



Crisis, Social Reproduction, and the Capitalist State: Notes on an Uncertain Conjuncture

Rafael Khachaturian

1 PANDEMIC AS SOCIAL CRISIS

Even though it did not lead to social collapse—as seemed quite possible for a short time in the spring of 2020—for the better part of two years the coronavirus pandemic threw a major wrench into the reproduction of capitalism across its social, political, economic, and ecological dimensions. Among its most pronounced effects has been how forcefully it reasserted the relationship between social reproduction, social protection, and the state. By exposing the ethical and emotional challenges of practising triage in underfunded, unprepared, and overwhelmed medical systems across the world, the pandemic revealed the degree to which public services and provisions of basic necessities are affected by the constraints of capitalist social relations. It made visible to all the vulnerability of elderly, immunocompromised, and marginalized populations—harms often concealed by social relations under twenty-first-century capitalism. And not least of all, it laid bare the ideological character of the questionable distinction

R. Khachaturian (✉)
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA
e-mail: rafkhach@sas.upenn.edu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2023

R. Hunter et al. (eds.), *Marxism and the Capitalist State*,
Political Philosophy and Public Purpose,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36167-8_4

between ‘essential’ and ‘nonessential’ work and labour, which masks the more foundational capitalist division of labour and the resulting class struggles.

The onset of the pandemic catalysed new attempts to theorize this unprecedented crisis *in medias res*. Ben Tarnoff (2020) pointed to the shock waves that it immediately sent through both the formal and informal economy and the sphere of social reproduction, as well as to the new ‘sites of social power’ and upsurges of ‘proletarian self-activity’ soon generated in response. Zachary Levenson (2020) identified it as a moment of an organic crisis, composed of interconnected economic, political, social-reproductive, racial, and ideological crises, which together were causing the deterioration of social stability and exposing cracks in the hegemonic order. Taking an even broader perspective, Salar Mohandesi (2020) characterized that conjuncture as comprised of four interlocking, ‘nested’ crises, with each one again operating on their own level and on a distinct temporality. For Mohandesi, these articulated moments of crisis were: first, the coronavirus, representing a particular, conjunctural crisis that unexpectedly disrupted normal patterns of life; second, a deeper organic crisis of neoliberalism, marking the ‘breakdown of the entire hegemonic system itself’; third, a yet even deeper structural crisis of capitalist social reproduction, in which the ‘normal’ precarity of life under capitalism was further compounded by the slashing of wages, layoffs and closures, and the withdrawal of public means of social care; and finally, the fourth, epochal crisis: the climate catastrophe, threatening planetary life altogether.

The fusion of these various crises in 2020–2021 made it publicly evident that the capitalist state was either incapable or, or uninterested in, caring for its citizens. The peak of the coronavirus exposed the state’s general inability to adequately protect the population—and, for a moment, to ensure the conditions of social reproduction necessary for the accumulation of capital. Today, with the development of effective vaccines and available information suggesting lower infection rates than before, we are no longer in the nadir of the pandemic. However, with most governments prematurely ending mitigations under the combined pressure from both organized capitalist interests and public desire for a return to ‘normalcy’, the coronavirus continues to circulate globally. It is likely well on its way to becoming an endemic disease, liable to produce new mutations that continue to threaten the most vulnerable and to strain existing medical infrastructure. What is more, apart from the measures taken by

governments in coordination with private actors to enable the rapid development of vaccines, the uneven prophylactic response to the coronavirus crisis has exposed the many pathologies, fault lines, and contradictions internal to the state, understood as the political form corresponding to contemporary capitalism. In other words, practically no one would argue that the root causes of the many social contradictions that it brought to the forefront in 2020 have been fundamentally resolved. However, it is just as important to emphasize that among the reasons they have gone unresolved is the capitalist state itself.

This chapter's goal is to help theorize how the unfolding of the pandemic, understood as a new conjunctural crisis, has affected and exacerbated the capitalist state's role. I contend that the state (crucially, a *capitalist* state, not a state *embedded in* capitalism) is largely faltering in its responsibilities for social reproduction and ideological-popular legitimation, even as its role in capital accumulation continues unabated. Contra suggestions that we are witnessing a reassertion of state power *against* the power of capital, the pandemic has actually further exacerbated the inherent contradictions of the decades-long 'authoritarian neoliberal' hegemonic project that spanned from the late 1970s to the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent Great Recession. What we now witness is the state's *inability* to convincingly reconcile the competing priorities of capital accumulation, social reproduction, and ideological-popular legitimation. In other words, what we have seen since 2020 is the deepening of a pre-existing crisis and a reaffirmation of, rather than departure from, the capitalist character of the state, expressed here by a crisis of its role in the field of social reproduction.

