

Notes Towards a Materialist Understanding of Progressive Solidarity

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Abstract

This article argues for a renewed materialist understanding of progressive solidarity. It historically situates various debates, particularly on the left, to understand how progressive solidarity has been theorized. On this basis, an assessment is made concerning the state of progressive solidarity in North America following two crises: the financial collapse of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the world in early 2020. In so doing, it seeks to map how the crisis-ridden political economy of neoliberalism mediates the particularities of social experience. To borrow a phrase from British cultural critic Raymond Williams, the purpose is to locate and map the “structure of feeling” of the current historical conjuncture. In this respect, incompatible progressive and reactionary social movements seek to define a new hegemonic common sense within the broader legitimation crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Against this background, the article concludes that any renewed project of progressive solidarity will need to address the dominant structure of feeling produced by neoliberalism—*anxiety*.

Since the election of Donald Trump as American President in 2016, there has been a surge in scholarly and journalistic publications decrying the emergence of a so-called “post-truth” era (McIntyre, 2018). Faith in mainstream liberal institutions, including government and journalism, has faltered, while bad-faith politicians and conspiracy theorists label news organizations purveyors of “fake news.” Misinformation is rampant on social media networks and prominent right-wing broadcasting outlets. Meanwhile, governments worldwide struggle to control a deadly global pandemic that is baselessly labeled a partisan hoax by an influential minority of citizens. Politics has become decidedly unstable.

Many liberal and conservative commentators blame “Trumpism” for this turn of affairs. And while his encouragement of far-right politics certainly deserves critical attention, this research starts from the assumption that Trumpism, and the hyper-polarization of public life that has flourished worldwide, are symptoms of broader legitimation crises.

The article begins by situating the discussion of social solidarity in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It then moves to a review of literature concerned with the historical development of solidarity and its fragility. In doing so, it seeks to sketch the political-economic

context of crises and contradictions within neoliberal capitalism, especially regarding the particularities of the North American social experience after the global financial collapse of 2008 and the 2020 global pandemic. It is hypothesized that these social experiences, with their “emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics” (Williams, 1977: 132) are constitutive of the uneven and contradictory nature of solidarity projects and their antitheses. What then are the barriers to progressive solidarity after 40 years of neoliberal economic and social policies.

Whither solidarity?

In the past, critical scholarship on news media critiqued mainstream newsrooms’ professional ideology of objectivity. In contrast, much of the recent scholarship on democracy and media focuses on disruption and polarization. As Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argue, “many democratic societies are suffering profound challenges related to the legitimacy of institutions, the incoherence of publics, the rise of disinformation, and the limited reach of once-authoritative information flows from the legacy media” (245). They go on to propose that scholars should rethink the fields of political communication and journalism in light of the disruptions, in particular by “re-contextualizing concepts such as gatekeeping, agenda-setting, indexing, framing, and media effects in more realistic empirical accounts of the political communication processes in which they operate” (247). These research concepts, argue Bennett and Pfetsch, no longer properly account for the massive changes in political communication in many democracies. They do not address the disconnection of publics from institutions of press and politics due to the hollowing out of center parties and the growth of social divides. This is a welcome and useful critique. However, it is not enough to say that old assumptions about publics, gatekeeping and agenda-setting are no longer reliable. We may also wish to study the broad range of social and political struggles that inform rising levels of mistrust in public institutions such as the media and government. By doing so, we can address fundamental political-economic changes.

The stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been experienced equally. Workers in long-term care facilities, for example, along with low-paid retail workers, were at much greater risk. While many White-collar professionals worked at home via online networks such as Zoom, workers who stocked shelves or staffed the tills at supermarkets were expected to brave public transit during a deadly pandemic to serve the needs of the broader community (Allen, 2022). Some North American jurisdictions provided support, but in most cases, these workers did so without danger pay or paid sick leave. “Physical distancing,” as one Toronto public health official put it, “is a privilege by postal code” (Bascaramurty et al., 2020). According to Danielle Allen (2022), the failure to provide equitable health care “threatened all political regimes on earth with legitimacy failure” (10).

The early days of the pandemic saw ritual displays of support for nurses and doctors involving evening pot-banging and declarations that “we are all in this together” (Pelley, 2020). Less than two years later, healthcare workers across North America found themselves on the receiving end of angry crowds of anti-vaxxers shouting abuse and groundless conspiracy theories (Chaarani, 2021). Then, for more than three weeks in February 2022, Canada’s normally sedate parliament was surrounded by a convoy of trucks organized by a collection of right-wing conspiracy theorists. Some carried Nazi flags, and some claimed that the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau was connected to a globalist plot to rule the world in league with the World Economic Forum (WEF), while others hurled abuse at local Ottawa citizens for observing the city’s public indoor mask

mandate. All rallied around the libertarian cry for freedom and an end to vaccine mandates. Some protest leaders presented a memorandum of understanding they had drafted calling for the Governor General of Canada to dissolve parliament and join them in a power-sharing agreement that would unlawfully unseat the elected Liberal government (Ling, 2022a).

In contrast with public opinion polling in the United States, particularly among Republican voters, polling prepared for Elections Canada suggests that a strong majority of Canadian voters (81%) still have faith in their electoral process, while 77% said they agreed with public health restrictions to address the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when asked whether governments care about what people like them think, two-thirds (66%) of respondents said “no”. Another poll found that only one-third of Canadians surveyed believe most people can be trusted (Moscrop, 2022). Millions of Canadians also say they do not trust the media or government. Forty-four percent of respondents agreed with the statement “much of the information we receive from news organizations is false.” A slight majority (52%) agreed that “official government accounts of events can’t be trusted” (Anderson and Coletto, 2022). The data suggests that generalized bonds of solidarity and mutual commitment—sometimes referred to in the abstract as a social contract—are under stress, even though most Canadians complied with pandemic regulations. “Solidarity,” writes Danielle Allen, is fundamental for liberal democracies. It “is the resource that enables people to make small sacrifices of liberty so as to avoid harm to others with whom they have a social bond” (Allen, 2022: xii). As these bonds of solidarity weaken, they can be replaced by other, sometimes fleeting, symbolic forms of the political imaginary. The quite literal cry of “freedom” shouted daily during the occupation of Parliament Hill was perhaps one of the most visible indicators that social cleavages had intensified and that new communities of interest were forming. The anti-vaccine protesters were not cut from whole cloth, but the empty signifier of “freedom” became a unifying libertarian rallying point.

