

# Social Reproduction Theory

# Social Reproduction Theory

Remapping Class,  
Recentring Oppression

Edited by Tithi Bhattacharya

Foreword by Lise Vogel

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Front cover image: *Alone we are powerless, together we are strong* (1976)  
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# Foreword

*Lise Vogel*

What a pleasure it is for me to welcome this important and timely collection of essays. *Social Reproduction Theory* is probably the first book to draw on the past decade's resurgent interest in developing a coherent Marxist-feminist understanding of everyday life under capitalism. And who better to edit it than Tithi Bhattacharya, herself operating on the cutting edge of recent work on social reproduction theory.

The ten essays in *Social Reproduction Theory* address a range of questions. But one way or another, each contributor tackles the thorny problem of explaining just what social reproduction theory is. Not surprisingly, they do not always agree. Having myself had a go at this demanding task 35 years ago—in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, originally published in 1983<sup>1</sup>—I'm sympathetic with their difficulties. At the same time, I have to recognize that the context in which this work is being developed has markedly changed, and in ways I find very exciting. First, people interested in these questions today benefit from a more developed understanding of Marxism and of history than what was available to us decades ago. And second, they appear to be connected to one another and to the nascent social movements of the twenty-first century, again in contrast to the relative isolation many of us felt in the late 1970s and after.

As proponents of social reproduction theory, the authors are wrestling with both new and old challenges. One of the oldest debates among women's liberationists concerned dualism, or dual-systems theory. By the early 1980s, the verdict was in, at least among Marxist feminists, who shared a desire to replace the dualism of earlier analyses with what they called a "unitary" account. To put it another way, instead of conceptualizing social reproduction as having two component aspects (for example, production of commodities and reproduction of labor power), they sought to develop an approach that would enclose both production and reproduction within a unitary framework. This is still easier said than done, as several of the essays in *Social Reproduction Theory* show. The

pull of dual-systems thinking remains powerful, something that requires constant vigilance.

Several contributors explicitly link social reproduction theory to their understanding of “intersectionality.” Like social reproduction theory, intersectionality is one of several theoretical frameworks deployed over the past eighty-plus years to represent social heterogeneity as consisting of the interaction of multiple “categories of social difference,” for example, race, class, gender, etc.<sup>2</sup> To some extent the two theoretical stances have been taken as antagonistic—as a confrontation between Marxist (social reproduction theory) and non-Marxist (intersectionality) approaches. In contrast, these authors argue that it is possible to embrace social reproduction theory without discarding the strengths of intersectionality thinking, especially its ability to develop nuanced descriptive and historical accounts of various “categories of social difference.” This strikes me as a promising direction in which to go.

In the long run, however, I think we must jettison two dearly-held assumptions. First, the assumption that the various dimensions of difference—for example, race, class, and gender—are comparable. Second, the implication that the various categories are equal in causal weight. Willy-nilly, these two assumptions lead to an interest in identifying parallels and similarities among the categories of difference, and a downplaying of their particularities. With these assumptions gone, we can break out of the tight little circle of supposedly similar categories. Our theoretical task would then be to focus on the specificities of each dimension and to develop an understanding of how it all fits—or does not fit—together. Out of this process could come a lens, or perhaps several lenses, with which to analyze empirical data.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most interesting essays in *Social Reproduction Theory* explore the strategic or policy implications of social reproduction theorizing. Among the topics considered are: childhood; sexuality; pensions; migration; paid domestic service; and the International Women’s Strike on March 8, 2017. Here we see the power of the social reproduction framework to shape our understanding of practical concerns. Or, as Bhattacharya puts it in the introduction to this book (page 19):

[Social reproduction theory] reveals the essence-category of capitalism, its animating force, to be human labor and not commodities. In doing so, it exposes to critical scrutiny the superficiality of what we

commonly understand to be “economic” processes and restores to the economic process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced, and unruly component: living human beings, capable of following orders as well as of flouting them.

