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Reviews

Looking at Social Reproduction

- Reviews section -

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Materialist and Marxist feminist theory is currently undergoing something of a renaissance. Wide-ranging conceptual and empirical work on social reproduction is a major part of that theoretical innovation. [1] Some of this work has been reviewed in recent issues of ATC. Verónica Schild's materialist feminist intervention on capitalism, environmental destruction, and contemporary Latin American feminisms is a sobering reminder that any serious anti-capitalist feminist politics must take seriously the question of ecology and social reproduction. "Feminisms, the Environment and Capitalism: On the Necessary Ecological Dimension of a Critical Latin American Feminism." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 20, 6 (2019): 23-43] So, too, are the recent international women's strikes highlighting key issues such as gender violence and attacks on reproductive autonomy, as well as the range of unpaid social reproductive labor often performed by those gendered as women.

Materialist and Marxist feminist theory is currently undergoing something of a renaissance. Wide-ranging conceptual and empirical work on social reproduction is a major part of that theoretical innovation. So, too, are the recent international women's strikes highlighting key issues such as gender violence and attacks on reproductive autonomy, as well as the range of unpaid social reproductive labor often performed by those gendered as women.

As Cinzia Arruzza observes in the concluding essay of *Social Reproduction Theory*, "the women's strike can legitimately be seen as a political translation of social reproduction theory." [2]

These developments reflect a search for alternatives to mainstream liberal feminism and to the profound crises and contradictions of everyday life as well as the need for an anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal theoretical framework and politics. This may be one of the most important contributions of a renewed social reproduction theory: it can help us understand, as Laura Briggs has recently argued, "how all politics became reproductive politics." [3]

Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression, edited by scholar and activist Tithi Bhattacharya, forms part of this renewed work on the theory of social reproduction and everyday life in global capitalist context.

As the subtitle suggests, the collection argues for a more expansive understanding of class relations. It also aims to build on the insights of anti-racist feminist intersectionality analysis, with a view to creating theory and anti-capitalist politics that can account both for class power and the material organization of gender and race in the context of a unitary system.

But for those unfamiliar with the basic concept of social reproduction within Marxist feminist theory or needing some re-cap, here's a brief overview.

Expanding Marxist Feminism

Social reproduction is defined and conceptualized in different (although overlapping) ways and at different site and scales. [4] While the capitalization of SRT (Social Reproduction Theory) in the book's introduction might suggest a singular theoretical tradition or current of feminism, there are in fact various genealogies of theorizing in the field as well as some productive debates. [5]

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Adding to the mix, as the introduction also acknowledges, is that several bodies of literature theorize what many Marxist feminists call social reproduction using different conceptual terms. Marxist feminist theorists of social reproduction do differ, but they converge on themes including an expanded understanding of work and the working day and a concern for the production and reproduction of labor power.

However, this focus turned out to be no mere addition to Marxist theory. As Kathi Weeks describes it, social reproduction theory "has in fact required a vast re-thinking of [Marxism's] concepts and models, its critical analyses and utopian visions" as feminists mapped the possibilities of an expansive politics at the site of "the contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction." [6]

So while there remain productive theoretical and political debates within SRT, and some unanswered questions, there is no doubting its capacity for powerful and exciting theoretical insights.

Social reproduction, as a conceptual framework within Marxist feminism and feminist political economy, is not new. A number of Marxist feminists, including Meg Luxton and Silvia Federici, have been publishing theoretical and empirical research in this area consistently for decades. [7]

Such theoretical work dates back to the late 1960s at least and is part of a broader inquiry and set of debates regarding the question of women's oppression in capitalist context and the critique of political economy and its categories. [8] As part of that theoretical trajectory, Against the Current readers may recall the classic and oft-cited definition of social reproduction from Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner. Writing in the 1980s, they referred to social reproduction as:

"the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and the elderly, and the social organization of sexuality." [9]

