

Social Reproduction, Labour Exploitation and Reproductive Struggles for a Global Political Economy of Work

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1. Introduction

Activities and realms of social reproduction – all those regenerating or ‘making’ life (Bhattacharya, 2017) under capitalism – are often excluded from analyses of labour exploitation and value generation. This exclusion has implied that the contributions and hardship of reproductive workers – house-workers, care workers, sex workers and many other wageless categories – has gone unrecognised. Marxist Feminist analyses, instead, have illustrated how social reproduction generates value and structures exploitation (Fortunati, 1981, Federici, 2004). This is because it literally produces workers and hence labour-power, crucial to ‘make’ everything else: all other commodities and services we produce and consume. Scaling up this argument and building on Early Social Reproduction Analyses (ESRA), I show in this chapter that the recognition of reproductive activities and realms as generators of value is also crucial to understand employment in contemporary capitalism. Today, as processes of labour precarisation and casualisation become increasingly widespread, reproductive activities and realms not only provide unpaid housework to sustain paid work; they also directly expand exploitation rates. Based on these observations, I put forward three related claims. First, I claim that a feminist re-theorisation of value and exploitation represents an important novel horizon for analyses of the global world of work, to capture the features of the contemporary labour processes and regimes. Second, I contend that the recognition of social reproduction as directly linked to exploitation and value generation allows us to establish key links between labour and reproductive struggles. Finally, I briefly discuss some of the implications and possible ways forward for organising across the productive/reproductive continuum, also drawing from my experience as a global anti-sweatshop scholar-activist.

2. Social Reproduction and its Theories

Since 2017, there has been a renaissance of studies centred on the concept of social reproduction. Today, this complex body of work epitomises one of the most exciting developments in feminist theory, contributing to contemporary debates on global capitalism (e.g. Federici, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017), International Political Economy (e.g. Bakker, 2007; Rai et al, 2014; Elias and Rai, 2019; Bakker and Gill, 2019), feminist geography (e.g. Katz, 2001), and global development and labour studies (e.g. Naidu and Osome, 2016; Mezzadri, 2019, Rao, 2021).

The publication of Tithi Bhattacharya’s edited volume *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* has been central to this process of rediscovery. However, rather than one single ‘theory’, social reproduction analysis is best understood as a complex body of work including varied theorisations, each contributing differently to understandings of capitalism and the labour and life relations

it shapes and is sustained by. This is so as the very term ‘social reproduction’ is so complex to lend itself to be explored along different axes.

A term first used by Karl Marx to refer to the regeneration of societal capitalist relations and the transmission of inequality (Gimenez, 2018; Cammack, 2020), the concept of social reproduction has then been reappropriated by feminist analyses including Marxist feminist frameworks (Federici, 2019). All social reproduction theorisations centre the making of the ‘worker’ as their central trope. Yet, they use this lens for different purposes.

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), developing lines of enquiry explored by Lisa Vogel (1984) and Laslett and Brenner (1989), explores the centrality of the architecture, institutions and practices of care and reproductive sectors and workforces in sustaining capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal phase (Fraser, 2017). It also analyses the co-constitution between class and social oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017), complementing a number of powerful analyses of intersectionality (e.g. Bannerji, 2005; see also Bohrer, 2018), as well as studies of gender, class and race (e.g. Davis, 1983).

Early Social Reproduction Analysis (ESRA), developed across the 1970s and 1980s, focuses instead on labour processes and relations. It explores the centrality of unpaid domestic and care work and wagelessness in general for the regeneration of capitalist relations, including wage-labour (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Fortunati, 1981; Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004; Hensman, 1977, among others). ESRA unveils links between gendered and other forms of social oppression (e.g. Reddock, 1994; James, 1975) by analysing processes of devaluation of work impacting women and racialised people.

More recently, a third body of Marxist Feminist social reproduction analysis is arising, concerned with making explicit the links between social reproduction and racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018), and reaching out to both SRT and ESRA in different ways. This Raced Social Reproduction (RSR) approach has proven particularly useful in capturing the impact of COVID-19 and its links to past histories of slave and indenture labour (see Mezzadri, 2022).

