue). The private sector's capitalization on the pandemic has been widely facilitated by policies combining Keynesian-style responses (e.g., unemployment benefits, capital injections in specific sectors) with measures to ensure the continuation of economic activities and the global circulation of commodities, despite the health risks for workers in production and logistic chains (Benders and Ulceluse, this issue; Mezzadri, this issue; Zanoni, 2021).

In the first contribution, "Social Reproduction and Pandemic Neoliberalism: Planetary crises and the reorganization of life, work and death," Alessandra Mezzadri relies on a social reproduction lens to theorize the pandemic as a planetary crisis of capitalist life. She reconstructs three distinct theories of social reproduction to then analyze, through them, how the pandemic triggered the reorganization of life, work, and death. The first is Social Reproduction Theory (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2017; Fraser, 2014), inspired by Vogel's (1983/2013) "feminist exploration of the reproductive architecture and governance of capitalism" (Mezzadri, 2022: 379–400). This perspective is grounded in Marx's analysis of capitalism, yet puts the social

reproduction of labor rather than the production of commodities front and center. The emphasis is on how the erosion of the welfare state under neoliberal capitalism leads to crises of both social reproduction and production, which has both become fully apparent under the pandemic. The second approach is the Early Social Reproduction Analyses of feminist scholars and activists such as Dalla Costa and James (1972) and Federici (2004). Originating in the 1970s debates on domestic labor largely carried out by women, this perspective contests the arbitrary distinction between productive and non-productive labor. It argues that socially reproductive labor produces surplus value for capital and, accordingly, that exploitation includes wageless activities and subjects carrying them out. The value of socially reproductive work has become particularly visible during the pandemic, notably in debates surrounding so-called “essential” work on which life (and thus labor) rests. Finally, the third perspective is what Mezzadri calls Race Social Reproduction approaches, which relate social reproduction to capitalist processes of racialization, othering and dying (e.g. Bhattacharyya, 2018; Mbembe, 2003; Patterson, 1982). This last type of approaches points to how capitalism produces disposable, racialized “surplus subjects” who can be left to die, as the pandemic has shown, as also argued by other contributions (Alamgir, Alamgir and Alamgir, this issue; Jagannathan and Rai, this issue; Zulfiqar, this issue). Combining these three perspectives on social reproduction, this paper counters readings of the pandemic as a crisis of neoliberalism. On the contrary, it is argued that the pandemic further deepens neoliberal logics: it shows the contradictions inherent in capitalism and how such contradictions play out in ways that entrench inequalities not only along class, but also gender, race, and geography. The paper ends with a call for a post-pandemic progressive politics grounded in a care and embracing a politics of liberation that rejects slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism.

In the second paper, “‘Let the virus spread’: A doctrine of pandemic management for the libertarian-authoritarian capital accumulation regime,” Théo Bourgeron unveils the contradicting interests of disaster capitalists and society. He builds on Poulantzas’s (2001 [1978]) theory of the state, as further developed by Jessop (2015), to analyze the initial response to COVID-19 of the right-wing UK government. This latter initially let the virus spread among the population and delayed the enforcement of strong social distancing measures such as a lockdown. Bourgeron highlights how this pandemic management doctrine originated in a changing UK capitalist class, in which some are able to make enormous profit out of the crisis while others lose. He traces the ideological grounds of this doctrine and relates it to the rise of libertarian think tanks in British conservative circles as well as historical shifts in the composition of committees in charge of policy on pandemic preparedness. In particular, the paper points to the crucial role of including more behavioral scientists favorable to laissez-faire policies. Bourgeron argues that this early pandemic response is a manifestation of the current transition from the neoliberal accumulation regime toward a new libertarian-authoritarian one which reflects the economic and political interests of an emerging group of “disaster capitalists.” The COVID-19 crisis is convincingly deployed as a prism reflecting the reconfiguration of the capitalist accumulation regime into one that articulates a new doctrine of catastrophe management, radical right-wing ideologies, libertarian-authoritarian institutions, and the rising power of capitalist actors able to profit from extreme events.