The strain on social bonds in North America was part of a global trend. Food insecurity doubled during the first two years of the pandemic “from 135 million to 276 million, with almost 50 million on the edge of famine” (Owen, 2022). Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor continued to grow exponentially. Oxfam International reports that the wealth of the 10 richest men doubled during the pandemic, while the incomes of 99 percent of the world’s population declined (Ahmed et al., 2022). It is not surprising that a growing chorus of commentators from a wide range of political perspectives have suggested that liberal democracy is facing a legitimization crisis (Bulowski, 2020; Castells, 2019; Fraser, 2015; Fukuyama, 2022; Gerstle, 2022; McLaughlin, 2022; Rogers, 2022).

But while the pandemic exacerbated and highlighted the problem of social inequality, it was not the cause. Instead, according to Robert Putnam (2020), “pre-existing geographic, class, and racial disparities became even more visible” (441–442). Government lockdown mandates shuttered many businesses leading to large-scale layoffs along with economic and emotional hardship for workers. However, the rise of social inequality was more than 40 years in the making, coinciding with the collapse of the post-war social consensus in Western democracies, which had lasted roughly from 1950–1980. This era saw “institutions and social and fiscal policies created for the express purpose of reducing inequality,” such as public ownership, social insurance, and progressive taxes (Piketty, 2020: 868). The subsequent trend against this was global. Comparative data from across Europe, the United States, Russia, India, and China indicate that from 1980–2018, inequality increased sharply. Using the measure of income distribution, we see that across all five regions, the top decile’s share of income rose from 25–35% in 1980 to between 35 and 55% in 2018. This increase came at the expense of the bottom 50% of income earners. In the United States, their

income had fallen to 10% (Piketty, 2020: 20–21). In what follows, we will take a step back and ask how these material conditions affect solidarity.

Theorizing progressive solidarity

In his discussion of difference and solidarity, Jeffery Alexander (1998) argues that “It is not the mere fact of energetic positive self-identification, much less the simple demand for deliberation, but the construction of the social context within which claims for recognition are made that determines whether the negative understanding of social differences—‘stereotyping’ in an earlier vocabulary—can be ameliorated or reversed” (6). Alexander draws our attention towards the unavoidable social context in which “claims for recognition” are made, recognized, denied, or disputed. In this “fragmented public sphere,” he argues, the “utopian promises of civil society” play out unevenly for historical reasons. He notes that “[c]ivil society is not and has not been integrated, cohesive, and substantially solidary” (6). Progressive change has occurred, but unevenly; it is in this context that continued and future representations for inclusion have been made in the hope that a “more advanced model of civil integration” can be achieved.

Understanding the experience of social contradictions is at the heart of the historical work of E.P. Thompson. In the *Origins of the English Working Class*, Thompson documented in exhaustive detail how ‘friendly’ societies formed in the late 18th century helped to nourish popular traditions and forms of organization unique to English plebian culture. These ‘cooperative’ societies and trade unions were self-organized popular institutions in which an autodidactic culture of sobriety and mutual improvement was encouraged and supported by non-conformist church groups. And while they advocated for the collective rights of workers, these societies also served an important social reproduction role that was homologous with the needs of employers who increasingly required workers with sufficient literacy skills. It was in these ‘reading’ societies, and later the popular coffee houses, that copies of radical newspapers were read aloud to illiterate workers and others striving to improve themselves and better understand their shared interests as a class. These public readings also helped to circumvent the stamp taxes levied against the radical press (Thompson, 1968: 781–914).

At the same time, this emergent working-class culture, mixed with older traditions of the ‘freeborn Englishman’, combined with middle-class pamphleteers to “put an exceptionally high value upon the rights of the press, of speech, of meeting and of personal liberty,” (Thompson, 1968: 805). The solidarity of the English working class was forged through a mix of factors—there was the conflict between labour and capital on the shop floor, but there was a common working-class popular experience in the overlapping spheres of culture, politics, and the economy. It was workers’ involvement with trade unions, cooperative societies, and radical periodicals which re-claimed the dominant bourgeois values of freedom of assembly and speech for themselves as a class. These social bonds prepared the ground for the eventual development of a shared working-class consciousness shaped through the experience of capitalist exploitation in the industrial revolution. Similarly, E.J. Hobsbawm commented on how the experience of popular culture affected social relations and supported a shared feeling of confidence that working people could remake the world to better serve their collective interests:

But the novelty and rapidity of the social change which engulfed them encouraged the labourers to think in terms of an entirely changed society, based on their experience and ideas as opposed to their oppressors’. It would be cooperative and not

competitive, collectivist and not individualist. It would be ‘socialist’ (Hobsbawm, 1991 [1962]: 254–55).

Here is evidence, following Williams (1977), of an emergent structure of feeling: “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (132).

According to Ellen Meiksins Wood, Thompson’s emphasis on how objective relations of production are experienced is a methodological strength that allows for the exploration of social complexity and contradiction.

The concept of class as relationship and process stresses that objective relations to the means of production are significant because they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles; that these conflicts and struggles shape social experience ‘in class ways’, even when they do not express themselves in class consciousness or in clearly visible formations; and that over time we can discern how these relationships impose their logic, their pattern, on social processes (Wood, 1995: 82).

Class is not an object or thing; it is a relationship and process that evolves over time under specific historical conditions and structures. Wood argued that historians and sociologists “explore what these structures do to people’s lives, how they do it, and what people do about it—or, as Thompson might put it, how the determining pressures of structured processes are experienced and handled by people” (97). He revealed how class solidarity emerged over time through the popular struggles of working people against reactionary class resistance to their claims for representation and justice. In his holistic approach to social science, modern social order is characterized by the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe, the decline of religion and belief in magic and the growth of mutual or cooperative societies. This general secularizing trend gives way to what John B. Thompson calls “the age of ideologies”, culminating “in the radical revolutionary movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Thompson, 1990: 77).

