The Contradictions of Coronavirus Fiscal Policy in the United States: Lessons from Feminist Political Economy

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The Contradictions of Coronavirus Fiscal Policy in the United States: Lessons from Feminist Political Economy

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Abstract

Feminist political economy can elucidate how and why states may reluctantly assume the role of the social reproducer of last resort. This paper presents three ways to evaluate the role of the U.S. state in managing labor’s social reproduction, before and after the coronavirus pandemic. Prior to Covid-19, the responsibility for labor’s social reproduction had already shifted from capital onto labor and the state, both as a secular trend and as a result of economic crises. The coronavirus pandemic and recession will exacerbate this shift. In both relative and absolute terms, the U.S. state is responding more to the social reproduction crisis of lost incomes, than to the social reproduction crisis related to public health. The U.S. fiscal policy response to the coronavirus has re-articulated the privatized, commodified nature of U.S. social reproduction, and the individual household as the main unit of social reproduction.

Keywords: social reproduction, United States, coronavirus, fiscal policy, income support, decommodification

JEL codes: B5, E62, H5

1. Introduction

U.S. federal spending in response to the Covid-19 crisis exemplifies the contradictions inherent in state intervention into capitalist crises of social reproduction. President Trump, who has repeatedly threatened health insurance, nutrition programs, and other income support, has instead greatly increased—at least temporarily—the reach of these programs by signing four pieces of legislation between March and April 2020, with more federal spending potentially on the horizon. These laws have significant implications for the distribution of the responsibility for social reproduction between capital, labor, and the state. Feminist political economy can help us understand how and why states may reluctantly assume the role of the social reproducer of

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1 Thank you to Anamary Maqueira Linares for excellent research assistance and Noé M. Wiener for helpful feedback and discussions. The usual disclaimer applies.
This paper will have the following structure. Section 2 defines social reproduction in both microeconomic and macroeconomic terms. It outlines threats, crises, and chronic conditions related to social reproduction processes, emphasizing the role of the U.S. state before and after Covid-19. Section 3 outlines empirical methods that illuminate the political-economic implications of the U.S. legislative response to the Covid-19 crisis. Section 4 provides a feminist political economy analysis of U.S. federal coronavirus laws using projections from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). Section 5 offers concluding remarks on the intersectional implications when the U.S. state assumes greater responsibility over social provisioning and reproduction processes.

2. Social Reproduction: Crises, Threats, and Chronic Conditions

Feminist scholars and activists have long argued that so-called non-capitalist institutions and activities are critical to the capitalist system. Care theorists emphasize the essential role that paid and unpaid caregivers play in economic processes related to creating human capabilities—in both labor-processes and output terms (Braunstein, van Staveren, Tavani 2011, p.7). Social reproduction theory (SRT) emphasizes that labor-power—the capacity to work—is replenished on a daily and generational basis. The work of paid and unpaid caregivers—most of whom are women, immigrants, or racial/ethnic minorities—is essential to social reproduction and the development of human capabilities.

Social reproduction processes also occur in a more macroscopic sense. The capitalist system—and the institutions in which it is embedded—are also socially reproduced. While social reproduction and care theorists often emphasize the pro-social and nurturing aspects of these processes, societal social reproduction also includes the perpetuation of oppressive and exploitative structures such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, inequality, and wage-labor. As Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage (2019) have written, “social reproduction does not need to be nice to continue to function” (p.630).

A core argument of SRT is that workers are not fully compensated for the total cost of the social reproduction of their labor-power. This entails a series of externalities—positive and negative spillover effects—resulting from the inequality of private and social costs related to social reproduction. Folbre (1994) has emphasized the positive externalities of care, arguing that children are public goods from which all of society benefits. Those who do not contribute to the care and raising of children free-ride on the non-excludable benefits of a future generation of workers. There are also negative externalities that result from societal neglect and under-funding of social reproduction. Capitalists firms, especially when emboldened by their political power and enabled by corroborating institutions, find ways to shirk their responsibility to workers’ social reproduction, causing externalities in the physical and mental health of the working class, particularly women and people of color.
The wage-labor bargain contains a series of externalities related to the systematic undervaluing of care work and social reproduction processes. Therefore, social coordination problems—where the individual interest of a firm or household is not in the best long-term interest of its class—are pervasive in capitalist-patriarchal economies, both historically and contemporarily (Moos 2020). Crises of social reproduction can occur when the processes that are taken for granted—the nuts and bolts of everyday life—breakdown. The Covid-19 crisis demonstrates how vulnerable societies are to shocks to various public and private social reproduction processes. Attempts to “flatten the curve” of the coronavirus pandemic are an effort to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed—a social reproduction crisis in the healthcare system.

