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Social reproduction theory and critical state theory after the COVID-19 syndemic

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Abstract
This article offers an insight into the challenges faced by social movements when attempting to politicize the crisis of reproduction which took place during the COVID-19 syndemic in the city of Barcelona. The analysis provided here expands on the analysis of social reproduction theory and, more broadly, on Marxist feminist approaches. In fact, one of the factors accounting for the absence of politicization during the syndemic is the type of responses given to the emergency by the authoritarian neoliberal state, which were beyond those envisaged by the 10th thesis theorized by Marxism-Feminism and social reproduction theory. Thus, in this article, we argue that this situation is an opportunity to establish a dialogue between critical state theory and Marxism-Feminism to understand how the agency of the state may condition the social reproduction of life and block the emancipatory possibilities of care and the social struggles regarding the crisis of care, complementing thus the10th thesis of Marxism-Feminism.

Keywords
COVID-19, feminism, Marxism, social reproduction, state

Introduction

The dismantling of the welfare state in globalized economies has come hand in hand with a global crisis of care in which women and other marginalized groups often

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experience situations of discrimination, exploitation, vulnerability, and precarization of their living standards, as pointed out by the 10th thesis of Marxism-Feminism (Haugg 2018). In this context of change, care and social struggles not only take place in the sphere of production, but they also occur increasingly in the arena of social reproduction and are therefore related to the central contradiction between capital and the reproduction of life. These conflicts take on different shapes, such as protests in defense of public services – especially in the fields of healthcare and education – for the protection of the pension systems, for sexual and reproductive rights, for access to housing, as well as struggles for the defense of civil and labor rights.

In this sense, the adoption of lockdown and social-distancing measures during the COVID-19 syndemic might have been expected to foster a change in the policies regarding – and the social recognition of – the sphere of reproduction and care as a consequence of the interruption of part of the productive activity, of the normal functioning of schools, and of other services related to care and work and family life conciliation affected by such emergency measures. However, the centrality acquired by care work as the locus of life preservation did not translate into any improvement of the working conditions of caregivers or any change in the orientation of social policies. Instead, most states favored a biomedical and securitarian approach that left the care needs of many unattended, especially those of social groups enduring economic, cultural, and social vulnerabilities.

Therefore, it was the most vulnerable social sectors (low-income households, elderly people, children, dependents, and migrants in situations of vulnerability) that experienced the worst effects of this crisis (Muñoz-Moreno et al. 2020). On the one hand, their chances of obtaining income were limited, as they often worked in jobs in the informal economy; on the other, their access to care-providing sources was reduced in a moment when this was most badly needed (Parella Rubio 2021).

To tend to the needs of these most vulnerable social sectors, several solidarity networks and mutual-support groups were spontaneously established, normally with a base on local communities and stemming from previous activist organizations, associations, and social movements (such as the 15M movement and anti-racist, feminist, or housing-rights movements).

The goal of these solidarity networks and mutual-support groups was to provide assistance to – and tend to the needs of – social sectors which had been left unattended by the system of social protection as a result of lockdown measures (Romanos et al. 2022). To do so, these networks implemented different actions, such as food distribution, provision of care to elderly people, home assistance, emotional support, and face-mask making. In addition, as weeks went by, they felt the need to establish a common space of coordination to develop alternative discourses and actions to those of the state. However, as it is revealed by our study of the case of Barcelona, they did not manage to go beyond the mere coordination of aid actions and did not succeed in articulating an anti-capitalist political response to the crisis of social reproduction that the COVID-19 syndemic had only worsened.

A good deal of research associated with social reproduction theory (SRT) and Marxism-Feminism has focused on the study of corroborative cases such as the Women's Global Strike. However, our aim here is to study a negative case: Why did the

politicization of the crisis of care during the COVID-19 syndemic failed in Barcelona? In other words, why, despite the existence of a dense fabric of solidarity networks and mutual-support groups, these never managed to bring government policies regarding the crisis of care to the public debate and organize mass protest actions, as it had historically been the case with Catalan social movements? We do not mean to say that SRT and Marxism-Feminism are unsuited for the explanation of the present crisis of care, but we argue that the study of a negative case will allow us to consider other factors that have not been sufficiently taken into account by the Theses of Marxism-Feminism and SRT, such as the role of the state's agency in emergency situations. Thus, as we shall see in our discussion of results, we hold that the failure of feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist movements in Barcelona when it came to politicize the crisis of care associated with the COVID-19 syndemic can be accounted for by the state's actions in the face of such an exceptional situation, as it succeeded in combining coercive elements (the state's police function) with other elements based on the creation of consensus (its ideological function), aborting possible displays of social antagonism before an enhanced crisis of care. Our case study will also be helpful to understand how Marxism-Feminism and SRT can be improved if they consider the need to broaden their view of the state in dialogue with the critical state theory developed by authors like Nicos Poulantzas or Bob Jessop.