Readers new to the issues covered in *Social Reproduction Theory* will have much to learn from this collection. And those who lived through the frustrations of the various early women’s liberation debates will find novel answers to old questions. Tithi Bhattacharya and Pluto Press are to be congratulated for bringing this thought-provoking collection to us.

#### NOTES

1. Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983). Although the book’s official publication date was 1983, I view it as in fact a product of the hopes, discussions, and activism of the 1970s and before.
2. For this analysis of intersectionality, see Lise Vogel, “Beyond Intersectionality,” *Science & Society*, in press.
3. For the metaphor of theory as a lens, see Lise Vogel, “Domestic Labor Revisited,” *Science & Society*, 64, no. 2 (2000): 151–70; reprinted in Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013 [1983]), 183–98. For the view of theory as necessarily abstract, and disjunct from empirical investigation, see *ibid.*, esp. 184–95.

# Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory

*Tithi Bhattacharya*

Life itself appears only as a means to life.

—Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

A working woman comes home from work after an eight hour day, eats dinner in 8 to 10 minutes, and once again faces a load of physical work: washing linens, cleaning up, etc.

There are no limits to housework . . . [a woman is] charwoman, cook, dressmaker, launderer, nurse, caring mother, and attentive wife. And how much time it takes to go to the store and drag home dinner!

—testimonies of factory women in Moscow, 1926

This [unpaid care work] is the type of work where we do not earn money but do not have free time either. Our work is not seen but we are not free as well.

—woman in Patharkot, Nepal, 2013

If our kitchens are outside of capital, our struggle to destroy them will never succeed in causing capital to fall.

—Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*

Let us slightly modify the question “who teaches the teacher?” and ask this of Marxism: If workers’ labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker? Put another way: What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society? What role did breakfast play in her work-readiness? What about a good night’s sleep? We get into even murkier waters if we extend the questions to include processes lying outside this worker’s household. Does the education she received



at school also not “produce” her, in that it makes her employable? What about the public transportation system that helped bring her to work, or the public parks and libraries that provide recreation so that she can be regenerated, again, to be able to come to work?

The goal of social reproduction theory (SRT) is to explore and provide answers to questions such as these. In doing so, SRT displays an analytical irreverence to “visible facts” and privileges “process” instead. It is an approach that is not content to accept what seems like a visible, finished entity—in this case, our worker at the gates of her workplace—but interrogates the complex network of social processes and human relations that produces the conditions of existence for that entity. As in much of critical theory, here too we “build from Marx,” for both this approach and the critical interrogation mirror the method by which Marx studies the commodity.

The fundamental insight of SRT is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. The notion of labor is conceived here in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it, as “the first premise of all human history”—one that, ironically, he himself failed to develop fully. Capitalism, however, acknowledges productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate “work,” while the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence. Against this, social reproduction theorists perceive the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism. The framework thus seeks to make visible labor and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and politically denied by policy makers.

SRT develops upon the traditional understanding of both Marxism and capitalism in two transformative ways.

First, it proposes a commodious but more specific reading of the “economy.” SRT, as Susan Ferguson has recently pointed out,

insists that our understanding of capitalism is incomplete if we treat it as simply an economic system involving workers and owners, and fail to examine the ways in which wider social reproduction of the system—that is the daily and generational reproductive labor that occurs in households, schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on—sustains the drive for accumulation.<sup>1</sup>

Marx clearly marks for us the pivotal role played by labor power, for it is that which in effect sets the capitalist production process in motion. He also indicates how, unlike all other commodities under capitalism, the “unique” commodity labor power is *singular* in the sense that it is not produced capitalistically. The implications of this insight are, however, underdeveloped in Marx. Social reproduction theorists begin with these silences in Marxism and show how the “production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process,” as Meg Luxton has put it.<sup>2</sup> If the formal economy is the production site for goods and services, the people who produce such things are themselves produced outside the ambit of the formal economy, in a “kin-based” site called the family.

Second, and following from above, SRT treats questions of oppression (gender, race, sexuality) in distinctly nonfunctionalist ways precisely because oppression is theorized as structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production rather than on the margins of analysis or as add-ons to a deeper and more vital economic process.

