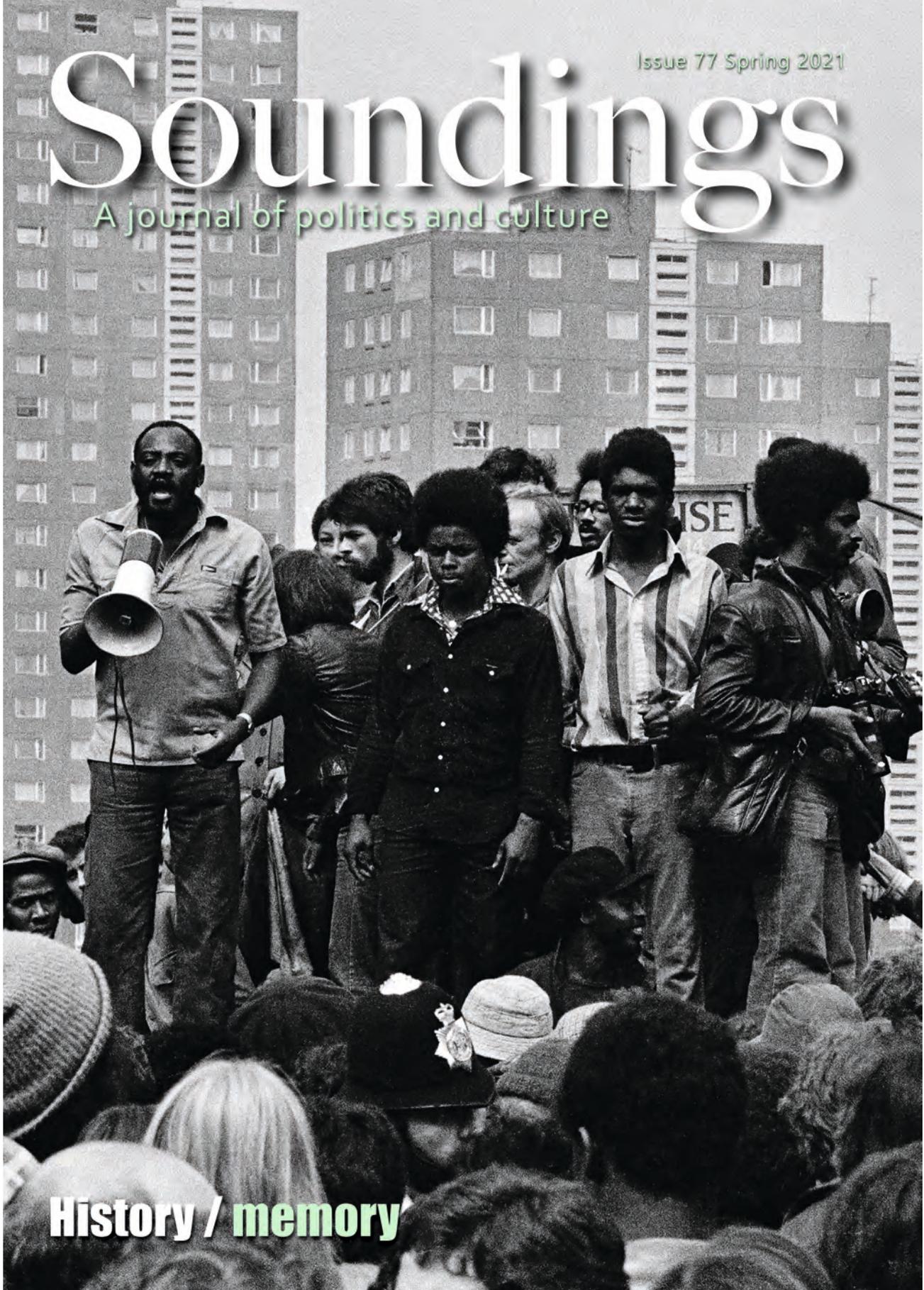# Soundings

## A journal of politics and culture

**History / memory**

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Issue 77

# History / memory

Cover Photo: Darcus Howe addresses the anti National Front demonstrators from the roof of the toilet block in Clifton Rise on the day of 'The Battle of Lewisham', 13 August 1977 © Syd Shelton www. sydshelton.net.

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## *Small Axe* and the big tree of 2020

*Roshi Naidoo*

This article reflects on Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series, exploring its importance in placing black narratives at the centre of history and on prime time television. It locates the series within the context of a longer history of struggles over black representation and misrepresentation in mainstream British media, and discusses the very slow progress towards diversity in the cultural life of Britain. The prime time screening of *Small Axe* was all the more important given Britain's consistent failure to come to terms with its history - from the legacies of Powellism, to the longer histories of slavery, colonialism, migration and Empire (cf Brexit). Politicians talk reverentially of patriotism, family, tradition and Britishness - as if these can exist outside of languages of race, nation and belonging. For black communities the films were a reminder of past battles, but also of the need to talk about trauma, rather than burying it behind a familiar stoicism. Recuperating people's subjectivity and agency means confronting the full horror of a past that stripped this away. More than anything, however, what made these films so important was the space given to pleasure, presence and collective joy.