Social reproduction theory

SRT, contrary to equality feminism and critical equality feminism, argues that women's oppression is due to the place of domestic work in relation to productive, remunerated work and the contribution of the latter to the general process of creation of wealth. So, it holds that neither the hardship of domestic work, nor its unproductive character, nor the fact that it involves women's dependence on men constitutes the deep causes of women's situation of oppression in capitalist societies. For SRT, we can only understand women's oppression if we understand the systemic nature of domestic or reproductive work as a condition of possibility on which the sphere of production is grounded.

In this sense, SRT develops the Marxist postulate that 'every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction' (Marx 1976 [1867]: 711). In other words, the reproduction of waged labor is embedded in capitalist production. Besides this, Marx also mentions the possibility that labor be remunerated below the value of the commodities required for its reproduction, introducing thus the notion of overexploitation in the first volume of *Capital*. Despite this, as SRT points out, when Marx stated this, his interest was in the processes of surplus-value extraction associated with the production of commodities, and he never paid enough attention to the organization of the sphere of reproduction as Dinerstein comments on in her article (Dinerstein 2024).

The Theses of Marxism-Feminism hold that, even though patriarchy precedes the emergence of capitalism, both systems are nowadays in a relation of mutual dependence (Haugg 2018). Thus, it is impossible to speak of one without speaking of the other. We owe one of the first theorizations of this issue to Benston (1969), for whom the housewife figure reduces the cost of production and presupposes the existence of a reserve army that makes it possible to cut salaries in general. Therefore, she points to an interaction between the productive and reproductive spheres.

However, it is autonomist Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici (2012), Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1975), as well as Maria Mies (1999) later on, who move beyond their theoretical approach to the subject. Based on Marx but being critical with their work, they argue that domestic work done by women inside the household – which they term the 'social factory' (Dalla Costa & James 1975) – has been made invisible and socially unrecognized. For them, domestic work does not only produce use value, but also the commodity that labor actually is. So, capital accumulation is made possible, not only by means of surplus value, but also by the work which is produced in households where labor is reproduced. To this, Mies (1999) adds, from a non-Eurocentric outlook, that this state of affairs is only possible thanks to the international division of labor that enables the creation of colonized non-capitalist spaces (women, peripheral countries, and the nature) producing life and subsistence and enabling the generation of 'productive work' and its associated processes of exploitation.

One of the political applications of these theories will be the one developed by Italian autonomists Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici together with American Selma James, who will end up launching *Wages for Housework* as a political strategy to make domestic work visible.

In spite of this, Black Feminism became critical of the *Wages for Housework* initiative. Thus, Davis (1981) argues that the full-time housewife is only a reflection of the partial reality of the middle classes and the bourgeoisie, and it obviates the realities of Black and migrant women in the United States, who have been earning salaries for their work for decades and still have not managed to get out of their oppression situation.

Davis (1981) also points out the inability of SRT in the 1970s to carry out an integral analysis of patriarchal capitalism accounting for oppression based on racial reasons, and she argues that the fact of giving so much importance to domestic work renders the mechanisms of interaction between the productive and the reproductive spheres invisible. For Davis (1981), the emergence of capitalism meant the separation of domestic and productive work. The separation of both spaces also entailed the transferring of some of the tasks needed for the social reproduction of life to the productive sphere, for instance, the production of clothes, soap, and so on. Therefore, Davis (1981) suggests the need to conceptualize social reproduction as the set of tasks that make life possible and which may be found outside the domestic sphere, an approach which will be developed by Vogel (1983) in her renewed theory of social reproduction.

