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Social reproduction

# Marching to a Different Drummer

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**Capitalists and Marxists both have long studied how capitalism imposes a time-work discipline on waged workers. And some Marxists—most famously perhaps Henri Lefebvre—have suggested that time structures social life more generally. In what follows, I think about this question from the more specific perspective of social reproductive labor time. That is, what can be said about the temporalities of life-making in capitalist societies? How might an analytic focus on time and temporalities help us better understand *how* capitalism concretely conditions the work of life-making? And how might social reproductive labor time, despite being conditioned by capitalist productive relations, contradict and be deployed to resist capitalism?**

This essay, I hope, offers some thoughts on how answers to such questions might be pursued. It is part of a larger project on the social reproduction of childhood in capitalism. After a condensed discussion drawing heavily on Jonathan Martineau's discussion of capitalist clock-time, I consider ways in which social reproductive labor enacts and resists capitalist clock-time. I offer ideas about what makes the capitalist temporal organization of social reproductive labor both *necessary* and *possible* if never *total* and argue that the temporalities of meeting human needs through capitalistically unproductive social reproductive labor are essential to both profit-making and to resisting capitalist class power. (By "capitalistically unproductive" I mean both unwaged social reproductive labor done in households and communities and waged social reproductive labor performed by workers in the public and nonprofit sectors.)

## Capitalist clock-time

In *Time, Capitalism and Alienation* (Haymarket, 2016), Martineau argues that clock-time is *constitutive* of class power. Noting that clock-time itself precedes capitalism (the earliest clocks appearing circa 1300), he shows how—with its precise, invariable, quantifiable units of hours, minutes and seconds—clock-time is the very condition of the production of capitalist profit or surplus value. The quality of time is irrelevant. What matters, he demonstrates, is that the average hours of labor time is a key *determining* force of wealth creation. Quantitative clock-time is the force behind the law of value, which not only dictates the prices of goods and services (and thus which goods and services will produce a profit and thus be produced) but also how these must be produced in order to realize that profit. His point is that clock-time is not simply a measure of capitalist productivity, but that it structures production and the on-going production of surplus value, ultimately undergirding capitalist class rule.

However, Martineau stresses, capitalist clock-time does not and cannot fully determine productive activity in general. Whether life- or value-making, he writes, *all* "acts of concrete labor, as producers of use-value, entail and produce a *concrete time*" (114). Clock-time, Barbara Adam (*Timewatch*, Wiley, 1995) tells us, is artefactual, empty time abstracted from natural processes and human activities. This contrasts with what Martineau calls *concrete time*, which is variable, generated and measured in the process of the activity itself (for example, the amount of time it takes to change a baby's diapers equals the amount of time it takes to change a baby's diapers). Whether drilling for oil on a rig off the Gulf Coast or learning to tie a shoe, workers, waged and unwaged, produce things, services and people in concrete time: within specific timeframes "based on the very unfolding of the activity itself" (114). But Martineau also notes that there is a crucial difference between the production of oil and the production of a tied shoe or shoelace-tying expertise: only the former is directly and immediately organized by the law of value, by clock-time.

## Social reproduction time and accumulation

We know a fair bit about how clock-time is enacted in the workplace over waged workers producing profits for capitalists. Studies on productivity and time-work discipline are countless, an essential part of the capitalist labor management arsenal. But what of communities and households engaged in non-commodified life-making work? How—and to what extent—does capitalist clock-time assert its discipline over the social reproduction of labor power and of life? And how is this discipline resisted?

To begin, the timeframes of social reproductive labor generate and respond to multiple and particular needs (of subsistence, pleasure, education, health and so on) as well as to natural processes of growth and development (processes, that is, that are guided by an internal dynamic, responsive to but not principally dependent upon human intervention). These timeframes tend to be conditioned by: (i) particular, concrete interactions between reproducer and reproducee (e.g., teacher/student, nurse/patient) and their specific desires, needs, aptitudes; and (ii) the material and social environment in which life-making is carried out (e.g., available resources, specific dynamics of social oppression at play). Moreover, the timeframes of social reproductive labor (and, relatedly, its standards) are—to a point—flexible, fluctuating and subjectively defined. A parent can make their own baby food or buy it off a shelf; a teacher can advance an excellent or a “good enough” student from one level to the next.