## The legacies of British slave ownership

*Catherine Hall talks to Ruth Ramsden-Karelse*

**The Legacies of British Slave Ownership** project has explored the significance of slavery to Britain's history, including the wealth it generated for industrialisation. Such histories are crucial for understanding the present, given that disavowal of these legacies has been central to white British thinking. The project's mapping of who received compensation after abolition showed the widespread incidence of slave ownership across the whole of the UK. Focusing on individual stories can be an illuminating way of identifying systemic patterns of inequality and questions of social, economic and political structure. A further legacy has been the way ideas on race developed by white plantation owners still inform contemporary thinking. An important first step towards reparation is understanding and knowing what happened, and breaking the patterns of denial.

# In this issue

## 'Every generation has to make its own women's movement'

*Sheila Rowbotham talks to Jo Littler*

In this interview Sheila Rowbotham talks to Jo Littler about her involvement in feminism and politics over several decades. This ranges across her role in the Women's Liberation Movement, left activism, historical scholarship, work with the Greater London Council, involvement in the international homeworking movement and her secret life as a poet.

## When care needs piracy: the case for disobedience in struggles against imperial property regimes

*Valeria Graziano, Tomislav Medak, Marcell Mars*

The aim of the Pirate Care project is to put the politics back into caring and to disrupt the global property regime that is colonising public welfare services and turning them into privately traded assets. Piracy refers to all the practices of survival and solidarity that disobey unjust legal and social rules that have as their primary goal the enforcement of an entrenched division of labour and the expansion of property at the expense of living beings. It evokes the resistance of pirates in an earlier age of empire. Three specific practices are examined, all of which have intensified during the pandemic: the platformed division of labour; the marketisation of health care; and the global land grab that creates refugees and a supply of cheap migrant labour. The idea of piracy enables the foregrounding of the need to expand the realm of conceivable responses to the crisis - and for coordinated action that questions the normalisation of current property and labour regimes.

## Arch villains

*Richard Payne*

The privatisation of railway arches, which has led to big rent hikes and many small-business closures, is an example of asset-based capital in action. Arch Co bought a 150-year lease of the arches formerly owned by Network Rail during Chris Grayling's custodianship as transport secretary - as part of successive governments' massive programme of privatisation of publicly owned land. It is jointly owned by Blackstone and Telereal Trillium, two global property companies.

Blackstone CEO is Steve Schwarzman, formerly of Lehman Brothers and a Trump ally. Telereal Trillium is owned by the William Pears property group. Its advisor, Lord Griffiths, was one of the Goldman Sachs executives involved in the Malaysian 1MDB scandal.

## Can a re-animated New Deal see off Trump Republicanism?

*Matt Seaton*

Because of the structure of the US constitution, the Democrats find it very difficult to assemble an electoral coalition capable of reliably delivering united government with working majorities in both chambers of Congress and a president of the same party. In the 2020 elections, Biden's electoral college victory was secured by 44,000 votes, distributed in three states. Republicans currently hold 59 state chambers to the Democrats' 39, and they will use the next two years to further gerrymander boundaries and suppress votes. Democrats need to emulate Trump's ability to mobilise the base to retain their fragile hold, but inner party differences may make this difficult. The Republicans are ruthless in using their advantages at state level, while at federal level their strategy since the Reagan presidency has been to shrink government. Trump took Reagan's Republican strategy - small government, populism and mobilising conservatives - to a logical conclusion by seeking to wreck government as a deliberate strategy and mobilising right-wing extremists to support his rule. Repairing Americans' faith in government is a long-term task. However, Biden's continuing allegiance to the ideas of the New Deal, and the recognition the party must now give to its grassroots activists, particularly in black communities, may help to energise and hold the Democrat coalition together.

## Is Macron the persuader reaching the end of the road?

*Chris Myant*

For Emmanuel Macron it is natural that a French President should have the powers of an English Tudor monarch, whether in determining the way a faith is celebrated (Islam) or how to deal with a plague (Covid). His fundamental characteristics as a political operator are self-belief and consistency: he has appeared flexible because of his understanding of how to manoeuvre and adapt in the jungle of modern

French politics, but has always pursued a single vision. He believes in a version of neoliberalism in which the state is rolled back when it comes to protections for workers, welfare support and regulating the economy, but not in its role in *determining* everything. Macron was a key Hollande advisor at the time of his U-turn to neoliberalism. He has been named 'the Great Manipulator'. As French citizens have become increasingly disenchanted with his performance, Macron's political machine, *Le République En Marche!*, has crumbled. The signs are that he will now tack further to the populist right in seeking support for another term as economic liberaliser in chief.