Whilst all social reproduction frameworks are crucial to understand the regeneration of capitalism and varied aspects of the capital-labour relation, given their emphasis on distinct yet complementary processes ‘making’ the worker and life, ESRA’s insights are particularly relevant for analyses of the contemporary world of work, which is composed of vast segments of unwaged labour, often misrepresented as self-employed or misconstrued as unemployment (Denning, 2010). ESRA’s subversive redrawing of the social perimeter of value to include reproduction and the wageless offers a more inclusive theorisation of labour exploitation, accounting for varied experiences in the world economy. It reaches out to debates on ‘forms’ of exploitation (Banaji, 2003; 2010) and their ‘intersectional’ character (Folbre, 2021). Moreover, ESRA speaks intimately to those who do first-hand field-based research on labour processes, by providing robust conceptual tools to overcome productivist understandings of exploitation that hardly capture how our planet works. Below, I draw on my own experience to explain how the concrete study of the world of work in the Global South not only validates ESRA’s claims, but also provides scope to scale them up.

3. Reproducing the World of Work: Problems, Struggles, Ways Forward

After decades documenting and writing on exploitation inside garment sweatshops in South Asia, I have become convinced that any toolkit analysing exploitation solely

from a productivist vantage point centred on the space of work is bound to be limited. Far more attention should be given to the spaces where workers live, both in industrial areas as well as at their place of origin, as many migrate - more or less temporarily - to work. In the analysis of concrete settings, exploitation, emerges as a process taking place across spaces of work and life; that is, bridging productive and reproductive domains. This is an important point, as it means that political strategies need to adopt a far broader focus than the narrow space of work and extend instead to workers' life domains as well, as sites of the compounded struggle against the wider 'social factory' (see Federici, 2012). Quite crucially, expanding our understanding and analysis of exploitation beyond the space of work effectively means rethinking value, what and who makes it, and how.

In grappling with questions of exploitation and value, I have always been particularly concerned with the need of rethinking and redrawing the social perimeters of struggles, in ways that may speak to how workers today experience exploitation and fight against it. Theory and politics must always be conceived as in a dialectical relation. These concerns are central to show how feminist frameworks and methodologies can lead to novel ways to think of struggles, which are inclusive and may transgress and/or reappropriate forms and instruments of traditional working class organizing, a point powerfully articulated by NiUnaMenos activist-scholar Veronica Gago (2018), in relation to the feminist strike.

But to reimagine different approaches to struggles, we also need a different approach to theory. If we continue theorising exploitation as primarily taking place 'in production' – as labour process theory has done for a long time – we miss all those activities that 'make' workers and literally accompany them all the way to the factory gates, the office, the street, or the home. No wonder that a lot of people may remain excluded from this narrow understanding of exploitation. If we only focus on what happens in the space of work, the history of exploitation and value creation becomes the history of a relatively small cohort of (primarily male) waged workers (in a handful of regions of the world). House-workers, sex workers, domestic and care workers, and other wageless people – like slaves and indenture workers in early capitalism or unfree workers in today's global commodity chains - get automatically excluded, although one is left wondering how on earth the (mostly white and surely male) waged workers may suddenly appear on the labouring scene (see Bhattacharya, 2017).

Sitting in workshops and in homes with garment workers in India, I have been working on how to rethink exploitation and value under contemporary capitalism to capture the experience of my interlocutors, who experience exploitation as a far more totalizing process than one only circumscribed to specific spaces or times. For them – for us all, in fact - exploitation, and the ways in which it manifests from the home all the way to the world economy, is a life rather than a mere work-experience. This problem of characterisation of exploitation is both theoretical and political. Exclusionary conceptualisations of value characterises both mainstream neoclassical/liberal economics as well as orthodox Marxist analyses. For the former analyses, value is obtained by adding together the inputs of production in a specific production process. In this schema the source of value is in effect capital, as it is only capital that is productive. Indeed, Marx (1991) has challenged this view, by placing labour at centre of the equation and showing that all source of value come from labour through the process of exploitation. Now: this revolutionary shift in thinking about value and value creation, centres analyses of capitalism on inequality and labour surplus extraction.

However, it anchors value creation and exploitation to production. The former schema excludes all workers; the latter excludes non-wage and reproductive workers.

