Social reproduction as the reproduction of capitalism

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Focaal’s recent Forum discussion, prompted by Jan Newberry and Rachel Rosen’s (2020) “Women and children together and apart: Finding the time for social reproduction theory,” takes a fresh view on finance capitalism by foregrounding its unlikeliest of actors: children. Children usually feature in scholarship as objects of care and investment in future goals that are not their own, rather than as the active building blocks of society. Indeed, their very positioning as children implies their non-agency. The authors in this Forum offer alternative understandings of children’s agency, and of the price of its retraction, as a lens into the workings of contemporary capitalism.

Rachel Rosen draws on her fieldwork in Canada and Jan Newberry draws on hers in Indonesia to analyze the consequences of children’s removal from their mothers’ tutelage. If the activities of children and mothers used to be synchronized in the domestic sphere, children are now shepherded through long-term schooling and freighted with future obligations to those who set them on this path. To enable their children’s schooling, mothers become ensnared in day-to-day struggles of wage work, unwaged domestic work, and interminable debt servicing. Mothers and children are thereby chained to finance capitalism interminably yet separately, each according to a different temporal logic. This strains prior links between them, as well as between more and less privileged children, to everyone’s detriment.

Kate Cairns (2020) finds this conclusion too one-sided. She shows that Black and Latinx youth in New Jersey position themselves rather as allies of struggling mothers, helping them provision for their families. Deborah James (2020) spotlights one South African family’s housing and student loans as an example of finance enlivening the bonds between parents and children, orienting them toward a common, aspirational future. And Olga Nieuwenhuys (2020) contends that children in the Global South are encumbered with debt to their families that is no less burdensome than schooling debt for being immaterial; indeed, mothers are the ones whose actions are future-oriented in raising children that would look after them when they are old.

Placed together, these ethnographic sketches present a mosaic of finance’s effects as global and variegated, shaping lives lived out below the radar of conventional finance discourse. Yet the juxtaposition also hinges on a disagreement over their conceptual stakes, specifically with respect to social reproduction theory. For Rosen and Newberry (2020), social reproduction refers to a synchronicity or “species being” as a sphere of freedom, care, and recognition that links women, children, and others. They identify financial pressures as upsetting social reproduction writ in the idiom of this primordial bond. Cairns (2020) describes youth activism as an effort to reclaim social reproduction against adverse environmental and social pressures. James (2020) contends that social reproduction...
can also be a generative outcome of household members working together with credit rather than dividedly falling prey to it. And for Nieuwenhuys (2020), social reproduction marks the intergenerational commitment to the collective that grows out of the Global South’s positioning within global capitalism.

My own intervention is to propose a different understanding of social reproduction, namely, as the reproduction of capitalism itself. By pinpointing the reproduction of capitalism as one of capitalist society, the social reproduction paradigm helpfully foregrounds tensions between the accumulation-driven logic of capitalism’s production process and the survival and well-being of the people subject to it (Weiss 2021). One must not lose sight of social reproduction being an aspect of capitalism, and of the fact that the society to be reproduced is a capitalist society. To me, insisting on this point is more closely aligned with the spirit of Karl Marx’s critique, even as Marx himself seldom discussed social reproduction as such. I will spend the next paragraphs explaining what I mean by social reproduction as the reproduction of capitalist society. I will then revisit the Forum debate to see how this alternative understanding might reconfigure the agencies it draws out.

**The reproduction of capitalist society**

To begin with a banal observation: social reproduction cannot be the undertaking of an individual, be it a caring mother, an activist teen, or an aspiring household member. Individuals may strive to secure a better life for themselves and their loved ones. If they are activists, they may seek the same for their society. In so doing, they may be agnostic about the broader social and economic conditions with which they must contend, or avail themselves of those that provide them with opportunities while opposing those that stand in their way. Yet it is precisely the repetition of these conditions over time, and their replication over space, that are the conditions of possibility for whatever individuals do. And they are the stipulation for and the outcome of capitalism’s dynamic of accumulation through market-mediated production, exchange, and consumption.