Vogel (1983) is the first feminist Marxist theorist to propose a single theory of labor and life preservation, as opposed to theories distinguishing between productive and reproductive work, and she argues for the existence of a systemic logic that creates the conditions for people to reproduce themselves and capital to produce value. Her ideas were taken up by the works of Arruzza (2013), Bhattacharya (2017), Arruzza and Bhattacharya (2020), and Ferguson (2020 (2019)), who produced a renewed SRT.

For these authors, what is essential is to understand what the strategies used by capitalism to solve its socio-reproductive contradiction are (Fraser 2022), that is, its strategies to find the way of reproducing labor from one generation to the next at the lowest cost and to continue accumulating the maximum capital. To make this possible, capital always tries to limit the life standards generated by labor (Vogel 1983). For these authors,

the reproduction of life does not only take place in households, but there are other spaces, such as the market, community life, or the informal economy, where processes of social reproduction and control of social reproduction take place, and where the state plays a key role.

According to them, each regime of capitalist accumulation presents a different response to the socio-reproductive contradiction of capitalism (Fraser 2022). Thus, during the period of development of the Keynesian welfare state, part of social reproduction was internalized by the state, while, in the present regime of globalized financial capitalism, there is an evident trend toward the commoditization, 'rehousewifization', and familiarization of social reproduction (Fraser 2022), which will only deepen the present crisis of care.

In this way, SRT argues that the state, with its action or inaction, absolutely conditions labor reproduction. Thus, state inaction overloads households, communities, and the people who ensure social reproduction. On the contrary, the development of the state's regulatory action (the setting up of the legal framework enabling the development of welfare policies) and of its provider role (the implementation of public policies and provision of facilities such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes) may relieve those same spaces.

This renewed SRT also focuses on how state action determines the conditions of reproduction at the different levels which can be found within labor. In this sense, it argues that the initial inequalities between different sections of the population, the degree of market regulation by the state, and the different possibilities of access to public services or common goods such as water and energy – which are determined by the state's action – all contribute to the creation of different levels within labor (Arruzza & Bhattacharya, 2020).

This extension of the field of social reproduction, in connection with the first thesis of Marxism-Feminism (Haugg 2018), leads these authors to consider the existence of a multiplicity of waged and non-waged subjects, mostly women and racialized people, in charge of those tasks enabling the social reproduction of life (Ferguson 2020 (2019)). However, as it is made clear by Goikoetxea's analysis (Goikoetxea, 2024), SRT proves unable to conceptualize the activities carried out by women and racialized people as a direct form of exploitation. On the contrary, it understands them as oppressions of a more cultural sort. Here, we should bear in mind that SRT places social reproduction in the complex area of interaction between capitalism and patriarchate.

For SRT theorists, the development of a theory of social reproduction is not only the creation of an integrated theory accounting for the importance of the tasks associated with reproduction, but also a tool for proactive analysis of new forms of social conflict – arising in socio-reproductive spaces – and a strategy for the renewal of the feminist movement from the proposal of a so-called Feminism for the 99% (Arruzza et al. 2019), which is politically developed by way of new repertoires of collective action such as the Women's Strike.

Thus, we can view the theoretical agreement between SRT and the Thirteen Theses of Marxism-Feminism (Haugg 2018) as a way of overcoming both the economic and androcentric reductionism of classic Marxism – blind to gender and race – and liberal feminism, which has a mystifying vision of inequality that does not question its structural determinants.

However, after a bibliographic review of both theories, we have not found a theorization of state's agency that goes beyond its instrumental role as provider or regulator of social reproduction. In this sense, the centrality granted by these theories to bottom-up political processes does not take into account the state's ability to frame controversies over social reproduction. Although such omission may be understandable in a context in which the state tends to abandon its protecting role, we think it is necessary to study what happens to state capacity in conditions of exceptionality such as the COVID-19 syndemic, when the paralyzation of productive activities forced states to take charge of social reproduction. In fact, we believe that, in a world which is increasingly prone to situations of exceptionality (pandemics, wars, climate crises, and so on), the state becomes an increasingly key actor whose agency cannot be disregarded. Therefore, we think that the lessons taught to us by critical state theory can be useful in the process of renewal of Marxism-Feminism which started with the formulation of the Thirteen Theses, as well as for the development of SRT. With this aim, we use this article's case study to analyze the state's responses – relative to both its ideological and punitive functions – in the presence of the groups and people involved in initiatives of social protection or resorting to collective organization to cater for their daily needs during the COVID-19 syndemic. Our goal is to understand how the reproduction of the life of the most vulnerable groups in the city of Barcelona was conditioned by the state's actions as a regulator of the welfare state, but also by its discourse and its punitive actions.