A thorough review of debates involving ideology and social reproduction is beyond the scope of this article. It is worth noting that a range of theories have been offered to explain how the existing social order is reproduced, including arguments concerning how state and cultural institutions, such as the media, justice, and educational systems, yield shared beliefs and values that secure the long-term interests of dominant classes (Althusser, 1994; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Marcuse, 1964).

The pessimistic strain of these radical critiques contrasts sharply with the work of the so-called end-of-ideology theorists led by sociologist Daniel Bell. Following the end of the Second World War, with the post-war consumer culture boom, a consensus developed among liberal and conservative intellectuals: radical doctrines of revolutionary change were on the decline in developed industrial societies of the global north. Bell and others suggested that in the emerging “Post Industrial Society” (Bell, 1973), social tensions and contradictions would be managed away through benign technocratic administration. With the hindsight of 50 years, it is clear that Bell was wrong and that social contradictions continue to be experienced in the workplace and the broader lifeworld. They are also implicated in new struggles of social reproduction at the level of class, gender, race, and identity.

In contrast, what follows considers the interlinked instability of cultural, economic, and political spheres in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in North America. It will be argued that the popular experiences generated through the interconnections of the three

spheres are conflicted because “of the complex relation of the differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes” (Williams, 1977: 134). The article will proceed to sketch the broader social totality within which fragmented social groups struggle for their versions of social justice and equality. In this context, one can examine liberal democracy’s legitimation crisis and the difficulties of building and sustaining progressive solidarity.

Hegemony and subaltern fragmentation

Our first step is to document the contradictions and social struggles that have emerged since the crisis of global financial capitalism and the Great Recession of 2008. As Nancy Fraser (2019) has argued, the hegemonic common sense of neoliberal capitalism has destabilized and come under challenge from all sides—from the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests on the left to the reactionary backlash from the far right, as seen in the January 6 siege of the U.S. Congress and the occupation of Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada.

In the theory of hegemony, as Fraser (2019) suggests, the “organizational counterpart is the hegemonic bloc: a coalition of disparate social forces that the ruling class assembles, and through which asserts leadership.” For this to be challenged, or changed, “dominated classes must construct a new common sense, or counter hegemony, through a new, more powerful political alliance, or counter hegemonic bloc” (10).

Hegemonic relations are always social relations in which dominated social groups, following Gramsci, engage in a philosophy of praxis “made dialectical in the contrast between popular and high culture” (Gramsci, 1971: 395). Commenting on the Protestant Reformation and French Revolution, Gramsci noted that these “populist” phases required “a long process, with actions and reactions, coming together and drifting apart and the growth of very numerous and complex new formations” (395–396). Gramsci observed that the struggle of dominated groups and classes to shed their subaltern status and gain autonomy is fragmented and contradictory.

Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy ... (52).

One can argue that such contradictory developments have unfolded in North America since 2010, beginning with Occupy Wall Street’s chant “We are the 99 percent.” There were others. In Canada, the Idle No More movement championed indigenous rights; global # MeToo protests were sparked by the sexual harassment scandals involving Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein; and, there were the worldwide BLM protests against police violence and racism. In the wake of these campaigns, many North American corporations introduced tougher sexual harassment policies and gender

equality training, alongside policies to address systemic racism, with mixed success (Kantor and Twohey, 2022; Paddon, 2020).

A similarly contradictory dynamic was at play among mainstream progressive neoliberal political parties in Canada. In a well-publicized gesture, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who liked to boast about his feminist bona fides, announced that half of his cabinet ministers would be women. He was later accused of hypocrisy after two female cabinet ministers, including Canada's first indigenous Minister of Justice, were removed from the Liberal Party caucus after they charged him with bullying (Rauhala, 2019). Trudeau also made numerous public apologies following the publication of photos depicting him in Black Face as a younger man.

Occupy has been credited with making "activism cool" and "shifting the window of what is deemed politically acceptable discourse" in North America (Levitin, 2021). But while many in the business world have embraced rainbow-colored rebranding to endorse LGBTQ rights, there has been little enthusiasm in corporate boardrooms for endorsing the class antagonisms emanating from the Occupy encampments that mushroomed across the continent and world wide. Meanwhile, elected public officials on the populist right in the United States endorsed the political imaginary shared by those who occupied spaces of power in the January 6 Capitol riot. Similarly, in Canada, some public officials supported the actions of truck drivers who blocked Ottawa roads and Parliament Hill.

The BLM movement, which enjoyed an initial increase in support from Republican voters following the 2020 killing of George Floyd by a police officer, saw support plunge a year later, especially among White people (Chudy and Jefferson, 2021). The movement routinely faced harsh criticism from commentators on the religious right, members of the Republican Party loyal to President Donald Trump, and influential media organizations, such as Fox News.

At this time, right-wing populist groups emerged that "intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them" (Gramsci, 1971: 52). They first became prominent with the rise of the Tea Party Movement in the United States in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession. Recent years have seen far-right radical extremists organize in opposition to the hegemonic "progressive neoliberalism" represented by the American Democratic and Canadian Liberal parties (Fraser, 2019). One study found that Canadians were promoting right-wing extremism in thousands of conversations openly taking place on the internet. British researchers tracked five far-right-extremist subgroups in Canada: White supremacists; ethnonationalists; anti-Muslim groups; militia groups; and misogynistic actors dubbed the "manosphere" (Freeze, 2020). And on the August 12, 2017 march in Charlottesville North Carolina, a racist rally featured torch-carrying far-right ethnonationalists chanting "Jews will not replace us." The American Department of Homeland Security stated that the biggest domestic threat facing the United States comes from "racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists" (Sullivan and Benner, 2021).

How do these new protest social blocs fare when assessed from the perspective of social solidarity? The #Me Too, BLM and Idle No More movements were mobilized around issues of gender, race, and colonial injustice, respectively. The Occupy Movement highlighted income inequality. These are all issues governing neoliberal parties in Canada and the United States vowed to address. As mentioned, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has championed gender inequality in his cabinet. He marched alongside BLM protesters and used his 2021 Canada Day celebration speech to encourage Canadians "to be honest with ourselves" about the country's colonial suppression of indigenous peoples (Gilmore, 2021). Indeed, according to Adolph Reed Jr. (2013), "versions of racial and gender equality" are to be pursued within this renewed neoliberal

project, but, he cautions, “exclusively within the terms of given patterns of capitalist class relations” (53).