Whether the life-making is carried out as part of waged work or not, of course, matters. While parents raising children are not directly supervised, teachers, nurses and social workers are. The latter are accountable to managers with established productivity goals—goals that are set not by the operation of the law of value but by bureaucracies beholden to variable if often market-related values and agendas. This is a key distinction that I cannot discuss more fully here. But I want to stress that, even in waged social reproductive work, the two conditioning aspects mentioned above regularly exert significant force—precisely because we are dealing with the reproduction of human life (as opposed to a commodity). For example, the time it takes for a child to learn to read is significantly determined by their emotional and intellectual readiness, the reading environment and resources, and the aptitude of the instructor; gender, class, race, age, sexuality, citizenship status and much more also factor into the equation—factors that can easily override the timelines imposed by curriculum designers and testing regimes that are imposed by managers of public sector teachers.

As a result, life-making activities from learning to read to making dinner to recovering from an illness—although essential to creating the human labor power that capital depends upon, as social reproduction theory reminds us—can stubbornly resist clock-time regulation. This is because they are, and generally must be, organized in relation to meeting human needs and to bio-physical and ecological trajectories of growth and development. That capacity to resist has much to do with the fact that the products of social reproductive work (clean clothes, healthy bodies, poems, little league baseball games and so on) are *not* exchanged on the market; they are not, therefore, subject to the law of value.

But while resistant to capitalist timeframes, concrete, social reproductive labor times are not unaffected by them. Capitalist temporal domination of life-making banks upon and exploits the uneven and flexible character of social reproductive standards and labor. As I explain below, ruling classes and their states variably squeeze, stretch and/or delay the time workers take to meet their needs in ways that direct that work away from meeting human needs and toward the goal of capitalist accumulation.

## A necessary possibility: capitalist conditioning of social reproductive time

The very structure of capitalist production makes ruling class conditioning of social reproductive time necessary; and the capitalist state’s political organization of social reproductive labor makes it possible.

Much social reproduction takes place in people's "spare time," which is nothing less than time away from waged work. Therefore, the time it takes to reproduce the self and others is, a priori, defined and limited by the timeframes of capitalist value production. And, as workers well know, spare time is hardly sacrosanct, especially as neoliberal capitalism has increasingly blurred the spatial and temporal boundaries between profit- and life-making such that millions juggle maintaining themselves and their households and communities interchangeably with zoom meetings, lace production, copy editing and much more for bosses. But the invasion of capitalist clock-time into spare (social reproductive labor) time is also a fact for the millions of workers who still earn their wages outside the home. It is felt through the dismantling of unions and state benefits placing greater responsibilities for caring on individuals (mostly women), and through bosses squeezing the time workers have to meet their needs by demanding workers take on overtime and irregular hours. Here, capital banks on the flexible and largely subjective nature of life-making time. It can do so because—to a point—needs can go unfulfilled and humans can be alienated from their bodies, their selves, their worlds.

Such temporal pressures and limits are structural. They are embedded in the economic system and essential to capitalist profit-making. Other incursions on workers' social reproductive labor time are not structural, but they are typical of capitalist societies. Backed up by the rule of law, they are deeply ingrained. These are state-led efforts to support, discipline and undermine workers' life-making time in ways that make capitalist clock-time domination possible.

Through laws governing social security, citizenship and immigration, education and healthcare and much more, the state alternately captures, colonizes and disciplines the social reproductive time of working class people—but it does so in different ways and to different extents depending very much on a person's social position—their wealth, gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability and status.

