

The Social Reproduction of Value, Body Depletion, and Wages for the Wageless across the Global Social Factory

Alessandra Mezzadri*

Introduction

In this short article, I will reflect on the entanglements between production and social reproduction in structuring the process of value generation and exploitation, and how one can scale-up classic debates on domestic work to capture trends more broadly at work for the vast world of informal employment. Moreover, I will also reflect on how – in relation to patterns of exploitation co-shaped along the productive and reproductive continuum- bodily depletion should be understood as both input and output of what I call the process of ‘social reproduction of value’. Notably, this reading of value-generation not only centres the experience of millions of women worldwide, but also that of wageless workers across past and present histories of capitalism. It has key political ramifications in relation to a multiplication of the revolutionary subject in capitalism and concrete policy implications, as a renewed attention towards reproductive realms and activities shapes a new agenda connecting wage and income support. This last point should inform legislation and action in favour of different categories of working poor, likely to vary across regional contexts.

*SOAS, University of London, UK: am99@soas.ac.uk

The Social Reproduction of Value

Analyses centred on ‘Social Reproduction’ are back onto mainstream discussions in social sciences since the publication of Tithi Bhattacharya’s volume *Social Reproduction Theory* (2017). This is a welcome development, given the wealth of insights this debate – which started with the publication in 1972 of Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James’ pamphlet *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* – generated. In its early avatar, in what can be defined as *Early Social Reproduction Analyses* (ESRA), the debate started off around domestic labour; yet the key issue at stake was nothing less than the decentring of subjects of value generation under capitalism.

The domestic labour debate centred around breaking the classic boundaries in which exploitation was thought to take place; namely, the factory and/or the workspace. Instead, ESRA feminists identified the unpaid contributions made by women in the home as the first frontiers of the ‘Social Factory’. The ‘kitchens and bedrooms’ (Federici, 1975) where women toiled for free were the first gates for processes of value-generation and exploitation, as it was here that women were ‘making’ and regenerating the most important input of all under capitalism; that is the worker, and within them labour power itself.

This implied challenging the strict use-value/exchange value distinction that many orthodox Marxist accounts utilised. Leopoldina Fortunati, in her ground-breaking *The*

Arcane of Reproduction (1981), contributed to this debate by showing how this distinction does not hold, or better, in relation to labour, it falls into the clear impasse of the two forms of value not being separable at all. How are we to separate use-value – how we make/regenerate the worker – from exchange value –how we sell or ‘consume’ labour-power, in practice? The dichotomy use/exchange value is present in each of us, inseparable and inextricable.

However, arguably, this dichotomy might hardly apply in a neat, reified way, even to ‘vulgar’ commodities. As noted by EP Thompson, the various facets of value are not separable as discrete units of analysis; rather, they are two different aspects of the same relation. This is discussed at length by Diane Elson who, in her contribution to her own 1979 edited collection *Value*, provokingly further argues that Marx *de facto* elaborated a *value theory of labour*, rather than a labour theory of value. His objectives were not the formulation of a theory of price formation, like Ricardo. His message was rather simple: that all value, under capitalism, is created through the extraction of labour surplus from the worker, and hence that all the world of commodities capitalism generates is the outcome of exploitation (Elson, 1979).

Building on these insights, I would further suggest that the compartmentalisation operated by formulaic orthodox Marxist accounts (e.g., Smith, 1978) – what produces use-value, what produces exchange-value – is quite static and problematic, as it does not consider how labour surplus value extraction and exploitation are instead highly dynamic processes, *always* taking place across the productive-reproductive continuum. Moreover, they fetishise the wage as the value of labour whilst - as

Antonella Picchio (1992) reminded us in her wonderful *Social Reproduction and the Labour Market* – the wage is only one form of its *pricing*. In effect, the forms of exploitation – as the processes of labour subsumption - are many, as highlighted by Jairus Banaji (2010). Instead, the wage signifies inequalities within the labour market, as it marks who, under capitalism, is at least entitled to see a portion of its labouring, even if often small for millions of precarious factory workers worldwide, remunerated. During Marx's time and still to date, the likelihood of this waged subject to be a white male is substantial. Yet, so many more are excluded from the wage relation, whilst still greatly exploited, and experiencing this exploitation in other *forms*. As stressed by Silvia Federici (2021), the wage is patriarchal. It is also racist. Women, brown and black workers have performed labouring at the margins of the wage relations, across the history of capitalism, and still today through their incorporation in informalised employment, the largest share of employment on the planet according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2018). Indeed, this is quite clear to anyone who, like me, studies global labour processes.