Canadian pollster Frank Graves and journalist Stephen Maher note that radical movements on the far right invoke a reactionary populist discourse shared by conservative politicians in both Canada and the United States. Here, a downtrodden majority is pitted against a so-called ‘woke’ liberal elite “more concerned with virtue signaling than dealing with inflation or creating affordable housing” (Graves and Maher, 2022). But, they argue, opinion research in Canada indicates this partisan animus has deeper roots.

Older mainstream Tories, motivated by a desire for low taxes and smaller government, have been joined by a younger and angrier set of voters. Radicalized into toxic views by vaccine mandates, they are far more economically insecure and display higher levels of institutional mistrust than other voters (Graves and Maher, 2022).

What links the reactionary populist movements in the United States, Canada, Britain, Hungary, Italy, and Brazil, argue Graves and Maher, is a shared feeling that their lives are materially less secure than their parents and grandparents. In contrast, polling indicates that more economically secure “[u]rban progressives are inclined to assume the governing consensus in Ottawa, which prioritizes their ideas of diversity and inclusion, will continue indefinitely” (Graves and Maher, 2022).

The ‘affective polarization’ (Iyengar et al., 2019), of the electorate—in which voters become less tolerant of others with opposing political views—is amplified by online misinformation, but it is supported by the real experiences of people continually struggling with stagnant wages, precarious employment, pension insecurity and a weakened healthcare system. Rioters who stormed the Capital Building on January 6, as well as the truckers who blocked roads on Ottawa’s Parliament Hill were drawn by unfounded conspiracy theories advanced by bad-faith actors and politicians who saw political opportunity in stoking the flames of culture war. Trump had infamously called Mexican migrants ‘drug dealers and rapists’ and promised to build a border wall to keep them out. In Canada, Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre was seen to walk a fine line with anti-vaccine falsehoods: “Just as he is careful to echo the crowd’s anger over vaccine mandates, Poilievre avoids saying anything that will contradict their false beliefs” (Graves and Maher, 2022). The discourse deployed by both politicians encourages and rewards anger and anxiety without addressing peoples’ material conditions.

Additionally, some scholars have hypothesized that both progressive and reactionary mobilizations seen during the pandemic have been fundamentally conditioned by COVID-driven anxieties.

[T]he futures of COVID may not be controlled through existing modern methods of risk management relying on probabilistic calculations, as they will not suffice to contain the erupted awareness about the ever-present possibility of unknown contingencies. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that truth will ultimately prevail over conspiracies; the impending political/ideological struggles to set the meaning of COVID-19 will involve the production of competing fantasies that offer different ways of closure. Moreover, the occurrence of the largest racial justice mobilization in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement in the pandemic summer of 2020 was possibly a manifestation of the radical mobilizing effect of anxiety (Rumelili, 2023: 3).

Wendy Brown suggests that we should not comfortably assume the self-destruction of far-right actors (arising from their anger and scandalous behavior). Deep-seated social trends require investigation.

[I]n the Global North, neoliberal economic policy devastated rural and suburban regions, emptying them of decent jobs, pensions, schools, services, and infrastructure as social spending dried up and capital chased the cheap labor and tax havens of the Global South. Meanwhile, an unprecedented cultural and religious divide was opening. Hip, educated, slender, secular, multicultural, globetrotting urbanites were building a different moral and cultural universe from the midlanders, whose economic woes were salted with steadily growing estrangement from the mores of those who ignored, ridiculed, or disdained them (Brown, 2019: 3).

Brown argues here that neoliberal capitalist policies of privatization and deregulation help explain the cultural performance of reactionary populist social forces. Brown also argues that the anger and resentment at Trump rallies (and it might be added, the conspiratorial libertarianism on display on Parliament Hill in Ottawa) arises from humiliation, suffering, and lost entitlement. Importantly, it is not refined into a new set of “moral values, but remains rancor and rage” (117). After 40 years of policies deliberately reducing the state’s ability to support social reproductive needs, from health care to education, the social mores supporting the concept of the common good give way to nihilism and the will to power (Brown, 2019).

Former President Trump’s authoritarian affinities were designed, in part, to appeal to the unsettled and volatile emotions that Brown outlines. An anecdote from May 31, 2020, is instructive. The *New York Times* posted a story online with the headline: “As Protests and Violence Spill Over, Trump Shrinks Back” (Baker and Haberman, 2020). On that weekend, large-scale protests over the brutal police killing of George Floyd were organized across the United States. On Monday June 1 in Washington, D.C., peaceful BLM gatherings were situated in Lafayette Square, a short distance from the White House. President Donald Trump had reportedly retreated to a bunker beneath the White House for safety. When he arrived in the Oval Office for work on Monday morning, reports said the President was agitated over the televised images he had seen on cable news coverage and wanted to act (Parker et al., 2020). As Trump delivered a live television address from the White House declaring himself “an ally of all peaceful protesters”, split screens on cable news channels showed live images of police dispersing the non-violent crowd in Lafayette Square with rubber bullets and smoke canisters. An Australian TV news crew were among the many people struck with batons. Minutes later, with the protesters dispersed, Trump and a small entourage walked the short distance from the White House, cameras in tow, to the St. John’s Episcopal Church where he held up a bible for a photo-op. The intended image was clear: the President was in control.

The media spectacle was a striking instance of the use of state violence, but not in the interest of protecting the public or upholding the law. President Trump wanted a photo-op to display his power and control. This is a stark exemplar of Antonio Gramsci’s argument that hegemonic power is maintained through the management of consent alongside coercion (Gramsci, 1971). The spectacle also carried the potential to fragment the working class along racial lines. It is in these kinds of performances, argues Adolph Reed Jr. (2013), that social identities such as race and gender are separated from the basic dynamics of capitalism, thus allowing the “ideologies of ascriptive difference” to help “stabilize a social order by legitimizing its hierarchies of wealth, power, and privilege, including its social division of labor, as the natural order of things” (49).

