

Value theories in motion: Circular labour migration, unfinished land dispossession and reproductive struggles across the urban–rural divide

EPF: Philosophy, Theory, Models,
Methods and Practice
1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/26349825231224027

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Abstract

This analysis theorises the central role of the urban–rural divide in the making of value relations and exploitation in contemporary labour regimes. Inspired by insights contained in Diane Elson’s ‘value theory of labour’ and informed by evidence on labour circulation in India’s ‘Sweatshop Regime’, the article combines Early Social Reproduction Analyses (ESRA) and debates on ‘forms of exploitation’ to illustrate the integrated nature of the circuits incorporating production and reproduction, use and exchange value across the urban–rural divide. It represents these circuits as a concrete instantiation of ‘value in motion’. In this schema, the countryside emerges as central to the regeneration of the urban labour regime; as key provider of labouring bodies; and as absorber of reproductive costs, also performing the function of ‘global housework’ for contemporary capitalism. The narrative is particularly attentive to post-industrial work trajectories, which further explain how partial land dispossession and informal work interplay to sustain the dynamic nature of value relations as well as workers’ livelihoods beyond factory labour. The conclusions stress the political implications of reproductive readings of value for labour struggles and pro-labour policy.

Keywords

Value theory, social reproduction, urban–rural divide, circular labour migration, global housewifisation

Introduction

This article explores the role of the urban–rural divide in the making of value relations and exploitation in labour regimes. It builds on Diane Elson’s thought-provoking reflections on the ‘value theory of labour’ and scales up insights on housework and value by Early Social Reproduction Analyses (ESRA) to illustrate how contemporary capitalism valorises social reproduction through multiple processes of circular labour migration connecting urban and rural spaces. Empirical evidence is drawn from the workings of India’s *Sweatshop Regime* (SR), a complex system of exploitation and oppression, which systematically banks on the urban–rural divide to in-source migrant labour for industrial needs while externalising all the reproductive costs necessary to its regeneration to villages and places of origins where this labour comes from, and where it shall return once the temporary industrial experience comes to an end.

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Among ESRA scholars, this narrative builds particularly on the work of Silvia Federici (2004) and Leopoldina Fortunati (1981), while also reaching out to theories stressing the manifold forms of exploitation present in capitalism (Banaji, 2003, 2010) and studies connecting the patriarchal and racial contours of processes of labour-surplus extraction (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The analysis illustrates how social reproduction is put to work across India's SR in ways that systematically summon the mobility and motility of the labourforce and labour process. Structured entirely across the urban–rural divide, the process of value generation and labour-surplus extraction at work in the SR is constantly in flux – it concretely appears as value in motion, in a schema where production and social reproduction, and use and exchange value, fully compenetrates as if in an integrated circuit. The picture emerging is one whereby realms of social reproduction – namely dormitories, industrial hamlets, as well as villages and places of origin of the labourforce performs the extended role of 'housework' within the capitalist labour regime. The countryside, in the expanded social reproductive schema proposed here, is central to the regeneration of the urban industrial conglomerate, as key provider of labour as well as the chief absorber of reproductive costs. The narrative carefully illustrates these processes also looking at patterns of post-industrial work, which further explain the role of partial dispossession, land, and alternative forms of informal work and livelihoods in regenerating life beyond the garment factory.

While this is mostly a theoretical analysis, it is greatly empirically informed by the author's long-term engagement with India's garment industry and its SR, in ways that recall Michael Burawoy's (1998) reflections over the extended case method. This engagement involved multiple rounds of field-based research, including a longer mapping exercise conducted between September 2003 and August 2004; short field trips conducted between 2005 and 2008; a 3-month field study in 2011 followed by a longer 7-month stint in peri-urban rural India; short field trips in 2013 and, more recently, in 2016–2017 and 2019–2020 respectively, collaborative work for two projects focusing on post-industrial work livelihoods aimed at capturing the trajectories of former garment workers first in Bengaluru, and then in Bihar. After this introduction, in the section 'The 'value theory of labour' against the labour theory of value', the article illustrates some key aspects of Diane Elson's 'value theory of labour' that work as powerful points of departure for this analysis; in particular, the questioning of reified understandings of Marx's concepts and distinctions, with regard to labour and value. The section 'Labour, Exploitation and Social Reproduction in a 'value theory of inclusion' explores how Elson's questioning of reified distinctions may connect with insights from ESRA and analyses centering and pluralising 'forms of exploitation', which enable us to account for patriarchal and racial oppression in processes of value generation, labour-surplus extraction and exploitation. Building on all these frameworks, this section moves us from Elson's 'value theory of labour' to a 'value theory of inclusion'. The following section introduces the SR and analyses the specific mechanisms for the social reproduction of value that characterise it, also showing how each challenges the use/exchange value distinction and implies a specific role for the urban–rural divide. The section 'The countryside and village performing the 'housework' of global capitalism' expands on the role the urban–rural divide plays in processes of externalisation of reproductive costs that workers face at the end of their industrial experience, and on the 'central marginality' played by land in processes of partial dispossession enabling the countryside to reabsorb the labourforce originally released to the urban-based industrial labour regime. The section 'Conclusions, on value and reproductive struggles' concludes the analysis by stressing its political implications, focusing on the benefits of reproductive readings of class, struggles and pro-labour policy, in line with feminist radical geography's commitment to remark the political nature of theoretical analysis (Werner et al., 2017).