In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx wrote: “Whatever the social form of the production process, it has to be continuous, it must periodically repeat the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction” ([1867] 1992: 711). For “social reproduction” to make sense, then, “society” has to cohere as a “connected whole” that transcends its members’ actions and deliberations. It would be difficult to imagine such coherence in a society plagued with injustice. Unless, that is, there were something barring the members of society from changing its course.

In capitalism, there is. Capitalist society differs from prior social systems in that its members—broadly divided into capitalists and workers, as well as their dependents—cannot reproduce themselves outside of the capitalist market. Removed from their lands and other sources of livelihood, they rely on the market for subsistence and wages, if they are workers. Capitalists also rely on it for the labor power they need to employ, for the sale of their products, and for financing their undertakings. The capitalist market, which operates according to an imperative of competition and the exploitation of labor power to produce more value than the value encapsulated in wages, is therefore a precondition of every social exchange. The absence of independent sources of livelihood means that the entirety of the population in a capitalist society is subject to this compulsion and domination (Wood 2002). And conversely, the reproduction of capitalism also reproduces the compulsion and domination of the market, no less than it reproduces workers and capitalists, commodities and livelihoods.

Social reproduction can therefore hardly constitute a standard against which other features of capitalist accumulation stand out as oppres-
sive externalities. It is precisely against the tendency to do so that leading theorists such as Lise Vogel ([1979] 2013) and Martha Gimenez (2018) made a point of specifying capitalist social reproduction in their scholarship, insisting that reproduction itself proceeds capitalistically, that is, according to a dynamic of accumulation through for-profit production and market exchange.

What they opposed was the tendency to affirm social reproduction in the sense of a society to be maintained and reproduced, upon which capitalism is superimposed without fully subsuming. This affirmative approach equates social reproduction with livelihoods or survival strategies, which might be subject to capitalist “pressures” from above. Enzo Mingione (1991) makes this view explicit. He contends that, while pre-industrial societies have been organized for survival, industrialization has turned production into a separate sphere of social organization whose logic precedes that of households’ reproductive strategies.” On this understanding, household strategies are certainly influenced by wages, commodified consumption, and state intervention. But they are also external to these institutions and often clash with them.

The tendency to view social reproduction and socially reproductive work as analytically separate from (if subject to) imperatives of the capitalist production process resurfaces in the new wave of social reproduction theory. For example, Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) and Susan Ferguson (2020) grant reproductive labor—which they associate with unpaid or low-paid care work by mothers and mostly gendered and racialized care workers—ontological and moral priority. Waged workers may produce commodities, the argument goes, but someone must produce the workers. Since capitalism requires labor power, those who birth and care for workers as well as future and former workers are its undervalued enablers, and their unrecognized struggles are ipso facto anti-capitalist struggles. So, Ferguson (2020) insists that pressure from above to speed up and shortchange reproductive labor confronts a counterpressure, from below, in the form of care workers’ emotional and intellectual investments to resist capitalism’s alienating tendencies.

Such prioritization of a discrete sphere of social reproduction that includes socially reproductive work rests on an empiricism that mistakes forms of appearance—in this case, a historically and geographically specific division of labor in society—for reality. As its critics point out, in an attempt to revalorize practically devalued gendered and racialized reproductive work, it naturalizes and universalizes this work as gendered and racialized, all the while leaving intact the violent and destructive system of production that has so fashioned and devalued this work in the first place. Supporting reproductive work through such proposed reforms as wages for housework, or better working conditions for care workers, unwittingly affirms, thereby, the very system that created them as separate spheres of activity (cf. Best 2021; De’Ath 2018; Lange 2021; Munro 2019; Vishmidt and Sutherland 2020).

More fundamentally, this approach assumes concrete labor, productive as well as reproductive, to be the transhistorical source of wealth in goods and lives, respectively. Marx insisted, however, that labor only gains social significance in its abstract form, as average labor time expenditure, calculated with reference to the totality of capitalist production. This average labor time expenditure determines the work that the concrete processes of production and reproduction entail and the way it is remunerated. It determines the value of both productive and reproductive work, as much as that of commodities and profit, so as to enable the relaunching of subsequent cycles of production and to commit workers and capitalists to them for the sake of their own reproduction (Postone 1993).