The third paper, “Overcoming Enduring Inequalities in Global Value Chains? Interpreting the case of Brazil’s Covid-19 vaccine supply through a chess metaphor,” shows the structural inadequacies and inequality of organizing life-saving drugs development, production, and distribution through Global Value Chains. Drawing on the case of the COVID-19 vaccine supply chain, Ely Paiva and Priscilla L. S. Miguel show how vaccines remain highly unequally distributed between the Global North and the Global South due to the concentration of the high-added value pharmaceutical activities of drug development and production in countries in the Global North as well as these latter’s nationalistic policies. The authors use the metaphor of pawns moving in a chess game

to advance two possible scenarios. In the first, pawns remain less important compared to other, more “qualified” pieces. They are easily captured and often “offered” to the adversary to preserve other pieces as part of the general strategy. Analogously, in this scenario regional suppliers from low- and middle-income Global South countries remain unimportant actors in the global vaccine supply chain, leaving inequalities intact. In the second scenario, these suppliers upgrade their activities in the vaccine supply chain, similar to when a pawn reaches the opponent’s end of the chessboard and is promoted to become one of the most powerful pieces. Paiva and Miguel argue that this occurs when public policies in Global South countries foster industrial infrastructure, system reforms, and technological standardization, increasing suppliers’ relative power within the Global Value Chain and leading a more polycentric supply chain configuration. The persisting concentration of the governance of Global Value Chains in the Global North, it is claimed, will not only exacerbate current inequalities, but also likely increase worldwide health, economic, and social vulnerabilities for all.

State policies exacerbating inequalities under COVID-19

A second key dimension addressed by the contributions concerns the various responses of the state to the pandemic and their unequal effects on different segments of the population and workers more specifically. While the pandemic manifests itself in the first place as a crisis of public health, it is not difficult to see it as part of capitalism’s boom-and-bust crises, which inexorably exacerbate the gap between “that which is socially necessary and that which is economically viable” (Madden, 2020: 677). Highly dependent on the functioning of firms and markets to themselves function, state institutions in many cases enforced policies that, to sustain economic activity, increased fractures and inequalities across a wide range of sectors and groups (see Bapuji et al., 2020). The “war on COVID” has widely become a tool to enforce risky conditions and enact violent repression onto some, while others have been granted spaces of bio-economic privilege. The management of the pandemic has been deployed to legitimize a host of policies that would have been vigorously contested in other times. The three papers hereunder all reflect this, as they focus on how various national states’ responses to the Covid-19 crisis have exacerbated inequalities between different groups of citizens and within the labor force.

In their paper “The necropolitics of neoliberal state response to the Covid-19 pandemic in India,” Srinath Jagannathan and Rajnish Rai depart from the observation of the deaths of migrant workers during the pandemic to outline necropolitics “as a form of state action in response to the pandemic” (2022: 426–448). Mbembe’s (2003) notion of necropolitics refers to “the threat of violent death as a technique of governance where politics takes on the contours of war” (Jagannathan and Rai, 2022: 426–448). The authors rely on the case of India to show how “the consolidation of neoliberal policies occurs through the intersection of racialized biopolitics, marketization, withdrawal of the state from welfare provisions, and police repressions” (Jagannathan and Rai, 2022: 426–448). The pandemic has shown the abysmal state of public health institutions in India, as people experienced an erosion of dignity in both life and death. The harsh and sudden lockdown rendered workers jobless, hungry, exhausted, and on the borders of death. Instead of protecting them, the state embarked on a neoliberal agenda of deregulation, which weakened job security and collective bargaining legislation. To deflect attention from its own responsibility in the lack of healthcare and social security for vulnerable segments of the population, the state furthermore launched a violent discourse of Hindu nationalism to blame Muslims for the spread of the pandemic. The neoliberal policy response of the Indian state during the pandemic was embedded in the necropolitics of protecting the middle class and elite lives, while directing structural violence against the working class and Muslims, making their lives disposable.

