

MARX IN THE SWEATSHOP: EXPLOITATION & SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN A GARMENT FACTORY CALLED INDIA

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Abstract

In Volume One of Capital, Marx takes us on an odyssey through the secrets of the world of commodities produced under capitalism – their ‘real’ value, the exploitative nature of the labour process and the dark abode of production. His contribution to studies of early capitalism and working poverty is seminal, but how is Marx still relevant for the study of contemporary, globalised production? This chapter identifies three tropes of Marxian methodology relevant to the study of India’s ‘sweatshop regime’. Firstly the initial framing of the analysis around ‘the commodity’, to illustrate the concrete workings of ‘commodity fetishism’ and its links to regional comparative advantage; secondly the study of different modes of extraction of surplus value, their interplay, and implications for the labouring body; and lastly the mapping of distinct processes of subsumption of labour into capitalist circuits, resulting in various ‘forms of exploitation’. While celebrating the relevance of Marxian method for the concrete analysis of contemporary sweatshops, drawing on radical feminist literature the chapter also reflects on the need to complement it with insights on the social traits of exploitation and social reproduction.

Introduction: from Volume One of Capital to the Indian sweatshop

One hundred and fifty years after its publication, *Das Kapital* remains relevant for the study of capitalist production. Marx’s analysis of the ‘abode of production’ developed in Volume One still powerfully resonates with many issues facing the labouring classes worldwide, especially the developing world. First, many of these classes experience unacceptable rhythms, intensity and length of working hours while remuneration often remains below what is defined as a ‘living wage’. Secondly, these classes remain exposed to high occupational risk, industrial ‘disasters’ and health conditions linked to overwork and exhaustion. The labouring body strains under the intense pitch and speed of work imposed by the ever-increasing velocity of circulation of raw materials, goods and delivery times characterising today’s global economy.

However, the most important reason Volume One should still be considered vital reading to interpret key aspects of our contemporary global economy is for Marx's *method*. The very structure of the volume, in this sense, offers a crucial research framework.

Marx starts from an investigation of the commodity form, then proceeds to reveal the 'dark secrets' behind its value, which lie in the process of surplus labour extraction and exploitation of the worker. Several chapters are dedicated to analysing how labour surplus can be extracted, in *absolute* or *relative* terms; that is either through ruthless strategies to extend the working day or by increasing work intensity and/or productivity. Different modes of labour surplus extraction have distinct implications for the labouring body. We don't encounter the processes that initiated the whole system until the end of Volume One; the mechanisms of dispossession that threw workers onto the market to sell the only commodity they had left, labour-power – a commodity that, if kept for personal consumption, will not save the worker from starvation, but once sold to and consumed by the capitalist will instead generate surplus-value and reproduce the worker simultaneously.

Different typologies of labour surplus extraction are not the only ways in which exploitation can differ in practice. Exploitation can have different features and manifestations and crucially, as argued by Jairus Banaji, different *forms*. For instance, depending on the 'degree' of dispossession and divorce of people from their means of production (land, but also work tools and access to markets outside the clutches of the capitalist) exploitation can manifest in more or less pure or disguised forms of wage work (e.g. Bernstein 2010). Labour can be subsumed into the capitalist process in

either *real* or *formal* terms (Banaji 2010). Under generalised capitalist production, even those not fully divorced from their means of production may still be fully divorced from means of survival outside the market, and subsumed *formally* into the capitalist circuit as units of labour.

In this paper I argue that these three ‘tropes’ within the Marxian method of analysis as developed in Volume One – namely initial framing of the analysis around the commodity; observation of the different modes of labour surplus extraction; and mapping of the different processes of labour subsumption – are crucial to understanding key features of contemporary production in labour-intensive industries. This viewpoint is supported taking the case of India’s ‘sweatshop regime’ (Mezzadri 2017). Here it allows for an investigation into the features of ‘the garment’ as a commodity, and into the multiple processes of labour surplus extraction and ‘forms of exploitation’ (Banaji 2010) behind the ‘made in India’ label. While deploying the Marxian method, the analysis also complements it with insights from feminist radical literature, particularly Maria Mies (1982, 1986) and Silvia Federici (2004, 2012). This deepens our understanding of contemporary social features of value and exploitation; of the mechanisms of surplus extraction; and of the distinct patterns of social reproduction of the workforce within India’s sweatshop regime. The empirical narrative draws on many years of extensive fieldwork in India, across garment export hubs, industrial hamlets, and peri-urban/rural outposts (Mezzadri 2017).