The ‘value theory of labour’ against the labour theory of value

In March 2020, as multiple countries called national lockdowns to contain the deadly effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mysteries of value-making were revealed. The removal of the one key ‘commodity’ from the cogs of the global capitalist system caused the system to immediately jam, triggering a crisis of capitalist life from which we are still recovering (Mezzadri, 2022; Stevano et al., 2021). That ‘commodity’ was – obviously – labour, the ‘most precious commodity of all’ (Federici, 2004), which produces value once consumed – often depleted and exhausted – by the capitalist relation. So, the pandemic laid bare the secrets of Marx’s (1990 (1976): 1012) ‘hidden abode’, validating one of the central messages of his critique of political economy; that everything under capitalism is created through labour, not as a ‘productive activity’ per se, but as capital’s ‘value-creating substance’.

According to Diane Elson (2015 (1979)), this focus on labour as the generator of value has always been the central aspect of Marx’s labour theory of value. Unlike classic political economists like Adam Smith or David Ricardo, whose works were the object of his critique of political economy, Marx (1990 (1976): 121) was not interested in a theory of the formation of natural prices, nor after (Sraffa-based) mathematical models to explain such formation. Rather, Marx’s (1990 (1976): 123) project, as well as his value theory, was centred on labour; namely, on why labour takes the (plural) forms it does, and with which political consequences. Overall, as remarked by Elson, rather than a labour theory of value, Marx developed a ‘value theory of labour’. This is a helpful starting point to evaluate Marx’s analysis of the various characters of value and value-making in capitalism, as connected to the labour relation.

The lens of Marx’s ‘value theory of labour’ – placing labour as the central value-making social relation in/for capitalism – has important implications for the assessment of other Marxian debates on value. Since chapter 1 of Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx explores the commodity form, and in fact starts the analysis with an exploration of the dual character of its value; namely use-value and exchange value, both connected to labour and its own dual character (Marx, 1990 (1976): 129–130, 131–143). In fact, in the same chapter, Marx discusses the different forms labour takes in the process of value generation connected to capitalist production; namely concrete (or ‘useful’, p. 132) and abstract labour. He also deployed two other categories: private and social labour. In the Marxist literature, these distinctions have often been reified, and reconceptualised as if they were discrete units of analysis, which one could separately isolate and even measure. Yet, following Elson, once we recentre our focus on Marx’s ‘value theory of labour’, we understand these distinctions as varied sides of the same multidimensional coin; as qualifications – or, as put by E.P. Thompson, *potentia* – of the same social relation, namely labour.¹ They could never exist on their own, as labour always has concrete and abstract, private and social aspects. As Elson (2015 (1979)) writes:

Marx saw the determinations of social forms as an historical process; a process eventuating through time in which every precipitated form become in turn dissolved, changes into a new form, a process whose dynamic is internal to it, which has no external ‘cause’, existing outside of history. This entails a view of the world as a qualitatively changing continuum, not an assembly of concretely distinct forms. (p.140)

Notably, while problematic in general, rigid takes on the use/exchange value distinction are even shakier when applied to the special ‘commodity’ labour-power (Mezzadri, 2019, 2020); a method which has been deployed since the 1980s to neutralise feminist critiques to understandings of reproductive labour as ‘unproductive’ as a merely ‘private’ service (Smith, 1978). In this light, while certainly not its direct objective, I argue that Elson’s ‘value theory of labour’ enables us not only to challenge more orthodox versions of the labour theory of value, but also to counter reified distinctions between productive and so-called unproductive (read reproductive) labour.² In fact, also in this case, learning from Elson, we can understand private and social labour – central to the productive/

unproductive distinction – as qualifications of the same relation. Even more, what is central in Elson's analysis of value theory is the recognition that the forms of labour, as all manifestations of the value-generating substance in capitalism, are part of a historical process which we need to analyse through a logic that, in the words of Thomson (1978, p. 230; in Elson, 2015 (1979), p. 141), is 'appropriate to phenomena which are always in motion'. Ultimately, value – as also labour, and value theory in general – in Elson's analysis, is undoubtedly in motion.³

Now: Elson's take on value generation remains critical of theories placing exploitation as central to it (Elson, 2015 (1979): 115–116). However, Thompson's (1966: 203) approach, on which she draws, also places exploitation as a central engine of capitalist history, as a key relation, and not merely a 'sum of grievances and mutual antagonisms'. In fact, I argue that by centering labour and exploitation, we can further elucidate the ways in which contemporary processes of value generation always takes place in motion both abstractly and concretely. Concretely, labour mobility and motility are crucial elements of exploitation, in a world where workers are increasingly migrants in circulation; literally, constantly on the move. Abstractly, these movements are central to the process of generation of value, as they connect multiple realms of life into the system of production and the process of valorisation. They also regenerate the contemporary labour relation as characterised by a specific type of (informalised, and often only partially dispossessed) proletariat. Notably, concerns over the connection between realms of production and life have been the subject of several Marxist-feminist theorisations. These, in my view, complement Elson's value theory of labour as they move the debate on value from the realm of commodity production to that of social reproduction, strongly speaking to the observed realities of today's labour.

In the sections below, drawing from insights of ESRA, I first sketch how a combined focus on labour and exploitation as the engine of capitalist history allows us to rethink value as dynamically co-constituted across realms of production and reproduction. Then, I move to explore the relevance of this approach to capture the concrete workings of the global world of work, which cut across urban, peri-urban and rural settings. In fact, I will reflect on the role the spatial mobility of labour plays in co-constituting exploitation and co-generating value. For this purpose, I will draw on findings on labour circulations at work across India's SR. I will reflect on what is perhaps the least explored process of labour circulation; namely, the reversed migration of rural migrants from urban areas once their industrial employment experience is exhausted. Evidence presented and discussed on these processes is based on collaborative work I originally conducted first with Sanjita Majumder in and around Bengaluru, and then with Kaustav Banerjee on the Delhi–Bihar corridor. Here, I discuss comparative aspects of these findings.