Our results reveal how collective organization and social initiatives were essential for the survival of the most vulnerable groups, but they failed in politicizing the crisis of care derived from the lockdown and social-distancing measures adopted to confront the pandemic.

In this sense, we argue that the re-legitimization of the state as a consequence of its ideological and punitive actions was the key variable accounting for the de-politicization of such networks of assistance as emerged in response to the emergency.

In our discussion of results, we shall explain how the contributions of critical state theory may allow us to understand the way in which the punitive and ideological actions undertaken by the authoritarian neoliberal state were also determining factors for the social reproduction of life during the pandemic, as well as for the absence of politicization of the associated crisis of reproduction. Thus, our case study will also allow us to contribute theoretically from the standpoint of critical state theory to a renewed SRT and expand the scope of the 10th thesis of Marxism-Feminism (Haugg 2018).

Method

We chose to research the lockdown situation in the city of Barcelona during the COVID-19 pandemic because it constitutes a critical case that allows us study the issue of how the state determines the possibilities of a communitarian social re-organization of care to take place. To do so, we resorted to a combination of different research techniques. First, we carried out an analysis of documentary sources (newspapers, legislative, and statistical ones), which allowed us to establish a framework for the understanding of events. Second, we undertook a qualitative study of the mutual-support networks organized in the city of Barcelona during the COVID-19 pandemic in the first lockdown period. Data gathering consisted of four focus groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, and FG4) composed of

representatives of different organizations and groups which had taken part in those solidarity networks and mutual-support groups. The focus-group sessions were held in the months of October, November, and December 2022, with durations of between 90 and 120 minutes. The sessions took place in facilities at the University of Barcelona, where all the participants received detailed information about the purpose and treatment of the data collected within the frame of our research. In addition, in accordance with the protocol established by the Bioethical Committee at the University of Barcelona, all our participants gave their informed consent.

Our selection of participants was done by purposive snowball sampling according to the following criteria: (1) participants must have had previous experience in some kind of mutual-support network or group established during the pandemic to provide assistance to people in situations of vulnerability, excluding established, professionalized third-sector organizations; (2) our selection comprised equal representation of the different geographical areas (neighborhoods) and population sections (social groups) involved in mutual-support networks; and (3) it should reflect the diversity of participants in such networks, in terms of age, gender, and origin. Eighteen people involved in mutual-support networks and solidarity groups took part in our focus groups. Among the mutual-support networks represented in our study, there were: one devoted to assisting Sub-Saharan street vendors; two focusing on domestic workers; one centered on people affected by mental distress; two housing-rights movements; an organization for the denunciation of police abuse; one mutual-support network for retired elderly people; two popular education projects (one for adults and one for children); one cooperative; and a riders' trade union.

Focus-group sessions were transcribed and analyzed with a mixed approach combining both deduction and induction for the analysis of thematic content. The purpose was to understand the activities developed by mutual-support networks, their ways of coping with the needs of vulnerable populations, and their relationship to the several governmental services, ranging from those providing temporary assistance (like healthcare and social-assistance services) to those with a punitive function.

Solidarity and mutual-support networks

During the pandemic, there was a deep crisis of social reproduction in the Spanish state, with severe consequences for all the working population, and especially for the most disadvantaged strata in our society. Most households became overloaded with a diversity of responsibilities related to care (in particular, single-person and single-parent households, as well as households with dependents and those not covered by the protective measures adopted by the government).

Even though the responses implemented by the Spanish government included the implementation of employment protection policies, they still left the needs for social assistance, education, and care unattended. As for the employment protection policies that were adopted, these included several emergency measures to prevent layoffs, like tax-rate cuts for companies and an extension of so-called Records of Temporary Employment Regulation (ERTE in their Spanish acronym), a mechanism aimed to maintain employment contracts in companies that had been forced to stop their activities due to lockdown measures. This strategy provided double protection – to companies

and to workers, since the state became responsible for paying 80% of workers' salary at no cost for companies – with the single obligation of maintaining work contracts. However, ERTEs only covered activities in the formal economy, leaving informal economic activities, which constituted the subsistence base of the most vulnerable social groups, unprotected. On the other hand, the government simultaneously dictated a set of measures destined to protect the most vulnerable groups, such as the suspension of evictions and of cuts of basic supplies (water, gas, and electricity). These measures, though, were only applicable to families who could provide documentary evidence that they were in a situation of vulnerability.