Section two, which follows, discusses the relevance of adopting the commodity as the starting point of analyses of production, and explains how global and regional capitalists fetishize India as a giant sourcing factory specialising in distinct garment

‘commodities’. It will also expand on the relation between physical and social materialities of production and work, and on the social features of exploitation. Section three discusses processes of labour surplus extraction across the sweatshop regime and compares them to those described by Marx. It insists on their mutually reinforcing nature, and on their highly socially-differentiated aspects and impacts on distinct labouring bodies. Section four highlights the multiple ‘forms of exploitation’ within the sweatshop regime and reflects on how they shape social features of today’s garment proletariat. It also expands on how social reproduction sustains different forms of exploitation. Section five concludes by considering what India’s sweatshop regime suggests about the contemporary nature of exploitation and value.

The Commodity and the Sweatshop

In the 19th century capital already appeared as ‘an immense collection of commodities’ (Marx 1990: 125). The opening chapter of Volume One highlights the double nature of the value of all ‘things’ produced under capitalism. Capitalist things are defined; they have a use-value, on the basis of their utility, and an exchange-value, based on which they will be exchanged in the market. While the latter is naturalised as linked to the former, this is hardly the case. Under capitalism the exchange value of commodities – their real value – is given by the quantity of labour, or labour-time, needed to produce them. From this point of view everything that surrounds us and that we purchase and use today – our furniture, cars, i-pads, and indeed our clothes – incorporates different quantities of ‘congealed labour-time’, conferring distinct values beyond their mere sensuousness. Marx is quite clear about this (163).

‘A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it... But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.’

This is a key insight. Indeed, the value of a garment has little to do with its use-value. If this was true when Marx was writing, it is even more so today. Western wardrobes – but also increasingly those of the rising middle classes in emerging economies like India – bulge with cheap garments. Their usefulness as ‘sensuous things’ is therefore greatly limited. The value of these garments, unfortunately, does reflect the value of labour-time congealed in them; a value that is greatly depressed by the cheapness of services provided by the poor labouring masses in garment-producing economies. It is only for those garments that command high prices due to ‘branding’ that exchange-value reflects not only congealed labour-time in production but also intangible ‘rents’ based on the vast consumer power of global actors. But let’s stay focused on the commodity and its twofold value form.

The fact that the real value of commodities under capitalism transcends their usefulness has been largely interpreted as an indication that their physical features do not really matter. Marx (165) writes:

‘...The commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this.’

Ways to interpret this vary. One is that the physical properties of commodities have no relation to the social process deployed to produce them. Another is, instead, that in the process of becoming commodities, things should not be seen as simply linked to their physical status but *primarily as an expression of the social relations deployed to produce them*. These are crucially different explanations; one suggests that physical and social ‘materialities’ fundamentally differ, the other highlights the presence of multiple, different types of ‘materialities’ epitomised by the commodity form.

An enquiry into the world of garments clearly supports the second explanation. The word ‘garment’ can refer to different commodities – jeans, jackets, T-shirts, blouses. Product differentiation is astonishing, currently further boosted at a global level by the Zara business model, which is increasing the speed of production, circulation and, crucially, withdrawal from circulation, a strategy designed to push consumers to frenetically buy and discard in a process which can be dubbed ‘economic consumption bulimia’, and which generates massive waste. While this amazing product specialisation raises key questions about today’s consumerism, it also needs to be accounted for when thinking about the garment as a commodity defined by its exchange value, in turn given by the labour-time necessary to produce it.

If we look at the features of distinct sets of garments they all differ, and entail distinct processes of production. Their physical properties do not necessarily matter in terms of use-value; however they do matter in terms of the *quantity and type* of congealed labour-time they are likely to incorporate. An order for 100,000 basic jeans will be produced on an assembly line, with a specific organisation of production, at a given

pace, by a labour force at a specific level of productivity and intensity of work. Meanwhile, an order for a small batch of embroidered blouses will be realised under different conditions. In short, different physical properties of commodities, here garments, entail different social processes of production.