Labour, exploitation and social reproduction in a 'value theory of inclusion'

Old and new analyses of social reproduction contribute to understandings of capitalism that centre processes of 'life-making' (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2019). One can find different definitions of social reproduction; yet one could argue that at its broadest, the term – deployed by Marx in relation to the regeneration of labour-power (in *Capital Volume 1*, chapter 23, see Cammack, 2020: 85; see also Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, in Naidu, 2023: 95), and then reappropriated by feminist theorists – include all activities and realms that regenerate life daily and intergenerationally, as well as capitalist relations (Katz, 2001: 711). The debate on social reproduction stated in the 1970s, when Early Social Reproduction Feminists rejected orthodox understandings of value that squarely put it in (commodity) production, and in effect in what back then were mostly white, male, European factories. In their seminal pamphlet, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) dispelled the myth that as women were excluded from the socially organised productive cycle, their contributions must also lie always outside social

productivity. Women still participated to the generation of surplus value within capital from the ‘domestic ghettos’ of the Social Factory (Dalla Costa and James, 1972: 36). The commodity they produced from these ghettos, ‘unlike all other commodities, is unique to capitalism: the living human being – “the laborer himself”’ (Dalla Costa and James, 1972: 10). Producing the worker, women did not only produce use-values, but also possibility for capitalism itself. The wage, in their view, already subsumed domestic labour, as the key relation regenerating the male salary earner (Federici, 2019).

These insights were further developed by Leopoldina Fortunati. In *The Arcane of Reproduction*, Fortunati (1981) dispels the idea that we can ever divide exchange and use value, placing the former in production and the latter in reproduction. It is exactly the study of the special commodity ‘labour’ that shows us the impossibility to separate these two characters of value under capitalism. In fact, the distinction use/exchange value lives in each of us, as the distinction labour/labour-power; inseparable, indivisible and co-constitutive. In effect, Fortunati’s vision is wholly compatible with Elson’s ‘value theory of labour’; both in fact stress the inseparability of the various qualifications of the labour relation. Fortunati, however, also stresses their inseparability in relation to the process of labour surplus extraction and exploitation. Notably, writing from and on India even earlier, Rohini Hensman also reached compatible conclusions on the value-generating nature of domestic work, theorising it as ‘productive consumption’ (Hensman, 2011; Hensman, 2020 (1977); Naidu, 2023).

As anticipated in the earlier section, the recognition of the productive nature of social reproductive work also erodes a second dichotomy that appears as stark in orthodox understandings of Marx’s labour value theory; namely that between social and private labour. Paul Smith (1978) elaborated one of the early critiques to the work by Dalla Costa and James and rejected their claims on value, based on a reified reading of this distinction. According to him, domestic labour does not acquire a social character given its exclusion from the wage relation, which captures value-generation in capitalism. However, this critique reads like a tautology: domestic labour is not social labour as unwaged, in a framework where the wage is (mis)understood as the marker of value-making in capitalism. We are repeating ourselves in circle. Moreover, is the wage the marker of value-making in capitalism? As argued by Antonella Picchio (1992) in *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Markets*, this is hardly the case. The wage is the price of labour, not its value. In fact, in classical political economy, including Marx’s analysis, the value of labour remains somehow exogenous – once again, we rediscover the basis of the early ESRA critique. This observation is crucial, as it rejects the wage as the main indicator assessing the presence/absence of capitalist value relations (see also Federici, 2018). On the contrary, capitalism is not defined by the presence or absence of wage-labour. The wage is only one form in which the pricing of capitalist labour can occur. As argued by Jairus Banaji (2003, 2010), capitalism is instead defined by the dominance of processes of labour surplus extraction; yet ‘forms of exploitation’ are multiple, and may be waged or, indeed, wageless.

Notably, this point not only does recuperate the value contributions to capitalism of millions of women, but also that of all wageless people; those historically excluded from the wage relation while subjected to the most brutal processes of value extraction (see Bhattacharyya, 2018). These include historical slave, indenture and bonded labour, reorganised in contemporary forms of forced and neo-bonded labour – also defined as modern slavery (LeBaron, 2020). Black Feminist analyses like Angela Davis’ (1983) for instance, highlight the linkages between gender, race and class in shaping patterns of exploitation for Black people in the United States and South Africa, and Saidiya Hartman (2007) reflects on the various ‘afterlives of slavery’, which include unfree labour within the ‘prison industrial complex’ (Davis, 1998) – which represents, as argued by Ruth Wilson-Gilmore (2007), congealed form of *surplus* land, capital and state racism. Notably, for them, the exclusion from the wage – as well as the exclusion from domesticity – was the basis of exploitation, their labour often subsumed at zero cost, and their body literally destroyed by the process of value-extraction. Black feminist historical accounts of slavery also stress the different role domesticity played for black women slaves or indentured workers, and how it evolved with slavery needs (Dadzie, 2020; Morgan, 2004; Reddock, 1994).⁴