This circumstance deprived of protection certain sections of the population who were not sufficiently covered by the government's measures, a situation that was only worsened by the paralyzation of social services. As a response to these groups' needs, different solidarity networks and mutual-support groups emerged in the city of Barcelona, and they played a key role in catering for the needs of those households most badly affected by the pandemic during the lockdown period. The efforts of these networks primarily focused on the households of vulnerable groups like low-income families, elderly people, and single-parent households. They also assisted households whose income was dependent on economic sectors particularly affected by lockdown measures, such as the hotel and catering trade, street vending, and domestic and care work, where most jobs were done by women and people of migrant origin.

The emergence of these networks can be explained by a deeply rooted tradition of social movements in the city, with an origin in the struggles and the resistance of the *Indignado* protesters against austerity measures (2011–2015; Bonet-Martí 2015) and in the cycle of fights for Catalan national self-determination (2012–2017; Bonet-Martí & Bretones Esteban 2022). The main groups taking part in these support networks were the movement for the defense of public services; the coalition for housing rights, headed by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages and the tenants union; anti-racist groups and support networks; cooperatives in the sector of social and solidarity economy; legal aid groups; and the feminist movement that had promoted the 8M strikes and whose activist actions were focused on the issue of care (Camps & Di Nella 2020).

The aiding activities developed by these mutual-support networks were mainly intended to be a response to the suspension of basic social services and the overloading of healthcare services, which were unable to distribute the required protection equipment to confront the pandemic, such as face masks and personal protective equipment (Martínez & González García 2021). Actually, as it is revealed in FG1 and FG2, the city administration even referred people to these mutual-support networks when it realized that it was unable to tackle citizens' needs.

Despite this, FG1 and FG3 agreed that these support networks lacked the ability to generate and spread political criticism for the state's actions, both concerning the limitations of its social measures and the violation of the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable social groups during the lockdown period: arbitrary detentions of racialized individuals or harassment of groups taking part in solidarity actions.

At the same time, it is also clear that the few initiatives adopted to politicize the discontent generated by the government's insufficient responses and police control hardly had

any impact on the country's public opinion, as opposed to the visibility of negationist protests (Griera et al. 2022) and the protests of businessmen in the hospitality industry (Hidalgo et al. 2022). For example, our focus groups highlighted the fact that, in the area of housing, there was a national rent strike which allowed some tenants to renegotiate rents and payment schedules with landlords and landladies. Nevertheless, even though the housing-rights groups involved in such action reckon that nearly 16,000 households joined the rent strike, the impossibility of making their protest visible in the streets reduced its effectiveness, according to FG3.

FG1 also pointed out that there was an attempt to produce a joint political proposal called Social Action Plan with a set of alternative measures to those implemented by the government, an initiative conjointly carried out by mutual-support networks, alternative trade unions, and housing-rights movements. Even though the plan got some publicity on the digital social networks, FG1 considered that it did not have any significant impact on the public opinion or any power to influence the government's decisions.

As possible transitory reasons for this failure, our focus groups suggested the digital gap, the weariness of virtual communication, and the lack of spaces for interaction which were not virtually mediated and where people and support groups could get physically together. Also, the participants in our focus groups agreed that the main reason for the blocking of the politicization of the discontent produced by the crisis of care was the state's ability to obtain legitimization in the implementation of its protective function.

State actions and re-legitimization

On 14 March 2020, the Spanish government made the decision to declare the state of emergency in all the Spanish territory to confront the situation created by the increase in the number of deaths because of COVID-19. Before that, this exceptional measure envisaged in the Constitution had only been used in 2010 for the militarization of airports in response to the air-controllers' strike after the modification of their working conditions. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, this was the first time that the state of emergency was declared for the totality of the Spanish territory.

From that point on, the state and the people in office developed a discourse of self-protection and individual responsibility as the best way of protecting economic activity and social welfare, and avoiding the saturation of the country's health system. Thus, those who rejected – or were critical of – the decreed policies were presented as selfish or unsupportive.