Sue Ferguson, who has contributed a great deal to the renewed project of SRT (and who contributes to the collection with an important chapter on social reproduction, capitalism and the making of children's subjectivities), elaborates on social reproduction in a recent essay:

"(I)t's most powerful insight is that the process of capital accumulation requires human labour power but does not produce it. As there is no mechanism in the direct labour/capital relation to ensure labour's daily and generational renewal, it finds ways to organize historically specific embodied subjects differently gendered and racialized subjects in and through hierarchically and oppressively structured institutions and practices, such as private households, welfare states, slavery, and global labour markets." [10]

Ferguson's conceptualization is helpful because social reproduction is often popularly conflated with the family, domestic labor and the private household, all of which may be very important in a given context but do not define social reproduction across all historical conjunctures.

Some social reproduction theory (especially some of the earlier formulations) too easily assumes a national frame where questions of migration, (lack of) citizenship, and the increasingly global character of working-class lives and social reproductive labour disappear. Additionally, recent work on labor, social reproduction and the global South has asked whether widespread informal labor might necessitate a re-working of the concept of social reproduction. [11]

While the focus of Social Reproduction Theory is largely on the U.S./Canada context with some scattered references to struggles over social reproduction in the global South, some of these points are addressed by Carmen Teeple Hopkins, editor of a recent special issue on feminist geographies of social reproduction and race, [\[12\]](#)

In this contribution, Teeple Hopkins asks how migrant domestic workers meet their own social reproductive needs in a context of long paid working hours and the lack of a place to call home that is not a workplace.

Drawing on theoretical tools from feminist economic geography as well as diverse currents within SRT (including Black feminist approaches to transatlantic slavery), Teeple Hopkins examines how Filipinx women rely on religious spaces, and the friendships connected to them, as sources of reproductive support.

Theory and Strategy

In her introduction to Social Reproduction Theory, Bhattacharya outlines the three major tasks of the anthology: a) clarifying the theoretical focus and site of inquiry of Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory; b) expanding on Marxist theory from the standpoint of social reproduction, including the understanding of race and gender, as well as class; and c) teasing out the strategic possibilities of a social reproduction politics within contemporary context. (6)

Bhattacharya's own theoretical chapter, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," offers an approach to all three, but not all of the contributors necessarily address all three equally.

While many of the contributors offer some interesting examples of the strategic possibilities, the book does not discuss at length concrete contemporary organizing initiatives at the site of social reproduction. Cinzia Arruzza's essay on the women's strike concludes the book, but it's the only contribution that is a handful of pages and not a full-on chapter.

At the same time, several chapters offer theoretical insights and historical examples that can clarify the broader structural context of specific struggles. Serap Saritas Oran's "Pensions and Social Reproduction," for example, illuminates why and how the question of intergenerational social reproduction has become such a major site of struggle across various social contexts. Similarly, Nancy Fraser's "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism" anatomizes crises in social reproduction and their outcomes across three historical regimes.

In one of the most interesting and ambitious chapters, "Without Reserves," Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman work with the standpoint of social reproduction to revision the historical sweep of U.S. capitalism, state formation, and class composition. The result is a rich contribution that draws on the important contributions of U.S. women's, gender and labor history to understanding social reproduction. [\[13\]](#)

In "Body Politics: The Social Reproduction of Sexualities," Alan Sears locates sexuality within the context of broader social relations of production and reproduction, with a view to theorizing why and how heteronormativity and gender power persist. As part of this analytic work, Sears envisions the possibilities for a more expansive understanding of sexual liberation, bodily autonomy, and freedom from sexual violence.