Attempts to address one social reproduction crisis can threaten social reproduction processes elsewhere. An inherent contradiction in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic is that even prudent policies—social distancing practices which necessitate the closing of schools and businesses—disrupt social reproduction by interrupting children’s education and causing workers to lose their income. This can partially explain the ambivalence of the state—and some people—in enacting or following such policies.

2.1 Social Reproduction and the U.S. Neoliberal State

In advanced capitalists countries, the state plays a major role in social reproduction—through socialization of workers via schooling and training, funding healthcare and hospitals, and the redistribution and supplementation of income. The state also plays a meta-role in the social reproduction of the capitalist-patriarchal-white supremacist system, through institutions, norms, and laws which reinforce the wage-labor relationship, capitalist exploitation, patriarchy, racial-ethnic-sexual hierarchies, and the nuclear family as the main unit of social reproduction.2

Despite the crucial role that the state plays in social reproduction in advanced capitalist societies, neoliberal ideology is built upon the myth that waged work is the primary source of workers subsistence and survival. This myth both obscures the crucial role of the household and unpaid caregivers—a central point of feminist critique—as well as misrepresents the role of the state in creating and maintaining markets.

While the U.S. state plays an important role in social reproduction, it typically does so with reluctance, ambivalence, and fervent contestation. As de Brunhoff (1978) argued, the capitalist state must play a role in the management of labor-power. Even under ordinary conditions of capitalist production, the state assumes a “managerial function [which] corresponds to a requirement of capital which capital itself cannot meet” (p.9). By adding a feminist perspective to this argument, we can better understand the contradictory role played by modern states when responding to global social reproduction crises.

2.2 Analyzing U.S. Coronavirus Legislation from the Perspective of Social Reproduction

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2 For example, Albelda and Carr (2014) argue that U.S. social policy is based on a heteronormative male breadwinner model, which is also racialized.
The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic recession presents a natural experiment with which to study state-policy responses to crises of social reproduction. The U.S. federal government exerts enormous influence both inside and outside its own borders. It does not experience the same balance-of-payment constraints as developing countries, nor is the United States bound to international agreements on fiscal or monetary policy as are European Union member states.

The United States is also widely considered the paradigmatic liberal market welfare state—marked by stingy, contributory, and stratifying programs, most notably a lack of universal healthcare coverage and a for-profit, pay-for-service healthcare model. The United States is also a chief contributor of neoliberal ideas and policy favoring deregulation, lower taxes, and cutting welfare programs. These conditions, along with stark economic inequality and underlying health disparities, have made the country especially vulnerable to the health and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The U.S. federal government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic has, at the time of writing, included four major pieces of legislation. The first law, the “Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriation” (H.R. 6074, Public Law 116-123) passed March 6, 2020 and totaled $8.3 billion in emergency funding for federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, the Small Business Administration, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development. Additional direct funding was also allocated to temporarily allow Telehealth services under Medicare.

The “Families First Coronavirus Response Bill” (H.R. 6201, Public Law 116-127) passed March 18, 2020, represented the second U.S. legislative response to the coronavirus. A total of $192 billion included direct relief for individuals in the form of nutrition assistance, an expansion of protections under the Family Medical Leave Act for caregivers who must miss work due to school or daycare closings, emergency unemployment insurance, emergency paid sick leave, and additional spending for health provisions. More than half of the cost is in new tax credits for paid sick leave and family medical leave.

The “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES ACT)” (H.R. 748, Public Law 116-136) passed March 27, 2020. This is the largest of the four laws, representing $2.3 trillion. Major social reproduction aspects of the law include expanded unemployment insurance and compensation, recovery rebates for individuals, healthcare services and coronavirus testing, nutrition assistance, paid sick leave, and funding for primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions. This bill provided funding for firms to continue to pay their employees, similar to what has been done in European countries as a way to keep workers employed. The program was channeled through commercial banks, delaying distribution to firms. The bill benefitted a number of large corporations, including airlines and fossil fuel companies.
At the time of writing, the most recent coronavirus legislative response is “The Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act,” (H.R. 266, Public Law 116-139), signed into law on April 24, 2020. The law provides $484 billion in additional funding for small business loans, health care providers, and coronavirus testing.