Identifying this gap in Marxian analysis, ESRA focused on housework and carework, either in terms of unpaid labour in the home or paid care and sex ‘services’ (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Federici, 2004, 2012; Picchio, 1992; Fortunati, 1981; Mies 1982, 1986; Hensman, 2011). All these labours and activities, according to ESRA, whilst unpaid, underpaid, or excluded from what is considered as ‘productive’ employment, generate value as they regenerate the most precious commodity of all; namely, the worker and their labour power.

Today, their insights are not only still valid; they also acquired further resonance and can be scaled up to capture the mechanisms of the contemporary world of work. Take the Indian garment sweatshop workers whose working conditions I have been documenting (Mezzadri, 2017). For these workers, reproductive activities subsidise low wages – an early feminist observation (Hensman, 1977). Furthermore, the whole spheres of reproduction where workers are in effect ‘made’ – the villages, the peri-urban/rural areas where they are from, and the industrial housing systems in which they are incorporated – either feed and regenerate workers in line with garment factories’ industrial needs or sustain processes of intensification and depletion of work.

While unpaid housework was/is a subsidy to low industrial wages, the wider sphere of reproduction in its multiple sites – the industrial dormitory, the village of origin - is a wider subsidy to capital, as it allows it to systematically externalise all costs related to the social reproduction of the workforce. In other words, it allows employers (in this case garment exporters) to sack workers whenever orders are down and send them back ‘home’ to be taken care of, without paying a penny for them during the period of break-in-service (Mezzadri, 2017). During the contemporary COVID-19 crisis, millions Indian migrant workers were simply chucked out of factories, workshops and dormitories, and sent home walking for miles, many dying in the process (Samaddar, 2020; Breman, 2020). By walking home, unpaid, workers were subsidizing their employers, who could wash their hands of labour’s reproduction. Villages, households, or communities were called to sweep capital’s floor, so to speak, playing the same role housework has always played in sustaining life on a low salary. In short, feminist subversive understandings of value are central to understand labour relations today, well beyond the remit of the early debate premised on housework.

4. The channels of the social reproduction of value

The study of the contemporary world of work suggests that social reproduction is central to processes of generation of value in ways which far exceed the original ESRA’s debate on domestic and carework. In fact, scaling up ESRA’s key insights, one can develop a theory of value which is *inclusive* and account for the contributions and trajectories of labour exploitation not involving a direct wage (Mezzadri, 2019).

Concretely, the study of global labour processes today suggests that there are three mechanisms through which social reproduction contributes to value generation and labour-surplus extraction. The first reproductive mechanism of value generation is based on (migrant) workers’ living arrangements at their place of work. Every year, millions of rural workers move to cities looking for work and find accommodation in industrial areas. Industrial housing arrangements vary across the world economy, ranging from dormitories in China to informal hamlets in slum-like industrial villages

like Kapashera, in the Delhi metropolitan region. In all cases, however, housing arrangements – in proximity of factories and managed by various contractors connected to them - are central to employers’ ability to easily recall labour onto the global assembly line, and to manufacture compliant workers (Schling, 2017). This organization of *daily social reproduction* thus is central to the expansion of exploitation rates, and to the process of labour-surplus extraction and value generation.

The second channel through which social reproduction is generative of value is through the complex process of rural-urban migration and circulation of labour. This process involves millions of internal migrants worldwide – estimated at around 300 million in China and 100 million in India alone (Shah and Lerche, 2020). It enables the externalisation of a significant portion of costs for the social reproduction of labour, which employers (and states) can dump onto workers’ families and villages of origins of migrant workers. In subsidizing capital by socialising reproductive costs, intergenerational reproductive realms *de facto* perform a function like that of domestic labour in relation to the ‘social factory’ in ESRA – just on a massively magnified scale.

Finally, the third channel of the social reproduction of value is shaped by the resilience of processes of formal subsumption of labour across the Global South and - with the rise of platform capitalism and the reorganisation of work triggered by COVID-19 – increasingly also in the Global North (Stevano et al, 2021). Worldwide, homeworkers are incorporated in many value chains. In homework, productive and reproductive times and spaces overlap entirely, a process revealing the problematic nature of theories reifying distinctions between productive and reproductive work. In fact, the exclusion of homeworkers from processes of value generation may well be the result of statistical fiction, as shown in the case of India. Here, where labour markets are structured by stratified familialism embedded in patriarchal and caste norms (Palriwala and Neetha, 2011), women’s contribution to value is entirely invisibilised. The official estimates of the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) exclude a huge number of home-based activities performed by women - and far exceeding definitions of domestic work - from the employment count, *de facto* hiding women’s contributions to labour and the economy (Ghosh, 2016; Naidu and Ossome, 2016).