Gary Gerstle (2022) argues persuasively that the success of any political order depends on its ability to shape what a majority of citizens and elites view as “politically possible and desirable”. However, by the same token, “losing the capacity to exercise ideological hegemony signals a political order’s decline” (3). As Edward Comor notes: “Gramsci approached hegemony as a process; one in which the forces, relations, and mediations shaping class rule had to be addressed in all their complexity” (Comor 2015: 1). One striking example of this complexity came when Senator Mitt Romney—the Republican Party’s 2012 nominee for the American presidency—was recorded marching alongside anti-racist protesters at a Washington D.C. BLM event, which put him offside of the Trump White House’s official position. This demarcated the movement as a counter-public standing outside the political imaginary of Trump supporters. Similarly, the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in the immediate aftermath of the Trump church photo-op signaled division and complexity at the highest levels. He stated that,

[w]hen I joined the military, some 50 years ago, I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution, never did I dream that troops taking that same oath would be ordered under any circumstance to violate the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens—much less to provide a bizarre photo op for the elected commander in chief, with military leadership standing alongside (cited in Blake, 2020).

Trump’s use of force in Lafayette Square also exposed a rift among the evangelical community. Some pastors, including 90-year-old televangelist Pat Robertson, criticized Trump’s use of the bible to justify the use of state violence (Teague, 2020). While the political order’s hegemonic common sense was being challenged from a wide range of ideological positions, the crisis involved more than disputes at the level of discourse.

Legitimation crisis and the state

Citing a litany of evidence, including declining electoral turnouts, the corrupting influence of big money and the “collapse of traditional left-wing parties in the Global North,” Fraser (2015) asserts that liberal democracy is in crisis (157):

[E]very capitalist social formation harbors a deep-seated *political* “crisis tendency” or “contradiction.” On the one hand, legitimate, efficacious public power is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s drive to endless accumulation tends to destabilize the very public power on which it relies. This political contradiction of capitalism lies at the root, I claim, of the present political crisis—and of the hollowing out of public power (159).

In short, without political legitimacy, capitalism and the social order become unstable. Here, Fraser borrows Jürgen Habermas’s core categories of system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1989a). The system world logics of the economy valorize “growth, efficiency, choice, and negative liberty” (Fraser, 2015: 164). On the other hand, “the polity appeals to the public interest, equal citizenship, democratic legitimacy, and popular sovereignty” (164). Fraser argues that the contradiction can play out in two ways: “One result can be an administrative crisis, in which public powers lack the necessary heft to govern effectively.” And a “second result can be a legitimation crisis, in which public opinion turns against a dysfunctional system that fails to deliver” (165).

Jürgen Habermas’ book *Legitimation Crisis* (1975) theorized the contradictions of state-managed monopoly capitalism—more colloquially called the welfare state. In the past, the state was

primarily concerned with repressing revolts against the private-market economy. Subsequently, they undertook the additional functions of crisis management. How, asked Habermas, could crises be managed through the expanded administrative powers of the state without provoking a legitimation crisis? A crisis could happen, he suggested, if a critical number of citizens were no longer motivated by “the privatized, consumerist, and careerist orientations that undergirded their loyalty to the regime” (cited in Fraser, 2015: 171).

For a while, the New Left uprisings of the 60s and 70s appeared to challenge the legitimacy of capitalism. But, the system was retrieved. A potential legitimation crisis was resolved with the replacement of monopoly state capitalism with what became known as neoliberal capitalism. Fraser (2015) calls it financialized capitalism—where power devolved from the state to central banks and global financial institutions, leading to a transfer of debt and responsibility onto individual citizens. The general result, she argues, “is a growing incapacity of public powers to rein in private powers” (176). Markets, under the new hegemony, were to be set free from state and bureaucratic interference. The mantra was privatization and deregulation.

This apparent ‘common sense’ came to an explosive end during the 2008 global financial collapse when the instability of financial derivatives and collateralized debt obligations led to the so-called Great Recession—an accumulation crisis of fictitious capital circuits in which the state provided corporate welfare to bail out the financial sector, along with the automotive industry. It too had become financialized through in-house lending. The overall impact of the recession was dire for labour and poor people worldwide. Arguably, this served to delegitimize the capitalist order and expose the central irrationality of the system.

The weakened state was no longer able to address the range of crises facing society, from raging unemployment, growing inequality, job precarity and environmental damage caused by climate change. The result was decreased faith in public institutions, and the core values that undergird social peace and stability. For Fraser (2015), that social consensus depends “on the political common sense through which system dysfunctions are experienced and interpreted by social actors” (181). Neoliberal common sense views subjects as autonomous centers of initiative, rather than the “passive clients” of state-managed capitalism. Autonomy is private and centered on “choice” and “personal responsibility.” It’s no longer the state’s job to help you. People, as possessors of human capital, must take the initiative to maximize their own potential. In other words, the contradictions of the neoliberal order are experienced and understood as personal problems without a public solution.

Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult for people to comprehend the broader social totality of capitalist social relations confronting them. This “crisis of subjectivity” (Engster, 2016) is often experienced in fragmented form as alienation. Or as David Harvey writes: “The capacity to arrive democratically at collective decisions gets lost in the perpetual battle between the conflicting rationalities of isolated private interests and of state powers. Social wealth disappears into the pockets of private persons (producing a world of private wealth and public squalor)” (Harvey 2014: 268).

Canada’s pandemic experience reveals how the state’s capacity to act in the public interest continued to be challenged by political actors who operationalized enduring neoliberal tropes. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, some wealthy countries, such as the United States and Canada, allowed government-active economic policy to stave off the recessionary impacts of public health mandates and lockdowns (Gindin, 2020). In Canada, new policies, such as the Liberal government’s Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), were arguably successful

as clear examples of how the collective interest could be advanced. The CERB funded eligible workers who lost their jobs because of COVID-19 with a monthly payment. In the absence of such supports, the Canadian economy could have fallen into a steep recession. Reporting by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and *The Globe and Mail*, a center-right establishment newspaper, was largely supportive of the policy. And yet, the program was opposed by right-wing columnists and opinion makers writing for Postmedia newspapers (the largest chain of dailies in Canada), such as the overtly right-of-center *National Post* and *Toronto Sun*. They remained loyal to the same neoliberal assumptions that had held sway for the past 40 years. Pierre Poilievre, who at the time was the Conservative Party's finance critic, went so far as to call CERB "a gigantic experiment in freakonomics" that would punish people for working hard and turn others into welfare slackers (Iverson, 2020). Poilievre praised the protesters who illegally occupied the streets surrounding Ottawa's Parliament Hill, calling them freedom-loving patriots.