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I examine a representative recent account that makes both an empirical and normative case for a post-pandemic neo-statist turn, seeing the pandemic as catalysing a social demand to marshal the capacities and resources of the state in order to stabilize the conditions of social reproduction. In contrast to these projections, I then provide a general outline of the purpose and function of the capitalist state, as that entity responsible for capital accumulation, social reproduction, and popular legitimation. I suggest that instead of introducing a new form of state power or inaugurating a new relationship between the state and capital, the post-2020 period has been characterized by the further erosion of both the state's socially reproductive functions, and as a corollary, of its popular legitimation. Turning then to the example of the United States, I argue that the pandemic has revealed

how the social order maintained by the neoliberal state is now in a condition of what can best be described as perpetual crisis, as state managers find themselves tasked with the responsibilities of facilitating capital accumulation but increasingly lack both a comprehensive ideology and the political capacities to do so. After proceeding in this manner from the abstract to the concrete, I conclude with some reflections on why, despite these eroding capacities, the present crisis has not led to an imminent collapse of the system but to the period of readjustment and protracted stasis that we are still experiencing today.

2 THE STATE AS SOCIAL PROTECTION?

Among the most prominent questions raised by the pandemic is the responsibility of the state, in its self-representation as a public power, to care for its population in the midst of a novel social crisis. Given the sheer magnitude of the pandemic, this crisis of social reproduction, and the other interlinking crises mentioned above, have renewed calls for the state to play a more active, mitigating role. The most common form of these social democratic and neo-Polanyian arguments is to diagnose the disruptive effects of decades of neoliberal adherence to globalization and free markets, and in response, to posit the state as a means for social protection against the harmful ‘disembedding’ effects of the market.

In his recent book *The Great Recoil: Politics After Populism and Pandemic*, Paolo Gerbaudo has argued that, while the events of the past decade had already been trending in this direction, the pandemic has turned the post-industrial societies of the capitalist core towards a qualitatively new horizon. Accepting the framework of an organic crisis of capitalist democracies, Gerbaudo calls for the creation of ‘new democratic institutions by means of which political communities might recover some control over their destiny and overcome their perception of impotence and despair’ (Gerbaudo 2021, 11). Proclaiming the end of the neoliberal era, which he deems the outside-facing ‘exopolitics’ of the past, Gerbaudo suggests that we are now witnessing the emergence of a new neo-statist ‘endopolitics’, concerned with the ‘re-establishment of a sense of interiority and stability’, symbolically marked by the key triad of ‘*sovereignty, control, and protection*’ (Gerbaudo 2021, 4, 40). At the core of this neo-statism, which may take either a reactionary or progressive form, depending on the outcome of political struggles, are ‘attempts to re-internalise capital, to re-embed economic processes in social and political

institutions and to reaffirm a sense of interiority, order and equilibrium as a means to confront and navigate a world marked by uncertainty and disruption' (Gerbaudo 2021, 67).

Gerbaudo's account, which marshals the conceptual frameworks of Gramsci, Poulantzas, Laclau, and Polanyi, among others, situates itself in the socialist republican and democratic socialist tradition. It makes a case for today's nascent left to embrace a politics of social protectivism and so-called 'democratic patriotism', 'through the promise of greater social, health and environmental protections; through a politics of care that strengthens social support systems to respond to people's sense of vulnerability while reinforcing social reciprocity and solidarity' (Gerbaudo 2021, 252). Notably, he observes that the pandemic has prompted the demand for a new 'politics of care' on the socialist left, featuring calls for investments in healthcare, social care, education, and environmental protection, to offset the stressors that the pandemic placed upon existing social infrastructure and the looming wide-scale disruptions of climate change in the coming years (Gerbaudo 2021, 107).

However, despite these agreeable goals, Gerbaudo's account falls short of convincingly explaining how and why the state would be in a position to implement them (Jäger 2021). Such progressive and social democratic neo-statist accounts that wish to revitalize the state for the purposes of building an anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal project suffer from a common problem—that of seeing the state in a relationship of externality to capital and the capitalist mode of production. That is, instead of beginning with the premise of a *capitalist* state, they begin with the idea of the state *in capitalism*. This is not merely a semantic difference. Upon it rest the general parameters of both the role and the limits of the state given capitalist relations of production. In embedding the state within a broader socioeconomic relation called 'capitalism', the latter formulation reverts to an old dichotomy that has run through the history of the Marxist tradition, that of either approaching the state as an instrument or as a subject. As Poulantzas noted, in this schema either the state is a 'passive, if not a neutral, tool totally manipulated by a single fraction' or the state is a subject, one that 'has absolute autonomy and functions of its own will' (Poulantzas 2008, 308). In other words, either the state becomes an instrument in the hands of the ruling class or a particular fraction of it; or it takes on a mystified existence of its own, expressed through the rationality and foresight of its bureaucracy and elites (Poulantzas 1976). Both approaches misunderstand the true link between the state and social

classes, treating them in a relationship of externality to each other, where ‘either the social classes, subdue the state (thing) to themselves through the interplay of “influences” and “pressure groups”, or else the state (subject) subdues or controls the classes’ (Poulantzas 1976).