Despite the enormous expense of the recent coronavirus legislation, these laws do not represent a structural break in U.S. social policy. The laws gave substantial support and tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy. There were deep inequities and inefficiencies in the accessibility of funding and protection—many individuals and households were excluded from important benefits. Nevertheless, the increase in funding for existing social programs, the creation of new social policy such as federally-mandated paid sick and family leave for workers affected by the coronavirus, and one-time payments of up to $1,200 per eligible person, does undermine neoliberal rhetoric. The U.S. government’s stubborn insistence that such policy is not the role or responsibility of the state, and should be determined through employer and employee bargaining alone, is clearly not believable in times of crisis.

### 3. The Distribution of the Responsibility of Labor’s Social Reproduction

Recent empirical political economy research demonstrates that U.S. capitalists have effectively shifted the responsibility of labor’s social reproduction onto the state and households. The shift of responsibility has occurred in the late 20th and early 21st century as both a secular trend and as a result of economic crises. Two aggregate political economy accounting methods—one old and one new—can be used to analyze the ex post distribution of the responsibility of labor’s social reproduction between capital, labor, and the state. These methods can give us insight into the immediate and long-term effects of the legislative response to the Covid-19 crisis.

#### 3.1 The U.S. Net Social Wage in the Time of Coronavirus

The net social wage (NSW) is a measure of social expenditures that benefit labor (E), minus taxes paid by labor (T).

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NSW = E - T
\]

This measure was originally conceived by Shaikh and Tonak (1987) and has been used by various authors to study the effect of net redistributive spending in a number of countries. See Moos (2019a) for a complete literature review and details on methodology.

The net social wage provided a critique of both mainstream and heterodox literature which blamed the welfare state for poor economic performance. This argument, a cornerstone of anti-welfare state thinking, has played a major role in justifying neoliberal policy, especially during times of economic crisis. Even progressive economists such as Bowles and Gintis (1982) argued that the U.S. accumulation crises of the 1970s were the result of distributional gains made by labor, in particular a rising “citizen wage” which squeezed capitalists’ profits. They argued that redistribution to labor, in particular unemployment benefits, allowed workers to
access the means of subsistence without selling their labor-power, undermining the disciplinary function of the reserve army of labor. In response, Shaikh and Tonak (1987) argued that the effect of social expenditures should not be analyzed without also looking at taxation and proposed the concept of the net social wage. Based on their methodology, Shaikh and Tonak (1987), Shaikh and Tonak (2000) and Shaikh (2003), argued that welfare state spending cannot be blamed for poor growth, as the net social wage in the 20th century was on average approximately zero.

Recent research by Moos (2019a) shows that the net social wage—both the original method developed by Shaikh and Tonak (the NSW₁), and an alternative method which subtracts an estimate of labor’s share of indirect taxes (NSW₂)—has risen substantially in the 21st century. By looking at data from 1959-2012, Moos (2019a) explains this rise as a combination of cyclical, structural, and secular factors, including a high level of prolonged unemployment in the Great Recession, the jobless recovery, high healthcare costs, an aging population, refundable and non-refundable tax credits, and the expansion of low-wage jobs.

Fig. 1 shows the NSW/GDP from 1959-2018, the most recent data available from the National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA). Both measures of the NSW remain at a high level even after the economy recovered from the Great Recession. The sustained higher level of the U.S. NSW in the 21st century challenges the commonly held assumption that higher levels of social spending occur because workers have more bargaining power. While this may be true in some welfare state regimes; the opposite is true for the United States. In the U.S. context, net fiscal redistribution increases when workers are more vulnerable, due to wage stagnation, the erosion of employer-based benefits, healthcare inflation, and economic crises.
What will happen to the NSW as a result of the coronavirus? While it is too soon to calculate using NIPA data, we know that due to the Covid-19 crisis, expenditures for workers have risen as a combination of automatic stabilizers and increases in new spending. The unprecedented level of unemployment—14.7 percent in April 2020—will drive this trend and affect both the rise of social expenditures and the decrease in revenue from labor taxation. Furthermore, the NSW is commonly normalized by dividing by GDP, which is expected to contract severely. For this reason, the 2020 NSW/GDP ratio will likely dwarf the 2010 high.