## Mutualism, massive and the city to come: Jungle Pirate Radio in 1990s London

*Tom Cordell and Malcolm James*

In the 1990s Britain was under Thatcherite continuity rule. But radio waves were appearing that carried fragments of the future: weekend broadcasts of a new kind of music - Jungle - were being illegally beamed across the city from improvised studios in empty flats, via aerials on tower block rooftops. To suburban Tory voters the tower block - run by socialist councils and home to multiracial working-class communities - became the symbol of all that was wrong with Britain. But jungle pirate radio flipped that symbolism on its head, appropriating the tower block as the locus of an alternative cultural infrastructure, for the people of the inner city demonised by mainstream politics. Pirate stations such as Weekend Rush in Hackney were subversive and challenged dominant cultures. Today, as the zombie of Tory Powellism rises again, online music makes possible new cultures of resistance.

## The long revolution: why the left needs a strategic and long-term perspective

*Michael Rustin*

How should a political party that is primarily focused on winning elections respond when it suffers a catastrophic electoral defeat? A number of tactical steps have been taken by Keir Starmer, but there has been little sign of engagement in the crucial task of seeking an understanding of the deeper context of events and exploring what new memorable political ideas it can put forward. One resource for such a

transformative perspective are the ideas of Raymond Williams: in particular the idea of the 'long revolution', and the central role of culture and processes of learning. Self organisation by the working class was central to Williams's analysis but seismic societal changes have since made the question of agency more difficult. Labour now needs to focus some energy on considering such questions: among its other roles a progressive party needs to have diagnostic capacity, and an educative purpose.

# When care needs piracy: the case for disobedience in struggles against imperial property regimes

## Valeria Graziano, Tomislav Medak, Marcell Mars

Reclaiming the idea of piracy foregrounds the need for radical collective action to challenge contemporary global systems of property and power

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A s a collective whose research work has focused on disobedient care practices, we found our work becoming increasingly topical after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.[1] As so many journalists and scholars began the labour of reflecting upon the wide-ranging impacts of the virus on social life, we were witness to the rapid rise of 'care' - the focus of our research - to the status of a watchword. (To be more precise, care was one of the two focuses of our inquiry, the other was 'piracy'.) This watchword was endlessly repeated in the news, and relentlessly evoked in the wealth of statements and position pieces that

proliferated across the mediascape. Our concern is that this explosion of 'care' virtually everywhere - including, to our dismay, in management talk about the need for workers to 'take good care' of themselves while keeping up normal levels of productivity - may lead to an exhaustion of the critical capacities of the term; and to the development of 'care fatigue' - given the compulsory performative tone that 'care' so often carries; and we are also concerned that being in favour of 'care' is little more than an obligatory form of 'virtue signalling' in polite society. This has prompted us to revisit our own investment in the concept, and to seek to better articulate the reasons for our coupling of the notion of 'care' with the qualifier 'pirate' when we started work on the topic four years ago. What is at stake, we feel, is more than a mere intellectual refining of vocabulary: it is, rather, a question of determining whether or not there is any possibility of orienting political action (aka, taking sides) within the complexities of this long pandemic.

## Care, a pacifying notion?

Care is an extremely capacious notion. It encompasses labour, emotions, knowledges and resources, as well as ethical and moral reasonings. It can be work, either paid or performed for free; and it can be a pleasure, the most fulfilling of tasks. It can describe attention to the self, or it can be directed towards others, sometimes at great personal cost. It encompasses the micropolitics of everyday interactions just as much as the vast scale of the global systems that shape them.

But it is precisely this capaciousness that makes a broad notion such as 'care' prone to misuse and abuse when it begins to circulate as a keyword in current political wars over the future order of society. In the aftermath of the first pandemic waves, the concept of care is increasingly being used to deflect more radical and urgent political debates. Rather than being a conduit for a fundamental rethinking of institutions and infrastructures, the language of care risks confining debate to more 'moral' or sentimental registers, in which mobilising 'togetherness' involves little more than symbolic acts. (The ritual of public applause for medical workers, celebrated as sacrificial heroes while they are put at risk by reckless policies, is one of the principal examples of this tendency.)