Despite drawing on Poulantzas for other aspects of his analysis, as well as in recognizing that ‘capitalist neo-statism is very selective in the things it can allow and cannot allow’ (Gerbaudo 2022), Gerbaudo does not extensively grapple with this point in his argument for social protectionism. His account appears to occupy an indeterminate place between these two poles, implying both that the state may be put to use for particular policy goals given a strong enough mobilization of popular social forces, and that it is a subject that can generate a certain sense of interiority for society (hence, endopolitics.) But the state is not equally pliable and conducive to any particular social project, nor is it akin to a contentless vessel whose institutions can be occupied and redirected from exopolitics to endopolitics, or from a reactionary endopolitics to a progressive one. The parameters of the capitalist state are defined by the capitalist relations of production grounded in the extraction of surplus value through persons’ exchange of their labour power for wages under conditions of their nominal ‘freedom’ in bourgeois civil society. The capitalist state is a contradictory terrain that subsumes popular struggles and (unintentionally) reproduces their own contradictions within its institutions; nevertheless, it is structurally weighed towards the reproduction of the dominance of the capitalist classes, for its institutions serve to organize the dominant, capitalist classes and simultaneously disorganize the dominated and subaltern classes.¹ Given this fundamental constraint, accounts that seek to reappropriate and repurpose the state for social protectionism downplay or sidestep a key point: that overcoming capitalist relations of production and domination would have to be, to a significant extent, an overcoming of the capitalist state itself (Smith 2017, 183–90). This raises the contentious question of the nature of the transition from capitalism to socialism and the role of the state therein, which preoccupied Marxist debates in theory and in practice for over a century (and which would take us too far afield in the current analysis). But even more importantly, it requires briefly restating the theory of the capitalist state as developed within that tradition.

¹ For a related discussion, see the contribution by Michael McCarthy in this volume.

3 THE GENERAL ROLE OF THE CAPITALIST STATE

Although its particular features vary across space and time, we may theorize the state as fulfilling three general roles within the capitalist mode of production: (1) creating the socially necessary conditions for ongoing capital accumulation; (2) ensuring a degree of social reproduction beyond the ‘strictly economic’ dimension of capitalist social relations; and (3) generating the political and ideological mechanisms of cohesion, through which both capital accumulation and social reproduction are represented and articulated. These three roles are by no means mutually exclusive, nor do they ever appear in a ‘pure’ form, isolated from the others. They are best thought of as analytical starting points, instead of descriptions of concrete (and complex and contradictory) social formations.

The first of these roles sees the state take up the task of capital accumulation. Among these are establishing and preserving public order; managing fiscal and monetary responsibilities such as establishing and enforcing taxation, printing and regulating currency, and using economic apparatuses such as central banks to set fiscal and monetary policy; establishing and maintaining public credit and favourable investment conditions; building and maintaining physical infrastructure; and perpetuating the commodification of labour power, preservation of private property, and enforcement of contractual obligations via the mediating abstraction of the legal form (Block 1977; Offe 1984; Pashukanis 1983). Taken together, these are the concrete, material processes through which the state is involved in the ongoing valorization and private accumulation of capital. The state provides the physical, legal, and intellectual infrastructure through which different capitalist class fractions can compete in the accumulation process, thereby serving as a stabilizing node for perpetuating the $M-C-M'$ chain of the production and circulation of capital. In this manner, the state is rendered, in Engels’ famous phrase, as the ‘ideal personification of the total national capital’ or the ‘ideal total capitalist’ (Engels 2010, 319; Walker 2016).

The second dimension of the capitalist state, that of social reproduction, is closely intertwined with the gradually expanding role and capacity of the historically specific form of the social welfare state that emerged over the course of the twentieth century. Social reproduction is a demand in all stages and phases of capitalism—indeed, it is a demand upon human social organization in all modes of production; yet the role of the state in this process has been historically variable and subject to

changes based on given relations of production. Through much of the nineteenth century, the high period of liberal-competitive capitalism and the bourgeois-parliamentary state, the basis of social reproduction in the industrial core of the capitalist world-system was the extended family and the social construction of a nominally ‘private’ sphere that established the bourgeois family and its accompanying gender subjectivities (Fraser 2017; Wallerstein 2011). By no means was the capitalist state absent or passive in these processes, insofar as it facilitated the accumulation process by enshrining and enforcing private property, and even regulating the duration and conditions of the working day.

However, the subsequent development of industrial capitalism during the late nineteenth century in the core, as well as parts of the periphery and semi-periphery, saw a period of intensified class struggle; working-class organization and the efforts of progressive, feminist reformers altered the specific form of social reproduction. Insofar as popular struggles even outside of the state-enshrined, formal spaces of politics nevertheless traverse the state’s material institutions, the role of the capitalist state was rearticulated during this new phase (Poulantzas 1980). By the middle of the twentieth century, while social reproduction remained heavily gendered and continued to take place primarily in the domain of the family and the household, the capitalist state acquired a welfarist, socially protective dimension and came to be articulated in part through those new functions (Abramowitz 2020; Fraser 2017). Politically, it was recast as a guardian against capitalist exploitation, even while its ‘socialization’ of the costs and responsibility of social reproduction nevertheless kept it sustaining and reproducing the labour power that produced surplus value and thus enabled capital accumulation.