Moreover, an understanding of capitalism beyond the wage also allows us to account for the myriad complex forms of petty commodity production formally subsumed into capitalist circuits as units of labour, in the context of past and present putting out systems of production (Banaji, 2010). These still dominate the rural and urban production and labour landscapes and circuits of the Global South (Naidu, 2023), and are also significantly present in the Global North through processes of platformisation of work along gendered, mobility and racialised lines (Mezzadri, 2022). The wage does not disappear from this analysis of capitalism; yet its significance and character are re-thought and theorised as the outcome of gendered and racialised processes, which adversely included some and entirely excluded others – all subject to the capitalist laws of value. This is what Silvia Federici refers to as the *Patriarchy of the Wage*. The racial logics of this wage – the ‘wages of whiteness’ – had already been exposed by several analyses (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 1991), which recognise the reverberations of the centrality of slavery to capitalism (Williams, 1944) and to the industrial revolution (Berg and Hudson, 2023) – a key relation theorised by Cedric Robinson (1983) through his lens of ‘racial capitalism’. By re-orienting our analysis of value on both labour and exploitation, of both the waged and the wageless, we can propose a value theory finally inclusive of all. At this point, we can trace its movement and spatiality, in different contexts.

By overcoming wage-centric, productivist understandings of value, processes of working-class formation appear far more diverse and complex. Relatedly, also the processes of dispossession at their basis multiply and pluralise. As powerfully demonstrated by Silvia Federici (2004), the process of primitive accumulation itself becomes a process of accumulation of differences, social fragmentations and inequalities within the working class (along the wage–non-wage spectrum) that far exceeds simpler schemas of separation of (genderless and raceless) producers from the means of production.⁵ If we gender and race the process of primitive accumulation, we can appreciate the diverse ways in which different cohorts of people have been exposed to dispossession, from their land, livelihoods, labour and work. This is quite a crucial point to account for the varied ‘classes of labour’ – to use Henry Bernstein’s (2007) expression (Mezzadri, 2019) – or ‘working people’ – to use Shivji’s (2017) concept (Naidu, 2023; Naidu and Ossome, 2016) – inhabiting the Global South, or majority world. Across the history of capitalism, these classes have included combinations of free and unfree labour (Banaji, 2003), as if along a ‘continuum’ (Bremen, 1996, 2013; Lerche, 2010). They are the class expression of the multiple ‘forms of exploitation’ (Banaji, 2010) at work in the world economy. Indeed, current estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggests that informal employment – in its greatly varied manifestations through self-employment, casualised or own-account work – represents over 60% of planetary employment, peaking in key regions of the Global South, like Sub-Saharan Africa or India, where it is set at over 80% (ILO, 2018).

In sum, by integrating some of Elson’s insights on the value theory of labour with ESRA and approaches stressing multiple forms of exploitation, we move to an analysis able to capture the dynamism and motion of value generation across categories, processes and realms of production and social life, integrating theory and concrete experiences of labour under contemporary capitalism, especially in the Global South. Here, the dynamic nature of the compenetration of labour and value relations across productive and reproductive domains shape patterns of ‘incomplete’ or ‘partial’ dispossession. The marginal access to land by people who make their livelihoods selling their labour in a vast array of economic circuits show the inseparability of use/exchange value and of production and reproduction. Elsewhere, I already analysed these processes as foundational of an extended social reproduction schema, which I named as ‘value theory of inclusion’, and analysed the mechanisms at the basis of the social reproduction of value. Below, I revisit these mechanisms by exploring them also as dynamic illustrations of the inseparability between use and exchange value in the process of value generation. To do so, I deploy evidence from India’s SR; the complex system of exploitation at work in the garment industry in the Subcontinent (Mezzadri, 2017), and I further reflect on post-industrial work experiences to show how the urban–rural divide is valorised and ‘put to work’ for capitalism.

Value theories in motion in the Sweatshop Regime

Worldwide, garment production is organised in a complex network, where global and local pressures and dynamics interplay, and various categories of highly precarious labour are mobilised locally and often segmented along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, mobility or other markers of social differentiation linked to long histories of imperialism and colonialism (Werner, 2016). Indeed, also in India, Garment production is organised into a complex global commodity chain, stretching across the Subcontinent and incorporating several key local industrial clusters (Mezzadri, 2017). The industry is highly labour-intensive, and it is well recognised for its poor working conditions. Centering labour-intensity and working poverty, the garment chain can be reconceptualised as a SR. Across India's SR, exploitation is a social relation encompassing realms of production, social reproduction and circulation. Workers are exploited based on what they do – in spaces of production that are greatly varied – the factory, the workshop, the home – but also who they are – in terms of caste, provenance, gender and age (Mezzadri, 2017), which in fact also inform in which space they would land working – and who is in charge of their employment and which segment of the product cycle they contribute to. Relations of subordination across these realms are 'interlocked' – in the sense that they result from power relations interplaying and intersecting across many different markets and domains of social life – and so is the resulting exploitative relation we observe.

Interlocked markets and corresponding modes of exploitation were originally the focus of agrarian debates on 'forced commerce', which explored how small and marginal farmers were compelled to sell their produce to upper classes or castes of traders who dominated them across multiple markets, of labour, land and credit (Bhaduri, 1983, 1986, 1999; Bharadwaj, 1974). Relations of attachment (or unfreedom) often formed based on advanced payments, which locked farmers and labourers into specific contractual or labour relations, hence amplifying their subordination across multiple spaces of economic life (Srivastava, 1989). This form of interlocked exploitation could be further reinforced where dominant classes also acted as local community leaders, or what Lenin (1956) in his seminal study of capitalist development in Russia, and more recently Habibi (2021) in his study of agrarian transformations in Java, Indonesia, called 'masters of the countryside'. In short, it could be amplified where interlocking also involved reproductive relations.