Here, again, from Capital: “The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the hand
the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer” (Marx [1867] 1992: 724). In other words, the capital relation is the foundation of capitalist society, not concrete labor. Labor power, whether waged or unwaged, constitutes a relative component in a process whose end goal is accumulation. The social significance of productive and reproductive work is not prior to profit-pursuing capital, but its constituent.

Isolating and prioritizing the reproduction of people makes no sense within a capitalist system. At issue for capitalist social reproduction is the reproduction of a social relation. Capitalist reproduction does not necessitate the reproduction of the entire population or even of a determinate amount of people. It requires only that there be enough workers to set the next cycle of production in motion (O’Laughlin 1977; Vogel [1979] 2013). In practice, it depends on workers receiving wages low enough to bar them from extracting themselves from the wage–labor relationship. In an era of more job seekers than jobs, capitalism can take for granted the sufficiency of workers and disregard the population that is surplus to its needs (Lebowitz 2003).

Having laid out the analytical underpinnings for the reproduction of capitalist society in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx launches into his “schemes of reproduction” in the second volume. First, he explains the ratios between the production of means of production and that of articles of consumption, which would allow the reproduction of total social capital. Next, he explains the ratios between them, which would allow this production to take place on an expanded scale. As Susana Narotzky (1997) makes clear, the course that social reproduction takes proves, in this sense, to be much closer to distribution than to the actual production of commodities and of labor power. It is essentially the allocation of resources to people and of people to resources in a way that would support the continuity of accumulation. In capitalism, accumulation takes place through exploitation and domination. Social reproduction is the securing of optimal conditions for this process to be carried out.

Far from reproductive labor being a virtuous source of social wealth, then, it serves as an input in the reproduction of capitalist society and its attendant miseries and injustices. Highlighting this point, Kirstin Munro (2019) cautions against the artificial disentangling of the reproduction of labor power that women (and children) may perform from the reproduction of capitalist society. Reproductive work is more accurately distributed between people and resources across households, firms, and the state. Firms, too, engage in reproductive work. They do so when they remit payments to the state in the form of taxes and when they pay workers’ wages. States engage in reproductive work when they provide redistributive pooling, insurance, pensions, education, and health services to households. And workers do so when they use their wages to buy commodities, thereby “realizing” (to use Marx’s terminology) these commodities’ profit potential, and when they reproduce, in their households, the labor power that firms will hire (Munro forthcoming).

Nor can finance be said to press down on those engaging in reproductive work. On the contrary, it facilitates the distribution of people and resources for relaunching production, and by extension it enables reproduction. For example, finance allows household members to afford the property and services they cannot purchase through their wages alone. This encourages the widespread purchase of household commodities, profiting the firms involved in their production and financing. Profit rates are further increased when capitalists can pay their finance-leveraged workers less. Finally, through debt servicing and payment streams, households become suppliers of liquid, risk-managed assets, a source of monetary stability for capital (Adkins 2019). As Gavin Smith (2018) notes, finance’s intertwinement in various aspects of accumulation makes it even harder to separate the (financialized) economy from society, or “social reproduction” from the reproduction of capitalism.

Another implication of social reproduction as the reproduction of capitalism, which Beverly Best (2021) points out, is that gendered re-
productive work cannot be detached from the sphere of production, nor is gender itself a determinant modality at the abstract core of the capital–labor relation. On the contrary, capital evacuates workers of concrete specificity. Marx could set aside the question of how workers would be reproduced precisely because capital can take for granted that it will find work available. So long as subsistence depends on wages, capital generates a workforce larger than it can absorb. It can therefore step away from managing the reproduction of labor power. It relies on nothing more than workers’ producing a product of greater value than their cost price as labor power. Value, the product of this labor, is appropriated by capital. The unwaged activities of social reproduction, potentially the very definition of wealth, cannot therefore be objectified as wealth (Best 2021).