The Global Labour Process and the Expanded Social Factory

I like to say that my interest in the power of Social Reproduction as an analytical lens and its relation to value stems from the fact that I literally stumble over its generative power whilst researching the global labour process. Across the Global South, it becomes obvious how the study of the labour process – what Marx (1991) called the 'hidden abode of production' – must outstretch the narrow perimeters of the place of work, as the making of exploitation *concretely* starts from reproductive domains. Here

– yet, today across the whole planet in fact - the labourforce is greatly informalised. According to the ILO (2018), 61 percent of the whole world labours informally; 69 percent in the Global South. In informalised labour contexts, production and social reproduction are particularly intimately connected.

Notably, for many home-based workers, workshop workers and self-employed workers, which represent a very significant share of informal employment, the perimeters of the Social Factory literally start from Federici's 'kitchens and bedrooms', in the sense that many deploy the home as a unit of production and consumption, at once (e.g., Hensman, 1977; Raju and Jatrana, 2016). Within that same space, both today and tomorrow's labourforce will be 'made', regenerated, and replenished. In fact, accounting for processes of internal/circular migration and mobility and scaling up further ESRA's insights to explore work relations in global circuits of production and exchange, one could argue that the Global Social Factory start from the villages and industrial dormitories where workers are regenerated daily and intergenerationally. Moving from rural to urban areas to enter global factories and shifting back to rural areas during lean season or reproductive needs, the migratory labourforce – who might make our garments or textiles, computers or phones, children's toys, or shoes - trace a dynamic assembly line where processes of value creation and labour-surplus extraction – aka exploitation – are co-constituted across multiple spaces of work and life.

I concretely mapped the overlapping boundaries of Social Factory across workers' homes – that is, how 'kitchens and bedrooms' literally become part of the assembly

line - whilst doing long-term field-research in the garment industry in India, as I landed in a district in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP) called Bareilly, from the name of the main small town. Here, by the early 2000s, armies of embroiderers worked for labour contractors connected to the Delhi and Jaipur garment export producing urban industrial areas, shaping a complex urban-rural production network through which millions of homes were linked to globalised markets (Mezzadri, 2017).

At the same time, my research work in urban areas highlighted the complex ways in which the urban-rural divide, and the multiple processes of labour circulation which crossed and structured it, were central to the overall generation of value in the garment sector, and to the way in which workers' experienced exploitation. On the one hand, industrial hamlets and dormitories run by contractors and linked with garment factories enabled employers to recall the workforce onto the assembly line when needed and allowed the expansion of labour control beyond labour-time. The organisation of these reproductive spaces *de facto* expanded exploitation rates; they co-constituted processes of value generation and extraction. On the other hand, villages, and places of origin of the workers worked as a buffer against crises and shocks and re-absorbed the labourforce whenever it moved back, socialising reproductive costs for employers and *de facto* working as a subsidy to capital. Also in this case, the process was clearly sustaining accumulation, co-constituting value generation and extraction, and shaping exploitation. In fact, on a massively amplified scale, the village covered a role like that of housework; both sustained the inner working of the Social Factory. In short, both daily and intergenerational realms of social reproduction co-constituted processes of value generation and extraction and exploitation. Altogether, the dormitories/industrial hamlet; rural-urban labour

circulation, and home-based work shaped three key mechanisms for the process of social reproduction of value (Mezzadri, 2019; 2021).

The Body and Depletion

By establishing a very quick sliding door between life and work and placing all at the service of processes of accumulation, the entanglements of production and reproduction sketched above are particularly bodily exhausting. They signify the colonisation of the whole life of the worker for purposes of extraction. As argued by Rai *et al* (2014), they escalate processes of depletion *through social reproduction*. A focus on the bodily depletion moves the debate from the value to the costs of social reproduction. In fact, bodily depletion should be understood both as an input and output of the process of ‘social reproduction of value’. Depletion, at once, is generative of value as the direct result of the ways life is ‘consumed’ and valorised by capital. At the same time, it is the outcome of the process; its cost and/or ‘waste’, epitomised by multiple health manifestations. Certainly, in the garment industry as in many other labour-intensive productions, bodily depletion can be concretely traced in regimes of ill health and exposure to significant risks, including that of premature death; that is, depletion is intimately connected to the necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of labour.