But we do not want to give up on care just yet. It is a notion that has the ability to express simultaneously an ethical orientation, a feeling and a mode of labouring; and, notwithstanding the problems we have been discussing, it can indeed be a

# When care needs piracy

useful tool for imagining a much needed reorientation of societal priorities. It is this way of understanding care that has been to the fore in recent struggles such as the Care Income campaign promoted by the transnational movement Global Women Strike; the Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational campaign of the Transnational Social Strike Platform; and the #ProtectHomeCareWorkers campaign by the UNI Global Union; and it also informs discussion in *The Care Manifesto*.[2] Working with the insights from our research into pirate care processes, we want to contribute to such efforts to anchor the use of 'care' in political and materialist terms, by highlighting its (in our view increasingly unavoidable) relationship to criminalisation, disobedience and piracy.

Despite the wealth of grassroots solidarity initiatives and some unprecedented relief measures taken at governmental level in various countries (which have included the temporary re-nationalisation of hospitals and the distribution of basic income to citizens affected by the pandemic), this last year has tended to reinforce a perception that there is no space for political agency within community-based practices. Although grassroots organising stepped in to fill the vast gap created by the sudden upsurge in demand for various kinds of support that neither states nor markets were able or willing to adequately supply, strong political mobilisation aimed at the failures of care systems, either locally or internationally, has remained largely absent. For instance, campaigns to make Covid-19 vaccines globally accessible under open-patent licenses have been largely limited to online petitions.[3] In contrast to reactions in other historical moments of major crisis, there seems to have been serious difficulty in finding ways of organising that are effective political responses to the current phenomenon of pauperisation.

It seems important in this moment, therefore, to take stock of the practices that are able to politicise care, and able to push for structural change in the provision of care beyond the spheres of either grassroots solidarity or top-down state intervention. Thus, in this article, starting from our own research process within the Pirate Care project, we want to flesh out the importance of disobedience in this impasse: to find ways of politicising the terrain of care, and actions that are able to redefine the terms of what counts as political in the first place.

These questions have been our point of departure in approaching the topic of care. And what we have wished to evoke with the term piracy is all the practices of survival and solidarity that disobey unjust legal and social rules that have as their

primary goal the enforcement of an entrenched division of labour and the expansion of property at the expense of living beings.

## Pirate narratives of care and freedom

The figure of the pirate is oft quoted and much beloved in left and libertarian political visual cultures because it immediately conjures up defiance of authority and cheerful plebeian liberation. In its most popular incarnation - a ragged sailor with a black patch over one eye and a wooden leg, and with a hook replacing a missing hand - the figure of the pirate already evokes a story of disobedient care; for it is well known that during the 'Golden Age of Piracy', between 1650 and 1730, those sailing together under the flag of the Jolly Roger had strict rules of compensation for those injured in battle. Unlike the lower ranks in the navy or on commercial ships, who, once they were no longer useful, would be disembarked at the first opportunity and left to their own devices, sick pirates would be allowed to remain with their crews as long as they wished to and would receive healthcare on board.[4] (The doctor himself, and his medicine chest, was one the most precious trophies to be acquired during a takeover.[5]) In fact, it was their poor conditions - 'impressment, harsh discipline, poor provisions and health, long confinement aboard ship, and wage arrears' - that caused thousands of sailors to turn pirate in the first place.[6]

However, rather than being associated with care, the figure of the pirate has more often been seen as embodying the adventurous and convivial forms of life that might become possible once the squalid regime of Empire has been left behind. Historians tell us that accurate primary sources of information about the life of pirates are scarce, and mainly derived from trial documents written by hostile parties. It is therefore remarkable that pirate stories and legends have contributed so much to the shaping of the modern notion of freedom and liberation, and to the political imaginary of the Enlightenment era. According to the late anthropologist David Graeber, the popularity of the myths that pirates put in circulation about their deeds and ways of life - including stories about the free land of Libertalia - can be considered 'the most important form of poetic expression produced by the proletariat emerging from the maritime traffic of the North Atlantic, whose mode of exploitation paved the way for the industrial revolution'.[7]

The history of European imperialism and the rise of global capital are indeed maritime histories. Alongside the plantation and the mine, the ship is one of the

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key sites in which the modern capitalist regime of accumulation from labour and property came into being. In the ship's belly, relentless regimes of labour discipline were first implemented; while new forms of financial speculation over fungible property were introduced in order to insure its cargoes.[8] Unlike the privateer, who played a key role in imperial expansion, and whose right to plunder was sanctioned by official *Lettres des marques*, the pirate appeared as an intolerable figure of disruption in the emerging new world order. During a moment when Empires were extending their domination over all known lands and people, pirate ships were inadmissible outsiders, existing beyond the boundaries of the totalitarian capitalist project. As Amedeo Policante has argued, the concept of Universal Jurisdiction (the right of states to claim jurisdiction over an accused person regardless of their nationality or the site of the alleged crime) was first introduced by European states in the eighteenth century as an exceptional measure, specifically designed to deal with pirate crews who operated beyond any single state's jurisdiction. Subsequently, as the measure was gradually extended, it developed to the point of 'radically transforming the very nature of international law'.[9]

