On pandemic solidarity

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Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar (eds.), *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, Plutopress 2020 (304 pages)

ABSTRACT

The book *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (2020) comprises multiple accounts of horizontal and mutually supportive self-organisation that have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in different places throughout the world. The book gives a voice to activists who portray how lives in the margins contextualised within the midst of a global pandemic activate networks of material, emotional and artistic support in efforts to overturn the competitive logic of neoliberal society. This review highlights how the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated mechanisms of exclusion and social injustice that are not exceptional but structural to the global society in which we live, regulated by the triad of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. The forms of resistance to this crisis are not extraordinary measures of self-organisation: they re-emerge from a long history of collectivity, pre-existing resistance networks and uncompetitive sociality, which were already part of the political life of those who inhabit the margins – from Rojava to the P.I.G.S.

Keywords
mutualism, solidarity networks, Covid-19 crisis, care

The volume *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (2020) edited by Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar features a series of experiences of horizontal and mutually supportive self-organisation that have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in different places of the world. It is organised on the basis of continental macro-areas, highlighting places which can be understood to share the commonality of belonging to different 'Souths' – both internal and global (Sousa Santos 2014); or, places which challenge the North-South geographical dualism through their historical existence. These places are located, in various ways, on the margins, inhabited by communities of people that are often marginalised, whose lives have been made invisible and precarious already before the pandemic; or as marginal spaces at the edge of national states and welfare systems.

The text opens with a first section dedicated to the "Greater Middle East," then divided into three subsequent chapters, relating to Rojava, Turkey and Iraq, respectively. One of the themes that seems to unite this section of the text is the constant presence of a state of crisis that precedes Covid-19 in a region that has been historically subjected to political and social

instability. The metaphor of war – albeit with new weapons and a new enemy – is constantly present in the pandemic narrative, as it is part of the shared experience.

In the first chapter, written by Emre Sahin and Khabat Abbas, on Rojava – or, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) – the experiences of Kurdish self-organization during the pandemic have followed the extraordinary forms of survival already experienced in the various stages of the Rojava conflict and of the Syrian Civil War. Online classes were conducted during the multiple military attacks by the Turkish state. Nevertheless, during the pandemic online classes caused new social problems: for example, how is the condition of mental and emotional health of children and adolescents isolated from their own friends for a long time? And how about their teachers? These challenges highlight the social implications of the education system: not only as a service given by the State, but a specific space of creation of bonds and relationships.

"The king is naked," says Seyma Özdemir in the second chapter of the book (77), dedicated to the Turkish experience: Covid-19 showed "the inability of governing." In addition to distributing health kits to indebted and homeless people, as well as organising groups among neighbours to share care and resources, it was also necessary to build a new narrative in opposition to the authoritarian negationism of Erdogan.

In Chapter 3, which deals with "Solidarity Network in Iraq During Covid-19," Midya Khudhur talks about the virus as the 'invisible enemy' which must be fought against by people in Iraq, who are used to be involved in wars among visible enemies. The author interviews activists from different geographical locations in Iraq in order to represent the internal differences, challenges and political responses in a complex nation. One of the main issues discussed by different activists involved is a continuity of a state of emergency in their respective regions and the necessity to understand the specificities of the Covid-19 crisis, compared with the other exceptional periods.

The second section is dedicated to South and East Asia, focusing on Taiwan, South Korea and India. In Chapter 4, Chia-Hsu Jessica Chang outlines different voices from Taiwan, under the common theme of "Sharing Spaces and Crossing Borders," the title of her text. This chapter argues that Covid-19 corresponds to a crisis of a violent and inhumane economic and social system already rooted in a specific form of social distancing: "in the modern/colonial world, we are disciplined to be lonely" (105), she writes.

Chapter 5 discusses disability activism in South Korea, or, the activism of "those who must refuse to keep social distance" (132). Disability activist Ji Young Shin says that we should think about the pandemic as the generalisation of an experience that, in an ableist world, we are used to think about as particular – namely that of disease (physical and mental) and the fragility of our bodies. For the first time, we have to imagine new ways of being together, not all based on the protagonism of the healthy body.