This official discourse also appealed constantly to the unity of all Spanish people under the protective mantle of the country's army, police, and healthcare professionals (Añel Rodríguez & Rodríguez Bilbao 2020), which was presented as necessary to confront the virus in the speeches by the Spanish President (Sánchez 2020), ministers, and King:

> Your professionalism, dedication to others, your courage and personal sacrifice are an unforgettable example. We can never thank you enough for what you are doing for your country. It cannot surprise you that an exciting and heartfelt applause is heard from the houses of all Spain. A sincere and fair applause, which I am sure comforts and encourages you. (el Rey, 2020)

While the government's speeches placed emphasis on the country's health system, the implementation of the state of emergency relied on the maintenance of public order by the application of the Criminal Law and the Citizens' Security Law, which modified the state's initial message and made it move from emphasizing the security provided by the public health system to highlighting the protection given by the police and military forces.

Thus, the state presented itself as a protective entity and appealed to the unity of all citizens to 'fight', 'combat', and 'defeat' the virus. The appearance in the initial conferences of the ministers of Defense, Mobility, and Health and the presence of high-ranking police and military commands, even before the appearance of any healthcare authorities, reinforced the idea of a 'fight' against the virus, as if we were in the middle of a 'military conflict' (Bernat & Cutillas 2023). The resource to the Military Emergencies Unit to track and disinfect the public space, the imposition of sanctions (thanks to police presence in the streets) to those violating the initial lockdown, and other measures restricting people's freedom of movement all point to the importance of public order and the appeal to discipline (Bernat & Cutillas 2023).

During the first lockdown period, which went from March to May, there were 9,173 arrests, but the number of proposal of fines was 1.3 million. According to the report *Consequences of the state of alarm and the infringement of citizens' rights – Final report* (Observatory of the Penal System Human Rights (OSPDH) 2021), those areas with a predominantly working population and people from minority ethnic groups were the places where the most severe penalties were imposed, penalties which were marked by class and racial prejudices.

FG1 and FG4 agreed as well that the implemented securitarian policies and police surveillance directly affected the people who were forced to leave their homes for subsistence's sake, to work in either formal or informal jobs. Besides this, FG1 agreed that the activities of mutual-support networks also found difficulties to be carried out due to police control and because of the impossibility of meeting in physical public spaces.

Even if, in Barcelona, we saw the creation and expansion of mutual-support networks all over the city, FG1 and FG4 agreed that there was no questioning of the role of the state as a guarantor of public order and social protection, a questioning that had actually occurred with regard to the repression of the 15M movement and, later on, the pro-independence protests in Catalonia (Bonet-Martí & Bretones Esteban 2022).

Discussion and conclusions

The results of our research show that: (1) The inability of the state to provide a response to social welfare issues such as housing, food, and care provision was compensated for by the spontaneous creation of mutual-support networks by groups and entities which had taken part in previous mobilizations associated with social reproduction. (2) The state had a predominant role in the imposition of public-order measures to guarantee order and compliance with lockdown policies using police and military forces. (3) The state also succeeded in generating a discourse emphasizing the unity of all Spanish citizens to guarantee the proper working of the economy and the functioning of the health system and its professionals in the face of a healthcare emergency. (4) Mutual-support networks

were one of the pillars in the response to social needs, but they did not have the ability to articulate a joint mobilization to claim better guarantees for social rights and fewer responses based on public-order measures on the state's part.

Contrary to the 2008 crisis, when the state renounced its protective function with the application of austerity measures, which would end up triggering the global cycle of protest in 2011–2014 (Bonet-Martí & Ubasart-Gonzàlez 2021; Camps & Di Nella 2020), in this health crisis, the state would become legitimated again through the development of its protective function, with a focus on the areas of police and health policies. As Wacquant (2010) left-hand and right-hand metaphor suggests, during the COVID-19 syndemic, the state developed a discourse of protection (emphasizing the role of the health system) and of collective responsibility (characteristic of the welfare state and progressive social struggles), combined with a securitarian discourse (typical of the authoritarian neoliberal state; Bringel & Pleyers 2022).

In this context of renewed state legitimacy, the ability of activist networks to politicize the existing crisis of social reproduction became limited due to the lack of a clear political distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Mouffe 2010). Actually, the state even managed to appropriate citizen initiatives such as the collective evening applause for healthcare professionals, or the banners hanging from balconies. As for the mutual-support networks that were established, while the state controlled them and repressed their activities, it also resourced to them when it found itself unable to offer a proper response to the social needs of the population through its municipal administrations.