Notably, even outside farming or agrarian relations, and even in the context of present-day capitalism, it is quite common for workers in the Global South to be embedded in relations of production, reproduction and circulation where they depend on the same party. Today, in complex manufacturing networks, often embedded in globalised circuits, commodity or value chains, it is the labour contractor – rather than the merchant – who often acts as the key figure regenerating interlocked modes of exploitation (Mezzadri, 2016; Srivastava, 2012). The labour contractor is a very complex character who has travelled across Imperial and colonial times, and who is still central to labour control in our global present. In colonial plantations, the contractor, or *Sardar*, was pivotal to the functioning of the plantation system and its indentured labour regime (Roy, 2007). The *Sardar* recruited, deployed and organised labourers in the plantation, and employers benefitted from a system disentangling the organisation of labour from that of production. Today, evidence suggests labour contractors still dominate the labour process in multiple contemporary production networks engaged in the production of various global goods; namely, agro-food commodities such as cocoa/chocolate, textiles, garments and electronics and cars (Andrijasevic and Novitz, 2020; Barnes et al., 2015; Barrientos, 2013, 2019; De Neve, 2014; LeBaron and Gore, 2020). They in-source labourers in factories, workshops or farms, guaranteeing the regeneration and management of a flexible disposable workforce. Other labour contractors dominate non-factory (or home-based) settings linked to global production circuits, where they may oversee the whole labour process in ways that recall the traders-led organisations of putting-out systems of former tropical commodities, such as Indigo or opium (Banaji, 2013).

Many of these forms of control, which regenerated since colonial times presupposed the use of migrant labour, and it is still the case in contemporary forms of production. Today, the process of

circular labour migration connects cities and countryside in several main ways. Turning the focus on my own case, workers across the SR are indeed mostly migrants, who circulate between the rural and the peri-urban space and the urban industrial areas. This circular migration may happen at greatly differentiated speed, connecting both commuters and migrants from more remote destinations and it is the outcome of both capital's industrial needs as well as workers' reproductive temporalities (Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020). In fact, time – as already space – is a fundamental qualifier of the exploitative process.

Through the observation of the rhythms and pace of the capital–labour relations in the sector – and in effect the features of different processes of circular labour migration – it is possible to characterise the mechanisms of what can be defined as the social reproduction of value; namely, how reproductive activities and realms co-constitute exploitation in practice. These are (a) the centrality of industrial 'dormitory arrangements' in shaping the labour regime in industrial areas, (b) the reverse process of urban to rural migration that allows a systematic externalisation of costs of social reproduction and (c) the endemic presence of processes of formal subsumption of labour.

Crucially, these mechanisms demonstrate the (perniciously) 'inclusive' nature of the law of value, which extracts systematically from unwaged reproductive realms to feed waged productive ones, and constantly and inextricably articulate such realms to amplify value-extraction and exploitation, as in an integrated social circuit. By focusing on the integrated nature of these processes across the reproductive-productive continuum, we can understand socially necessary labour time as being extracted from both production and life spaces at once, in a dynamic process where both labour and exploitation are always in motion, the former systematically cheapened, the latter systematically amplified. This is the central message of the 'value theory of inclusion', as well as its difference with Elson's 'value theory of labour', where dynamism and motion mainly applied to the category labour, and to value via that channel. Both labour and exploitation, which works through the systematic inclusion of reproductive realms into processes of generation of value, are highly dynamic, and always take place in motion. Concretely, these processes involve mobile labouring subjects moving across the urban–rural divide, based on modalities of interpenetration between production and social reproduction that may vary considerably based on flexible re/arrangements.

This motility of the process reinforces the impossibility of separating use and exchange value, and this can be clearly illustrated for each of the three mechanisms of the social reproduction of value. Let's focus on the first mechanism. In industrial areas, the whole daily organisation of workers' life – in dormitory, hostels or more dis-organised/informal industrial colonies and slums – is put to work for capital, resulting in the stretching of the working day (workers can be recalled continuously on the shopfloor) and an amplification of absolute surplus extraction.⁶ The distinction between use and exchange value is meaningless in these contexts. Moving on to the second mechanism, the reverse urban–rural migration through which workers circulate back to their place of origin allows us to appreciate a second way in which use value and exchange value interpenetrate dynamically. In this case, the whole intergenerational reproductive realm of the labourforce – domains of use-value, where those left behind in the process of labour circulation regenerate the workers upon their coming back, ejected from the global factory, are *de facto* utilised as a subsidy to capital to reduce the overall costs of the social reproduction of labour. Once again, only by collapsing the reified distinction between use and exchange value and observing the spatial and temporal dynamic interconnections between the city and the countryside we can capture the ways in which exploitation operates. Finally, focusing on the third process, that is, the formal subsumption of home-based and household labour by the SR, we can instead appreciate the full collapse of the distinction between use and exchange value in contexts where both are co-produced simultaneously and where both space and time of production and reproduction dynamically overlap (Mezzadri, 2019, 2020). Homeworkers live and work in same space, at the same time, and it is literally impossible to separate consumption and production.⁷

If labour mobility in the form of multiple labour circulations is central to the process of social reproduction of value, and the way in which use and exchange value interpenetrate, their distinction collapsing into one another, it also shapes the ways in which dispossession remains always incomplete, partial and concretely functional to capital – employers within the SR in this case – and hence how land is central to regenerate livelihoods sought away from that land. In fact, the presence of land – if marginal – not only concretely shapes the second mechanism for the social reproduction of value, making sure workers are re-inserted in and looked after within the village economy during the rounds of labour circulation between factories and places of origin of the workforce. It also guarantees their reinsertion into village life once workers engage in the last ‘act’ of circulation: that is, their exit from factory work. Within the SR, as already across a multiplicity of global labour regimes producing a variety of goods, workers terminate their industrial experience in roughly 15 years’ time. Still young, in their mid to late 30s/early 40s, workers will leave the urban space to go back to their villages. Arguably, this is yet another channel sustaining the social reproduction of value, in ways that place the countryside and its villages once again as central to the dynamic regeneration of both labour and capital.

