

Children, reproductive labor, and intergenerational solidarity

Comment on Newberry and Rosen

Kate Cairns

At the very time that I was reading Jan Newberry and Rachel Rosen's "Women and Children Together and Apart," young people around the world were organizing collectively to demand action on climate change. On 15 March 2019, children and youth in more than one hundred countries walked out of school in a coordinated act of defiance. Gathering in parks, public squares, and on the steps of government headquarters, their signs and chants decried the intergenerational violence of planetary destruction, demanding accountability from the world's most powerful. As these young people make clear, the climate crisis is very much a crisis of social reproduction: the environmental devastation wrought by capitalist accumulation threatens the conditions for making and sustaining life, with particularly devastating consequences for the world's most marginalized. In their organizing to demand political action to address this crisis, young people have shone a light on the multiple temporalities at stake: by withholding their labor as striking students, they refuse to produce value for a future that is increasingly under threat.

Newberry and Rosen propose that attending to such temporalities can yield new insights in social reproduction theory. Specifically, they seek to craft a theoretical approach that can "keep women and children in the frame." In this response, I will highlight what I see to be three of

their central insights: the analysis of childhood, generation, and temporality, respectively. Then, I'll briefly consider how bringing the lived experiences of women and children into the frame might further extend this theoretical project.

The piece marks a continued effort to challenge the positioning of children as mere objects or "outputs" of reproduction. Here, Newberry and Rosen's insights as scholars of childhood are crucial. They write that while the resurgence of interest in social reproduction theory has brought much-needed attention to dynamics of racialization and migration within the reproduction of global capitalism (e.g., Bhattacharya 2017a), children continue to be dominantly positioned as objects—as outputs of reproductive labor and as sites of investment defined by their adult futures. In a pattern long critiqued by childhood studies scholars, children are reduced to objects of care—mouths fed, bodies cleansed, subjectivities molded. Newberry and Rosen join a small group of scholars of childhood who have called for greater attention to children's participation in reproductive labor (e.g., Abebe 2007; Ansell 2008; Cairns 2018a; Ferguson 2017). Pushing this analysis further, they consider not only the reproductive work that children do but also how children's reproductive work both binds and differentiates them from women. In previous collaborations, they have examined the site of early childhood edu-



cation to illuminate tensions between the social reproductive labor of children and of women in these settings (Rosen and Newberry 2018).

While the piece is framed as a contribution to social reproduction theory, Newberry and Rosen also make an important, if implicit, intervention into childhood studies. With roots in a critique of developmentalism and an insistence on seeing children as social actors, the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies has long challenged the dominant framing of children in terms of their futures—that is, the tendency to view young people as “becomings” rather than “beings.” This critique of the child’s futurity has countered scholarly approaches to children as adults-in-the-making, as well as political discourses rendering children the promise and peril of collective futures (see Katz 2008). Yet, a rigid insistence on “beings” over “becomings” carries its own intellectual baggage. As Rosen (2017) notes elsewhere, this overriding critique of futurity has limited the field to a sort of “epistemological presentism,” containing the analysis of childhood within children’s day-to-day experiences. In a corollary spatial critique, geographer Nicola Ansell (2009) argues that the field’s obsession with children as social actors has limited inquiry to the microgeographies of childhood: a commitment that yields rich ethnographic accounts of children’s everyday environments but leaves the workings of global capitalism unquestioned. By situating children’s reproductive labor within a broader critique of capitalism, Newberry and Rosen expand the spatiotemporal boundaries of childhood studies.

The tendency to construct children as objects of social reproductive labor is facilitated by generationing—the dichotomous and hierarchical construction of child and adult. Here, again, an analysis of childhood brings new insights to feminist theory: while feminist scholarship is deeply attuned to systems of oppression, the generational order is often taken for granted. Definitions of social reproduction commonly refer to the “daily and generational” reproduction of the population, with children at the heart of these processes, but the workings of gener-

ation are seldom interrogated. Newberry and Rosen ask, “How can we keep the gendered, racialized, and generationed aspects of social reproductive labor in focus?” Such an analysis works to keep both women and children “in the frame,” without collapsing them into the conflated status of “womenandchildren” (see Burman 2008).

The third piece of this puzzle is Newberry and Rosen’s attention to temporality. For them, the temporal dimensions of reproductive labor extend beyond normative models of development and generational replacement. Rather, the authors seek to make visible the temporal contradictions of social reproduction under financialized capitalism, where “temporal modalities of accumulation” cast women and children in different, seemingly competing, realms. Regimes of debt, for example, produce “conflicting temporalities” that position women and children in tension: one carrying an immediate burden, the other saddled with long-term obligation. At the same time, increasing pressure on formal schooling (to prepare future workers to compete in the “knowledge economy”) decreases children’s availability for domestic labor, while neoliberal policies combine with ideologies of intensive parenting to deepen the burden of familial caregiving. Newberry and Rosen argue such temporalities both bind and differentiate women and children in ways that seem to put them in tension. From this perspective, perhaps popular critiques of the “helicopter mom” and the “entitled student” operate in the service of capital, as they work to individualize responsibility for reproductive labor. The pressures of intensive mothering seemingly pit children and caregivers’ interests in opposition but actually serve as a dividing practice while offloading evermore costs onto families. Thus, the contradictions of capitalism are masked as conflict between groups.

While Newberry and Rosen emphasize their commitment to bringing both women and children into the frame, no *actual* women or children enter this piece. As I moved slowly through the dense prose, I wondered how the

lived experiences of social reproduction in particular contexts might bring to life some of the theoretical complexities at stake. In my own research on food and garden education initiatives in Camden, New Jersey, I have spoken with young people who position themselves as allies of mothers who are struggling to provide in the context of poverty (Cairns 2018b). While food education projects are commonly framed as a way of educating future healthy consumers (what Newberry and Rosen might characterize as temporalities of “scholarization”), the Black and Latinx youth I spoke with described present efforts to contribute to the work of family food provision, whether by sharing summer wages, bringing home leftover produce from a youth-run farmers’ market, or providing emotional support to mothers during times of stress. These young people were not only engaged in the production of human capital for future value extraction but also key contributors to reproductive labor in the present. Their stories challenge assumptions of a generational order that render young people only objects of care, as they narrate lives rich with intergenerational interdependencies. Even more, their stories contest temporal logics of capital that work to divide women and children by positioning their needs as competing. They also challenge the imagined division between children who work for wages in the present and those who work on human capital for the future—a division that appears in Newberry and Rosen’s text.

To be clear, I do not want to romanticize young people’s contributions to family food work. These mother/child alliances arise in a context of poverty wages and meager government support, suggesting that the “re-familiarization” of social reproduction increases not only women’s reproductive burden but also the reproductive labor performed by some children. Even still, I wonder how such stories of intergenerational solidarity—children who seek to ease women’s reproductive burden in the daily struggle against racial capitalism—might expand our theoretical imaginations. As these young people position themselves as allies of

mothers who are struggling to provide in the context of poverty, they offer one model of forging intergenerational solidarities to counter exploitation. We might learn from their stories—and the stories of others, such as young climate strikers who refuse to produce value for an uninhabitable future—as we attempt to theorize the multiple presents and possible futures of social reproduction.

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