The essays in this volume thus explore questions of who constitutes the global working class today in all its chaotic, multiethnic, multigendered, differently abled subjectivity: what it means to bind class struggle theoretically to the point of production alone, without considering the myriad social relations extending between workplaces, homes, schools, hospitals—a wider social whole, sustained and coproduced by human labor in contradictory yet constitutive ways. Most importantly, they address the relationship between *exploitation* (normally tethered to class) and *oppression* (normally understood through gender, race, etc.) and reflect on whether this division adequately expresses the complications of an *abstract level* of analysis where we forge our conceptual equipment, and a *concrete level* of analysis, i.e., the historical reality where we apply those tools.

#### RENEWING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY IN THE SHADOW OF NEOLIBERALISM

Since the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009 and exacerbated by the government bailouts of those who perpetrated the crisis, there has emerged a renewed interest in Marx and Marxism. Major news sources of the Global North, from the *New York Times* to the *Guardian* and even

to the conservative *Foreign Policy* have declared that Marx, without a doubt, “is back.”<sup>3</sup>

Within this generalized interest, there has been a revival of more specific attention to Marx’s *Capital*. Even aside from Thomas Piketty’s 700-page *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* becoming a runaway bestseller, the period following 2008 has seen an unprecedented rise in scholarly publications on Marx’s seminal text.<sup>4</sup>

While this is an unqualifiedly welcome development, there remains room—indeed, an urgency—to redraw the contours of some of these conversations about *Capital* in particular and its object of study, capitalism, in general. This book is an attempt to begin that process by highlighting the critical contribution of SRT to an understanding of capitalist social relations.

There is a limited but rich literature by Marxists and feminists across disciplinary boundaries which has, since the 1980s, developed the insights of the social reproduction framework in very productive directions.<sup>5</sup> The republication in 2014 of Lise Vogel’s classic work *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* has given a new lease of life to this growing body of scholarship. While this literature embodies *instantiations* of SRT in a range of critical areas, there remains a need for a text that can act as a map and guide to this vivid and resonant body of work. Indeed, it is precisely because social reproduction scholars have so effectively applied and extended its theoretical insights to a diverse set of concerns in such creative ways that it is useful to compile and outline its key *theoretical* components along with its most significant *historical* applications.

That said, this volume stands in a very specific relationship to the recent literature on oppression. We see our work as furthering the theoretical conversation with this existing body of scholarship in two kinds of ways: (a) as a conversation between Marxism and the study of specific oppressions such as gender and race, and (b) as developing a richer way of understanding how Marxism, as a body of thought, can address the relationship between theory and empirical studies of oppression.

Let me elaborate. We make two central proposals in this volume about SRT: first, that it is a *methodology* to explore labor and labor power under capitalism and is best suited to offer a rich and variegated map of capital as a social relation; further, that this is a methodology that privileges process, or, to use Lukács’s words, we believe that the “developing

tendencies of history constitute a higher reality than the empirical ‘facts.’”<sup>6</sup>

Many recent studies similarly grapple with elaborating on these. Cinzia Arruzza, in her book *Dangerous Liaisons* (2013), offers a summary of the historic relationship between Marxism and feminism and tries to plot precisely where the tributaries of analysis about the system as a whole (capitalism) meet or diverge from analyses of categories produced by the system (gender and/or race). Arruzza’s work refuses the reduction of this complex dynamic to a simple question of “whether class comes before gender or gender before class,” but points the way toward thinking about how “gender and class intertwine in capitalist production.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Shahrzad Mojab, in her recently edited volume *Marxism and Feminism* (2015), alerts us to the actual dangers of theoretically severing the integrated relationship between class and gender. Contributors to Mojab’s volume show how decoupling feminism from capitalism carries the twin perils of emptying out the revolutionary content of feminism which “reduces gender to questions of culture” and of “reduc[ing] gender to class relations.”<sup>8</sup>