Poilievre would eventually go on to easily win a contest for Conservative Party leader, running on a populist platform that was partly Trumpian in style and content. Poilievre's campaign did not attack minorities, but he used every opportunity to attack so-called elites. He declared personal freedom from government "gatekeepers," the end to vaccine mandates, and celebrated choice and competition in money and financial products. Poilievre touted the cryptocurrency Bitcoin as a hedge against inflation saying he wanted to make Canada the "blockchain capital of the world." He later refused to apologize when the value of the crypto currency collapsed causing losses for anyone who may have followed his advice (Tasker, 2022). Poilievre also flirted with baseless conspiracy theories about the WEF. He labeled the annual gathering of wealthy businessmen, politicians, and celebrities as "socialist" and promised that, if elected, none of his cabinet ministers would be allowed to attend (Ling, 2022b). As part of his populist monetary policy, he promised to fire the Governor of the Bank of Canada.

Experiencing crisis as anger, fear, anxiety, and depression

As detailed, competing hegemonic blocs have sparred to have their preferred common sense prevail. This struggle is playing out in debates over identity politics, feminist demands for equality and calls for racial and indigenous justice. However, the numerous oppositional movements are highly fragmented, and their mere existence does not tell us how these "movements might converge and coalesce into a more unified solidarious movement against capital's dominance" (Harvey, 2014: 266).

A significant barrier to building progressive solidarity and overcoming oppositional fragmentation is the anxiety which is imbricated within neoliberal social relations. There are multiple factors giving rise to this experience. During the years of neoliberal policy hegemony, wages and the labour share of income fell, while inequality and poverty increased. Unions also lost bargaining power. During all of this, the fragmentation of audiences through the circuits of legacy news institutions, right-wing radio, and social media contributed to a "balkanization of knowledge" and an "epistemic crisis" as truth claims in the public sphere were subject to misinformation and became tests of identity and partisan loyalty (Benkler et al., 2018; Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008; Nelson, 2019).

On income, the Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute reports that the "major factor depressing wage growth for middle earners and driving the growth of wage inequality over the last four decades has been the erosion of collective bargaining" (Mishel, 2021). The report also argues

that neoliberal policies of fiscal austerity and high-interest rates combined to unnecessarily inflate unemployment over the same period. In the 1950s, 35% of workers were unionized in the United States. By 2020, that number had fallen to just under 11 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In Canada, the decline in unionization was less dramatic, dropping from 37.6% in 1981 to 28.4% in 2014. However, the decrease disproportionately affected men, falling from more than 42% in 1981 to 27% in 2014. During the same period, unionization rates for women remained relatively stable (between 30 and 32%), due in part to the high proportion of women with public sector employment in healthcare and education (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Close to 8 million people lost their jobs in the United States alone in the first few months of the financial crisis (Dufour and Orhangazi, 2014). The pain was widespread but unevenly distributed by race and ethnicity. Median net worth among American families dropped 39% from 2007 to 2010, according to a Pew Research survey. Low-income White families experienced greater losses during the recession than lower-income Black families. However, those White families had started from a comparatively wealthier position, holding 10 times the median wealth of Black families prior to the pandemic (Kochhar and Richard Fry, 2014; Kochhar and Cilluffo, 2017). The result was that disparity between White and Black households deepened (Gerstle, 2022: 235).

While the labour share of income, as a percentage of gross domestic product, declined, after tax corporate profits rose. By 2014 they were at their highest level in decades. The banking sector experienced a significant redistribution of wealth, and the largest institutions “increased their size and market shares through acquisitions and other means” (Dufour and Orhangazi, 2014). The massive U.S. government bailout of the financial sector sowed the seeds of anger and resentment among the progressive supporters of the Occupy Movement, and among the reactionary right, such as the Tea Party Movement.

The bank bailouts were part of a much broader financialization of capitalist society. Public and private debt had increased, while broader social provisions were clawed back. Governments around the globe adopted austerity budgets leaving debt-burdened individuals struggling to make ends meet (after decades of wage suppression and job shedding due to automation) (Streeck, 2016). And, the responsibility for managing this turmoil and uncertainty remained individualized as labour competition weakened residual bonds of solidarity. As Zygmunt Bauman (2007a) explains:

[T]he task of coping with fears emanating from new uncertainties has been, like the fears themselves, deregularized and subsidiarized, that is left to local initiatives and efforts, and in large part privatized – transferred in large measure to the sphere of life politics, that is left by and large to the care, ingenuity and cunning of individuals, and to the markets, stoutly resenting and effectively resisting all forms of communal (political) interference, let alone control (68).

For Streeck, social policy, even prior to the crisis, had become oriented towards “public provision for private ‘competitiveness’”—labour was recommodified, taxes lowered, regulations on capital relaxed, to enhance the flexibility of labour and capital markets. Meritocracy replaced the entitlements of citizenship. With social supports weakened, and economic precarity on the rise, individuals were left to struggle on their own, or rely, according to Streeck, on four broad types of behaviors to mollify their “entropic social life”, which he “identified as coping, hoping, doping and shopping” (Streeck, 2016: 22). After the first two years of the pandemic, the impact of declining mental health on labour productivity became part of the mainstream discussion among business elites (Molko, 2022).

For many people, the experience of neoliberal social relations is loneliness. As Robert Putnam notes: “Since the turn of the twenty-first century, fewer and fewer Americans are socializing through membership organizations” (Putnam, 2020: 2). Instead, mass membership organizations have been replaced by non-profit organizations which have altered the nature of progressive advocacy.

The shift to the non-profit drastically changed the composition of these advocacy groups. Instead of relying on dues-paying members, they reached out to wealthy donors to fill their coffers. In a United States in which the government was increasingly giving up its redistributive role, this move created a natural constituency from new welfare recipients. The logic was self-evident: associations that practically operated as businesses but did not want to fulfill their tax obligations to the state saw an opportunity in the non-profit model. The American political scientist Theda Skocpol casts them as “advocates without members”: non-profit organizations functioning as the lawyers of a mute defendant (Jäger, 2022).