The countryside and village performing the ‘housework’ of global capitalism

The previous sections have mapped the way in which: (a) the systematic integration of dormitory arrangements and spaces into the labour regime; (b) the constant circular process of rural–urban migration; and (c) the process of formal subsumption of non-factory, household or home-based work, constitute three key mechanisms sustaining the social reproduction of value – that is, the way in which social reproduction actively co-structures exploitation in contemporary capitalist production. Arguably, all three mechanisms speak of the centrality of mobility and motility – of people, goods and services – for shaping processes of value-generation and exploitation. They also explain the reasons behind the partial dispossession of the labourforce – as this process of value-making in motion requires the possibility to flexibly externalise reproductive costs to villages and migrants’ families when needed. They represent, in the words of Nathan et al. (2022) a ‘reverse subsidy’ from (migrant) labour to capital.⁸ Yet, crucially, these flexible reproductive arrangements are not only central to the social reproduction of value in industrial labour regimes, but also allow for the swift final ejection of the labourforce from such regimes once their employment experience is completed. In fact, while modernising theories depict stagist narratives where workers get stably incorporated into industrial development virtuous cycle (Krugman, 2000 in Cawthorne and Kitching, 2001; Powell, 2014), empirical evidence suggests instead how industrial experiences are rather short-lived. Workers are literally expelled from the SR at 35–40 years of age. Similar trends are observed in other regions, both in garment and other types of labour-intensive production (Banerjee-Saxena, 2014; Munni, 2019; Sineat, 2021; War on Want, 2011).

In 2016, together with Sanjita Majumder, we analysed the life histories of 20 women former garment factory workers living in and around the industrial areas of Bengaluru. We discovered that unlike in other settings like, for instance, Sri Lanka (Hewamanne, 2017, 2020), women left the industry without savings, with debt and often went back to the same informal occupations industrial work should supposedly ‘save’ workers from. These women described in detail the constant processes of mobility between urban and rural areas shaping their exploitative experience in the sector and co-determined by productive as well as reproductive pressure – that is imposed by employers at times, but also by family and reproductive needs of different type. Exiting and re-entering the industry constantly, these women were made into eternal newcomers to the sector, their salaries always kept extremely low, with their relation to the countryside in this case working as a clear reverse subsidy to employers. Their final exit from the industry between the age of 35 and 40 and their re-insertion into

the vast world of informal employment directly countered modernising narratives of industrial development. It also further clarified how value-generation and labour surplus extraction remain highly dynamic processes set on the systemic externalisation of the reproductive costs of the labourforce until their final exit from the world of industrial work (Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020). Undoubtedly, in this case, the place of origin of workers works as a final reproductive buffer that allows a reabsorption of the excess labour originally released from the countryside for urban industrial needs. Ultimately, villages and rural areas ‘work’ for capital, in the sense that their role in resolving the post-work reproductive question of exiting workers is central to the regeneration of the patterns of accumulation of the industry overall.

After this project, focused on the Indian south, where many migrants come from nearby rural areas,⁹ I tried to explore post-industrial work livelihoods in the north of the Subcontinent, where migrants, mostly coming from the Hindi belt, cover far longer distances. Between 2019 and 2022, together with Kaustav Banerjee, we mapped the life and work trajectories of 50 returnee migrants and explored the productive and reproductive strategies of these. former garment workers upon leaving industrial work (Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2022). We found that processes of reversed labour transition once again disproved the linearity of many industrial development narratives, and particularly the simple modernising hypotheses of the Lewisian economic model. Specifically, in this model, migration is always conceived as unidirectional, taking place from the rural to the urban and from the countryside to the city. However, this was hardly what we mapped. Once back home for good, former migrant industrial workers – who mostly came from the areas of Patna and Nalanda in Bihar, over 1100 km away from the Delhi factories where they were employed – re-engaged in informal work like the women workers we interviewed in Bengaluru a few years earlier. Moreover, crucially, and unlike in Bengaluru, their livelihoods were supported once again by land. In fact, while the women former workers in Bengaluru we interviewed were mostly landless and made a living primarily and exclusively through informal jobs, these Bihari migrants combined the revenue from informal work with the reproductive safety-net offered by family marginal land back home (Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2022). Returning to the land was not an alternative to informal living – as already it was not an alternative to industrial work, the two being interdependent in the process of social reproduction of value during the process of labour circulation shaping their active work experience – but rather the two remain complementary strategies, showing how the interpenetration of exchange and use value travels back with workers also in their last industrial journey home. Here, it will remain a dynamic relation, crossing productive and reproductive domains, labour and land relations and markets. During COVID-19, this strategy successfully shielded workers from the harshness of national lockdowns in urban areas (Kabeer et al., 2021). However, it was also handy for employers, as it supported the shutting-down of industrial units across India. Evidence analysed with Rakhi Sehgal for an ILO-sponsored READ-led project running between 2020 and 2022 further suggests that employers scaled up retrenchment strategies in the COVID-19 period. Illegal terminations were a key industrial grievance workers filed in labour courts during the pandemic. Employers also actively engaged in wage-theft, facilitated by workers ‘return to villages of origin (Mezzadri and Sehgal, 2023).