As Policante also noted, the words Empire and pirate, curiously enough, share the same etymology, both deriving from the ancient Greek verb *peiran* - to attempt, to risk, to try.[10] The figure of the pirate is intimately linked to the expansion of those same empires that their way of life sought to challenge. What was at stake in the attempts and endeavours of both parties, and the risks and trials that they each undertook, was the form of government of the world itself: on the one hand, there was an attempt to create an integrated system of exploitation and ownership over humans and natural resources; on the other, an attempt to experiment with forms of decentralised and direct democracy - which some pirate communities even managed to replicate on land as well as on board ship (cf David Graeber). In other words, what was at stake was, on the one hand, a conception of freedom based on the idea of property; and, on the other, an idea of liberation - based on its negation.

These different conceptions of freedom and property are the red thread that links the pirates of the Golden Age with their contemporary counterparts battling against modern property laws. The piracy of today is largely associated with battles over knowledge, culture and biogenetics: who owns the copyright, who owns the patent, and on whose terms can such knowledge, medicines or crops be used and shared? The answers to these questions have immense implications for the provision of care.

These are the crucial issues at stake in the struggle between giant corporations and the networks of practitioners who are determined to repoliticise piracy as an act of legitimate defiance against laws that place property before freedom. But what kind of property regime are these contemporary pirates facing?

## In the gap

We mentioned earlier how, during the last year, we found ourselves increasingly reflecting on the ever more visible gaps of provision that were opening up between care that was being organised by self-organised mutual aid and solidarity initiatives on the ground and what was being offered by governmental bodies in response to the multi-layered care crisis associated with the pandemic. Implementing the kinds of welfare reform that would be necessary at a relevant scale to meet people's needs in such a crisis would have implied, inevitably, a radical change to current taxation regimes - i.e. those very same international regimes that have evolved over the years since they were first conceived of to combat the pirates, and which today frame the scope and legitimacy of all global financial transactions. Unsurprisingly, this did not happen.

Instead, the void that existed beyond what could be provided by civic organising and governmental actions was filled by the market. Caring for people is increasingly being organised through regimes of property, and this development was accelerated during the pandemic.

We outline here three trends within the world of big capital that are shaping, and benefitting from, the practices through which care is organised: an acceleration in the platformed division of labour; an increase in the marketisation of targeted segments of healthcare provision; and the ongoing globalised landgrab that is depriving people of their means of sustenance and forcing them into migrancy.

Before considering some examples of how pirate care is seeking to resist these trends, let's look at each in turn.

## *An increase in the platformed division of labour*

The accelerated digitisation of all aspects of life in the present conjuncture of the pandemic has led to a significant transformation of labour conditions: those who can work in the safety of their homes have come to depend on digital platforms for their

work, delivery of groceries and/or medicines, as well as contact with their friends and families, while their needs were being catered to by a mushrooming army of low-wage care-workers, warehouse pickers and couriers, who have had to continue moving along the logistical vectors, thus risking infection. The pandemic lockdown has led to a precipitous increase in the rate at which both telework and provision-work are being transformed into forms of 'logged labour' - coordinated, quantified and measured through apps and platforms.[11] Similar processes have engulfed education, culture and recreation. The interaction between 'domesticated/connected' and 'mobile/disposable' subjects - operationalised through the networked capital that makes one the digital overseer of the other - has accelerated this kind of platformed division of labour and deepened the separation of the working classes.[12]

Big tech corporations have readily embraced their central position in the coordination of this new pandemic life. Amazon, Deliveroo and an endless roster of other delivery services have expanded to meet this exploding demand, unflinchingly piling pressure on their staff to work at a breakneck pace. In a parallel process, the kinds of tech companies that primarily command technology and data rather than labour were aiming for an increase in public esteem. Google and Apple claimed a role for themselves as benevolent public health advocates, creating a privacy-preserving contact-tracing protocol, and regularly releasing community mobility reports to monitor the effects of lockdown measures. Meanwhile Zoom, WhatsApp and other communication services were determining our capacity to work, socialise and organise. Differences between those companies aside, this sudden dependence on private digital platforms - dubbed the 'screen new deal' by Naomi Klein - has created a windfall for the techno-capitalist oligarchy. The financial markets, awash with money that had nowhere to be invested amid the largest global economic contraction since the second world war, have also secured fantastic increases in their wealth.