On the surface, social measures such as universal public education; expanded health, child and elder care; public housing; state-backed pensions; and unemployment and disability support all came to be seen as hallmarks of a mature stage of capitalism, characterized by a mutually beneficial compromise and symbiosis between a market economy and socially protective state—a social democratic ‘capitalism with a human face’. However, when considered from the standpoint of the ongoing compulsion for the valorization and accumulation of capital, the picture that emerges is instead the social reproduction of the labour force, the generative power behind the creation of surplus value. Whereas in the earlier, liberal-competitive phase of capitalism this reproduction of the labour force was almost exclusively the responsibility of the ‘private’

sphere—the space of the family, along with its patriarchal and gendered relations of power—industrialization and concomitant class struggles displaced part of that role onto the state, albeit in a limited and uneven way.

The third dimension is that of the political and ideological legitimation of these social relations. At the most abstract level, this entails displacing the inequalities of capitalist social relations onto the level of political and legal equality—what Marx called the ‘heavenly’ life in the universality of the political community counterposed to the ‘earthly’ degradation of human life in civil society (Marx 2010; Pashukanis 1983). But more than merely instilling this conception of political equality, juridical universality, the rule of law, and the ‘public interest’, the national-popular dimension of the capitalist state also plays the crucial role of generating the conception of popular sovereignty, as membership within ‘the people’ and the accompanying political rights and duties of active citizenship that this entails (Poulantzas 1973). This responsibility for popular legitimation puts the state in the position of being the material and institutional terrain upon which a hegemonic bloc—as an alliance between dominant class fractions with the support of the subaltern classes, and which generates a ‘state project’ that represents the political unity of society to itself—can be formed, consolidated, and reproduced (Jessop 2016, 49–51).

4 SOCIAL REPRODUCTION UNDER AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM

What has been called the neoliberal period, understood both as a distinct regime of capital accumulation and a corresponding political-ideological hegemonic project, was born out of a period of political and economic crisis that lasted for much of the 1970s. Yet it is now almost a truism to say that, contra popular wisdom about the retreat of the state, this period of falling profits and rapid inflation actually marked a significant persistence, transformation, and even expansion of state power (Jessop 2002). It is important to note the continuities between this regime of accumulation and the tendencies already present during the ‘Glorious Thirty’ years of the postwar boom—a period during which social democratic parties and trade unions were incorporated into national and global markets that were protected and insulated from democratic oversight and control via the institutions of the state itself (Panitch and Gindin 2013; Cahill and Konings 2017; Slobodian 2018). However, the crisis period

of the late 1960s and early 1970s also initiated an important shift in the structure and social power of the capitalist state. Poulantzas' early diagnosis of these tendencies under the concept of 'authoritarian statism' noted that the organizational methods of the capitalist state shifted from political parties to the state's bureaucratic administration; the power of legislatures weakened at the expense of its consolidation in the executive; a set of clandestine 'parallel networks' formed alongside official ones in the state apparatuses; and the reach and use of state violence expanded (Poulantzas 1980, 310). Building on these original insights, recent scholarship on 'authoritarian neoliberalism' has pointed to the tendencies in which contemporary capitalist-democratic states are beset by problems of crisis management stemming from austerity policies, weakened popular-representative capacities, and a general condition of ideological depoliticization and lack of popular-democratic accountability. In turn, these contradictions have led them to enact further repressive legal and political measures as a means of resolving what is a general crisis of legitimacy (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Boffo et al. 2019; Flohr and Harrison 2016; Tansel 2017).

Thus, after a vanguard phase of reorientation from 1979 to 1992, and a social regime of consolidation from 1992 to 2007, the neoliberal project can now be said to be in a crisis regime of permanent exception from 2007 to the present (Davidson 2017). In this current phase, this state form continues to find itself hemmed in both by structural incentives and past policy decisions—not least of all the financialization and transnationalization of capital and the ongoing weakness of organized labour—as well as by state economic apparatuses like central banks, which seek to limit the field of political action in the name of fiscal responsibility and market confidence.² At the same time, the repressive and surveillance components of the neoliberal state have continued to grow unabated over the past three decades; thus, in the United States, the semi-private policing-carceral complex works in tandem with authoritarian neoliberalism's fiscal-austerity side to perpetuate a heavily racialized form of capitalist domination (Gilmore 2007; Toscano 2021).

Yet even within this authoritarian neoliberal form, whose parameters became exceptionally stark in the twelve years between the financial crisis and the onset of the pandemic, the responsibility of the capitalist state to

² On this point, see the contribution by Stephen Maher and Scott Aquanno in this volume.

balance between its contradictory dimensions remains. It still has to fulfil the ‘strictly economic’ role of capital accumulation, the ‘societal’ role of reproduction, and the political-ideological-juridical role of legitimation. Especially after 2008, priority had increasingly been given to accumulation at the expense of legitimacy, with the resulting vicious cycle of the state enacting further repressive measures in response to social unrest, thereby further undercutting its representative-democratic character. But it was with the onset of the pandemic that the socially reproductive role of the state became threatened to a higher degree—one that, for a moment, threatened its position as a nodal point in the reproduction of the capitalist social order as such.