Indeed, in the processes of value-generation and labour-surplus extraction described above, it is clear how the whole urban–rural divide is arguably ‘put to work’ for capital. In this schema, villages and places of origins of workers in rural areas perform a function, which is extraordinarily similar to that performed by housework for wage-labour; namely, they support and regenerate the labourforce in ways that minimise employers’ (read capital’s) reproductive responsibilities towards their labourforce. In many ways, the process whereby the countryside supports highly uneven, exclusionary and unequal patterns of industrial development in the city speak to Maria Mies’ (1982, 1986) early conceptualisation of ‘housewifization’, while also significantly expanding its original remit. In the original formulation, ‘housewifisation’ entailed the mobilisation of the gendered ideology constructing women as housewives to (a) segregate women in the home and (b) cheapen the

cost of women's labour involved in the production of commodities made in the home. Notably, while centred in the reproductive space of the home, this process had the effect to cheapen women's work both inside and outside the home, reinforcing patriarchy across private and public spheres, domains of economic and social life – or of production and social reproduction.¹⁰ In the expanded schema presented here, it is now the village and the countryside – rather than the gendered ideology of the housewife – sustaining the broader process of labour surplus extraction in all its manifold forms, in ways that set migrant workers' places of origin as 'the kitchens and bedrooms' (Federici, 2004, 2012) of global capital. This ensures the potential 'housewifization' of all workers. The analysis above has clear implications for the way we conceive of labour struggles, an issue I will now turn to in the conclusions to this analysis.

Conclusions, on value and reproductive struggles

Moving from Diane Elson's 'value theory of labour' to ESRA and analyses centred on forms of exploitation, and drawing on extensive knowledge of India's SR, this article has mapped how labour relations and processes of value-generation, labour-surplus extraction and exploitation articulate across the urban–rural divide. Based on a 'value theory of inclusion', the analysis has shown how they are highly dynamic; include productive and reproductive realms in different locations; and are concrete instantiations of value in motion. Notably, in sketching the integrated, 'inclusive' nature of value-making, the analysis has also concretely shown the impossibility to neatly separate use and exchange value circuits when it comes to labour. Since the 1980s, reified understandings of this separation – and of social and private labour – are deployed as key critique to Marxist-feminist analyses stressing the value-producing nature of social reproduction. In order to neutralise this critique, and scaling up ESRA's insights (particularly based on Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati's work), the article has re-analysed how the various mechanisms of the social reproduction of value defy neat demarcations between what/who produces use or exchange value when it comes to the generation of the most precious 'commodity' of all; namely, labour-power.

Notably, the theoretical reading developed here has key implications for political praxis. On the other hand, radical feminist work, in geography and other fields, has often stressed how theory is always political (Werner et al., 2017). Indeed, mapping the dynamic, mobile, concrete compenetration of exchange/use value along the productive/reproductive continuum and showing the role social reproduction plays in structuring the labour relation, labour-surplus extraction and exploitation at the cusp of the rural and the urban has key implications for how we understand struggles. First, at a more abstract level of analysis, an approach challenging the reified distinctions between exchange and use-value and the 'labours' contributing to one or the other – hence rejecting wage labour as the only subject of history – multiplies the revolutionary subjectivities across the history of capitalism, past and present. Moreover, it also provides us with a complex cartography of 'value struggles' taking place along the productive-reproductive continuum. For example, a focus on the productive-reproductive continuum across the urban–rural divide, as developed in this narrative, allows us to identify what Harriss-White and Gooptu (2001) defined as struggles over class – that is, the struggles workers go through in becoming working class, from a condition of partial dispossession and partial 'freedom' from their means of production and subsistence beyond waged work. This is, at once, a struggle for survival and inclusion in the world of work, and one over class consciousness, so let me speak of each process.

Focusing first on survival, we shall note that by constantly floating across the urban–rural continuum, partially dispossessed workers regenerate the conditions for their own exploitability as circular migrant labour or – as put by Daeoup Chang (2012) – as mobile 'value-subjects'. In the process, they also regenerate the compenetration between production and social reproduction in ways that continue setting the rural, the village, the place of origin as central to the regeneration of capitalist value

relations in the city/urban space, in a schema where the insights of ESRA must be scaled up, and where not only housework and carework (or the sex work involved in biological reproduction) are central to the regeneration of wage work (as in the analyses by Dalla Costa and James, 1972, or Fortunati, 1981), but where social reproduction spaces, realms and rhythms in their totality are valorised and put to work for capitalism. In the expanded schema of social reproduction I mapped here, all realms of – daily, individual or collective, intergenerational – social reproduction of the labourforce may be seen as performing the role of ‘global housework’ of capitalism as the latter manages to progressively externalise an increasing number of reproductive costs and dumped them onto labour.

Notwithstanding the above, in this process of struggle over class workers find, if not class consciousness, given the many social fractures that may separate them, consciousness as labour. The enhanced exposure to productive and reproductive risks for this vast pool of generally greatly mobile workers – a floating population reaching 150 million in India, and over 300 million in China (Shah and Lerche, 2020) has been well-captured by analyses developed during the COVID-19 period, which saw quick expulsions of rural migrants from the world of urban labour (Samaddar, 2020; Sinha, 2021). In fact, one could argue that it is during heightened crises of reproduction (see Fraser, 2017) that this labour accelerates the consciousness needed to becoming working class.