According to Anton Jäger, advocacy has shifted from mass mobilization to lobbying, PR, and marketing. The change has similarly affected political parties contributing to further alienation between politicians and citizens. It is a moment of “dealignment” in which the decline of job security, and the drift away from membership and voluntary organizations, are inadequately supplemented by online experience, which “accelerates and entrenches social atomization” (Jäger, 2022).

Neoliberal privatization and deregulation dramatically reshaped news media, particularly in the United States. There were two key moments. The first was the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Established in 1949, the regulation mandated that all broadcasters using the public airwaves must broadcast all opposing views on controversial topics. The second, was the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which lifted barriers to media ownership and consolidation. These changes helped give birth to nationally syndicated bombastic right-wing radio talk shows, which joined forces with wealthy donors, Republican political operatives, and the evangelical Christian right. The Telecom Act eased ownership regulations and allowed the Salem radio network to go on an acquisition binge to become the predominant Christian radio network in the United States (Nelson, 2019: 56). In addition to its religious programming, the company promoted ‘shock jock’ hosts such as Hugh Hewitt and Sean Hannity who became stars. But no one was more popular than Rush Limbaugh, who epitomized the format’s merger of politics, profit-driven economics, and cultural valency. According to Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, the goal was two-fold: make money by engaging large audiences, and “engender mistrust of the problem-solving capacity of government.” In their judgment 15 years ago, “[w]ithout the requirement to broadcast opposing views, Limbaugh was free to invite “political engagement, not detachment, from his audience by mobilizing emotion in service of a “we/they” contrast between Democrats and the conservatives and conservatism he champions” (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008: 126–27). In Detroit, Salem station WDTK—AKA, The Patriot—bragged that it placed its focus firmly “on the anxieties of the Rust Belt: politics, pop culture, the war on terror, education, immigration, and much more” (Nelson, 2019: 58). The format, with its potent blend of conservative politics, capitalist economics and nativist patriotism was eventually adapted for cable television with the launch of Fox News in 1996. And, eventually, argue Benkler et al. (2018), this “right-wing media ecosystem” grew to include a host of online

purveyors of misinformation, such as Breitbart, Infowars and Gateway Pundit. That represented a radicalization of close to a third of the American media system (14).

In short, we find that the influence in the right-wing media ecosystem, whether judged by hyperlinks, Twitter sharing, or Facebook sharing, is both highly skewed to the far right and highly insulated from other segments of the network, from center-right (which is nearly nonexistent) through the far left (Benkler et al., 2018: 13).

This is the social context in which the nativist rhetoric of Donald Trump took hold. And it is the context of the Occupy and BLM movements. This widespread, but unevenly felt, trauma and anxiety constitute neoliberalism's complex structure of feeling. Given the volatility of the historical conjuncture, it is not surprising that the video of George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, went viral. However, this was not the first recording of its kind. The videoed beating of Rodney King in 1991 by Los Angeles police officers had sparked a series of riots in Los Angeles.

As John B. Thompson argues, the widespread introduction and use of video cameras, and now mobile phones and social media, is part of the changing dynamics of power involving a "new visibility" in which previously occluded activities of both individuals and institutions are made visible to the many (Thompson, 2020). In the past, the death of a Black man in police custody could be more easily managed by police who have long been privileged as "primary definers" of crime and punishment (Hall et al., 2013). More recently, mobile video technology, mediated by for-profit social media algorithms that favor the immediacy of visceral feeling over calm deliberation have accelerated the circulation of image commodities (Dean, 2009). These interactions need to be situated within a broader political economy that accounts for the complexities of cultural, political, and economic exchanges. John B. Thompson remarks that, "the use of communication media involves the creation of new forms of action and interaction, new kinds of social relationships and new ways of relating to others and to oneself" (Thompson, 2020: 4). The broader context of this 'user agency' is markedly different than the popular culture of the 18th and 19th century friendly societies that had featured the supportive in-person readings of radical newspapers with the effect of fostering working-class solidarity.

Jürgen Habermas (1989b) has argued that political will formation must involve a civic or community perspective if it is to carry legitimacy. Without the independent communicative exchange of autonomous citizens democracy is at risk. In this sense, the colonization of public life by instrumental political and economic interests—including profit-oriented social media platforms—constitutes a structural threat. Building on this idea, Hartmut Rosa suggests that the experience of social media—not the technology itself, but the social relations through which it is experienced—is problematic. Citing the work of scholars studying social fragmentation (Hedayatifar et al., 2019), Rosa makes the argument that:

[T]he physical separation of lifeworlds is reduplicated and mirrored in virtual space. The established construction of a common world out of facts, interpretations, stories and personalities on headline radio and television news programmes as well as in printed media has given way to a wide variety of media sub-universes that are not so much in competition as sealed off from each other (Rosa, 2022: 24).

For Rosa, this social separation in media and lifestyle consumption encourages "the loss of perceived common ground between different lifeworlds, as people from different socio-cultural (and ethnic) milieus are at home in very different universes of knowledge, practice and discourse" (24). In this retelling, the accelerated circulation of fabulous conspiracy theories, including claims

that vaccines are implanted with microchips to allow governments to track people, is facilitated by new forms of media, but is not a direct result of them. Democracy is not, argues Rosa, simply a matter of cognitive exchanges; it is a visceral experience that has a bodily and affective dimension. Conspiracy theories “resonate” for those people searching for information that confirms and strengthens their lived experience and identity. Research into fact-checking so-called fake news also suggests that flagging verifiably false social media posts as misinformation does not solve the problem (Andersen and S oe, 2020; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). As Rosa notes, blame cannot be placed solely on online ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers,’ and the solution to misinformation will not be found in the production of ‘better’ algorithms. The fear, anger and mistrust many people feel may be misdirected, but it has material roots that are exploited by for-profit media, bad actors, politicians, and moral entrepreneurs who possess the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital required to act in unsettled moments (Compton, 2022; Jutel, 2013). This is the political, economic, and media-cultural environment in which the January 6 insurrection and the Ottawa Trucker convoy occurred.