Even before the pandemic, theorists such as Nancy Fraser had noted that capitalism’s crisis of care was in fact caused by the ‘social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism’ (Fraser 2017). After first establishing the general tendency of capitalism to destabilize the ‘noneconomic’ preconditions (not only socially reproductive, but also political and ecological) of the accumulation process, Fraser then suggests that these general destabilizing tendencies are manifested within the current financialized form of capitalism primarily as a crisis of care (Fraser 2017, 22). Treating the heavily financialized regime of capitalism that emerged after the 1970s as distinct from the ‘state-managed capitalist order’ of the postwar decades, Fraser also sees it as encompassing a new regime of social reproduction.

Prompted by the late twentieth-century shift of women into the workforce, the globalization of capital flows, and state disinvestment and privatization of social welfare, the neoliberal project ‘externalized care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it’ (Fraser 2017, 32). Even before the novel coronavirus made the crisis of care more visible than ever, the need for renewed capital accumulation out of the 1970s had already generated the preconditions for a crisis of social reproduction. In recent decades, the working class in the capitalist core (and needless to say, in the periphery) has increasingly borne the rising costs and demands of social reproduction, through the defunding and means-testing of public assistance programmes; the push for the further privatization of social services, child, elder, and palliative care, and education; and the rising costs and patchwork coverage of the health care system. Moreover, this has taken place alongside the ongoing stark division between the capitalist core and periphery. As Fraser notes, the scaling back of the postwar, state-managed capitalist order further

intensified the incorporation of migrant workers—almost always poor, racialized, and rural women from the periphery—to fill the ‘care gap’ left open by the growth of the female white-collar labour force, thereby further extending and reinforcing the ‘global care chains’ through which the reproduction of the labour force now occurs (Fraser 2017, 34). The result has been a ‘*dualized* organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide care work in return for (low) wages for those in the first’ (Fraser 2017, 32). In this manner, the gendered division of the labour of social reproduction has been further traversed by class and racial divisions, with the state once again acting as enabler and coordinator.

Given these conditions, how did the pandemic bring about a crisis of social reproduction and expose the limitations of the capitalist state in its current form? Before moving on to analysing the concrete instance of the United States, it is useful to recall that crises are moments of political change that are both overdetermined and open-ended. They are overdetermined in their origins, insofar as they have complex, multiple causes, and are not caused by a single, primary contradiction, and may occur only in a particular, relatively autonomous domain of social relations (such as that of economics, politics, or ideology). If crises occur in more than one domain, their relationship is more likely to be temporally contingent than a stage-wise, necessary movement from a crisis in one domain to the other—for example from the economic to the social, and then to the political. However, should these crises converge, they give rise to a conjunctural crisis, a fusion of a plurality of contradictions, each with its own pertinent domain. As Stuart Hall noted, conjunctural crises occur when “these “relatively autonomous” sites—which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities—are nevertheless “convened” or condensed in the same moment. Then there is a crisis, a break, a “ruptural fusion”” (Hall and Massey 2010, 59–60). Furthermore, while crises have both structural and proximate causes, they are moments when structural forces and their relative weight may shift into a new constellation or arrangement of the balance of social forces. Being periods of relative indeterminacy, crises may also be windows of opportunity—the ‘nature of their resolution is not given’ (Hall and Massey 2010, 57)—but only under certain favourable conditions.

5 CONTRADICTIONS OF THE AMERICAN STATE

With these theoretical and historical premises in mind, we may now turn to the more concrete social formation of the contemporary United States. There, during the regime of permanent exception from 2007 onward (Davidson 2017), the competing priorities of capital accumulation, social reproduction, and popular-democratic legitimation were manifested as the displacement of contradictions from one domain to another.

The 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession were the greatest economic shock to American society since the Great Depression. The rapid response by the fiscal and legislative apparatuses of the state, which took the form of initiatives like the Troubled Asset Relief Program and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, helped avoid the worst possible outcomes of the crash and the recession, restabilizing the financial system (Konings 2010). Yet paradoxically, the successful economic recovery from the crisis also displaced the contradictions of the neoliberal authoritarian mode of governance onto the political level, in the sense that the economic crisis more broadly discredited the bipartisan neoliberal ideological consensus of the previous decades as a form of popular legitimation. While these effects were felt even more sharply in Europe, with the sovereign debt crisis and the decline of traditional parties opening new political windows for encroachments by the far right, the United States was also not immune to this process. From 2009 up through the Capitol insurrection of January 2021 and into the present, the decline of this consensus has facilitated the triumph of the far right within the Republican Party over its establishment wing. Compounded by the emergence of the Trump candidacy and subsequent presidency, Congressional deadlock and obstructionism, a transparently political and reactionary Supreme Court, and domestic undermining of electoral processes, the American political system has been shaken by a growing crisis of political authority (with popular lamentations about ‘political polarization’ missing the mark).