As the signature of harsh labouring, dramatic health outcomes are always connected to labour regimes (O’Laughlin, 2013). We have seen this truth laid bare during the pandemic, when armies of greatly precarious reproductive workers - ironically relabelled as ‘essential’ whilst remaining expendable (Kawashima, 2005) – literally

‘worked the pandemic’ with many in the care and medical sectors paying with their lives (Mezzadri, 2022). In fact, as many studies exploring slavery, indenture, or unfree labouring across apartheid regimes (e.g., Davis, 1981; Morgan, 2004; O’Laughlin, 2013) have shown, also many past epidemics could be ascribed to the structuring and evolution of specific labour regimes. Notably, contemporary, greatly depleting regimes of work routinely kill the worker.

Turning my attention again towards garment production, we shall remember that we just passed, a few months back, the 15th anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, which claimed the lives of 1234 workers, and injured over 2000 more - mostly migrant women workers labouring in the industrial area of Savar, outside Dhaka (Ashraf, 2017; Chatterjee, 2023). Rana Plaza, like other tragedies in the history of the sector – one of the first in New York City, at the Shirtwaist Factory Fire (Stein, 1990) - epitomises the necropolitics of the sector, and reminds us of its depleting potential. Yet, it is the relentless, low-intensity epidemics made of allergies, chronic backpain, infertility, loss of eyesight, fingers, sexual harassment, and constant exposure to violence that shape the everyday systematic depletion garment workers’ bodies are exposed to. These ill-health outcomes are co-shaped along the productive-reproductive continuum, across labour regimes where the working day colonises the whole natural day, with many workers reporting to work for 15-17 hours each day – in a process where life is work, and work is life, all of it valorised and consumed by capital.

From Methods and Theory to Politics and Policy

Hence, decades after the housework debate, ESRA remains greatly relevant for the ways we can read the world, and the processes of capital accumulation and exploitation that shape contemporary labour regimes. These can be sketched as a worldly, Global Social Factory, where reproductive activities and domains are increasingly central to the process of generation and extraction of value. Notably, now as then, this lens is crucial for both politics and policy. The political implications of scaling up ESRA insights and its take on value is not only the de-invisibilisation of the labour of many who have laboured ‘wagelessly’ across past and present histories of capitalism. It is also the decentring, recentring and pluralising of the revolutionary subject of history. The protagonist of the great capitalism saga, through the lens of social reproduction, is not merely the male white (mostly western) factory worker. It is the woman caged in her home and subject to processes of ‘housewifization’ (Mies, 1986). It is the black slave whose labour was stolen for free, his body fully commodified, sold and bought, destroyed when not needed any longer (Davis, 1981; Morgan, 2004). It is the indentured unfree worker, in constant debt, who laboured the plantations for salaries below their reproductive needs. It is the gig-economy workers disguised as self-employed; the slum-dwellers fighting for housing; the landless farmer fighting for land redistribution. The history of capitalism becomes a pluriverse with myriads of possible protagonists and where the revolution can still happen, in any moment, led by anyone, and not only outside the factory gates.

Far more concretely, the lens of social reproduction can offer new organising strategies across labour regimes. For instance, by focusing on reproductive realms, unionising and organising work may be directed towards hamlets of villages of origins, rather

than factories, given that the latter may vary constantly for workers who are often highly contractualised and precarised. Notably, through these new strategies centred on reproductive domains, the great initial feminist message of early social reproduction feminism holds true; the whole community is made into a subversive subject that can be mobilised against exploitation. A focus on social reproduction is hardly a theoretical matter alone; rather, it provides us with ‘new tools’ to dismantle what Audre Lorde referred to as the ‘master’s house’.