This is another reason why it is crucial to begin with the commodity and the Marxian method is still greatly useful in this respect. While this intuition has been followed up by commodity studies, especially in their early conceptualisation within World System Analysis (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1986; Bair 2009), attention to the interplay between physical and social materialities of production has not been systematically developed. In fact, it has been developed mainly with reference to nature and land (e.g. Coronil 1997; Castree 2003) or farming differences (Watts 1994), but not necessarily to the complex world of ‘man-made things’. If these things have a complex ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986) across circuits of distribution and consumption, their distinct features also shape a fairly diverse ‘social life’ across the labour process.

In India, within what I call the ‘sweatshop regime’, the correspondence between physical and social materialities of production is striking. Product specialisation is highly localised. Interviews with sourcing actors, global and regional buyers, retailers and manufacturers clearly reveal how the whole country is ‘made’ into a giant department store, with different garment collections on different floors. Delhi (NCR) and Jaipur produce embellished ladieswear; Ludhiana produces woollens; Bangalore and Chennai basic garments like jeans, jackets, or shirts, and Tiruppur churns out T-shirts. Kolkata, in industrial decline since Partition, specialises in low-end nightwear,

kidswear and workwear. Mumbai is a hub for fashion trade and design – the cash register of the India store. There are historical reasons behind each pattern of product specialisation; and global and regional actors continue reproducing them by placing differentiated orders across export hubs based on past performance (Mezzadri 2017).

The garment department store metaphor represents how sourcing actors have fetishized India based on garment commodities. The physical properties of these commodities differ substantially, as do the social processes of production; both in quantity of labour-time needed and type of labour deployed. In northern India and Kolkata, production is in networks of small and medium factories and workshops, and value-addition is decentralised to armies of artisan-workers. Within this organisation of production, useful for niche products made on semi-assembly lines, group systems or artisanal tailoring systems, the factory labour force is mainly male migrants from the Hindi belt. Ancillary activities take place in home-based settings. Embroidery, for instance, is organised by labour contractors and scattered across peri-urban and rural outposts like Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, where different types of home-based workers often perform these tasks under relations of neo-bondage or patriarchal unfreedom (Mezzadri 2017).

In the southern garment centres of Chennai and Bangalore, where factories aimed at mass-producing basic items are larger and organised in assembly-line production, the workforce is mainly factory workers, is feminised. Here, women are considered the best labour force to contain industrial costs. Tiruppur, which is characterised by a combination of Fordist and post-industrial landscapes (De Neve 2014), adopts a system whereby both male and female migratory labour coexist (Chari 2004; Carswell

& De Neve 2013). This product specialisation of the Indian garment store is realised through a process whereby the whole country is turned into a massive ‘global factory’ (Chang 2009) – a sweatshop regime, where distinct ‘labours’ perform distinct tasks and produce different garments.

Indeed, each garment in India can be conceived as an expression of the labour-time needed to produce it. However, the varying social profile of the workforce involved in producing garments also suggests that, as distinct commodities, different garments conceal *qualitatively different* types of labour-time, and not simply homogenous units of labour. In short, while the case of India’s sweatshop regime reaffirms the need to start our analysis from the commodity, it also suggests the need to pay attention to the processes of social differentiation of the labour deployed to make the commodity. While, at a more abstract level, the real value of commodities rests on the labour-power contained, in turn the value attributed to that labour-power changes with the social profile of the workers who sell it.

The relevance of the social profile of labour is stressed by feminist analyses, which have illustrated the racialised and gendered features of ‘global shop-floors’ and ‘global farms’ (Elson & Pearson 1981; Mies 1982; Salzinger 2003; Fernandez 1997; Novo 2004; Caraway 2005; Bair 2010; Ruwanpura 2011). In India, the social differentiation of the workforce operates as a ‘social structure of accumulation’ (Harriss-White 2003). Our case reveals how such social differentiation is also strongly connected to commodity differentiation. Complementing the Marxian method with feminist insights we gain an in-depth understanding of how things are made and by whom. Let us now examine labour surplus extraction across the

sweatshop regime. Once complemented with feminist approaches, the Marxian method again provides key insights that unveil salient features of contemporary exploitation.

