

# Labouring Geography: Towards World-Making Praxis in a Global Pandemic

Written by Hannah Schling and Ben Rogaly

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HANNAH SCHLING AND BEN ROGALY, JUL 21 2022

Bringing together three key structuring forces of the present conjuncture – ‘the racial character of capitalism, the tyranny of free market logics and our vulnerability as humans on an ailing planet’ – Beverley Mullings asks what their implications are for analyses by academic geographers who specialise in reading, researching and writing about the spatial practices of workers. In this article – and in a longer companion piece – we build on Mullings’ question, turning it round to ask what future academic research by ‘labour geographers’ such as ourselves means for workers’ struggles, including our own as *labouring geographers* within neoliberal and increasingly marketized conditions of higher education.

Thus we are not merely concerned with the *study* of other workers’ struggles and other forms of knowledge production but rather with labour geographers’ practices more comprehensively, including as carers, teachers and (labour) activists within and beyond educational institutions. We ask two further questions: i) how do the conditions of labour geography’s own re/production shape labour geography as a praxis oriented towards material social transformation within the present conjuncture? And ii) what practical modes of solidarity through teaching, research and activism emerge when we consider ourselves as *labouring geographers*?

In what follows we integrate our research about other workers’ spatial practices and labour struggles with these questions about our own roles as workers, activists and teachers. We draw on research on and with ‘unorganised’ temporary workers in warehousing and manufacturing sectors in the UK and the Czech Republic respectively. We use this research to demonstrate important interlinkages between questions of social reproduction and historically contingent processes of racialisation. These concepts and theories are then applied back to the context of our own labour, the university. Context is indeed important. Both of us work in the UK, Hannah in Scotland and Ben in England. In our discussion of the scholarly and political *praxis* of labour geography we ask what the pandemic reveals about, and proposes for, labour geography’s attempts to engage the present conjuncture.

### Pandemic times and conjunctural change

The pandemic, in its uneven impacts, revealed yet more sharply how reproduction of some modes of life occurs at the expense of others, as interdependent relations of social reproduction are structured through articulated classed, gendered and racialized inequalities. Long-range, structural inequalities in employment, housing and labour market were amplified by the pandemic. The pandemic thus compounded the greater ‘vulnerability to premature death’ that Ruth Wilson Gilmore has shown structural racism to exact upon racialised working-class people, who made up the majority of so-called ‘essential workers’. At the same time we witnessed workplace struggles over health and safety (e.g. cleaners at the UK’s Ministry of Justice) and historic uprisings against racial capitalism within the Black Lives Matter movement.

Government responses to such uprisings revealed the authoritarian reflexes of the UK’s present administration: including legislation to increase police powers at protests, closing routes to asylum outside of official settlement schemes, ongoing detention in makeshift prisons (e.g. Napier former army barracks), and an array of ‘culture war’ dogwhistles. The British state stoked a resurgence of racial nationalism just as its official discourse promoted a new

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formulation of post-Brexit 'global Britain' positioned to conclude bilateral trade deals with all-comers.

COVID-19's amplification of pre-existing structural inequalities, concurrent uprisings confronting state violence against racialized people, and states' multipronged efforts to push back against those uprisings suggest that pandemic times are associated with conjunctural change as understood via this formulation from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks:

*incurable* structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and... despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to *cure* them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the 'conjunctural', and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise.

We propose that labour geographers' growing engagement with social reproduction and racial capitalism is part of labour geography's contribution to these 'forces of opposition' in the current conjuncture.

## Social reproduction and racial capitalism in labour's geographies

Social reproduction centres the social relations, processes and labours bound up in daily and generationally re-creating social life, as well as the 'conditions of possibility' for capitalist value production, including the daily, unwaged work of reproducing labour power. As a scale-crossing analytic – social reproduction connects (as Cindi Katz puts it) the 'fleshy, messy and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' with a set of 'structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension'.