Moreover, at a more concrete level of analysis, and given that analyses of labour must always, in my view, address the issue of potential mobilisation and organising, especially in contexts of harsh working poverty, the analysis developed here identifies a clear agenda for future action. First, the crucial role social reproductive realms play in shaping exploitation patterns turn reproductive demands over improved living conditions, including housing and public service provisions – like water and sanitation, access to electricity, health facilities, right to food, and so on – as key labour demands. Even when directed at the state rather than employers, reproductive struggles over these issues should be seen as labour struggles, in the same way as fights over improved wages, continuity of employment, social contributions and so on. In the context of labour regimes that are ‘dormitory’ – that is, where living arrangements constitute a key aspect of how exploitation takes place (e.g.; Chan et al., 2013, 2020), reproductive struggles are always labour struggles at point of reproduction. In fact, evidence from labour protests escalating in the last decade across a rising number of industrial areas, especially across many sites in Asia, reveal realms of reproduction as key terrains of struggle. In China, we know from seminal work by Ngai Pun and Chris Smith (2007) that dormitories have eventually turned into cradles of resistance, in contexts where the place of work is likely to change or being largely inaccessible by activists – although recent evidence suggests rising workers’ turnover also in these sites may be complicating political action (Dong, 2022). Also in India, however, where life spaces of workers are less centralised into dormitory-like solutions (dorms do appear in areas like Bengaluru, but they are far less widespread than in East Asia), unions are increasingly targeting reproductive areas – including industrial hamlets, or villages of provenance of workers – to counter the tendency of the industry to deploy first generation industrial workers from rural areas to minimise labour mobilisations. Patterns of industrial grievances today suggest that while large mobilisation are still hardly identified in the sector, workers still voice their discontent by approaching unions to file complaints in labour courts (Mezzadri and Sehgal, 2023).

Finally, the framework discussed here also enables a few considerations on labour policy, which, while generally marginal in radical analyses, should instead be considered a compelling point to address especially when dealing with particularly exploited labouring communities. By centering the interplays between production and social reproduction in shaping the labour relation and exploitation for workers circulating across urban/rural divides, the analysis developed here suggests that the current polarisation of the policy debate between wage-support (e.g. rises in wages) and income-support measures (e.g. basic or housework/care income) may be greatly misleading. These demands are at times complementary, and at other times simply overlapping. Indeed, their distinction may appear all

but clear for all those workers not earning a ‘classic’ wage or the unwaged, whose exploitation takes shape across multiple domains of production and reproduction – and for whom an income-base demand may in fact be equivalent to a wage-support demand. Ultimately, centering social reproduction in our analysis of value relations across complex geographies of work and life not only enables us to expand our theoretical understanding of contemporary capitalist exploitation, but also allows us to expand and reimagine political and policy efforts to fight against it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Adam Morton for encouraging me to write this article, and the four anonymous reviewers who helped me to sharpen its arguments. Thanks to Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati and Jairus Banaji for our many engagements and discussions, and for being such an extraordinary source of inspiration. Thanks also to Sanjita Majumder, Kaustav Banerjee and Rakhi Sehgal, with whom I have collaborated productively on different projects, whose findings this article builds on. This article is dedicated to Maria Mies, who left this world in May 2023. Her ideas live on.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Part of the evidence analysed here is based on findings collected in India during projects financed, respectively, by SOAS (on Bengaluru, in 2016-2017) and UNU-WIDER (on the Delhi-Bihar corridor, in 2019-20).

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Notes

1. For Thompson labour and exploitation – leading to class struggle – as the engine of capitalist history.
2. For a review of different positions on the debate on value, from opposing standpoints (that is, respectively supporting the view that social reproduction is or is not value-generating, compare Harvie (2005), Ferguson, (2019); Mezzadri (2019, 2020) and Bieler and Morton (2021).
3. Notably, the concept of ‘value in motion’ has also been famously deployed by David Harvey (2018) in *Marx and the Madness of Economic Reason*. Harvey refers here to capital’s classic law of motion; that sets value being extracted in production and realised in the sphere of exchange.
4. Ecofeminist analyses also elaborated on the links between value extraction from women’s unpaid work and nature (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Salleh, 1997).
5. See also earlier work in Italian by Fortunati and Federici (1984), on these issues. On the colonial nature of processes of dispossession, instead, see Bhandar (2018).
6. The centrality of dormitory arrangements was observed by Michael Burawoy as early as 1976 (Burawoy, 1976). On the ways in which dormitory generate compliance among workers, see Schling (2014). See also Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2014).
7. In fact, in these contexts, the entirety of consumption can be defined as ‘productive’ in nature, as all housework sustains production in inextricable ways (see Hensman, 2020 (1977)). See also Baglioni (2022) on the role households cover in exploitative processes in Senegal.
8. Wide and Näre (2023) illustrate a compatible process at work in care chains, where the purchasing of migrant domestic workers’ less expensive time can be converted into productive labour-time by those who, by outsourcing social reproduction, subsidise their own labour to increment economic value for their employers.

9. Today there are changes to this labour regime, and long-distance inter-state migrants can be observed also in Bengaluru (see Mezzadri and Sehgal, 2023; RoyChowdhury, 2021).
10. See Mies' (1982) analysis in *The Lacemakers of Narsapur*.

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This article is part of the *Environment and Planning F: Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice* special issue on ‘Value Theory in the Country and the City’, edited by Adam Morton and Dallas Rogers.