All of these companies will emerge from the current crisis ready to exert an inordinate impact on the future direction of societal development, and to continue their colonisation of large parts of the care economy.

## Precision-hedging the future of healthcare

The effort to ramp up healthcare capacity to contend with the exponentially rising number of Covid cases has been, and still remains, the central concern for epidemiological responses. In the famous 'Flatten the Curve' graph illustrating

this concern, healthcare capacity is shown as a straight line, but the unfolding of the pandemic has demonstrated that this capacity is a mirage. It was initially measured in terms of its ability to meet the urgent need for more ICU beds and ventilators, but shortfalls in care provision across the board were to prove equally problematic; these were hard-baked into the system as a result of the crippling effects of marketisation in the decades prior to the outbreak: overworked medical staff; resource-strapped primary healthcare; the mass warehousing of the elderly in care-homes; and the precarity of care-workers who were shuffled between a large number of different care-homes. Healthcare systems in many countries had already been deliberately disaggregated: high-value treatments had been privatised, and private clinics had been allowed to extract high returns, while public healthcare systems were tasked with basic health provision and disease prevention - areas that were constantly underfunded and under-resourced. With governments ignoring the warnings of scientists that an epidemic of this kind was only a matter of time, capacity to produce medical supplies and conduct epidemiological responses in the face of any such emergency had been severely cut over the years. Thus, governments found themselves dependent on the private sector for the speedy delivery of PPE equipment and test-and-trace procedures. In the UK - to take one example - efforts to secure both these services faltered and failed, as private providers were selected that had little experience or capacity to deliver.

This retreat from public provision is widespread, but it is arguably best evidenced in the field of high-tech medicines, where the domination of big pharma, together with a slow but ongoing process of divestment from public research and development infrastructure, has led to reduced capacity for the production of medicines that address public health concerns, or are seen as 'non-rivalrous' (i.e. their consumption by one person does not affect the ability to consume of another person). The first Covid-19 vaccines were thus developed by venture-capitalised private research start-ups. The unprecedented public funding they received, and the advance orders for their vaccines placed prior to their finalisation, socialised the risks of developing these new remedies, but the resulting market valuations, profits and patents will remain private. The net effect of this market-dependent approach will be that the less affluent part of the world will be left to its own devices, unless countries with a strong public healthcare orientation, such as the economically struggling Cuba, produce their own vaccines and pass them on to generic drugs producers. With vaccines becoming only slowly available to the less wealthy

countries, the virus will continue spreading and evolving into more resistant strains, creating further complications down the line.

The novel approach to quick-delivery vaccines championed by BioNTech and Moderna is based on messenger RNA, which is also projected to be essential for custom therapies for cancer and heart diseases. This branch of medical research is dominated by private companies and closed patents.[13] Future high-value precision medicines are thus likely to remain in private ownership, meaning that in the future this model of development is likely to siphon off ever more resources from public healthcare systems, making them even less capable of responding to public health crises, and making the availability of treatments even more highly uneven.

## *Enclosures of land, disposability of migrant lives*

The last future-hedging process we want to highlight is corporate landgrab and incursion into wildlife habitats, which is the underlying force driving the zoonotic leaps that lead to epidemics such as SARS-Cov-2. In the logistically-connected systems of global agricultural production, financial institutions based in New York drive landgrabs and forest clearing in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa;[14] agritech and fintech work together to create new frontiers of extraction. The resulting destruction of ancestral habitats, global rush for productive lands and expansion of industrial farming - facilitated by global agribusiness - are driving people away from their land and into urban slums, and from there, in search of basic sustenance, across deserts and seas to arrive at the borders of affluent countries.

There they are met by a bordering regime that both criminalises migration and absorbs the exploitable illegal workforce; undocumented migrants are exactly what is needed for the performance of low-paid seasonal work in sectors such as agriculture or domestic labour. Global landgrabs and enclosures thus produce disposable populations: people who labour in the provision-systems of high-income countries, while living at the extreme end of the care labour asymmetry.

## Piracy today is a struggle against property 'on steroids'

What the three capitalist processes discussed above share is that they are part of an accelerated conversion of resources, infrastructures and social systems into assets - that is, a specific kind of private property which focuses on profits from the rising

values of assets rather than the production of goods. This is part of the wider trend towards the financialisation of all economic transactions, and it provides the basis for financial capital to exert control over the future development of large swathes of property, without necessarily holding them directly. Essential care provisions such as health, assistance for the elderly, housing, education, and so on, are being increasingly assetised; while at the same time the pensions, health insurance and savings of many ordinary people have come to depend on the income generated by these same processes of assetisation. Assetisation is thus progressively locking ever larger numbers of people into a trend in social development that will create even more radically segregated societies, while expropriating us from our very capacity to shape the future.