Feminist geographers have highlighted the long-range crises of social reproduction – born of neoliberal restructuring and the multifaceted contradictions of a capitalist system which depletes and destroys the very ecological and human 'resources' necessary for both accumulation and social life – and have centred these contradictions as sites for political mobilisation. In breaking down separated binaries of 'production' / 'reproduction'; 'life / work'; or 'home / work' – social reproduction transforms the parameters of labour geography: the who, what and where of these struggles.

For example, Hannah Schling's research on worker dormitories highlights how they exemplify complex articulations of waged and unwaged time within the reproduction and contestation of systems of migrant labour. In the Czech Republic's export-oriented manufacturing sector, mobile workers from Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Mongolia are routinely housed in employer-provided dormitories by the temp work agencies which recruit, transport, manage and employ them. The organization of workers' daily social reproduction through the dormitory is central to new regimes of labour mobility within the EU – and their disciplinary regulation.

Dormitory housing is contingent upon continued employment through a specific work agency – loss of work or quitting meaning immediate eviction. This compels work, and seeks to lengthen the working day, extract compliance with exhausting regimes of 12-hour shifts, and forms these hourly-paid workers in a pool of 'always available' labour. Workers 'discarded' from factories form highly mobile and highly precarious low-wage labour moving across the EU. Through the dormitory, globally-integrated electronics factories in the Czech Republic seek to assemble and extract workers' 'flexibility' for the fluctuating and lean operations of 'just-in-time' production. In turn, agency workers deploy 'quitting' strategies, leveraging tight labour markets and insecure contracts in search of better wages or less tedious employment – at times doing so in larger groups or in ways disruptive of the timetables of production.

Focusing upon the relational interdependencies highlighted by social reproduction requires unpicking interlinkages between different workers' exploitation and struggle, and possibilities for solidarity (including for academic workers as we will explore in the final section). Ben Rogaly's research in the English city of Peterborough, for example, reveals connections there between the exploitation of agricultural workers and that of an expanding warehouse and distribution workforce. People who worked at Amazon and other warehouses in Peterborough reported the continuities in modes of recruitment through agencies with the agricultural gangs that had been prominent in the

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region's labour regimes for decades and seeking out racialized people for temporary work. Key changes were the role of performance targets and ever-tougher sanctions whereby non-achievement of targets or minor infringements of break-time rules could easily lead to dismissal. It was the use of digital methods such as 'barcoding of everything, including the workers' that enabled Amazon and other businesses to put in place and double down on 'the inhuman power that reduces these workers to computational components'.

Peterborough workers spoke of how they fought back for their dignity, at times coming together across racialized difference to challenge supervisors' attempts to drive workers towards ever higher targets. Racialized hierarchies and other differences between workers could at other times militate against even such informal organizing. Nevertheless, there were instances where those working as supervisors combined with ordinary workers to undermine the intense digital scrutiny of this form of racialized surveillance capitalism.

Thus uneven geographies of social reproduction, and the relational interdependencies which structure them, quickly unfold into questions of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism and uneven development in the conjunctural crises of 'pandemic times' reveal yet more forcefully ways in which social reproduction is neither inevitable, nor inevitably 'successful'. Gilmore's formulation of racism as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' indicates ways 'race' itself is reproduced through uneven geographies of social reproduction. For example, Carrie Freshour has shown how in poultry plants in the USA exploitation 'not only shapes but also depends upon a continual crisis of social reproduction for its Black and immigrant Latina workforce' – a crisis articulated through social processes of racialization and gendering. As Gargi Bhattacharyya suggests,

[t]he hidden and unvalued work that surrounds and precedes waged labour, and which allows waged labour to be possible, is a matter at the heart of how humanity comes to be divided and allocated differential value.

Integrating questions of social reproduction and social differentiation into analysis of labour regimes, including their articulation within plural and geographically and historically attentive conceptualizations of racial capitalism, opens up political imperatives, modes of praxis and solidarity, for us as geographers based in the academy. Labour geographers' engagement with social reproduction and racial capitalism is thus key not only to understanding the current conjuncture, but also for reflecting on our broader praxis as *labouring geographers*.