The conjunctural shock of the coronavirus has further deepened this political and ideological crisis over the past two years, by compounding it as a crisis of social reproduction. The coronavirus was never strictly a biological phenomenon, but always a social one. Despite being the world’s lone superpower, possessing immense advantages in wealth and technology, the United States far outpaced other countries in the absolute number of covid deaths (1.136 million as of August 2023), while placing

nineteenth in deaths per capita worldwide. In the United States, state-driven messaging established a categorical distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘nonessential’ workers almost overnight, exposing millions of health-care workers but also service technicians, transit and sanitation workers, workers in agriculture and food production, workers in critical retail and trades, and public servants, among others, to a deadly virus at a time when we knew fairly little about its transmission. As one could foresee at the time, this distinction exacerbated already-existing divisions within the working class, between those who could pass the critical stages of the pandemic in relative safety and those who were on the front lines. In addition, the pandemic further exposed the racialized and gendered inequalities of access to care, as the patchwork medical system in rural and impoverished urban areas strained under the weight of record numbers of cases and mass deaths. De-regulated nursing homes became spaces of mass contagion, while longstanding financial pressure upon the health-care system left health workers scrambling to save lives in underfunded hospitals filled to capacity (Winant 2020). Just as disturbingly, prisons—the carceral core of the authoritarian neoliberal state—turned into sites of sickness and death intentionally located out of public sight. Absent a robust social safety net, layoffs and furloughs (especially in the service sector) left millions of people already living paycheck to paycheck under tremendous strain, in light of which the two small stimuli sent out by the Trump administration were more insult than relief. Under these conditions of exposure to death, mass precaritization, and an unprecedented strain on existing health and service infrastructure, the working class was once again rendered superfluous in the face of the logic of capital accumulation—the necessity of keeping ‘the economy’ going so as not to risk an even broader social crisis and collapse. The coronavirus crisis thus affected not only the reserve army of labour, which already bears upon itself the daily violence of capitalist exploitation and marginalization, but the entire working class.

In addition to the pandemic’s social impacts, the following two years were marked by the basic unevenness and shortcomings of the American state’s response to this crisis. Among these have been the uneven and changing federal messaging on social distancing and masking; the maldistribution of testing and vaccinations in underserved and poor communities; housing insecurity and the temporary nature of the moratorium on evictions, eventually overturned by the Supreme Court; and continuing issues of food insecurity in poor communities. Exacerbating

this even further has been the climate emergency, such that without any foreseeable binding global agreement on reducing carbon emissions, and with the high likelihood of missing the 1.5 C benchmark set for global warming by 2100, we will be confronted with a further intensification of this crisis of social reproduction, manifested as declines in agricultural production, mass displacement due to flooding and fires, and crumbling public infrastructure.

Altogether, this confluence of factors is putting an increasing strain on the ability of the American state to manage these crises. Despite the passage of the CARES Act in 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021 as necessary stopgaps, as well as the recent passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (a stripped-down version of the Build Back Better Plan that stalled in the Senate earlier in 2022), promising relief on prescription drug, clean energy, and health coverage costs, other parts of the Biden agenda had been met with legislative roadblocks. Thus, the social safety net proposals originally intended with Build Back Better were set aside. Among these were significant investments and revitalizations of physical, transportation, and digital infrastructure; investments in both the manufacturing and service sectors; rebuilding the infrastructure for clean drinking water; the building of affordable housing, educational institutions, and care facilities; and jobs training and workforce development (The White House 2021a). Furthermore, the American Families Plan proposed by the Biden administration, which would have represented a significant state-backed investment into the social reproduction of the labour force, was likewise left aside. Among the Plan's goals for the next ten years were to introduce new spending to help subsidize childcare; make available free and universal pre-kindergarten programmes; allocate money towards government-subsidized paid family and medical leave; invest in education by introducing free community college; allow convicted felons to access SNAP food benefits; and introduce additional health insurance subsidies through the Affordable Care Act (The White House 2021b). None of these initiatives made it through the Senate to be included in the Inflation Reduction Act of August 2022.

At the same time, more than three years into the coronavirus crisis and well past the midway point of the Biden administration, what becomes apparent is that despite straining political, ideological, and social-reproductive relations, the pandemic has not yet significantly affected the processes of capital accumulation. Corporate profits have continued at a record pace, with the new wealth passed along to executives and

shareholders, while rising costs due to inflation have been passed on to consumers and the lower and middle layers of the workforce (Daniel 2022; Pickert 2022). And while global supply chains have not yet fully recovered from the strain of 2020 and have been further compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, transnational capital flows remained unimpeded, indicating not a turn to a 're-internalization' of capital under the mantle of social protectionism, but largely the continuation of the post-2008 status quo in terms of capital circulation and accumulation. Under these conditions, the state continues to consolidate, facilitate, and represent the interests of multinational corporate capital and stabilize its mechanisms of accumulation. These policies have also continued to squeeze smaller entrepreneurs, in this manner further contributing to the rise of reactionary politics (Cooper 2022; c.f. Heideman 2022). It remains to be seen how the prolonged fallout from the war in Ukraine and other global conflicts will affect these tendencies, particularly as global ripple waves from conflicts over fossil fuels and rare minerals, food scarcity, and stretched supply chains resonate domestically, especially in terms of the Federal Reserve's goal of curbing inflation and the possibility of a recession. For now, though, the response of the American state, as the linchpin of the global capitalist order, has been sufficient to stabilize the coronavirus crisis—but at the ongoing cost of its popular-democratic and social-reproductive roles.