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\text{NSW}_{\text{Covid}} = E^\uparrow - T^\downarrow \\
\text{NSW}/\text{GDP}_{\text{Covid}} = \text{NSW}^\uparrow / \text{GDP}^\downarrow
\]  

The anticipated rise in the NSW/GDP ratio as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic supports the view that in 21st century neoliberal United States, the NSW is the measure of how poorly workers are doing, not their strength or bargaining power. As the United States runs major budget deficits, the U.S. state is not redistributing capital's value-added back to workers. Instead, the federal government is using its ability to print and borrow money to stabilize and subsidize workers' social reproduction.

3.2 The Cost of U.S. Social Reproduction in the Time of Coronavirus
Moos (2019b) presents a novel feminist political economy accounting method which measures the total societal cost of social reproduction, and compares it to the contribution made by capitalists. While inspired by the NSW method, it differs by including an imputed value of household production, and taking an explicit feminist interest in the household as a site of social reproduction. The total societal cost of social reproduction for all households, $CSR$, is described as:

$$CSR = W + F - T + G + H + N + B$$ (4)

Where $W$ represents wages and salaries, $F$ represents employer-based benefits, $T$ represents taxes, $G$ is government social spending, $H$ is an imputed value of household production, $N$ is non-profit expenditures, and $B$ is consumer borrowing (excluding mortgages). To calculate the societal cost of social reproduction for working-class households, $CSR_w$, each variable is weighted by appropriate measures such as the working-class income share, population share, or other methods to determine the amount of taxes and government benefits going to the working class.  

A key finding of Moos (2019b) is that the share of employers’ contribution—the sum of wages, employer-based benefits, and contributions to social insurance—of total working-class social reproduction has decreased from a high of 50 percent in 1966 to a low of 38 percent in 2011. This is a secular, downward trend, although it does appear to be influenced by the business cycle. During and immediately following economic downturns, the cost of employment to cost of social reproduction ($CE/CSR$) falls.

Fig. 2 demonstrates the contribution of capital, labor, and the state to working-class social reproduction. During the entire period of study, household production contributed more to total working-class social reproduction than the sum of net wages and employer-based benefits. This is particularly stunning result, given that the imputation method used for estimating the value of household production is considered by feminist time-use researchers to be an underestimate (Suh and Folbre 2016, see also Moos 2019b p.10). The role of the state in working-class social reproduction grew as a proportion of total working-class social reproduction. This occurred in the 1990s as a result of the expansion of low-wage jobs, wage stagnation, and the erosion of employer-based benefits.

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3 Working-class households are defined as those that do not have enough wealth to forgo working for income, and do not exercise a supervisory role in their jobs (Moos 2019b, p.7).
What will happen to the distribution of the cost of social reproduction as a result of the Covid-19 crisis? Wages and employer-based benefits, as well as taxes, will decrease. Government spending will increase substantially. The contribution of household production will likely increase more than any other variable, driven by the closings of schools and daycare centers. Hours spent cooking and cleaning will likely also increase, as it may not be possible to purchase market substitutes. The effect on nonprofit expenditures and consumer borrowing are more difficult to predict, but play a much smaller contributory role in overall social reproduction.\footnote{Nonprofit expenditures may rise due to greater reliance on food banks and other charities, but this may be offset by layoffs and organizations closing. The use of credit cards to pay for groceries or healthcare may increase, but may be offset by a contraction in borrowing for education, automobiles, and other consumer goods.}

The anticipated rise in government spending and household production as a result of Covid-19 supports the argument that as a result of the crisis, the responsibility for labor’s social reproduction is being pushed onto households and the state.

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CSRW_{\text{Covid}} = W \downarrow + F \downarrow - T \downarrow + G \uparrow + H \uparrow + N + B \tag{5}
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4. **Analysis of Ex Ante State Role in Social Reproduction**

The methods described in section 3—the net social wage and the cost of social reproduction—
were designed to measure the *ex post* distribution of net fiscal transfers from the state to labor and the relative contribution of capital to labor’s social reproduction, respectively. To understand how U.S. coronavirus legislation is likely to redistribute the roles and responsibilities for labor’s social reproduction in 2020 and beyond, we can analyze governmental projections before and after the pandemic.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is a nonpartisan agency which creates economic analysis of budgetary issues, including cost estimates for bills approved by Congressional committees. The CBO published a baseline budget projection on March 6, 2020 which excludes the effect of the coronavirus-related legislation. According to the document, “CBO’s baseline is not intended to provide a forecast of future budgetary outcomes; rather, it provides a benchmark that policymakers can use to assess the potential effects of future policy decisions” (CBO 2020, p. 1). For this reason, our analysis of the CBO projections is not meant to provide a precise prediction of the *ex post* data ahead of time. Rather, our analysis illuminates what information the state has on the potential redistributive effect of fiscal policy. This can help us understand how legislation is anticipated to alter the role of the U.S. state in social reproduction.