To sum up, social reproduction is the social dimension of the capitalist production process. As such, it is the outcome of a historically evolving totality governed by everyone’s dependence on the market for their subsistence, and of the competition imposed upon them for wages and profit. To juxtapose “social reproduction” to capitalism’s “pressures” is to misleadingly bracket off what are intertwined components of capitalism. When scholars privilege the reproduction of lives through (gendered and racialized) care work or reproductive work, they reify relations that change along with changes in industry and exchange. And capital does not respect the need for a separate sphere of reproduction or concern itself with the replenishment of labor power any more than it prioritizes the lives of individual workers or future generations (Cammack 2020).

**Family and time**

How does this understanding of social reproduction illuminate the position of children and their relationship with their mothers under contemporary finance-led capitalism? To begin with, they should be viewed within the frame-work of the changing role of the family in capitalism. If, prior to the worldwide takeover of capitalism, the family had been a foundational relation making up society, it “becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate [relation] . . . and must then be treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to ‘the concept of the family’” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010: 43).

Capitalist development has maintained the family as a useful institution for the regulating of work, consumption, and intergenerational reproduction, and for maintaining the relation between labor and capital. The structure of the family has proven porous and malleable enough to adapt to these functions. Relationships within and between families are themselves mediated by differential access to material and social resources. But the family remains an “imaginary concrete,” according to Gimenez, whereas “the ‘real concrete’ or ‘totality comprising many determinations and relations’ is the capitalist organization of social reproduction and the resulting changing networks of social relations within which social reproduction becomes possible at a given time for different strata” (2018: 356).

Contrary to the Forum debate’s premise, then, changes in family relations neither shape nor set limits on socially reproductive work. The exact opposite is the case: the reproductive work that capitalism necessitates transforms what the family means and how it operates. When children’s education is “stretched out,” for example, parenting may follow suit, with the family’s sense of itself refashioned. In circumstances that do not conform to the temporalities of conventional kinship narratives, families create new kinship imaginaries to accommodate the shift in the rhythms of daily life (Ginsburg and Rapp 2011). Reviewing ethnographic studies of kinship, Rayna Rapp (1978) shows how the concept of “family” functions ideologically to absorb tensions in the management of household resources. One must work for the sake of the family; the founding of a family is what one does for a sense of gratification and autonomy;
working to support one’s family commits one to existing relations of production; and one voices family to marshal the resources of others.

The agency of the family’s members, as that of all other actors within capitalist society, is neither given nor static. Rather, is it afforded on behalf of social reproduction and to the extent that family members contribute to it. Circling back to the Forum debate, it could be argued that children’s agency and their relationships to their mothers take shape within these parameters. To sharpen this proposition, I would like to recall the temporal component of Newberry and Rosen’s (2020) argument—namely, that children are integrated, through schooling, into a long-term temporality, whereas women are caught up, through the quick pace of debt repayment, in temporal immediacy; and that this difference generates tensions between them, desynchronizing experiences that would otherwise be organically linked.

Such understanding of time as heterogeneous implies—as William Sewell (2008) formulates it—a causal heterogeneity, in the sense of different contexts engendering different actions and outcomes. But capitalism is unique, Sewell goes on to argue, in that for all its dynamism it operates according to a single, unchanging, and repeatable temporal pattern. The temporality of capitalist social reproduction is a homogeneous one of self-reinforcing accumulation through business cycles and uneven development, propelled by diversely paced yet subordinate actions and events. Certainly, individual lives are unique and eventful. Yet individuals are also bearers of social relations. In capitalism, these relations are formed by constraints on subsistence and opportunities for profit.

Agencies take shape within this temporality rather than representing an alternative to it. This suggests a more restrictive role for children and mothers (and everyone else) than that which is debated in the Forum. But it does not mean that they are non-agents. As Sewell (2008) reminds us, even though capitalism’s logic has successfully reproduced itself for over two centuries, its temporality is itself contingent and contra-
dictory, generating efforts at its containment as much as at its supersession. Future efforts may well succeed in precipitating meaningful transformation in the lives of women and children. Such transformation, however, would depend on disrupting (capitalist) social reproduction, not on affirming it against the pressures of schooling and finance.

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References