According to the renewed version of SRT, movement and political spaces responding to the crisis of social reproduction can also be spaces of political struggle where new frames for the interpretation of reality are produced (Arruzza & Gawel 2020; Fraser 2022). In this context, the crisis of social reproduction associated with the COVID-19 pandemic should have become an opportunity to launch a mobilization for a new model of social organization of care (Arruzza 2020; Fraser et al. 2022; Ross 2021). However, as it is manifest in the case under study, such mobilization never reached any significant scale. In fact, it was the most reactionary movements (Pleyers 2020) that finally took advantage of the demonstrations against the government's policies to control the pandemic, in alliance with negationist groups and with those economic sectors most badly affected by lockdown (Gerbaudo 2020).

In spite of it all, it should be highlighted that this process was not a homogeneous one throughout the Spanish territory. In the Basque Country,[1] mobilization and social conflict remained active with the call for strikes in the educational and healthcare sectors, while in the Spanish state as a whole, according to the Event Protest Analysis project by Romanos et al. (2022), the protests led by trade unions and social movements were on the retreat, especially those led by the feminist and environmentalist movements, which had had great prevalence before the pandemic. Also, during lockdown, we witness a significant increase in protests led by professional associations, mainly in the hospitality industry. In addition, in Madrid, there were protests organized by the right-wing organization Vox demanding more freedom in the face of lockdown measures.

The difficulties experienced by the feminist movement and other alternative social movements to politicize the crisis of care, at least in the area covered by our case study, lead us to suggest that the 10th thesis of Marxism-Feminism could give rise to richer

analyses if it explored the state's agency in more depth, that is, beyond its regulatory and distributive functions. In this sense, contributions like Jessop's (2015) strategic relational approach, which brings back Poulantzas's (1968) views that the state is neither a direct representative of the dominant class nor a completely autonomous subject, may prove useful. In this approach, the state is regarded as a social relationship between past and present forces (Jessop 2015), between different classes and class sections, which succeeds in establishing political domination by the dominant class (Poulantzas 1978), while it manages to incorporate the demands of past and present grassroots struggles as well.

As we have just seen, the ideological discourse of the state managed to put the emphasis on the right to healthcare and on collective responsibility. In other words, the state, bringing back the whole political tradition of social rights and the welfare state, put the right to healthcare, to care and life, center stage. At the same time, though, public-order measures and the resource to repressive mechanisms, which are both characteristic of the neoliberal project, were presented like actions adopted in the name of the general interest and comparable to healthcare assistance. Thus, in the case of this crisis of social reproduction, the state, in its neoliberal and authoritarian form, was able to combine a discourse about human safety with securitarian practices and a discourse about security. With this, it managed to counterbalance its coercive actions with the conformity of the population. Altogether, it made it possible to conceal the state's weaknesses when it came to tend to all the needs raised by the health emergency, as well as the shortages of the health system itself. Moreover, this facilitated the blocking of the processes of politicization and creation of new frameworks for the interpretation of the experienced reality that might have taken place inside the established mutual-support networks.

To sum up, we think that, even though the renewed SRT constitutes a solid conceptual framework within Marxism-Feminism to analyze the crisis of social reproduction during the pandemic, it does not manage to account for the absence of politicization processes in circumstances in which such processes should have been triggered. Therefore, we hold that it is essential to enrich the Thirteen Theses with other theoretical perspectives. Among these, Marxist and post-Marxist theories of the state stand out, since they allow us to examine social reproduction, not only from a material perspective, but also by considering the ideological and punitive roles of the state as elements that determine the behavior of the population in situations of social crisis. This is especially relevant when we undertake to study the role of the state, not only as a service provider or as the regulator of care relations, but also as an actor in the fight for legitimacy, as it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, according to our discussion of results, we consider the need to add to the 10th thesis, after 'through unequal creation of value levels', the phrase 'and through the state's agency in its authoritarian neoliberal form' (Haugg 2018).

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Note

1. Although it is not our aim here to carry out a comparative study, the successful cases of the Basque Country and, to a lesser extent, Madrid force us to take into consideration the fact that the legitimization of a multi-level state is never homogeneous throughout its territory, and the role played by sub-state administrations and their articulation with previous dynamics of mobilization should also be taken into account.

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