To analyze the pre-coronavirus baseline budget and cost estimates of coronavirus legislation from the perspective of feminist political economy, we defined Social Reproduction Expenditures (SRE) as: Education, Training, Employment and Social Services;⁵ Health (includes Medicaid); Medicare; Income Security; Social Security; Veterans Benefits and Services.⁶ All other expenditures are considered non-Social Reproduction Expenditures (non-SRE) as they represent costs of socially reproducing the U.S. state, or consist largely of subsidies to capital.⁷ Pre-coronavirus virus projections are based on the March 6 budget document; post-coronavirus projections have added the costs of the four pieces of legislation to the baseline estimate. See appendix for full methodology and data.

Figure 3 shows each component of social reproduction expenditures (SRE), as well as total non-Social Reproduction Expenditures (non-SRE) as a percentage of total expenditures (TE). These figures were calculated by summing up the estimated outlays in the March 6 document, and then adding in the estimated outlays in the four coronavirus bills. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic and related legislation, social reproduction expenditures (SRE) represent 70 percent of total projected expenditures in 2020. After the coronavirus legislation, SRE is projected to represent 73 percent of total projected expenditures in 2020.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Income Support is projected to increase from 11 percent of total federal expenditures, to 26 percent of total federal expenditures in 2020. This is a result ⁵ Note that this only includes federal funding. Additional funding for U.S. education and social services come from state and local governments.
⁶ The NSW and CSR exclude veterans benefits and services. The NSW, on which the CSR method is based, conceives of veterans benefits as a cost of war, not part of the welfare state. However, our analysis of the CBO data considers social reproduction funding for civilians and veterans alike.
⁷ Some expenditures related to community development, housing, environment, energy, transportation, the postal service, or other functions of the government, have a socially-reproductive effect, but they are not classified as social reproduction expenditures (SRE) in the current analysis.
of the recovery rebates sent to individuals, extended unemployment insurance, paid leave, the paycheck protection program, nutrition support, and other sources of income supplements. In absolute terms, projected 2020 Income Support expenditures increased from an estimated $524 billion before the pandemic, to more than $1.63 trillion as a result of the legislation.

The share of expenditures on Medicare and Health—which included Medicaid as well as research, training, and activities of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health—decline as a percentage of total federal expenditures. The increase in Medicare and Health spending in absolute terms was relatively modest. While projected Medicare spending as a percentage of total expenditures declined from 15 percent to 11 percent, in absolute terms it increased from $695.8 billion to $701.2 billion as a result of the pandemic. Projected Health spending decreased as a percentage of total expenditures from 13 percent to 12 percent, but in absolute terms it increased from $600 billion to $719 billion as a result of the coronavirus policy changes.

It is interesting that in both relative and absolute terms, the U.S. state is responding more to the social reproduction crisis of lost incomes, than the social reproduction crisis related to public health. Even in an unprecedented public health crisis, the U.S. government maintains its commitment to the commodification and privatization of human health. However, the notion that in capitalism, the private sector will provide workers with income for their subsistence, is much more malleable.

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8 This may over-estimate the socially reproductive use of this funding. Efforts were taken to exclude expenditures which represent a subsidy to capital that does not benefit workers, however, it is difficult fully disaggregate the CBO data.
Fig. 3: Projected Social Reproduction Expenditures as Percentage of Total Federal Expenditures, Before and After Covid-19, 2020  
Source: Author’s calculations based on CBO projections

Fig. 4 depicts projected SRE in billions and as a percentage of projected GDP for 2020-2025. The effect of the coronavirus legislation increases estimated outlays most dramatically in 2020. Estimated outlays increase to a lesser degree in 2021 and 2022. By 2023, the difference in projected SRE before and after the pandemic is negligible. However, these projections only describe the estimated budget outlays based on current laws and economic conditions. There is considerable uncertainty on the length and severity of the economic and health crises—and on future legislation.