Recent work in the field elaborates on these vital theoretical and political commitments. For example, the question of the production and reproduction of binary gender itself within social reproduction is currently undergoing renewed inquiry and critique as scholars bring a transgender theoretical lens to the concerns of SRT. [\[14\]](#)

Finally, Sears' notion of an erotic liberation re-envisioned via a social reproduction lens is echoed in disability scholar Loree Erickson's argument that people with disabilities are figured as sexually undesirable because they are read as dependent bodies. For her, full sexual expression for people with disabilities cannot happen without a re-making of ideas and practices of care and dependency. [15]

Class, Gender and Racial Dynamics

In general, theories of social reproduction have attempted to avoid the problems of so-called "dual systems" theory, that is, the argument that patriarchy and capitalism, gender and class, are two autonomous structures, and have instead sought to theorize women's oppression in a non-reductive way within the dynamics of capitalism. [16]

Much SRT emerged in the British, U.S. and Canadian context but as it grappled with the dynamics of class and gender, it often had far less to say about race and capitalism and the racial division of labor.

As Sue Ferguson has observed: "The theoretical work of explaining how and why capitalism's very existence involves racism, and how and why racism takes the specific form it does under capitalism that is, the theorization of a systematically racialized patriarchal capitalism lags behind." [17]

While the back cover of Social Reproduction Theory claims the book is "presenting an alternative to intersectionality," it would be more accurate to suggest that those contributors who do address intersectionality theory engage it in various ways. Put another way, the theorization of social reproduction in the context of racialized patriarchal capitalism remains a major problem that will require systematic work drawing on critical dialogues across different literatures and theoretical orientations.

Bhattacharya's introduction suggests (with particular reference to David McNally's chapter, "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory") that social reproduction theory opens up a way to build on the "insights of intersectionality" while critiquing its methodological approach to race and gender understood as discrete systems that intersect. (17)

Within intersectionality theory itself, there is already a wide-ranging extended internal conversation going on about the field's epistemologies and methodologies (which are in fact diverse). [18] This suggests one space of critical dialogue for SRT.

Second, in a context in which theories of racial capitalism are also undergoing renewal, there is rich potential for elaborating on cross-conversations between theories of social reproduction and those of racial capitalism. [19] There are important theoretical traditions among Marxist and socialist feminists of color and anti-racist feminists who have contributed in significant ways to theories of race, gender, capitalism and social reproduction.

In other words, it's important not to conflate all feminist of colour theorizing with intersectionality theory. In this connection, McNally's chapter rightly references the importance of Angela Davis's classic *Women, Race and Class* (1981). At the same time, contextualizing the book within the long tradition of Black Communist women's theorizing of which it is a part would yield further insights important for social reproduction theory while also identifying some of the unresolved theoretical problems of that tradition. [20]

Finally, there are important cross-conversations between the theoretical production by U.S. feminists of colour and transnational feminism. Much of this literature also suggests important insights into processes of race and social

reproduction.

As Lisa Duggan observes in an essay on social reproduction, "new scholarship on globalizing care chains, transnational adoption, and indigenous resistance to structural adjustment policies also centrally analyze processes of social reproduction in the context of global political economy, though these scholars do not generally employ the term itself." [21]

Re-reading Political Economy

Theories of social reproduction aim not to add another category to analyses of everyday life, but to re-read political economy, politics and anti-capitalist organizing and strategy anew from the standpoint of social reproduction. This has become an increasingly urgent theme in the debates given that, as Nancy Fraser warns in her contribution, "today's crisis of care...will not be resolved by tinkering with social policy." (36, ellipsis is mine).

Then there is the problem that, as Rada Katsarova has observed, "infrastructures of access to social services and social-reproductive needs have been turned into coercive instruments of dispossession and racialization" not to speak of their problems for transgender people. [22]

One thing that's clear, as she notes, is the increasing criminalization of all those who try to experiment with forms of life beyond capital, beyond the state.

A theoretical lens anchored in social reproductive theory is enormously productive, but the practical-political question ahead of us remains: What might what Silvia Federici calls "the reclamation and commoning of the means of reproduction" look like? [23] And how might this re-order feminist politics today?

[1] Women's Studies International Forum 48 (January 2015).

