

Reproductive subsumption

Notes on the making of reproductive labour in capitalism

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And to hell with hibiscus, frangipani, and bougainvillea.

Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be.

Suzanne Césaire, *Tropiques* n.4, 1942

How do we trace internal fractures of the working class? What histories do they have? How to *explain* the manifold production of difference within ‘classes of labour’? A few decades ago, Diane Elson was asking a question, the answer to which points in a useful direction: why does labour take the *form* it does in capitalism? And what are the political consequences? In posing this puzzle, Elson’s goal was to recast the centrality of labour within Marx’s value theory, as a theory of the specific way labour is transformed in capitalism.¹ In this article, I draw from Elson’s analysis to think about how workers are differently formed in capitalism by focusing on how capitalism changes the relation between production and social reproduction and with what consequences for labour. The analysis allows us to understand the fragmentation between productive and reproductive labour as processes intrinsic to class-making. I therefore ask: how is labour formed – reconstructed – as reproductive labour in capitalism? I suggest that a fruitful answer to this question may reside in an augmented analysis of the subsumption of labour. Responding to the needs to develop gendered global histories² and overall histories that chart the development of capitalism ‘beyond the immediate process of production’,³ I extend the analysis of labour subsumption beyond the productive sphere to include the sphere of reproduction.⁴

The sphere of reproduction is intended here as involving all labour that is devoted to the reproduction of

life, human and extra-human, in capitalism, the labour of social reproduction. In one of the early, comprehensive definitions, the labour of social reproduction includes ‘various kinds of work – mental, manual, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation. And the organisation of social reproduction refers to the varying institutions within which this work is performed, the varying strategies for accomplishing these tasks, and the varying ideologies that both shape and are shaped by them’.⁵ Since the 1960s and 70s Marxist feminists have demonstrated that reproductive labour is a fundamental ingredient of capitalism, it is essential for the regeneration and renewal of daily and generational labour power, which is the only source of new value in capitalism.⁶ This work invariably involves the reproduction of ecosystems, i.e. the ‘conditions of the natural world which make life, society and production possible’.⁷ Thus, my analysis benefits from decades of social reproduction scholarship to ask what can be gained historically by viewing the historical development of capitalism from the vantage point of social reproduction. As it has been argued, the making of these life-making workers ought to be at the heart of ‘global labour’ as ‘an international multiverse of class forces’.⁸

Why ‘subsumption’? The subsumption of labour represents a powerful analytical framework, with great un-

tapped potential. Echoing Elson's fundamental question above, for Andrés Saenz de Sicilia 'subsumption' provides a recipe for understanding how in capitalism individuals are *formed* as workers.⁹ Within the 'classic' analysis of labour subsumption, individuals become workers as the labour process becomes subsumed – enveloped, dominated – by the valorisation process. The work done in fields, workshops, ships and households first 'simply' intensifies and then drastically changes as capital comes to regulate fully the labour process. For Patrick Murray, different forms of subsumption 'point to the diverse ways that capital, understood as a specific – and explosive – social form of wealth, revolutionises society, its goods and services and the way they are produced'.¹⁰ In taking these remarks most seriously, I assume that capital's explosiveness and 'epoch-making power'¹¹ must exceed the labour process, and I propose to extend subsumption accordingly. Indeed, the classic analysis of labour subsumption remains essentially an analysis of capitalist *production*, as the pedestal of the valorisation process. This analysis therefore omits that part of labour working elsewhere other than immediate production. Specifically, it overlooks all that work *separated* from, and *subordinated* to, production and instead devoted to the reproduction of the working class. I suggest this labour encounters a different form of subsumption – reproductive subsumption – and call to study its historical trajectories in concrete settings. In other words, reproductive subsumption – or the subsumption of reproductive labour – designates the historical reconstruction of how some part of labour is divorced and subordinated to production and reconstituted as reproductive labour due to the material contradictions inherent to the valorisation process. Hence, reproductive subsumption is a process specific to capitalism, emanating from its internal material limits.

Calling for a history of reproductive labour as a process of capitalist subsumption allows us to do several things. Retaining the category of subsumption highlights the simultaneously differential and intertwined incorporation of productive and reproductive labour in capitalism and their mutual and contradictory relationship. First, this allows us to recover a rich sense of capitalism, neither reducible to stereotypical forms of exploitation nor the relationships involved in the immediate process of production.¹² Such a rich perspective takes subsumption to capitalism as occurring 'when the re-

production of any class, social category or formation, became impossible outside capitalist commodity relations, even *if reproduction is not constituted exclusively by them*'.¹³ Second, as a category, subsumption represents a powerful tool to investigate concrete settings in their dialectical relationship with capital's compulsions. Accordingly, subsumption 'marks the *interface* between capital as a system and capital as history',¹⁴ thus allowing us to 'strike a balance between theory and history'.¹⁵ The analysis of reproductive subsumption starts theoretically from detecting the reproductive function in capitalism as necessary for supplying labour power and sustaining life more generally. Reproductive subsumption then becomes a historical charting of how this function is secured through the construction of workers partially, or sometimes and in some places entirely, dedicated to this life-making work. In the movement from theory to history – from work to workers – this process of class-making vehiculates, catalyses, refashions, imports, adapts (and creates) available forms and systems of oppression, like gender, race, religion and sexuality (to name a few), to produce a canvas rich with all the contingency and jumble of history, a 'concrete universality' where 'distinct experiences of oppression are in fact internally related, discrete but interconnected parts of a totalising system'.¹⁶