The life-making time of "surplus populations"—meaning those whose labor power is not immediately required by capital—tends to be institutionally captured (in schools, prisons, retirement homes, for example) and colonized in ways that echo and accommodate capitalist clock-time. It is also regularly stretched in the sense that the state, as Javier Auyero (*Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*, Duke, 2012) explains, imposes periods of waiting for status, access to benefits, and so on. The latter is an especially insidious way of putting people's life-making "on hold" temporally, ensuring the survival of a permanent "surplus population" of workers that enable capitalists to keep wages in the regular working class depressed and/or to call people into waged work at some undefined point in the future.

Compulsory schooling for children is a prime example of state colonization of life-making time. (Not just a relic of the 20th century, the expansion of schooling is ongoing in the Global South.) The transfer of education from households to schools is of course about habituating children to capitalist clock-time through the official rhythms, pace and duration of schooling—we are all too familiar with the dreaded school bell. But it is also a means of capturing children's own life-making time, urging and disciplining them to become—and ensuring teachers produce—efficient and instrumental producers of self and knowledge.

Yet another temporality also dominates schools: that of hegemonic theories of child development that impose abstract standards and timelines of progress. These are imposed within and through a clock-time infrastructure dictating, for example, that students spend so many hours a week on reading and math; or that by Grade 1, a student should be able to meet certain academic and behavioral performance markers. Even punishment for veering from developmental norms, detentions, is meted out by clock-time. Indeed, it is precisely its integration with clock-time temporalities that ensconces linear, teleological child development ideas and practices (in which adulthood is associated with autonomous, self-interested rational, sexually disciplined worker) as hegemonic—ruling out other potentially more flexible and open-ended paths of development.

At the same time—and this is a crucial point—schools tend also to be spaces where other concrete temporalities are granted greater scope; accommodating slower learners, enshrining some time for play and creativity, allowing some time to meet “excess” needs by addressing interpersonal conflicts or caring for children who have not eaten or slept well, or allowing time for students to discover new needs. Time spent in school then does not fully “belong” to the student. It doesn’t fully “belong” to capital either. It—like non-commodified social reproductive labor more generally—is a potential space and time to redefine time in ways that prioritize the concrete time of meeting human need (this can also be the case for communities and households).

We see this every day in schools as students, teachers and staff regularly defy capitalist clock-time organization of their social reproduction. They do so individually when students are late for class or when teachers shift schedules to accommodate slower learners or perform some necessary care work or pursue certain projects off curriculum. This self-management of social reproductive time is not unlike waged value-producing workers who defy the clock individually by skipping shifts, sneaking smoke breaks or simply slowing down their work processes.

The relevant question for socialists is what and how concrete life-making temporalities at schools or in communities can be collectivized, politicized, and integrated into broad struggles against capitalism. The potential for this is always present. It is occasionally brought to the fore: the 2018/19 student-led climate strikes, or the 2018 walkouts in the US protesting gun violence (recently again after shootings in Nashville, Chicago, Uvalde). Socialists should learn from these examples and build upon them.

## Conclusion

What becomes clear in thinking this all through is that, even as capitalists do not directly impose it, the temporal regulation of unwaged and waged public and nonprofit sector social reproductive labor time is critical to the functioning of capitalism. For it is through squeezing, stretching and delaying workers’ life-making that the ruling class can so effectively degrade, differentiate and discipline the living labor upon which it relies to turn a profit.

These temporal relations are, in the first instance, structured into the very fact of capitalist value creation and made possible largely by the state’s capturing and disciplining of people’s spare time on the one hand, and by turning spare time into the “empty time” of waiting and abandonment on the other. But, insofar as people can define, create and expand the time of their social reproduction, then, they can and will push back against the state’s imposition of capitalist clock-time. When they do so collectively, as part of a conscious effort to democratize the conditions of social reproduction, they can create spaces where capital’s temporal edifice starts to crack.

Just like the fight to limit the workday, social reproductive struggles for clean water and air, or publicly funded childcare and open borders, or against standardized testing in schools and promoting safety from gun violence are always also class struggles to control the rhythm, pace and duration of social reproduction. Insofar as they can impose new, collectively determined, timeframes of life-making, they pose limits on capital’s overall societal domination.

Source [Spectre Journal](#).

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