Furthermore, a social reproduction lens also greatly informs policy debates, bridging the gap between calls for different forms of legislation in support of precarious and wageless workers. By exploring and understanding work through social reproduction, and accounting for all the different labouring possibilities situated along the productive-reproductive, waged-wageless spectrum, we can move towards a holistic policy approach where income support, wage support and the provision of a solid architecture of reproductive support through public welfare services are not understood any longer as measures in competition with one another, but as components of a much needed legal framework recognising the great heterogeneity in exploitation and in the production of life under contemporary capitalism. Income and wage support, in particular, may not appear any longer as opposing propositions; on the other hand, an income demand by and for the wageless subject, offering care for free, in the family or community, is *de facto* a demand for – and against – a wage.

References

Ashraf H. (2017) 'Beyond Building Safety: An Ethnographic Account of Health and Well-being on the Bangladesh Garment Shop Floor'. In: Prentice, R. and De Neve G. (eds.) *Unmaking the Global Sweatshop. Health and Safety of the World's Garment Workers*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 250-273.

Banaji J. (2010) *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*. London: Brill.

Bhattacharya T. (ed.) (2017) *Social Reproduction Theory, Remapping Class, Re-centering Oppression*. London: Pluto.

Chatterjee M. (2023) *Fighting the Sweatshop Regime: A Conversation with Alessandra Mezzadri*. In Jamhooor, Issue 8 available at <https://www.jamhooor.org/read/fighting-the-sweatshop-regime-a-conversation-with-alessandra-mezzadri> (accessed on 25 September 20-23).

Dalla Costa M., James S. (1972) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press Ltd.

Davis A. Y. (1981) *Women, Race and Class*. New York, NY: Random House.

Elson D. (1979), 'The Value Theory of Labour', in ed. D. Elson (ed.) *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*. London: CSE Books.

Federici S. (1975) *Wages Against Housework. Published jointly by the Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press*.

Federici S. (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Federici S. (2021) *The Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism*. PM Press.

Fortunati L. (1981) *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. Autonomedia. Originally published in Italian as *L'Arcano de/la Riproduzione: Casalinghe, Prostitute, Operai e Capitale* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1981).

Fraser N. (2017) 'Crisis of Care? On the Social Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism', in Bhattacharya T. (ed.) *Social Reproduction Theory, Remapping Class, Re-Centering Oppression*, pp. 21–36. London: Pluto Press.

Hensman R. (1977) 'Wage-Labour: The Production and Sake of the Commodity Labour-Power'. Republished in Historical Materialism Blog, 2020. Available at: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/wage-labour-production-and-sale-commodity-labour-power-1977> (accessed on 25 September 2023).

ILO (2018) *Women and men in the informal economy: A Statistical Picture, third edition* Geneva: ILO. Available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf (accessed on September 25, 2023).

ILO (2021) *Working from home: from invisibility to decent work*. Geneva: ILO. Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/--travail/documents/publication/wcms_765806.pdf (accessed on September 25 2023).

Kawashima K. C. (2005) 'Capital's Dice-Box Shaking: The Contingent Commodifications of Labor Power', *Rethinking Marxism* 17(4): 609–26.

Marx K. (1991) *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. London: Penguin Classics.

Mbembe A. (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40.

Mezzadri A. (2017) *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation and Garments Made in India*. Cambridge University Press.

Mezzadri A. (2019) 'On the Value of Social Reproduction: Informal Labour, the Majority World, and the Need for Inclusive Theories and Politics', *Radical Philosophy* 2(4): 33–41.

Mezzadri A. (2021) 'A Value Theory of Inclusion: Informal Labour, the Homeworker and the Social Reproduction of Value', *Antipode* 53: 1186–205.

Mezzadri A. (2022) 'Social reproduction and pandemic neoliberalism: Planetary crises and the reorganisation of life, work and death'. *Organization* 29(3): 379-400.

Mies M. (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed.

Morgan J. (2004) *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

O'Laughlin B. (2013) 'Land, Labour and the Production of Affliction in Rural Southern Africa.', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13(1): 175–96.

Picchio A. (1992) *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rai S. M., Hoskyns C., Thomas D. (2014) 'Depletion: The Cost of Social Reproduction', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16(1): 86–105.

Raju S. and Jatrana S. (2016) *Women Workers in Urban India*. Cambridge University Press.

Smith P. (1978) 'Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value', in A. Kuhn and A.M. Wolpe (eds.) *Feminism and Materialism (RLE Feminist Theory): Women and Modes of Production*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 198–220.

Stein L. (1990) *The Triangle Fire*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.