The next paper, “Two-tier EU citizenship: Disposable Eastern European workers during the COVID-19 pandemic,” documents the key role of the state—in this case many European states—in ensuring the conditions for the capitalist economy to persist despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic. Felix Benders and Magdalena Ulceluse investigate the differential treatment of Eastern European migrant workers during the pandemic by European Union countries. Despite the closure of national borders, these workers were brought into European countries to keep many economic activities running. Transportation, housing, and working conditions were organized without respecting the protective measures imposed by the pandemic, like distancing. The authors argue that such treatment reveals the existence of a two-tier European Union citizenship that is in contradiction with the political discourse of equality within Europe. This two-tier citizenship system historically originates in the implementation of transitional arrangements for up to 7 years following the Eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007, which restricted the access of Eastern European citizens to the labor markets and welfare systems of the incumbent member states (Dyson and Sepos, 2010). These arrangements created differential rights between European Union citizens, *de facto* undermining the right to free movement for some. Moreover, prejudicious practices cause these workers to experience exploitation, abuses, de-skilling, exclusion from public services and from the use of social rights. Benders and Ulceluse show that this two-tier citizenship system reflects the unequal power relations between EU Member States and the political, economic, and social hierarchy inside the European Union that predates its formation (see Hall, 1986), and how it renders Eastern European workers disposable workers.

Aisha Gill and Anitha Sundari’s paper “Domestic violence during the pandemic: ‘By and for’ frontline practitioners’ mediation of practice and policies to support racially minoritised women” delves into the implementation of state policy to protect individuals in situations of heightened risk during the pandemic. Their analysis examines the experiences of frontline female practitioners from domestic violence and abuse services for racially minoritised women in England and Wales facing the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Their findings offer key insights into the specific ways in which the pandemic and the policies implemented to contain it (such as the lockdowns) exacerbated the intersectional vulnerabilities of minoritised women, who experienced domestic violence and abuse. Through a standpoint feminist lens (Collins, 1997), they further explore how these practitioners—who are from the same racially minoritised communities as the women they support—from their specific position, adapted their professional practice of support to overcome the limitations imposed on them. These frontline practitioners used their bureaucratic discretion both to meet minoritised women’s changed needs during the pandemic to enhance their safety and to challenge the exclusions and intersectional inequalities underpinning pandemic policies. Gill and Sundari’s analysis emphasizes how the discretion exercised by these street-level bureaucrats needs to be understood not solely in relation to the functional constraints of their working conditions, but also in relation to their membership in social groups and communities defined along race and social class, which informs both their distinct ways of knowing and being (Allen, 2017) and their behaviors interacting with citizens (Raaphorst and Groeneveld, 2019). Importantly, the study also illuminates the agency of street-level bureaucrats who, from their position, advocated and lobbied within the state apparatus to change policies to reduce their unequal effects on different groups of citizens.

COVID-19 and women workers’ expendable lives in the Global South

The last two papers of this special issue focus on the precarious lives of women workers at the very end of global production networks in the Global South. Contemporary global capitalism ensures

capital valorization by increasingly compressing space and time. This process fundamentally shapes the relations that constitute us in work and society more broadly (Harvey, 1990). The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down and disrupted the global circulation of commodities, partially to date, making the mutual dependence between the Global North and the Global South highly visible, as well as the vulnerability of those global flows necessary to sustain consumption world-wide (Cowen, 2014; Danyluk, 2018). These two germane contributions suggest that, while the dependence is mutual, the vulnerability is highly unequally distributed. Women workers in the Global South are integrated in global capitalism by virtue of their expendability, a form of “adverse incorporation” (Coe and Yeung, 2015). The deregulation of their bodies allows for their superior exploitation, an essential condition for them to partake in the global economy. The informality of their work, carried out in their homes, positions them at the outer margins of the periphery of the economy, where they can be left to starve and die.

The paper by Fahreen Alamgir, Fariba Alamgir, and Faria Irina Alamgir “Live or be left to die? Deregulated bodies and the global production network: Expendable workers of the Bangladeshi apparel industry in the time of COVID” draws upon the experience of mainly women workers in the Bangladeshi apparel industry. They authors draw on the work of transnational Marxist feminist scholars (Ghosh, 2012; Sen, 2008) on how women workers emerged as a destitute category of workers, and how their work was shaped based on deprivation and discrimination during industrial capitalism, as part of the international division of labor in the postcolonial states. They further integrate their perspective with Brennan’s (2003) work on deregulated bodies to highlight how neoliberal regimes contribute to the formation of the gendered global production networks in the Global South. In particular, the paper poses the question whether deregulated bodies are the fundamental condition of work in global production networks. By documenting workers’ lived experiences, their findings reveal that, unlike those of other human beings, these workers’ bodies do not need to be regulated by norms that enable protection from COVID-19. For these workers, work implies earning for living and survival: “live or be left to die” becomes the fundamental employment condition, and the possibility of death not considered. Despite the existence of legislation, this remains reality. As scholars, the authors maintain, we bear a responsibility to self-reflexively consider how we engage in research on the implications of such organizational practices in a globalized economy.