These future-hedging processes are deepening further the entrenched divisions of labour that already exist - within and across borders - in the work of providing for essential societal needs. The ample statistical detail of the 2018 report from the ILO on care-work paints a very clear picture:[15] the majority of paid and unpaid care-labour is performed by working-class people, overwhelmingly women, migrants and people of colour. During the pandemic most of these carers had no choice but to continue going to work at high risk to their own health and the health of their communities. It is no surprise, then, that their communities - traditionally underserved by care-systems - were the hardest-hit. As black and decolonial feminist literature highlights powerfully, care-labour under capitalism is structured around this asymmetry: those who provide care can least expect to receive adequate care in return.[16]

The wave of community-driven organising we witnessed with the onset of the pandemic was geared towards filling the gaps created by insufficient capacity, bureaucratic negligence and deliberate exclusion across the institutional landscape of care provision. Such organising is, however, situated and localised, while the mechanisms driving the development of the contemporary institutional landscape of care provision are structural and global. Assetisation creates self-reinforcing mechanisms that seriously limit the future possibilities for institutional transformation, and pre-empt any change of direction towards more socialised and responsive care provision. This process is underpinned by technological change, which is entrenching a division of labour that normalises the conditions for low-paid, often migrant, workers through the proliferation of legal tools that make them 'legitimate'.

# When care needs piracy

In our work on Pirate Care, we have been focusing on practices that not only self-organise around care in novel ways, but do so by openly disobeying laws, executive orders and institutional arrangements, whenever these stand in the way of freedom and solidarity. People engaged in these practices frequently articulate their disobedient actions as political demands, contesting the normalisation of regimes of exclusion.

This is why we named them 'pirate'. What they do often entails risk: they get arrested and prosecuted for saving people from drowning in the Mediterranean; for leaving water for migrants crossing the desert; for bringing pregnancy terminations to women from countries where such procedures are illegal; for providing shelter to the homeless; for downloading scientific articles.

In the absence of other means to mobilise around the future of care-provision, it is urgent that laws which support imperial processes of assetisation, and the intensification of an unequal division of labour, are disobeyed and politicised. We want to highlight some of the initiatives that have inspired us as we have been working towards the articulation of what piracy and its political stakes could be today, in the context of the crisis of care.[17] These initiatives are Sea-Watch, Docs Not Cops, Science Hub and Njal.la - all organisations that have shaped our analysis from the very onset of our inquiry; and Sezonieri and DREPT, organisations with which we have come in contact while preparing a research residency in Austria.[18]

Sea-Watch is a civilian search-and-rescue initiative helping migrants survive arguably the deadliest migration route in the world - the short stretch of the Mediterranean Sea between Northern Africa and Southern Europe. Since 2014 over 600,000 migrants have made the passage, with over 16,000 of them having been confirmed as dead or missing in shipwrecks. Earlier in the decade, after a series of major shipwrecks, EU states, especially Italy, temporarily committed themselves to the prevention of further loss of life at this southern border. However, with the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015-16, the EU made an about-turn, rescinding its obligations under the Geneva Refugee Convention, Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union and other human rights norms. This about-turn led to the denial of entry into Italian and Maltese ports for civilian sea and rescue ships which had previously been able to bring refugees to safety; and in August 2017 this culminated in the confiscation of the *Iuventa*, a ship run by the German NGO Jugend Rettet and captained by Pia Klemp, while *Sea-Watch 3*'s captain, Carola Rackete, was arrested

in July 2019. Civilian sea and rescue organisations are estimated to have saved 100,000 lives since 2014. However, while up to thirteen ships constantly operated alongside a variety of civil society actors in 2016, Sea-Watch is now one of the few organisations still resisting the EU's clamp-down - and their ships are these days more often detained in port than in action. Despite the size of its operation and the risk its mission now entails, Sea-Watch nevertheless considers its efforts as having little more efficacy than the application of a sticking plaster. The solution they always put forward in their statements is a political one - securing a safe passage for all migrants.

Docs Not Cops is a campaign of medical staff and patients resisting the regulation imposed by the UK government on NHS England in 2017, requiring ID checks on all patients requiring non-emergency care, as required in the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, aimed at policing migrants. On the grounds that they've been trained to provide care universally to all who need it, groups of medical staff in hospitals have been refusing to act as part of an 'internal border', and as the extended arm of the immigration service. Furthermore, they have been refusing the accompanying introduction of charges for migrants, which could plant the seed for further expansion of charges to other patients.

