

# Social reproduction theory

## History, issues and present challenges

Silvia Federici

As the articles contained in this issue of *Radical Philosophy* indicate, 'social reproduction' is today more than ever at the centre of feminist debates. Yet the same articles also express a legitimate concern that recent theorisations obfuscate the political significance of this concept and its ability to describe the changes that have taken place in the production of labour-power in the present phase of capitalist development.

In the notes that follow, I summarise the key issues emerging from this dossier, and then sketch a tentative program of analysis and action that I think is made necessary by the crisis of reproduction that women are experiencing worldwide. First, however, I would like to briefly comment on the history of the concept, to dispose of the assumption that to speak of 'social reproduction' is by itself to take a radical stance. This may seem a minor point in the context of the present debates, but I think it is worth emphasising that the idea of social reproduction originated in the context of bourgeois economics to indicate the processes by which a social system reproduces itself. This is how 'social reproduction' was first conceptualised by the François Quesnay (1694–1774) and other Enlightenment-era Physiocrats who, according to Marx, were the first economists of capitalist society, and also the first theorists to identify the nature of productive labour with agricultural work.

Contrary to an assumption that runs through recent works on social reproduction, to look at social reality from this viewpoint is *not itself to take a Marxist or a radical stand generally speaking*. Social reproduction theorists have included a wide range of promoters of capitalist development. Thus, as an analytic category 'social reproduction' cannot be adopted as a form of a political identification, as it is done by feminists describing themselves as 'social reproduction theorists'.

What made the discussion of social reproduction by

wages for housework theorists and activists in the 1970s 'revolutionary' (in my view) was not the field that they examined, but what they discovered, which is the existence of a large area of exploitation until then unrecognised by all revolutionary theorists, Marxist and anarchist alike. It was discovering that unpaid labour is not extracted by the capitalist class only from the waged workday, but that it is also extracted from the workday of millions of unwaged house-workers as well as many other unpaid and un-free labourers. It was redefining the capitalist function of the wage as a creator of labour hierarchies, and an instrument serving to naturalise exploitative social relations and to delegate to wage-workers power over the unwaged. It was unmasking the socio-economic function of the creation of a fictional private sphere, and thereby re-politicising family life, sexuality, procreation.

This is what made the work of Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopolda Fortunati and many others a turning point in feminist political thinking, not the fact that they looked at the world from the viewpoint of social reproduction. Scores of bourgeois thinkers – not just Marx – had done that before us.

Placing the spotlight on the work that produces the work-force has made possible a new understanding of the mechanisms by which capitalist society has been reproduced. It explains why the process that Maria Mies has defined as housewifisation has been exported throughout the former colonial world and – as the article here by Mai Taha and Sara Salem indicates – it persisted even in the state planning of the postcolonial period. This was plausibly because the goal of social development was still defined by the postcolonial state in terms of capital accumulation. Yet, the fact that Nasser's government 'made reproduction a public concern' clearly indicates, as the authors again underline, a decisive political shift, redirecting social investment this time to the support of

the national workforce, although this new commitment never translated into a remuneration of the women in charge of this work.

Clearly, important changes have occurred in the organisation of social reproduction, with the restructuring of the global economy and the international division of reproductive work, that need to be theorised. As Mai Taha and Sara Salem point out, Egypt's adoption under Anwar Sadat of a neoliberal agenda has reversed the effects of Nasserism's social reproduction policy that strongly supported investment in the public sector. My own work has repeatedly focused on the consequences – worldwide – of the marketisation of reproductive activities that the neoliberal turn has produced, as well as the struggle of women in Africa and Latin America to create more cooperative forms of reproduction in response to this marketisation. Dalla Costa as well has written extensively on the effects of land privatisation, structural adjustment programs and the growing commercialisation of agriculture on subsistence economies and people's lives in the communities affected. In a co-authored work, entitled *Our Mother Ocean*<sup>1</sup> she has also extended her analysis of the neoliberal reorganisation of social reproduction to a description of the destruction of the greatest commons on earth – the seas, the oceans – caused by the industrialisation of fishing as well as by many forms of poisoning and contamination.

There is an immense work in which we, as feminists, have to engage, to denounce the profound crisis of social reproduction that entire populations across the world are experiencing because of the impoverishment capitalist development is producing, due to the defunding of social programs, the politics of extractivism and the now permanent state of warfare. We also need to write about the war that is being conducted against proletarian children and public schools, about the misery in which many elderly people are living, about the new forms of slavery constructed through the mass incarceration of black youth, and above all, about the struggle that can be made against these injustices.

What we do not need are new exercises in Marxology, which seek to demonstrate that reproductive work is not 'productive'. I will not reiterate the arguments against such efforts and resulting theories; Alessandra Mezzadri has already provided an exhaustive, excellent critique of them here, in her analysis of its articulation in some

of the articles contained in the recent collection *Social Reproduction Theory*.<sup>2</sup> I will only question why it continues to be so important for feminists to deny something so evident as the fact that those who produce the producers of value must be themselves productive of that value. I would also add that value production is not a linear process, but one that occurs through constant displacements, as value is most often realised not where it is produced. But the question is why should it matter so much to feminists to deny a proposition that reflects a position of power for women in our negotiation and confrontation with capital and the state.

