

COVID-19 and Social Reproduction

Rowan Tallis Milligan

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Covid-19 has brought to the fore two major tenets of contemporary anarchist and feminist thought: the importance of social reproduction and the frequent inadequacy of the “nuclear family” as a means of living together.

For the first time in living memory people across large swathes of the world have been forced to stay at home. Denied access to other people, to social events, to the “joy” of work outside the home, we are having to take a close look at our domestic lives. Covid-19 has highlighted inadequacies which were always present in our social and welfare services, such as the inadequate provision of medical care, food and benefit systems, and the lack of protections for homeless people, for squatters and for renters. It has also revealed some of the more intangible requirements of human happiness – the level to which we, perhaps without realising it, rely on social connections and interactions, and emotional intimacies *outside* of the home, for fulfilment. Covid-19 has revealed that domestic bliss isn’t really all that.

The more frightening angle of forced isolation within the home is of course centred around housing precarity and a lack of housing options in general. Minimal protections for renters have been put in place, residential squatting is still criminalised, and steps to criminalise non-residential squatting are also in motion. Temporary and emergency accommodation for homeless people is still grossly inadequate. It comes as no surprise that instances of domestic abuse are on the rise, as increasing numbers of women are forced to stay in close confinement with their abusers – a terrifying prospect and one worsened by the calculated decline in provisions for women’s refuges by the Tory government over the last ten years.

Although I can not offer an immediate solution to these problems, particularly since the right to protest has also neatly been curtailed by the social distancing measures put in place, I do think that this time of forced isolation for many people in precarious, unsafe, or simply undesirable living situations, is a time when we should also be thinking more hopefully, more optimistically, of alternative ways of living and being together. There are two ways of tackling these issues from a feminist anarchist perspective, which entail recognising the fundamental importance of the work of social reproduction and the limitations of a privatised family model for dealing with personal, social, and emotional needs.

Of course, any housewife could have told you that. Isolation, depression, alienation and misery are recognised tropes of the “housewife”, accepted and present in fiction and non-fiction for the last 100 years, parodied in *The Stepford Wives*, portrayed in *Mad Men*, and decried in feminist literature since the 1970s at least. But it needn’t be this way. We mustn’t assume it is work inside the home that is intrinsically awful. This in fact sustains a myth propagated by capitalist society – that paid work outside the home is the most fulfilling kind of work and, indeed, is the only kind of work that *counts*. Progress is not necessarily judged by how many women enter waged work, but how fulfilled they are doing the work that they choose, and what sorts of work come to be valued.

Now that so many people are working from home, except those suddenly deemed “essential” (let’s not forget a month ago they were called “low skilled” by the same government), it’s a good time to be thinking about the historical devaluation of the work of social reproduction. Suddenly we are noticing that the only *actually* necessary labour is the labour of care, of food, and of health and sanitation – work that is low paid and has historically been largely feminised and isolated within the home. Now we are all in the home, and complaints about the kids getting in the way of important work seem charming and funny until you wonder why working for profit is seen as more valuable than caring for children, or for the home.

It is interesting to note that the mutual aid groups set up around the country to offer community support and solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis have largely revolved around the work of social reproduction. One of the primary aspects of feminist anarchist theory is oriented around rethinking the way in which we approach social reproduction, shifting it from an individual or familial concern into a collective issue with collective solutions. The production of people, from giving birth to raising children to raising crops and providing meals, to cleaning and sanitising a home, to offering emotional support, healing wounds, providing a shoulder to cry on, and caring for the elderly and ailing are but some of the myriad forms of social reproduction we see (or rather do not necessarily see) in the world today, and throughout all of human history. Yet social reproductive labour has been increasingly hidden, privatised, individualised to be reproduced primarily within our individual homes, and has been, significantly, gendered.

The privatisation of social reproduction has been a key element of capitalist society, demolishing collaborative methods of food provision, childcare, and mutual aid. A primary means of accomplishing this has been the historical process of isolating women in the home to provide domestic labour, invisibilised and individualised. As political philosopher Friedrich Engels noted, the imprisonment of women within the family was a direct result of the appearance of private property and thus, the role of women has been intrinsically tied to the *property dimension* of the role of capitalism. Alongside hiding it away in the home was the process of devaluing the work of social reproduction. As Arlie Hochschild outlined in *The Second Shift*, it is not the fact that women tend to do the majority of domestic labour, “it is that society devalues the work of the home and sees women as inferior because they do devalued work” (Hochschild 2012, p. 274). Hochschild, here, is in good company with those who fight for the valuation of social reproductive work.

“This is why the efforts that women above all are making to deprivatise our everyday lives and create cooperative forms of reproduction are so important. Not only do they pave the way to a world where care for others can become a creative task rather than a burden, they also break down the isolation that characterises the process of our reproduction, creating those solidarity bonds without which our life is an affective desert and we have no social power”. (Federici 2019, p. 184)

By socialising reproduction we dismantle the oppressive logic of the nuclear family, which leads to a broader range of people engaging in socially reproductive labour for the good of the *community* rather than the individual.

The commoning of social reproduction also necessitates a rethinking of “the home” as the primary site of social reproductive labour. A true commons would include communal ways of living and being together, rather than simply moving certain practices outside of the domus and into the community. What would it be like if we were to break down the nuclear family altogether? How would this affect interpersonal gender dynamics and ideas around gendered forms of labour? While exorbitant house prices are increasingly forcing us to live in “communal” situations far beyond what we may desire – such as the increasing norm of flatshares into your 30s – what would be different if we were instead to choose these communal arrangements, rather than having them forced upon us? To socialise and communalise “the home” on our own terms could fundamentally change the relationship between women and the work of social reproduction that they do, and could also see a changed dynamic in the formation and sustainability of “alternative” ways of living in general.

With Covid-19 we are increasingly isolated from those around us, but there is hope: in the proliferation of mutual aid groups and community solidarity that has emerged; in the recognition of what essential work really and truly means; in our desire to see and to be with other people at this time when we are forced to be at home. There is an opportunity to rethink how we might want to live differently, what it means to live happily, and what really is important in our everyday lives.

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