What, then, does the crisis of social reproduction that has been catalysed and exposed by the pandemic, and the state's role therein, indicate for the coming years—at least in the United States? Considering the absence of revolutionary alternatives, a relatively weakened left following the unsuccessful Sanders presidential campaigns and the repression that followed the anti-carceral uprisings of the summer of 2020, the balance of forces remains strongly on the side of capitalist class interests—even as they are divided among themselves into competing fractions, which are only partially captured by the two parties. Just as problematically, despite the broad public mistrust and disillusionment with the political system, there are no apparent institutional mechanisms for a popular-democratic re-legitimation of the state, given entrenched interests, the resistance of the constitutional order to amendment and change, the anti-majoritarian design of the Electoral College and the Senate, and frequent Congressional legislative deadlock and obstructionism. Lastly, with the shortcomings of the most ambitious parts of the Biden legislative agenda concerning social care, and the enthusiasm for a progressive neo-statism

being more wish than reality at the moment, the crisis of social reproduction has continued to undercut the living standards of the working class, in the process creating a ‘new normal’ in which the social harms of the pandemic become the new baseline.

6 FROM CRISIS TO RESTABILIZATION?

If we take the common periodization of the neoliberal era as spanning from the late 1970s to 2008, we can say that neoliberalism was born out of a period of capitalist crisis, and now appears to be indefinitely muddling along through another one. Crises are periods where the state’s ability to organize class hegemony becomes less effective in the face of sharpening contradictions, both within the hegemonic bloc and between it and the dominated classes—that is, as these contradictions are diffused through the entire social formation. Even absent an economic crisis, social, political, and ideological crises may rupture existing modes of representation between the dominant and dominated classes, leading to the weakening of party systems and the emergence of new forms of representation and modes of organizing political power. Social crises, especially ones that begin to impede the ability of a social formation organized along capitalist relations of production to continue reproducing itself, resonate along other dimensions, with economic, political, and ideological consequences. Does the present crisis of social reproduction, having been exacerbated by the pandemic, and the state’s actions to stabilize capital accumulation at the expense of social investment and popular-democratic legitimation, pose a challenge to the system as a whole?

Certainly, the crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic project decidedly does not mean capitalist collapse. As the American example showed, the stabilization mechanisms deployed by the state’s economic apparatuses in 2009–2010 were enough to prevent economic collapse, even if it meant that the unresolved social, political, and ideological contradictions of the crisis would outlast the economic effects of the recession itself and manifest themselves in new forms. What remains of it today is the state’s ability to facilitate capital accumulation, but now largely shorn of its broader popular-reproductive role, further undercutting the stability of the hegemonic project as it existed during its ‘neoliberal’ peak. Thus, instead of a passive revolution from above, in which ambitious progressive legislation may have helped cement a new hegemonic order that addressed both the social-reproductive and popular-democratic shortcomings of the present

state project, at least for the time being we are left with a prolonged impasse, in which capital accumulation continues unabated even as the social relations that undergird it continue to unravel.

This same project is now in crisis and could very well be transitioning into a new form. Writing at the tail end of the 1970s, Poulantzas noted that political crisis and the crisis of the state ‘play an organic role in the reproduction of class domination’, by ‘establish[ing] the way for the restoration of an unsteady class hegemony and the way for a transformation-adaptation of the capitalist state to the new realities of class conflict’ (Poulantzas 2008, 297). Put differently, absent either a revolutionary mobilization of forces or a protracted equilibrium in which no social bloc or constellation of forces has the upper hand, crises may in fact become windows of opportunity for the reorganization of forces among the dominant classes towards a new arrangement for reproducing their power. More often than being revolutionary windows of opportunity, crises present existing powers with opportunities for adaptation, readjustment, and even reinvention. In such a case, the strategies deployed by the state in response to the pandemic may become the basis for a new regime of accumulation and hegemonic order—a ‘new normal’—without severing the link between the capitalist state and capitalist class power. The intensifying (perhaps now chronic) crisis of the capitalist state in its neoliberal form does not mean its collapse.

This brings us back to the initial question of social protection under the auspices of a new neo-statism. It is quite likely that the state will play a role within the transition to any emancipatory political project (no matter how remote this possibility seems today). Yet this is all the more reason to diagnose its potential capacities and limitations in the present moment. The capitalist state is neither an object that can be wholly redirected towards progressive ends through staffing and guidance by left technocrats, nor a subject capable of stepping in to shield society from crises, for it remains confined to a specific set of roles within the capitalist mode of production. The revival of interest in Marxist theories of politics and the state since the 2008 financial crisis also makes it an opportune time to continue building on that tradition’s insights—among them that if, much like capital, the state is a social relation, then it cannot simply be bent at will, incrementally taken over at its summits, or repurposed in its entirety for social emancipation. Its terrain is much more fraught.