We can well imagine, for instance, what a difference it would have made if, in the 1970s and 1980s, in the face of the most racist attacks on women on welfare in the United States, feminists had gone to the streets to support their struggle and, together with them, demonstrate that every mother is a working woman and a producer of social wealth. In this context, I particularly appreciate Mezzadri's acknowledgement that given 'the expanding informal and informalised labour relations, it would be hard and completely misleading to distinguish between value-producing and non-value producing activities and realms, strictly based on tasks and/or payments', also considering that to deny the productivity of unpaid work activities is to assume that much of the world population is irrelevant to capital accumulation, which means that it cannot make the claim that the wealth that capitalism produces is also the fruit of its labour. Such denial evokes the orthodox Marxist view that only the (predominantly white) waged industrial workers qualify as makers of the communist revolution. But most important it leaves open the question of what power do we have to force the state to return to us the resources we need for our reproduction.

Many feminists in the 1970s and today as well have rejected the thrust of our campaign for wages for housework. However, nothing has so far been put forward as an alternative, except for timid calls for state-provided childcare and the sharing of housework with men. Meanwhile, women, in the United States among other places, are now so in need of money of their own that they have children whom they will never know or care for, and whom they essentially sell to others for a stipulated price. According to Kalindi Vora's 'Surrogacy, Labor and Human Reproduction', in India, surrogate mothers engage in this

practice with the expectation that it will open the way to ‘ongoing social relations and social support of their own families by the commissioning parents.’ It is inconceivable, in fact, for many women that such an important act as giving a child to another family should not create affective ties and other obligations among all the people involved. This expectation, however, is destined to be cruelly frustrated, as it is one of the key requirements of surrogacy contracts that the children thus produced be immediately delivered to their new parents, a legal clause that has traumatic consequences, especially for the new-born infant who is separated from a body in which they have grown for nine months, the body whose voice and smell they recognise, and from which they expect their nourishment. Thus, as Vora, among others, has underlined, surrogacy can be taken as exemplary of the ways in which the extension of capitalist relations deepens the social hierarchies and the colonial structuring of the world economy, with the further racialisation of the activities considered to be of least value, beginning with the very process of procreation itself.

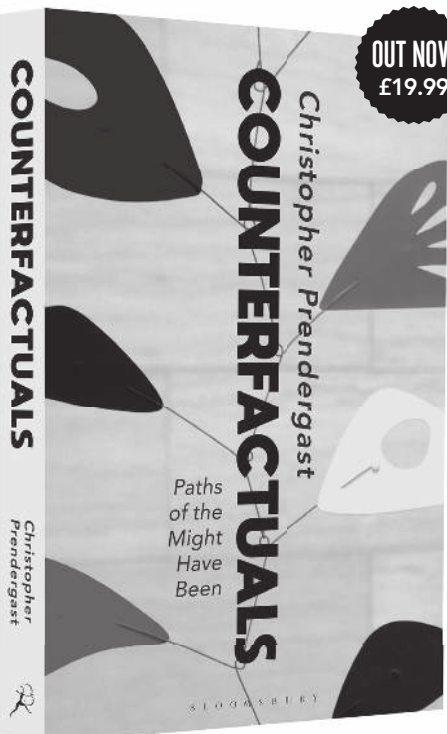
It is to be regretted that the feminist movement of the 1970s did not change the social status of such a vital

activity as reproductive work, and it did not struggle to guarantee that women should not be denied the possibility of being mothers; an omission that means the predicament of African American women in slavery who were forced to produce children that would be taken away from them, finds echoes in the present context of commercial surrogacy. How to achieve such goals, how to construct a feminist agenda and a feminist struggle that in the words of a contemporary feminist slogan ‘places life at the centre’, valorising the process of its reproduction remains an open question for feminist movements internationally. It is the task of feminist theories of social reproduction to see how these questions can be answered.

*Silvia Federici’s books include Wages Against Housework (1975) and Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (2004).*

### Notes

1. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Monica Chilesse, *Our Mother Ocean: Enclosure, Commons, and the Global Fishermen’s Movement* (Chico, CA: Common Notions Press, 2015).
2. Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).



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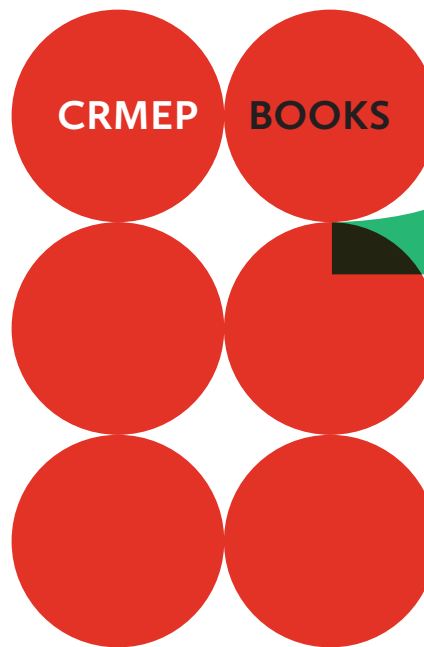
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