The Labour Process, the Working Day and the Sweatshop

The labour process is that whereby labour, through different ‘systems’ and ‘tools’, transforms raw materials into new use-values. Under capitalism the tools and raw materials are owned and provided by the capitalists, as is the labour-time of workers, and hence the use-value produced (ch. 7). In the act of labouring, workers consume their labour-power as sold to the capitalist, transferring its value and that contained in the raw materials onto the new products (ch. 8). In the process, workers both transfer ‘old’ value and generate a ‘new’ one; the difference between the labour-time *necessary* to workers’ reproduction and surplus labour-time gives the rate of surplus value. ‘Made’ in production, this surplus can only be realised in the sphere of circulation/exchange (ch. 9). Capitalists aim at expanding the share of surplus labour-time at the expense of necessary labour time. This, despite the fact that labour-power and its ‘container’ (Federici 2012) – the labouring body – needs to regenerate and replenish to be able to continue being sold. In the absence of legal boundaries imposed by the state, or economic ones imposed by profitability (like tight labour markets) capital is uninterested in workers’ fate.

‘Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power than can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-

power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility (376).’

In this light, the working day, to which Marx dedicates a long chapter (ch. 10), becomes not only the rhythmic cycle of the labour process, and the arena of struggle between workers and capitalists over the appropriation of labour surplus, but arguably also the theatre where the labouring body can be robbed of more labour-time than that initially sold by the worker, and be inexorably depleted. In short, the working day is the theatre of exploitation. Marx describes two types of surplus value appropriation, *absolute* and *relative*. The former is generally characterised as based on attempts to extend the working day beyond its limits. The second is linked to reducing necessary labour-time; that is the time needed to reproduce labour. This is either via a cheapening of commodities (meaning they absorb less labour-time) or rises in productivity, for instance through deployment of new tools of labour, like machinery.

Some analyses of absolute and relative surplus extraction processes consider the latter more virtuous/less pernicious. However, both can be ruthless. If absolute surplus extraction entails exhausting working hours and rhythms with the implications Marx describes (epidemics, low life expectancy, child mortality), processes of relative surplus extraction are not necessarily kinder. First, the cheapening of commodities can lead to cuts in wages. Second, the deployment of new machinery and deepening of the division of labour triggers deskilling that, by reducing workers to ‘living appendages’ of a ‘lifeless organism’ (Marx 1990: 548), cheapens the value of the commodity labour-power, hence *de facto* reducing workers’ share of overall surplus

(Braverman 1974). It also makes the workers ever-more dependent upon the labour market to survive, as they lose craftsmanship skills.

Marx is also clear that absolute and relative surplus extraction can proceed hand-in-hand (438). Indeed, today, sweatshops see both. Absolute and relative forms of surplus extraction are not only inextricably and intimately linked; they also reinforce each other, producing dark synergies. Take the cases of factory shopfloor production in Delhi and Bangalore. In Delhi, in factories and workshops, production is flexible and often requires a continuous adjustment to changing deliveries and orders. Overtime is inbuilt in such a system; many are compelled to work beyond their shifts. Workers in and around Delhi generally work 10–12 hours daily in factories and up to 16 hours in workshops (Mezzadri & Srivastava 2015). The majority are male migrants, so they may not protest against this practice if linked to an increase in take-home wages (see also Breman 2013). In fact, circulation can reinforce these overtime practices. Here, the extension of the working day cannot be solely classified as a device for absolute surplus extraction, as fluctuating worktimes become a key part of both the organisation of production and of workers' strategy at reproduction via circulation. As overtime is rarely compensated at overtime rates as set by Indian labour laws, the extension of the working day and cheapening of labour are realised simultaneously.

On Bangalore's feminised shopfloors Fordist assembly line production dominates. The larger size of industrial units and product specialisation in basic garments entails a cheapening of labour-power based on the technical division of labour and deskilling (e.g. Jenkins & Blyton 2016). Overtime also becomes necessary here during busy

periods. Women workers are far less keen on overtime than their male counterparts in Delhi. However, the majority report that they cannot refuse overtime. A significant portion of this overtime is not only not paid at legal rates, it may not be paid at all, presented as extra work women need to do to meet their targets (Peepercamp 2018); targets often set well beyond reasonable productivity levels. Here it is also impossible to disentangle absolute and relative surplus extraction, as the two processes are organically intertwined. A rise in the rate of absolute surplus extraction is obtained through the imposition of a technical organisation and management of production aimed at extending the share of relative surplus – namely batch, target-based production. Notably, both in Delhi and Bangalore, as in other garment hubs, the cheapening of labour is also linked to rising living costs. A study on wages in Tiruppur shows that while nominal wages have risen since the 1980s, real wages have stagnated (Sivakumar 2017).