A slightly older edited volume by Nancy Holmstrom (2002) likewise takes an integrative approach to the relationship between the oppression and the source of oppressions: capitalism. Holmstrom clarifies that although Marxism’s “basic theory” does not require “significant revision,” it does need to be “supplemented.” The volume thus seeks to champion a specific deployment of historical materialism that “gives a fuller picture of production and reproduction than Marx’s political economic theory does, that extends questions of democracy not only to the economy but to personal relations.”<sup>9</sup>

Kate Benzanson and Meg Luxton’s edited collection *Social Reproduction* (2006) is perhaps the closest theoretical kin to our project. This is not solely because Benzanson and Luxton deal explicitly with SRT, but because they restore to it a “thick” description of the “economy” and “political process.” The volume is premised upon the understanding that “in capitalist societies the majority of people subsist by combining paid employment and unpaid domestic labor to maintain themselves . . . [hence] this version of social reproduction analyzes the ways in which both labors are part of the *same socio-economic process*.”<sup>10</sup>

While Benzanson and Luxton problematize the concept of labor and the role it plays in the constitution and disruption of capitalism, Kathi Weeks (2011) has usefully drawn our attention to the most common

articulation of labor under capitalism, namely, work. Weeks's approach coincides with our own in that it is dissatisfied with efforts to align "work" with "a more equitable distribution of its rewards"—in other words, to think about how our working lives might be improved. Instead, Weeks points to the fundamental incommensurability of capitalism with any productive or creative sense of work. Hence her volume urges us to think about how the right to work and the right of refusal to work can be reimagined under the sign of an anticapitalist political theory.

This brings us to how this volume, while in conversation with the above scholarship, is nonetheless about developing a set of theoretical concerns that are related but different. The contributing essays of the volume can be said, broadly, to do three kinds of work: determining the definitional contours of SRT, using SRT to develop and deepen Marxist theory, and exploring the strategic implications of applying SRT to our current conjuncture. It is to an elaboration of those themes that we now turn.

#### MAPPING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY: THE WORK OF DEFINITIONS

All the essays in this volume are in some way engaged in the task of sketching out the contours of what exactly social reproduction theory is and what kinds of questions it seeks to answer.

In Marx's own writing, the term *social reproduction* is most often deployed to refer to the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett therefore suggest a useful distinction between societal and social reproduction, with the former retaining the original meaning as Marx has used it, and the latter referring to

the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work—mental, physical, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance

and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed.<sup>11</sup>

The primary problematic of what is meant by the social reproduction of labor power is, however, only a preliminary start to this definitional project. Simply put, while labor puts the system of capitalist production in motion, SRT points out that labor power itself is the *sole* commodity—the “unique commodity,” as Marx calls it—that is produced outside of the circuit of commodity production. But this status of labor power as a commodity that is simultaneously produced outside the “normal” productive cycle of other commodities raises more questions than it answers. For instance, Marx is very clear that every commodity under capitalism has two manifestations: one as use value, the other as exchange value. Indeed, when the commodity appears in its *social form* we only encounter it in its second manifestation because the capitalist circulation process, through an act of “necromancy,” turns use value into its direct opposite. But labor power becomes a “commodity” (that is, it becomes something that is not simply endowed with use value) without going through the same process of “necromancy” as other commodities, which raises a question about the very ontology of labor power beyond the simple questions of its “production” and “reproduction.” If the totality of the capitalist system is shot through with this “commodity” that is not produced in the manner of other commodities, what then are the points of determination and/or contradictions that must necessarily be constitutive of the system, yet must be overcome within it?

One way of resolving this problem is through a spatial understanding: that there are two separate but conjoined spaces—spaces of production of value (points of production) and spaces for reproduction of labor power. But then, as we gestured above, labor power is not simply replenished at home, nor is it always reproduced generationally. The family may form the site of individual renewal of labor power, but that alone does not explain “the conditions under which, and . . . the habits and degree of comfort in which” the working class of any particular society has been produced.<sup>12</sup> Public education and health care systems, leisure facilities in the community, and pensions and benefits for the elderly all compose together those historically determined “habits.” Similarly, generational replacement through childbirth in the kin-based family unit, although predominant, is not the only way a labor force may be replaced. Slavery