Inclusive understandings of value beyond productivist readings are not a merely theoretical exercise. They do matter politically, as they set the basis to forge horizontal solidarities based on the recognition of a common history of exploitation under global capitalism. The type of ‘inclusion’ discussed here is a pernicious one – one of subalternity to capital. Yet, it is only by allowing the wageless to reclaim the recognition of their exploitation that we can imagine a future of common struggles where the revolutionary subject is not decided *a priori*. In this future of common struggles, the fight will be fought across productive and reproductive sectors, realms, times, and spaces, at once. It is only through this articulation of struggles that we can reclaim the products of our formal and informal, productive and reproductive labours.

5. Labour, reproductive struggles and organising

A re-theorisation of value centred on the contribution of socially reproductive labour is crucial to expand the analysis of labour regimes and processes in ways that account for the exploitation of armies of women still confined within the walls of the household – and there are millions around the globe, notwithstanding the rampant processes of marketisation of housework and care services (e.g. Folbre, 1986, 2020) – and the armies

of wageless, disguised wage earners, self-exploiting ‘autonomous’ workers and unfree labourers who inhabit the planet, especially albeit not only in the Global South, that is, the majority world (Mezzadri, 2019). In fact, nowadays, also in the Global North, the expansion of precarious labour relations and the rise of the gig economy – with its army of Uber and Deliveroo drivers, amazon warehouse and delivery workers (Rani and Furrer, 2020) – are the symptom of a restructuring of the world of work along similar routes and trajectories to those crossing the Global South. Millions of these insecure jobs entail oppressive and degrading working conditions and workers, often migrants, are over-exposed to racist, sexist and gendered forms of socio-economic abuse. Their migrant status - that is their condition of social reproduction - deepens their exploitation, making them more exploitable for less.

The features of exploitation today can only be understood by placing social reproduction - and its brutal colonisation by capital - at the centre of value generation. If we do not embrace an inclusive theory of value, we cannot theorise capitalism and its meaning for millions of workers. Value-making does not start in production; an assumption establishing a hierarchy of capitalist oppression and excluding women (Federici, 2004), enslaved populations and colonial subjects from trajectories of labour (Davis, 1983; Reddock, 1994; Bhattacharyya; 2018)

Notably, workers themselves are drawing their value theory of inclusion, by engaging in struggles beyond the space of work and centred on reproductive spaces. In Asia, reproductive realms are becoming key sites of resistance, resilience, and sabotage against global capital (Pun, 2007; Dutta, 2021). In China, industrial dormitories, which are organised as infrastructural devices to further expand exploitation, used by employers to keep labour always available to quickly return to assembly lines (Schling, 2017), are cradles of resistance (Pun, 2007). A great number of protests start from these areas, where the daily social reproduction of the workforce takes place, rather than factories. In India, spontaneous revolts erupt frequently in industrial hamlets.

Workers’ mobilisations are not necessarily only centred on wages. In many instances, they are centred on social contributions. In others, they are either centred on contractors’ abuse or sexual harassment, or on housing or rights more in general - that is, against exploitation more broadly defined. In the process, also the line between struggles against capital and the state is fading away, and this is because since the raise of neoliberalism, the state is increasingly an expression of capital.