Both the exhausting length of the working day and the harsh intensity of work in the sweatshop lead to systematic depletion of the labouring body; a process described in detail by workers. Delhi workers revealed the high incidence chronic illnesses and fatigue. Those in large factories reported waves of fainting during the unbearably hot summer months, while homeworkers suffer the loss of eyesight (Mezzadri & Srivastava 2015). It is impossible to isolate the contributions of the distinct modes of surplus extraction to health depletion; they also work through dark synergies. Similar findings are encountered in other garment centres (De Neve & Prentice 2017).

The processes of absolute and relative surplus extraction are also enabled by discursive practices naturalising and deepening social inequalities and structural

differences in labour markets. For women factory workers, for instance, exploitation is both an economic and social experience, nurtured by the mechanisms of the assembly line and overwork, but also by the mobilisation of gender stereotypes reproducing their work as of lower value (Wright, 2006). For them, the fight for higher wages and the containment of the working day is indivisible from that against patriarchal norms. For low-caste workers like Ansari Muslims engaged in embroidery, stereotypes embedded in structural oppression are also mobilised to expand exploitation rates. Their experience calls for the development of a ‘labour theory of stigma’ (John 2013), as the traits of their lived exploitation transcend traditional (Marxian) debates on labour surplus extraction. Their bodies, trapped within regimes of stigma, cannot valorise their labour-power. For them, labouring is also a *performance* in subordination and humiliation.¹

A number of Marxian analyses identify a third mode of appropriation of labour surplus (which Marx excluded *ex-ante* from his analysis); namely, paying labour below its reproductive cost, or below the value of necessary labour-time, leading to ‘super-exploitation’ or ‘immiseration’ (Higginbottom 2012; Selwyn 2017). Some of these analyses link super-exploitation to imperialism (Smith 2016). While representing important contributions to our understanding of the contemporary global division of labour, these studies may downplay the role of national and local factors in setting the differences in the value of labour-power across the world (Fine & Saad-Filho 2018). Moreover, modes of surplus extraction have always been *experienced differently*. The feminist literature has illustrated this point at length, showing that modes of surplus extraction are always relational – in particular, gendered and

¹ Shah et al. (2017) explore these issues as ‘conjugated oppression’ in India.

racialised – hence dependent on the distinct social traits of labouring bodies. For many categories of vulnerable workers, harsher forms of absolute surplus extraction involving wages below the value of necessary labour power – and the cost of social reproduction – have been the norm, rather than the result of ‘super-exploitation’ (or indeed ‘modern slavery’). The next section will dwell more on exploitation and its multiple *forms* (Banaji 2010), proposing a Marxian feminist approach centred on social reproduction.

Forms of Exploitation and Social Reproduction in the Sweatshop

The distinction between formal and real subsumption of labour is the third key feature of the Marxian method crucial to the analysis of the sweatshop. Marx addresses the distinction between formal and real subsumption in the appendix to Volume One, on the *Result of the Immediate Process of Production*. We have the formal subsumption of labour when capital subsumes the labour process ‘as it finds it’, in the context of a pre-capitalist or ‘archaic’ mode of production (1021). In this case, the penetration of capitalism manifests with the takeover of reproduction, but not of the means of production. Labour may still own these means, but is deprived of the possibility to reproduce outside the logic of the market where it must sell its labour-power to survive.

The real subsumption of labour manifests when capital revolutionises the mode of production and imposes its own labour process. As Marx describes in the chapters on the labour process, the age of manufacture and co-operation, and of large machinery (chs. 7–15), real subsumption involves: i) restructuring of the labour process according to a new division of labour, progressively deskilling workers; ii) provision

of all tools of work and machinery by the capitalist; iii) the progressive transformation of the worker into an ‘appendage’ of the machine. Moreover, the initial enabling condition for the process of real subsumption is the dispossession of the worker from both the means of production and reproduction, so that she must return to the market to sell labour-power again and again. In short, selling one’s labour becomes, under capitalism, the only dynamic compulsion ensuring survival.