Chapter 6, by Debarati Roy, is dedicated to India and specifically focused on the neces-

sity of rethinking the role of minorities in Indian society. Roy's text shows how the presence of historical conditions of subalternity made the experience of the pandemic worse for specific social groups. According to the author, the spread of the Covid-19 crisis immediately corresponded to an increase of Islamophobic feelings among people. Beginning with the diffusion of fake news on social networks, Muslim people have been deemed responsible for the contagions. Although the interviewer did not to directly ask about the religious belongings of the interviewed, Muslim activists are identified as active contributors to solidarity networks, serving people across religious faiths. Roy also points to the experiences of *hijras*, the third gender identity recognised in India. Even though *hijras* are deeply stigmatised, their network of solidarity – primarily used as a form of reciprocal support among transgender people – was activated in order to help the wider population during the pandemic.

The third section is dedicated to Southern Africa and includes one chapter, written by Boaventura Monjane and titled: "Confronting State Authoritarianism: Civil Society and Community-Based Solidarity in Southern Africa." This text consists of a comparative analysis across three different states: Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. All three are governed by authoritarian regimes which applied restrictive, militarised measures in order to contain the spread of the virus.

The importance of this chapter is to force us to rethink of the difficult relationship between security and democracy during the context of the pandemic, in a specific period where people are vulnerable to accept stringent measures in order to feel safe. The texts speak from a specific place of the world, outside the unique Eurocentric narratives on dualism made by white philosophy, who failed to highlight the differences of privilege in standing points.

The fourth section is dedicated to what we can describe as the European internal Souths. Reading the texts written by Laís Gomes Duarte and Raquel Lima on "Intersectional Solidarity in Portugal" allows readers to contemplate on how to break the pietistic and charitable, and therefore paternalistic and colonial, understanding of solidarity, as typically carried out by States, supranational institutions, and even by certain humanitarian associations. The authors challenge readers to consider the creation of aid networks that are, above all, networks of exchange between equals.

During the pandemic, as written by Eleanor Finley in the chapter "Solidarity Flourishes Under Lockdown in Italy," Italy faced a proliferation of self-managed community canteens, support desks and all those networks for the collective management of 'commons' that make material goods, spaces, forms of life accessible for everybody.

In Chapter 10, written by EP and TP about "Solidarity Networks in Greece," we read that in many cities in Greece several medical centres are based on self-organised solidarity, thus refusing the logic of the market and profit applied on health, as well as the hierarchies of race and citizenship which regulate access to fundamental rights.

In his text about "Viral Solidarity: Experiences from the UK," Neil Howard highlights how

experiences of radical solidarity took place where there have already been several struggles facing forms of radically impoverished and/or structurally excluding welfare. Unsurprisingly, the inadequacy of the public aid system, especially in fields such as public health, has been at the centre of political debates.

The fifth section is focused on "Turtle Island," that is, "the name many Indigenous peoples give to the landmass known as North America" (289), according to Carla Bergman and Magalí Rabasa, authors of the only chapter of this session with Ariella Patchen and Seyma Özdemir. This chapter is particularly wide, highlighting different cases of self-organised networks through voices of activists. It is, arguably, one of the most "intersectional" texts of the book, discussing subjects such as indigenous organisations, immigrant communities, prisoner solidarity, online mutual aid networks, people who are unhoused or precariously housed, and autonomous health organizing.

The last part of the book consists of two chapters dedicated to South America. Chapter 13 is written by Nancy Viviana Piñeiro and Liz Mason-Deese from Argentina. They reflect on how practicing solidarity in the time of Covid-19 is also an exercise of memory, considering the importance that it has in the construction of political identity in Argentina after the dictatorship.

Chapter 14 is focused on Brazil, in which similar attention is provided to the continuity of solidarity movements born before the pandemic and reactivated during the year. According to Vanessa Zettler, Brazilian grassroots organisations never ceased to exist, holding together students, *aldeias* of indigenous people, and self-organised groups in the favelas. From the artists who organised digital poetry slams during the lockdown (#SarauemTemposdeCorona) to the intersectional collectives of "feminismo favelado" whom provide material, emotional, psychological and pedagogical support.

The most enlightening aspect of this book is the way in which it highlights how the 'crisis' caused by Covid-19 did not invent forms of social exclusion, existential precariousness or radical inequality between lives considered not worthy of being lived (Butler 2004). It is, on the contrary, a crisis of an already violent economic and social system. By collecting the voices of those who practice and imagine these radical forms of life – on the occasion of the biggest human and social crisis in colonial and patriarchal capitalism – we face a structured cartography of the limits of this same system, marked daily by those who inhabit those margins. It appears, in other words, what Partha Chatterjee (2004) would define "[t]he politics of the governed": a set of political practices implemented by diverse social groups who live on the edge of the national state and its differentially inclusive welfare.

Acknowledgements

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