[2] [Cinzia Arruzza, "From Social Reproduction Feminism to the Women's Strike." In Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*]. See also the dossier on the theory and practice of the feminist strike in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, 3 (July 2018)] as well as journalistic articles including: Linda Martin Alcoff, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser, Barbara Ransby, Keenanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Rasmea Yousef Odeh, and Angela Davis, "[Women of America: We're Going on Strike. Just So Trump Will See our Power.](#)" *February 6, 2017 The Guardian* and Linda Martin Alcoff et al, "[We Need a Feminism for the 99%: That's Why Women Will Strike This Year.](#)" *27 January 2018 The Guardian*.

[3] See Laura Briggs' excellent and very readable book, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018)

[4] Adding to the complexity is the fact that social reproduction is an important category in various currents of Marxist theory, for example, Italian autonomous Marxism. For more, see [Rada Katsarova, "Repression and Resistance on the Terrain of Social Reproduction: Historical Trajectories, Contemporary Openings." *Viewpoint Magazine*. 5 \(2015\).](#)

[5] [Silvia Federici, "Social Reproduction Theory: History, issues and present challenges." *Radical Philosophy* 2.04 \(Spring 2019\): 55-57.](#)

[6] Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 25, 27

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- [7] See Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). For Federici, see *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) and Federici and Peter Linebaugh, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).
- [8] For some insight into the historical trajectory, see the recent issue of *Monthly Review* 71, 4 (September 2019) looking back at Margaret Benston's classic 1969 essay, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation." See also the essay by Dorothy Smith, "Feminist Reflections on Political Economy" in *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- [9] Cited in Lisa Duggan, "(Re)Producing Social Justice After Neo-Liberalism." *Scholar and the Feminist Online* 7, 3 Summer 2009. Emphasis hers.
- [10] Sue Ferguson, "A Response to Meg Luxton's 'Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism'." *Studies in Political Economy* (2014): 165
- [11] [Alessandra Mezzadri, "Informal labour, the majority world and the need for inclusive theories and politics." *Radical Philosophy* 2.04 (Spring 2019): 33-41. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/on-the-value-of-social-reproduction>].
- [12] in her interesting chapter, "Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal."
- [13] To make a broad generalization, one might argue that social reproduction theory has been a strong theoretical current within feminist theory and sociology in Canada, whereas the U.S. context that has produced a particularly rich historical literature on social reproduction.
- [14] This is one of the themes of a 2017 special issue of *Society and Space*, "Beyond Binaries and Boundaries in 'Social Reproduction'"]
- The profound problem of widespread violence against women and gender non-conforming people calls out for further attention within social reproduction theory. In a recent interview, Silvia Federici speaks to the relationship between that violence and to name just some links the devaluation and coercion of women's labor; women's refusal to carry out social reproductive labor; and the dispossession of (often indigenous, often older) women from common lands.[[The interview with Federici is included in Fiona Jeffries, *Nothing To Lose But Our Fear* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015
- [15] Loree Erickson, "Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!" In Tristan Taormino et al, eds., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).
- [16] In this regard, Lise Vogel's work forms a key theoretical orientation for some of the contributors to *Social Reproduction Theory*. See her *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013). Vogel also wrote the foreword to *Social Reproduction Theory*.
- [17] Sue Ferguson, "A Response to Meg Luxton's 'Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism'." *Studies in Political Economy* (2014): 161-168
- [18] See also Collins's most recent book, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)
- [19] See, for example, the special issue of *Boston Review* on "Race Capitalism Justice" edited by Walter Johnson with Robin D. G. Kelley (Winter 2017).
- [20] See Carole Boyce-Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. (Duke University Press, 2008) as well as [some of the recent scholarship discussed by Alan Walk in "From 'Triple Oppression' to 'Freedom Dreams'" in an essay in *ATC* <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/162/p3777/>].
- [21] Lisa Duggan, "(Re)Producing Social Justice After Neo-Liberalism."
- [22] Katsarova, "Repression and Resistance on the Terrain of Social Reproduction."

[23] Federici and Linebaugh, Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Common.