‘Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour (723).’

There is a clear relation between the different ways surplus is extracted and the ways in which subsumption of labour manifests. Marx highlights that within processes of formal subsumption, surplus value can only be produced in absolute terms (1021). On the other hand, Marx also links relative surplus extraction with processes of real subsumption.

‘If the production of absolute surplus-value was the material expression of the formal subsumption of labour under capital, then the production of relative surplus-value may be viewed as its real subsumption (1025).’

Modes of value extraction and forms of labour subsumption, while related, are not the same thing. The former indicate the strategies through which capital obtains surplus. The latter indicate the particular *form* that the labour relation can take under capitalism; the *forms of exploitation* (Banaji 2010). Indeed, across the sweatshop

regime, the subsumption of labour takes place in both real and formal terms and exploitation takes various forms.

Re-examining the complex labour processes of the sweatshop regime – varying with the physical materiality of production – one can clearly appreciate the distinct ways in which labour subsumption can take place and exploitation manifest. Factories host armies of wage-workers with varied social profiles and positions on the employment ladder. A significant part of the labour process takes place in non-factory or home-based settings. Garment areas like Delhi, which need armies of embroiderers, have progressively incorporated peripheral colonies and villages into their orbit, repositioning traditional artisanal putting-out networks (Mezzadri 2017).

Contrary to Marx, however, in the sweatshop regime processes of formal subsumption of labour are not transitory. Forms of ‘unfree labour’ (Banaji 2010) are continuously reproduced by capital to resolve pressing issues of profitability, whilst also performing key, non-factory tasks central to value-addition. In fact, even dispossession, central to the formation of processes of real subsumption of labour, does not take place as Marx depicts. In India, as in many other parts of the world, dispossession is a ‘partial’ if ongoing process (Mies 1986; Harvey 2004), which may leave workers with some means of production – tools or land – but which ensures their inability to subsist outside the capitalist law of labour surplus extraction. It is first and foremost dispossession from alternative modes of living outside capitalism. Evidence from Delhi suggests that a significant proportion of garment workers still own some land. However, this is hardly crucial to their survival (Mezzadri & Srivastava 2015). Despite being only partially dispossessed, the contemporary

garment working class is neither ‘semi-proletarianised’ (e.g. Zhou, Fan & Gao 2015 on China) nor ‘de-proletarianised’ (e.g. Brass 1990). Their process of proletarianisation is complete in its aim to divorce producers from subsistence. In this context, expropriation from the means of production becomes irrelevant; indeed partial dispossession is handy for capital, as it guarantees the externalisation of all costs for the social reproduction of the workforce (Mezzadri 2017).

The exposure of the garment proletariat to multiple forms of exploitation is enabled by patterns of social reproduction that are equally multiple and complex. While Marx primarily observed the features and forms of exploitation at the point of production, illustrating the varied ways in which labour surplus can be extracted and labour subsumed into the capitalist relation, feminist literature has compellingly shown how these features and forms are moulded across *realms of social reproduction*. This is because exploitation is co-constituted through forms of social oppression crossing reproductive realms (Mies 1982, 1986). Indeed, the social (reproductive) profile of labouring classes is no secondary complication to the study of how things are made and value created and extracted. The Muslim Ansari embroidery workers of the sweatshop regime, for instance, are likely to continue being included into processes of formal subsumption of labour by virtue of their social profile as low-caste workers engaged in traditional occupations. Capital benefits greatly from these units of labour ‘in disguise’; hidden and easily disposable.

Forms of social oppression shaped by patriarchy and racism contribute directly to expanding rates of exploitation. The cost of the commodity labour-power varies for distinct labouring bodies. Labour commodification is a highly differential process,

crucial to the generation of distinct forms of exploitation; and workers come with different ‘price-tags’ on their bodies (Mezzadri 2017). Women workers arrive at garment factory gates already moulded as ‘inferior labour’ within the realm of social reproduction, where their unpaid labour is naturalised as a personal service and ‘act of love’ (Federici 2012). Hence, women’s labour enters production valued by its historical disadvantage rather than priced for its socially necessary value.