When investigating processes of subsumption, a third point thus crops up: violence. Like subsumption in general, reproductive subsumption is invariably a violent process. Threaded to the sheer violence of the primitive accumulation of capitalism, reproductive subsumption unearths the forms of oppression and coercion serving the subordination, naturalisation and even annihilation of reproductive labour to gain a greater understanding of its ubiquitous as well as specific manifestations. It therefore digs into how reproductive workers are at once different and the same. One of the greatest works charting the long reproductive subsumption in Europe is Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*. Here we discover the subordination of reproductive to productive labour through the violent gendering machine and the primitive accumulation of capital 'as a primitive *accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*'.¹⁷ While the labour of reproduction is immediately associated with the gendering of individuals, its relationship to processes of racialisation is less rehearsed. Yet, as

Gargi Bhattacharyya shows, threaded to gender, racialisation is a most powerful ‘differentiating force’ of the working class and one entangled with social reproduction in determining different ‘scales of humanness’.¹⁸ In her understanding of racial capitalism, ‘reproductive labour is the input that enables workers to be highly differentiated and differently constituted as workers, sometimes workers and non-workers’.¹⁹ Hence the need to reconstruct the manifold ways in which reproductive work becomes a marker of difference in different places and times, i.e. the specifically capitalist form of these differentiating forces as they yield a variegated and segmented global working class.



The reflections proposed in this article are far from catching or explaining all sources of fracture in the working class. Rather, by calling for historical inquiries into the constitution of reproductive labour, I wish to emphasise one element within the totality, conscious ‘that any category we use to cut the continuum of the material world can only capture a partial knowledge, a particular aspect seen from a certain vantage point’.²⁰ The hope is that an augmented understanding of subsumption can provide fertile ground to approach complex unfolding

debates, including the rich debate on the character of primitive accumulation²¹ or the structural/contingent role of gender and race within capitalism.²²

The rest of this article develops as follows. The next section sketches the classic analysis of the subsumption of labour and some of its most notable developments. I turn to construct the category of reproductive subsumption in section three, gradually moving from the abstract to the concrete level. I analyse some key contradictions of reproductive subsumption in section four and move to consider gender and race as key forms of violence in section five.

The ‘classic’ analysis of the subsumption of labour and beyond

Saenz de Sicilia captures the ground rules of subsumption as a nuanced, open and materialist framework for analysing capitalism in its logical and historical development.²³ By tracing the genealogy of the concept from Kant to Hegel, and then Marx, Saenz de Sicilia reconstructs subsumption as a logical category displaying in my opinion a four-fold character: it is a *relation* that is intrinsically *violent*, and it is a *process* constituting that relation, which is inherently *developmental*, i.e. open-ended and contingent. First, as a *relation*, subsumption indicates a hierarchy, a subordination of a ‘particular’ to a ‘general’. Second, a qualification: this relation is violent. Subsumption ‘always involves a kind of imposition or violence, as a particular “content” is determined by a “form” that remains in some sense abstract or indifferent to its specific qualities and so violates its singular identity’.²⁴ Third, as a *process*, subsumption actively expresses the formation of that relation as a reciprocal movement where the particular and the general co-determine each other. Fourth, rather than circular, this process is inevitably *developmental*: ‘the subsumption of the particular under the universal is no longer an infinitely self-same act realised within an unchanging totality, but rather takes on a fundamentally different character depending on the stage of the development of that totality, whilst at the same time driving that development onwards’.²⁵

These elements characterise Marx’s analysis of labour subsumption as an analysis of how individuals become workers subsumed to capital as a dominant social form and how this process is inherently violent, in-

ternally contradictory, characterised by struggle, contingency, and thus open-ended. The fundamentals of this analysis are in the ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’.²⁶ Here Marx distinguishes mainly between the *formal* and *real* subsumption of labour delineating a process of development of capitalist relations of production that move from the former to the latter.²⁷ A rough summary goes as follows.

Within the *formal* subsumption of labour, capital seizes the labour process – subsumes it – ‘as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an *existing labour process*, developed by different and more archaic modes of production’.²⁸ In this scenario, the labour process does not change its functioning and organisation and remains “technologically” continuous with earlier modes of labour’.²⁹ Subsuming here means that labour becomes imbricated and subject to capitalist extraction of surplus value within capital’s compulsion to produce as much surplus value as possible. Capital extraction is here *absolute*: surplus labour is obtained through labour intensification, by lengthening the working day. This happens ‘either when the producer is self-employing or when the immediate producers are forced to deliver surplus labour to others’, and ‘A man who was formerly an independent peasant now finds himself a factor in a production process and dependant on the capitalist directing it, and his own livelihood depends on a contract which he as a commodity owner (viz. the owner of labour-power) has previously concluded with the capitalist as the owner of money’.³⁰

Instead, the *real* subsumption of labour implies a drastic change in the form of the labour process: a ‘complete revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists’.³¹ In its most classic tale, this happens when capital directly penetrates and technologically transforms the production process, so that the productivity of labour increases without increasing the working day. Typically, this also happens when the scale of production increases, workers no longer work in isolation from one another, and capital reaps the benefits of economies of scale, cooperation, etc. This form of subsumption is typically developed by *relative* surplus value extraction.