Science Hub, the 'Robin Hood of access to science', provides public access to tens of millions of scientific research papers that are protected by commercial intellectual property law and only legally available after payment - often of very large sums. It has had a number of its domains revoked over recent years, and recently Twitter also revoked its account, following an injunction from an Indian court initiated by the largest commercial publisher in the world, Elsevier, which is famous for the staggering 37 per cent it rakes in for providing access to the articles that scientists write, review and edit, while receiving no compensation whatsoever. Losing domains is a given for 'shadow libraries' such as Science Hub.[19]

Njal.la is a domain registration service that acts as a go-between and allows organisations and individuals to operate through domain names that do not identify them. Incorporated (as 1337 Ltd) in the tax haven of Nevis, it reappropriates the mechanisms used by globalised capital to avoid taxation to provide anonymity for precarious projects such as shadow libraries. It thus allows these libraries to continue to resist globalised intellectual property enforcement and make science accessible to all, whether in low-income countries or in rich institutions.

# When care needs piracy

Sezonieri is an activist-led campaign for the rights of agricultural workers in Austria, which supports the labour struggles of migrant seasonal workers, in collaboration with the trade union PRO-GE. As part of its policy to close its borders to large numbers of people, Austria, like most European countries, has put in place processes that illegalise migrants, and has policed them heavily, and this in turn has led to shortages of exploitable labour; it has therefore had to organise a special fly-in visa regime for workers from Eastern European countries so that they can pick its asparagus and salad. These workers were provided with no epidemiologically safe accommodation or medical care. To counter this, Sezonieri has been working with migrant seasonal workers to prevent exploitation, improve working conditions and help enforce their rights. In their outreach activities, its activists have to go onto farms to meet the workers, thus facing the threat of being charged with trespassing on private land. In the midst of the pandemic, however, they have been putting a list of demands onto the political agenda - for higher wages, better sanitary conditions, and compensation for the increased health risk incurred by migrant agricultural workers, as well as for the abolition of nativist and anti-migrant discourses, the de-criminalisation of migration, and the creation of a more just system of food production.

DREPT is a self-organised initiative of eastern European live-in care-workers in Austria, founded in 2020 to protect caregivers from exploitation and abuse. The initiative provides counselling, crisis support and political advocacy for caregivers, who are nominally self-employed, but in reality are recruited and dependent on employment agencies, making them ineligible for trade union representation, minimum wage agreements, paid vacation or sick leave. DREPT argues that if caregivers were entitled to full protection under labour law, the entire system of elder-care would no longer be financially sustainable, and that this makes agencies, the state and the bulk of Austrian society complicit in their exploitation. Amid the pandemic, the initiative has built a Facebook community of over 10,000 and organised a protest - 'Applause is not enough, employment now' - demanding proper employment status and protection for care-workers.

## Conclusions

From our standpoint, it appears that at the onset of the pandemic much of the public expected governments to act rationally and to take decisions in the name

of a common good. But in the end the key issues of concern were not just the extent to which individual governments took on the challenge of meeting this expectation - important though this was; rather, a much more important cause for concern was the nature of the systemic conditions and structures within which these governments were functioning. Governments act in an environment that is already market-dependent, and, as such, thrives on scarcity and exclusion. Under these conditions, a failure to seize on the pandemic as an opportunity to transform the politics and values underpinning public health (as well as other areas of welfare provision) for the better was a completely predictable response. This is why these conditions must be placed at the centre of our political horizon: they must become politicised, and sooner rather than later. In the currently constrained terrain of political mobilisation, however, such politicisation may increasingly need to come from the standpoint of disobedient, maroon, and pirate, modes of organising.[20] We believe that the imaginary of piracy allows us to foreground the pressing need to expand the realm of conceivable responses to the crisis - and for coordinated action that questions the normalisation of imperial property and labour regimes.

**PS:** *Our point about care increasingly needing piracy could be complemented by a second, parallel, one - that acts of piracy can also be understood as a call for care. Piracy is frequently a necessary strategy for finding workarounds for people living in societies ruled by corrupt thugs who care for no one but themselves. Disposable populations sometimes have no other choice but to lie, cheat and dissimulate, simply to re-appropriate the necessities of survival. Yet there is nothing romantic about piracy in the majority world, where tinkering is a necessary skill rather than a political practice of liberation. One testament to this in the 'dial-up' parts of the world are the streets filled with stalls selling CDs with pirated content that the 'broadband' rest of the world would regard as a nostalgic remnant from a bygone era. The ruling thugs in those countries have no compunction about shutting down this kind of street piracy whenever the imperial order incentivises them to do so. This second question, however - the tragedy of piracy without care - will have to be left for another occasion.*

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# When care needs piracy

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All three authors are convenors of **Pirate Care** (https://pirate.care), a translocal research process focusing on collective learning and disobedient responses to the current care crisis.

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## Notes

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