REFERENCES

- Abramowitz, Mimi. 2020. 'Democratic Socialism, Socialist Feminism, and the US Welfare State'. In *An Inheritance for Our Times: Principles and Politics of Democratic Socialism*, edited by Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson, 261–77. New York: O/R Books.
- Block, Fred. 1977. 'The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State'. *Socialist Revolution* 33: 6–28.
- Boffo, Marco, Alfredo Saad-Filho and Ben Fine. 2019. 'Neoliberal Capitalism: The Authoritarian Turn'. *Socialist Register* 55: 247–270.
- Bruff, Ian. 2014. 'The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism'. *Rethinking Marxism* 26 (1): 113–129.
- Bruff, Ian and Cemal Burak Tansel, eds. 2019. *Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices, Contestations*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cahill, Damien, and Martijn Konings. 2017. *Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cooper, Melinda. 2022. 'Family Capitalism and the Small Business Insurrection'. *Dissent*, Winter. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/family-capitalism-and-the-small-business-insurrection>.
- Daniel, Will. 2022. 'U.S. Companies Posted Record Profits in 2021, Jacking Up Prices as Inflation Surged'. *Fortune*, March 31. <https://fortune.com/2022/03/31/us-companies-record-profits-2021-price-hikes-inflation/>.
- Davidson, Neil. 2017. 'Crisis Neoliberalism and Regimes of Permanent Exception'. *Critical Sociology* 43 (4–5): 615–634.
- Engels, Frederick. 2010 [1892]. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 24: 281–325. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Flohr, Mikkel and Yannick Harrison. 2016. 'Reading the Conjuncture: State Austerity and Social Movements: An Interview with Bob Jessop'. *Rethinking Marxism* 28 (2): 306–321.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2017. 'Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism.' In *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, 21–36. London: Pluto Press.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2021. *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*. London: Verso.
- . 2022. 'Neoliberalism, Globalisation and the State.' Verso, February 22. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/5276-neoliberalism-globalisation-and-the-state>.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hall, Stuart, and Doreen Massey. 2010. 'Interpreting the Crisis: Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall Discuss Ways of Understanding the Current Crisis'. *Soundings* 44: 57+.

- Heideman, Paul. 2022. 'Focus On the Family?' *Dissent*, February 9. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/focus-on-the-family.
- Jäger, Anton. 2021. 'The End of Neoliberalism?' Verso, November 5. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/5194-the-end-of-neoliberalism>.
- Jessop, Bob. 2002. 'Globalization and the National State'. In *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered*, edited by Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis, 185–220. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2016. *The State: Past, Present, Future*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Konings, Martijn, ed. 2010. *The Great Credit Crash*. London: Verso.
- Levenson, Zachary. 2020. 'An Organic Crisis Is Upon Us.' *Spectre*, April 20. <https://spectrejournal.com/an-organic-crisis-is-upon-us/>.
- Marx, Karl. 2010 [1844]. 'On the Jewish Question.' In *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 3: 146–174. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mohandesi, Salar. 2020. 'Crisis of a New Type'. *Viewpoint*, May 13. <http://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/05/13/crisis-of-a-new-type/>.
- Offe, Claus. 1984. *Contradictions of the Welfare State*. Edited by John Keane. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Panitch, Leo, and Sam Gindin. 2013. *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. London: Verso.
- Pashukanis, Evgeny B. 1983. *Law and Marxism: A General Theory*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pickert, Reade. 2022. 'US Corporate Profits Soar With Margins at Widest Since 1950'. Bloomberg, August 25. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-25/us-corporate-profits-soar-taking-margins-to-widest-since-1950>.
- Poulantzas, Nicos. 1973. *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: New Left Books.
- . 1976. 'The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau'. *New Left Review* I (95): 63–83.
- . 1980. *State, Power, Socialism*. London: Verso.
- . 2008. 'The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State'. In *The Poulantzas Reader*, edited by James Martin, 294–322. London: Verso.
- Slobodian, Quinn. 2018. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Tony. 2017. *Beyond Liberal Egalitarianism: Marx and Normative Social Theory in the Twenty-First Century*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tansel, Cemal Burak, ed. 2017. *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tarnoff, Ben. 2020. 'These Are Conditions in Which Revolution Becomes Thinkable.' *Commune*, April 7. <https://communemag.com/these-are-conditions-in-which-revolution-becomes-thinkable/>.

- The White House. 2021a. 'FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan'. The White House, March 31. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>.
- . 2021b. 'FACT SHEET: The American Families Plan'. The White House, April 28. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2021. 'Incipient Fascism: Black Radical Perspectives'. *Comparative Literature and Culture* 23 (1).
- Walker, Gavin. 2016. 'The "Ideal Total Capitalist": On the State-Form in the Critique of Political Economy'. *Crisis & Critique* (November): 434–455.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2011. *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Winant, Gabriel. 2020. 'Coronavirus and Chronopolitics'. *N+I*, Spring. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-37/politics/coronavirus-and-chronopolitics-2/>.