Thirdly, reproductive realms are the very foundation of capitalist processes, they generate and regenerate the commodity labour-power. Federici (2004) argues that capitalism starts from the kitchen and the bedroom. Domestic, reproductive and care work all serve the purpose of regenerating the commodity labour-power (Fortunati 1981). These activities nurture the labouring body as the ‘first machine’ ever invented by capitalism (Federici 2004). Given its constitutive role in processes and rates of exploitation, social reproduction should be considered as directly contributing to value generation (Mezzadri 2019). While this point is contentious (e.g. Ferguson 2019), it is fundamental to capturing the workings of exploitation in contemporary times and avoiding rigid distinctions between productive/value-producing and reproductive/non-value producing circuits.

Across the sweatshop regime the contribution of reproductive realms and activities to value generation is paramount. While in India one cannot yet witness the rise of a systemic ‘dormitory labour regime’ (Pun & Smith 2007), daily reproductive industrial sites still perform key functions of control. The chaotic, dirty and exhausting life workers live there, ruled by housing brokers often connected to labour contractors (Mezzadri & Srivastava 2015), curtails workers’ capacity to resist and expands

exploitation rates. Realms of inter-generational reproduction – e.g. villages of origin of migrant workers – subsidise capital. They re-absorb unemployed workers and internalise the social costs of labour externalised by capital – long-term housing, health provision, and care for children or the elderly, generally left behind. The deployment of these reproductive realms as social ‘buffer zones’ decreases the value of what is considered socially necessary labour-time. Moreover, across all reproductive realms, unpaid *reproductive activities*, mainly performed by women and involving the execution of both individual and collective care and domestic duties, further depress the cost of socially necessary labour time, and with it its value. If Marx provides us with a research framework for studying the world of production and the ‘secrets’ behind the generation of its value, the lens of social reproduction exposes the broader theatre in which this production and its secrets unfold.

Conclusions: the Many Struggles over Value

This chapter argues that the Marxian method developed in Volume One of Capital remains valuable for the study of contemporary, globalised production. Marx’s framing of the analysis around the commodity and its distinctive value form, and his illustration of mechanisms of surplus extraction and exploitation under capitalism still constitute a key framework for understanding the world we inhabit. It is deployed here to explore India’s sweatshop regime and yields key insights. Highlighting how the commodity (garments) reflects and incorporates labour-time illustrates the interrelation between physical and social materialities of production. The analysis shows the relevance of Marx’s distinction between modes of surplus extraction – absolute and relative – and it indicates how they not only co-exist in the sweatshop regime, but also reinforce each other. Finally, it shows the relevance of Marx’s

identification of differential processes of subsumption of labour under capitalism – formal and real – and the different ‘forms of exploitation’ (Banaji 2010) at work across the sweatshop regime are mapped.

While committed to the Marxian method the analysis also highlights the need to complement it, drawing on insights from radical feminist literature on the co-constitution of social oppression and exploitation and the role of social reproduction in production and extraction of value. This shows that while commodity values are clearly based on labour-time, this labour-time is valued, de-valued and re-valued following the distinctive social traits of different categories of labourers. Processes of absolute and relative surplus value are also structured and interplay on the basis of labourers’ social identities, and these identities, in some cases, carry regimes of ‘stigma’ (John 2013) that intensify the work and push the price of labour well below the cost of its regeneration and replenishment.

Moreover, the feminist lens allows deeper analysis of the forms and features of exploitation that co-exist under capitalism. Indeed, it partially explains the continuation of certain forms of exploitation and their stable (non-transitory) role in processes of surplus generation. It also illuminates the role social reproductive realms and activities play for the very creation of value (Mezzadri, 2019). Through the deployment of a Marxian-feminist lens focused on social reproduction, exploitation appears as a complex socioeconomic process and experience, which is not merely moulded at the point of production, but extends far beyond the social or physical boundaries of any place of work. While manifesting in production, its roots and rationale far exceed this sphere and originate in a co-constitutive relation with social

oppression. Reproductive realms and activities form key parts of the complex architecture within which distinct forms of exploitation survive and reconstitute. Ultimately, through the lens of social reproduction – in its more radical analytical sense – exploitation appear as a collection of struggles over the fruits of labour, the share of surplus, and over the recognition of who contributes to this process and how.

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