Despite pleas from governors and mayors, Congress appears unlikely to bail out states and local governments. This is due to partisan politics, but also because much of the U.S. welfare state—particularly education, Medicaid, and social services—occurs at the state and local level. As states cannot run budget deficits, Congress is forcing governors to loosen restrictions, cut services, or both. This may further reinforce the federal government’s role as a primary—albeit insufficient—source of social reproduction funding.

5. Conclusion
This paper has presented three ways to evaluate the role of the U.S. state in managing labor’s social reproduction, before and after the Covid-19 crisis. Prior to Covid-19, the responsibility for labor’s social reproduction had shifted from capital onto labor and the state, both as a secular trend and as a result of economic crises. The coronavirus pandemic and recession will exacerbate this shift.

The NSW method demonstrates that in the 21st century, the net redistributive effect of US fiscal policy has increased. The cost of social reproduction method reveals that household production and government social spending were greater contributors to working-class social reproduction than net earned wages and employer-based benefits. These trends are anticipated to intensify as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Government spending on various forms of income support have replaced or supplemented earned incomes, federal spending on health has increased modestly, and tax revenues will dwindle. Hours spent on household production have increased dramatically as schools and daycare centers have closed, and market-based substitutes for unpaid household work have become inaccessible or unaffordable.

As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, government social reproduction spending has increased. CBO projections reveal that the U.S. state is more willing to subsidize incomes, rather than decommodify healthcare. This reveals the deeper character of the U.S. state’s social reproduction mitigation strategy. An increase in public spending during economic crisis can decommodify the means of social reproduction, however, that has not occurred as a result of the U.S. coronavirus legislation. While both cash and in-kind government spending would boost aggregate demand, supplementing or replacing income maintains the consumption of commodities and the realization of profits. Government spending for income support does not undermine the market economy or challenge the political-economic status quo as much as greater decommodification or nationalization of the means of social reproduction. While government programs that provide income support can reduce inequality and poverty, the perverse nature of the U.S. welfare state—which subsidizes low-wage jobs through in-work benefits and provides cash benefits rather than healthcare or decent jobs—should not be overlooked. For that reason, the optimistic view of McKay (2001) that the “divorce [of] work and income” through a universal basic income will result in greater “gender-neutral social citizenship rights” seems unlikely to play out in the U.S. context.

Feminist political economy elucidates the role that the state plays in maintaining the capitalist-patriarchal system’s dependence on women’s unpaid labor. By requiring private households—in particular the women within them—to assume the public responsibility of children’s education, the state reinforces gender norms and hierarchies in times of social distancing. The disparity among unpaid work hours between mothers and fathers during the Great Recession and jobless recovery was “virtually unchanged” from pre-recession levels (Berik and Kongar 2013, p.210). A greater reliance on the household for social reproduction during the

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9 The strength of the U.S. pharmaceutical and health insurance lobbies, and other medical trade groups is considerable.
coronavirus pandemic may also reinforce traditional gender norms with relation to unpaid work. Furthermore, in issuing stay-at-home orders, the state assumes that nuclear families are safe places for women and children, which is often untrue. Unfortunately, the abject failure of public and private care institutions to protect elderly, disabled, and veterans populations from the coronavirus—the result of government austerity and corporate profit-seeking—does not inspire confidence in alternative social reproduction arrangements and may instead reinforce the normative belief that the private household is the most appropriate provider of long-term care.

The transfer of responsibility of providing worker’s income from capital to the state provides the government with an opportunity to reinforce racial-ethnic-national hierarchy and exclusionary politics. The recovery rebates excluded many immigrants and their households—even those containing U.S. citizens. Wage-labor may be inherently exploitative and alienating for workers. Firms often discriminate and abuse—leading to pay differentials and wage theft. However, the wage-labor relationship is based upon an intelligible contract between capitalists and workers. No such equivalent agreement exists between U.S. workers and the state.

The U.S. social contract does not affirm economic rights or broad-based universal entitlements for workers, other than secure property rights. The U.S. government has never guaranteed the right to a life without hunger, disease, or destitution. Instead, government spending is understood as fixing a market failure, or responding to a moral or economic imperative.

During the Covid-19 crisis, the U.S. federal government has reluctantly assumed the role of the social reproducer of last resort through four pieces of legislation. The U.S. state has chosen to mitigate the immediate social reproduction crises of the working class in a manner that further enriches the wealthy and distances capitalists from the responsibility of labor’s social reproduction. These policies have re-articulated the privatized, commodified nature of U.S. social reproduction, and the individual household as the main unit of social reproduction.

References