Thus, the problem of how to mainstream a value theory of inclusion can be overcome by analysing struggles and their features. Crucially, reproductive struggles should always be seen as labour struggles. Now, this is easy when we focus on the actions of workers in key reproductive sectors of society – like schools, colleges, or hospitals. Struggles in these reproductive sectors have rightly gained a lot of attention from Marxist feminist analyses. The US teachers’ strikes, for instance, featured prominently in SRT analyses (Bhattacharya, 2017; Arruzza et al, 2019; Ferguson, 2019). However, reproductive struggles should also be acknowledged when lying outside the more traditional remit of labour unions and their politics, that is, when the strike may not necessarily take the form of labour withdrawal, becoming instead a far more inclusive, messier process attempting to erase erasing the distance between production and reproduction (Gago, 2020). Or indeed, when the struggles are waged by the wageless, to gain recognition, to fight for social provisions, to battle for subsistence. In fact, we should acknowledge different typologies of reproductive struggles:

- a) Struggles by reproductive workers in traditional reproductive sectors – such as house-workers, paid/unpaid domestic workers, care and sex workers
- b) Struggles of workers in *societal* reproductive sectors – such as teachers, health workers, etc.
- c) Struggles on reproductive issues beyond productivist demands - which may be centred on living or existential conditions, such as housing, social provisions, social policies, or be waged against violence/harassment
- d) Struggles kicking off in reproductive realms – like dormitories or hamlets, which I analysed above, and which may be centred on working conditions
- e) Struggles *for* recognition by those denied ‘entry’ or inclusion into the labouring class – what some have called struggles *over* class (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001) waged by the wageless or the unemployed

Obviously, there are a lot of crossovers between these struggles; yet they also need distinct recognition.

Once embraced a value theory of inclusion and acknowledged the complexity and relation between productive and reproductive struggles, we can imagine new forms of organising in production and beyond. These may take place not only at work or in industrial areas, but also in neighbourhoods, hamlets, dormitories, in workers’ communities or places of origin. That is, the reproductive architecture capital exploits must be the primary locus where we imagine and we perform resistance, exactly in line with early calls for the ‘subversion of the community’ put forward by Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972). Only this time, the call should not only target the potential ‘power of women’, but rather also that of the wageless, informalised proletariat. The global labouring community across the continuum of production and reproduction is the potential revolutionary subject. Today more than yesterday, feminist theories of work and strategies of resistance can lead the way to fight global capitalism.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown the significance of the concept of social reproduction for the analysis of the global political economy of work. I have explored different Marxist Feminist theories which are centred on social reproduction, and their distinct contributions to understanding labour and labour relations in the global economy. Notwithstanding the relevance of all these theorisations, I have focused with particular emphasis on ESRA frameworks, as they are uniquely geared to capture the nature of contemporary labour relations and processes, given their subversive take on value-generation and exploitation. ESRA, moreover, also provides specific operational tools to capture the workings of labour processes and labour relations in concrete settings. In fact, I have shared how I ‘discovered’ the power of its insights through the concrete analysis of the sweatshop and its complex processes of exploitation and labour surplus extraction.

Building on ESRA’s insights, I sketched the contours of a labour theory of inclusion (Mezzadri, 2019, 2020), and I identified three specific mechanisms for the social reproduction of value; that is, through which social reproduction activities and realms co-constitute labour-surplus extraction and value-generation. The first involves the incorporation of daily reproductive arrangements into the global factory system, expanding its ‘social’ walls, and reinforcing the access by employers to compliant

workers whose working day can be extended on demand. The second involves the externalisation of the reproductive costs of labour by the employers, which happens thanks to labour circulations back to the countryside and their ‘invisible economies of care’ (Shah and Lerche, 2020). The third involves the formal subsumption of home-based labour, for whom it is impossible to draw a neat separation between ‘the productive’ and the ‘reproductive’. This value theory is inclusive as it accounts for the role all reproductive realms and activities – wageless, unpaid, disguisedly waged, self-employed - play in processes of value generation.

The recognition of the centrality of social reproduction in understanding the global political economy of work, and the role it plays in processes of value-generation informs analyses of labour struggles and strategies at organizing. In fact, workers already ‘adopt’ their own value theory of inclusion, as they centre social reproduction in their political demands. Through the lens of workers’ action, there are many distinct reproductive struggles emerging as labour struggles; those by reproductive workers in traditional or *societal* reproductive sectors; on reproductive issues beyond productivist demands; struggles kicking off in reproductive realms; and those *for* recognition. This mapping is important for strategies at organizing. These strategies should increasingly centre social reproductive spaces and demands, given ever rising processes of labour informalisation, which make the space of work a precarious and temporary location. In fact, evidence suggests that across the world economy, a number of successful campaigns have recentred the community as the subversive space for struggle.

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