## Abolition: towards praxis-based labouring geography

As labour journalist Sarah Jaffe has argued: 'The question of what higher education is for is intimately tied up with the questions of the conditions of its work.' We understand universities as institutions reproducing class and racialised hierarchies – but also as spaces around which multiple social, economic and political dynamics coalesce, and which hold significant potential for socially transformative 'work' (in its broadest sense) to occur.

For example, the very materiality of many campuses and university buildings are the outputs of slavery and colonialism – prompting movements in recent years (such as 'Rhodes must fall') which have focused on universities as sites of decolonising politics – its knowledges and its resources. Such contradictions can locate universities within the 'terrain of the 'conjunctural'' upon which the 'forces of opposition' organise à la Gramsci.

The pandemic exacerbated and made more visible contradictions within the UK's marketized higher education sector, and its increasingly commodified relations of teaching, learning and research. Reforms dating back to 1998 have brought widespread outsourcing, especially of non-academic university roles, large-scale borrowing by universities for the development of speculative, high rent student accommodation that entails long-term financial obligations to corporate property developers, and the purchase of expensive apps and software systems developed by private-sector corporations for outward-facing university websites and virtual learning platforms. The business models of the now marketized universities were threatened by shifts to online teaching and distance learning during the pandemic because of universities' reliance on student fees and rents received for university-provided accommodation. This contradiction is further highlighted in turn by student demands for fee refunds, and rent strikes organised from lockdown campuses.

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As universities attempted to 'resolve' these contradictions through rising student numbers (where permitted by the government), we have also seen escalating inequity in relation to (in)security of employment manifest in the increasingly casualised and precarious labour of early-career scholars conducting what Jaffe has termed 'hope labour'. Indeed, reproducing one's own future *as a labour geographer* is itself increasingly under threat for the growing number of academics on these insecure contracts. The future of labour geography itself – including who is engaged in it and on what terms – is one part of the struggle over higher education.

Such struggles are most powerful when collaborative – as conjunctural counterforces and building alliances with non-academic workers and with students is a vital part of our praxis as *labouring geographers*. For example, the University of London's Senate House cleaners' struggle was mobilised by and with a largely migrantized workforce around the (cleaning) labours of reproducing the university itself. It challenged the racializing dynamics of labour segmentation and built on solidarity between the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain, the University and College Union and the National Union of Students. Caitlin Henry has identified coalitional struggles of this kind as part of the 'socially reproductive work involved in making academic work possible' – and what that work should or could be like.

Undergraduate students in England face upwards of £50,000 in debt upon graduating. Many are not only students but are also simultaneously low-waged workers and unpaid carers. In our roles as educators we consider engaging with students as 'students-and-workers-and-carers' as a pedagogical approach to labouring geography that can *both* enable deeper analysis and understanding of the conjuncture *and* help build the grounds for solidarity between differently positioned subjects within the university. The teaching and learning goes both ways. We learn much from – and our own workplace struggles are sometimes sustained by – student organizing and activism.

The UK state's attempted 'cure' for the contradictions of the current conjuncture extends to its disciplinary approach to universities, particularly humanities and social sciences departments within them, as locations which encourage alternative visions to capitalism, and that insist upon making public the racist violence of colonialism and its legacies. Yet, for labouring geographers seeing ourselves as workers within a struggle – not only over the university but also over wider social relations – should encourage us to (continue to) push back against the hierarchies of academia and towards alliances with non-academic workers and students.

We take inspiration from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's abolition geography, her insistence that scholarship is bigger than the academy and her argument that 'militant scholars' working or studying within academia need to be engaged with the project of coalition-based organizing for radical change beyond it as well as within it. That such organizing needs to be internationalist is made more still more urgent by the resurgent nationalism of the current conjuncture coupled with the existential threat posed by climate change. In a chapter in the edited collection *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Gilmore makes the agenda clear:

Abolition geography is capacious (it isn't only by, for, or about Black people) and specific (it's a guide to action for both understanding and rethinking how we combine our labour with each other and the earth). Abolition geography takes feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure. In other words, it is a way of studying and of doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves.

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