Discussion

We return to the questions posed at the beginning of this article: What characterizes the contemporary structure of feeling, and what are the implications for progressive solidarity? The past 40 years of neoliberalism created greater inequality and sought to normalize labour precarity. As David Harvey has documented, this accelerated a social decomposition that has transformed labour into a disposable commodity. Erosion of unionized workplace protections is coupled with short-term labour contracts, increased privatization, and the imposition of personal responsibility over employer and political obligations. The consequences can be described as follows:

Stripped of the protective cover of lively democratic institutions and threatened with all manner of social dislocations, a disposable workforce inevitably turns to other institutional forms through which to construct social solidarities and express a collective will (Harvey, 2005: 171).

Harvey suggests that these substitute institutions include everything from non-governmental organizations and civic groups to criminal cartels, secular cults, and religious sects. On the progressive side of the ledger, we witness the mass occupy movements—which erupted from 2010 in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East—and the BLM. On the reactionary right, we saw, prominently, the January 6 Capitol insurrection in Washington, D.C. and the Trucker convoy movement in Ottawa. Both were infused with a mixture of unfounded conspiracy theories ascribing malevolent intent on the part of the political, economic, and cultural elites.

What may link these otherwise antithetical configurations is the social decomposition of a “fluid middle-class” strata that fears losing economic, social, and cultural capital. Nick Dyer-Witford (2015) has cautioned against oversimplifying the extent to which class decomposition can be tied to the Movement of the Squares, citing the role of labour strikes in Egypt (158–159). The point is well taken; however, some tentative research has indicated that participants in the U.S. Capitol insurrection, who were mostly male and White were also members of the precarious middle (Strether, 2021). More research is required on this point. That said, the social unease that comes with economic precarity was not limited to traditional working-class areas of employment. Precarity was a shared experience for workers in childcare, transportation, retail, health care and post-

secondary education. Universities in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand all depend upon low-paid contract instructors to teach most of their undergraduate students. Uncertainty, fear, and anxiety, sometimes mixed with anger, is a common experience for workers with a high-school diploma and adjunct professors with PhDs. What unites workers is a shared structure of feeling: the anxiety of living under neoliberal capitalism. According to Sam Gindin:

Capitalism has, by and large, been successful in making the kind of working class it needs: one that is fragmented, particularist, employer-dependent, pressured by its circumstances to be oriented to the short-term, and too overwhelmed to seriously contemplate another world. The challenge confronting the left is whether it can take advantage of the spaces capitalism has not completely conquered and the contradictions of life under capitalism that have blocked the full integration of working people, to remake the working class into one that has the interest, will, confidence, and capacity to lead a challenge to capitalism (Gindin, 2020).

This organizational task is daunting, and the challenge to capital must be comprehensive. The fragmented and precarious lives of workers today constitute a different affective relation to capital than was documented by E.P. Thompson in his history of the English working class. Capitalist social relations have always supported the atomization and domination of workers; what is different is that the institutional forms and popular associations of today have benefited reactionary forces on the right more than progressive social actors. The progressive mobilizations we have witnessed in recent years have been articulated through online networks such as Facebook and Twitter, but they have proven to be unstable and in some cases, ephemeral. Algorithms designed to maximize profit and monetize anxiety have demonstrated that they can be used to mobilize bodies in space, but they do not maximize solidarity through time.

Because capitalism has many guises and strives to spread its tentacles into the entire lifeworld, any progressive project must exploit the many contradictions felt by workers at the level of everyday experience. “Togetherness,” writes John Michael Roberts, is “not necessarily solidarity.” Rather, it “signals an emotional and physical connection among members, whereas solidarity signals unity structured around a political program” (Roberts, 2014: 179). Progressives need to rally around a political program that addresses the totality of capitalist social relations.

The path forward, argues Fraser (2019), is to build a progressive populism that has “an inclusive politics of recognition” that simultaneously addresses capital’s attacks on working people of all ethnicities and races (30). Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser call this movement a “feminism for the 99 percent.”

Contra fashionable ideologies of “multiplicity,” the various oppressions we suffer do not form an inchoate, contingent plurality. Although each has its own distinctive forms and characteristics, all are rooted in, and reinforced by, one and the same social system. It is by naming that system as *capitalism*, and by joining together to fight against it, that we can best overcome the divisions among us that capital cultivates – divisions of culture, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and gender (Arruzza et al., 2019: 56).

This fight will take many forms. It will require renewed efforts to organize labour—the most encouraging example of which may be the “Red-state Revolts” involving teachers in West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma (Blanc, 2019). Lessons must be learned from the organizational failures experienced by the Occupy Movement. Rituals can help build collective identity and solidarity, but

they should not be fetishized. The “mic checks” and “sparkle fingers” of the Occupy encampments “came to *stand in for strategy* for many Occupy participants” (Smucker, 2017: 105, emphasis in the original). The “horizontal” protests first launched in Zuccotti Park demonstrated an ability to quickly mobilize large numbers of people, but without sustained organization and strategy they disappeared (Nunes, 2021).

Importantly, a progressive project of solidarity will also require a renewed effort to address the crisis in social reproduction and the commodification of formally unpaid domestic work (connected to reduced social provisions in education, health, eldercare, and childcare) (Huws, 2019). The price of women having more equitable access to corporate boardrooms or faculty lounges cannot come at the expense of the precarious reproductive labour that supports it (Arruzza et al., 2019: 72–74). This is not an argument pitting political economy against identity politics; both kinds of politics need to be integrated so as to cover all classes and equity-deserving groups. Collective experience of the social contradictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic could provide a basis upon which to build such a project.

Under neoliberal capitalism “the overall task of sustaining the saleability of labour *en masse* is left to the private worries of individual men and women” (Bauman, 2007b: 9). This social relation must change. Building progressive solidarity will require that we address the root of the crisis of political legitimacy, which is at its core a “crisis of a form of capitalism, global financial capitalism” (Castells, 2019). And, as Thomas Piketty argues, we could do worse than start with rebuilding the social policies that historically reduced inequality, including mixed public-private ownership, social insurance, and progressive taxes (Piketty, 2020). Only by understanding the “new terrain” of the class war (Moody, 2017) will we be able to identify and address peoples’ unmet popular needs, hopes and fears.

Author bio

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