The special issue concludes with Ghazal Zulfqar’s contribution with the title “The Gendered Geographies of Dispossession and Social Reproduction: Homeworkers in the Global South During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” This article documents how Pakistan’s informally employed women homeworkers, who labor at the bottom of global production networks, fared during the first year of the pandemic. Zulfqar suggests that COVID-19 exposed global capitalism’s fault lines and the deep vulnerabilities built into its functioning. Embedded in an unpredictable transnational environment, with intense competitive pressures and high levels of financial risk, global production networks produce spatial hierarchies through the creation of “zones of accumulation” and, conversely, “spaces of dispossession” (Trauger and Fluri, 2021; see also Coe and Yeung, 2015). The stronger actors upstream in these networks, mainly located in the Global North, continuously pressure weaker actors downstream, suppliers mainly located in the Global South, to drop their prices to maintain their own competitiveness. This translates in a structural informalization and feminization of labor that renders workers highly precarious (Ghosh, 2012). Global production networks’ disruption under the pandemic wiped out the limited livelihoods of women homeworkers. This jeopardized not only their own social reproduction but also of their households, devastating entire communities. Despite the extremely precarious conditions they found themselves in, workers were agents of their own lives, in that they engaged in new everyday practices of inter-individual and collective solidarity in the community and extended family. The struggles and solidarities should

be viewed as a form of labor agency to ensure social reproduction against the economic and socio-political conditions of dispossession that come out of laboring in the Global South as informal workers. They show how as social relations of production and social reproduction are structurally related, labor agency can occur outside the sphere of production (Carswell and De Neve, 2013).

For a critical performative organizational scholarship in the post-pandemic

These contributions can obviously in no way cover all the multifarious ways in which the COVID-19 has affected life. What they however do is provide glimpses into the contradictions and fractures defining the neoliberal capitalist organization of the global economy and society, and which have become more clearly visible to a larger public because of the pandemic. In particular, they offer new insight into key relations that constitute us unequally, exposing some to more risks and making some lives more disposable than others. Such relations mediate the social, constituting subjects and institutions in specific ways. For instance, they constitute the state in relation to the citizens it regulates differently and, by so doing, also constitute citizenship unequally. They constitute supplier firms in relation to other, more powerful actors within global supply chains. They constitute wage workers as expendable in their relation to global capital and consumers. They constitute those who carry out socially reproductive work in relation to the “productive” wage work they are not involved in.

Taken together, these relations speak to critical organization studies by advancing an understanding of power and organization that reaches out beyond capitalist workplaces and the relation between managers and workers. It directs critical organizational inquiry toward queering the naturalized boundaries between work and the reproductive sphere, the state and the market, the state and racialized citizens, and various countries and geographical formations such as the Global North and South. Conceptually, this leads to expanding traditional understanding of struggle to include a variety of social antagonisms (e.g. for sufficient time to care, education, healthcare, housing, safe public spaces, accessible to all, etc.) as part of a broader, theoretically and politically renewed organizational research agenda.

Whereas some have interpreted COVID-19 as a crisis of the neoliberal economic and societal model, which will trigger the transition to post-capitalism, the articles included here refrain from such optimistic determinism. At the same time, they emphasize and document the capacity of various actors to enact every-day forms of agency, to build collective solidarity (Zulfiqar, this issue) and to engage in struggles for policy change (Gill and Sundari, this issue), identify scenarios reversing macro-level structural power inequalities (Paiva and Miguel, this issue), and formulate a call for post-pandemic progressive politics (Mezzadri, this issue). The ability to act differently and envision alternatives were not erased under the extreme pandemic conditions but, on the contrary, flourished. Taken together, these contributions invite critical organization studies to pay renewed attention to the continued acts of resistance and micro-politics, which not even the most extreme forms of exploitation, oppression, and domination under a pandemic completely erase.

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