Subsequent elaborations of the category of subsumption extend this analysis in important directions. A well-

known elaboration is Antonio Negri’s expansion of ‘real subsumption’, often reverberating in and out of his writing as ‘total subsumption’.³² For Negri, subsumption is an incremental process of capitalist development as a gradual annihilation of the ‘outside’ of capital. That is, subsumption is capital proceeding like a colonising force from the shopfloor outward through to society – ‘from manufacture to big industry to social factory’ – spatially conquering the whole of the world market and capturing every form of social exchange and production.³³ Once *society* is ‘really subsumed’ there is no outside of capital left, production, circulation and consumption collapse into each other, nature is reproduced as capitalist nature, and reproduction is capitalist reproduction.³⁴ Thus, within real/total subsumption we gain a flavour of the all-encompassing nature of capitalist development in time and space, yet much is lost along the way. First, differential trajectories of subsumption acquire a rather ‘stageist’ flavour where the bulk of the global South seems merely late down the line rather than another (larger) face of a Western present.³⁵ Second, and as a consequence of this narrow view, ‘the planetary proletariat’ as ‘the value-creating labor of billions of people’ is lost.³⁶

A less-known development of subsumption comes from feminist agrarian political economy. Here, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen transcended the inside/outside capitalism logic by looking at those who *seemed* to be not subsumed, the Third World ‘marginal mass’.³⁷ This included all workers who ‘work under any conditions’ and who ‘only struggle to survive’: the urban poor garbage collectors; shoe-shiner boys; housemaids; prostitutes; small peasants; the mass of migrant-day labourers; ‘the primitive artisans’.³⁸ Essentially, all the working mass ‘in charge of its own reproduction’ and ‘responsible for its necessary subsistence work’ and therefore very cheap to capital. Rather than excluded, Bennholdt-Thomsen saw these workers as in a position of *marginal subsumption* to capital, ‘not outside the capitalist system but in fact very much within it’, their work still valorised by capital.³⁹ Marginal subsumption, therefore, indicates the ‘specific socio-economic position of this vast majority of producers within the capitalist mode of production, their specific relations to capital, and the mechanisms by which their social position is reproduced’.⁴⁰ That is, although subsistence occupies most of the work/time/en-

ergy of the ‘marginal masses’, these masses are adversely incorporated rather than expelled from capitalist relations of production.

In their classic formulations, both the formal and real subsumption of labour consider how labour is subsumed in capitalism within the terrain of the labour process, i.e. the process of capitalist production, itself always mediated by exchange and circulation. This is because it is in the labour process that labour produces value for capital directly, whether this is exchanged for wages or any other phenomenal and disguised form that the extraction of surplus from labour occurs.⁴¹ Yet, this focus excludes all that labour subsumed differently or *elsewhere* along the circuit of capital. Similarly, while notions of total subsumption crucially raise the totalising nature of capital relations, they can obscure important ‘details’, including how commodities and labour are reproduced differently in capitalism. Among the masses of workers who are not immediately included in the capitalist labour process, one finds multitudes disproportionately working to reproduce labour power and the very conditions for life, yet they are disappearing from the analysis. How to retrieve them? Or, as Leopoldina Fortunati once asked, ‘How can we write a *workers’ history of reproduction*?’⁴²

I argue that the classic analysis of the subsumption of labour takes for granted that part of (the) labour (force) subsumed differently from the other: this part of labour encounters a form of *reproductive subsumption*, i.e. it is subsumed differently, as reproductive labour, a portion of labour separated from production and necessarily spent to regenerate life. This separation is structural: there is no formal or real subsumption of labour without the reproductive subsumption of part of (the) labour (force) that is not deployed to produce value for capital *directly*, but instead labours to reproduce the labour force and nature (the environment). Labour power lives in bodies, whose physical materiality requires, precisely, labour, i.e. ‘the universal condition of life itself’.⁴³ Because labour needs to be reproduced, replenished and renewed, reproductive subsumption is therefore the means through which formal and real subsumption can occur. Like other forms of subsumption, reproductive subsumption moulds to the terrain it finds, the unique social, economic and cultural characteristics of the social formations it encounters.⁴⁴ This moulding is always a complex result of the multiple forces and dynamics playing

in each concrete setting; it is not unilaterally determined by either capital or the state but always mediated by the agency, resistance and class struggle of those subsumed. The struggle between the productive and reproductive functions – the different policies and ‘identities’ vehiculated to facilitate those functions, and further their refusal, adaptation and reworking – results in multiversal working classes.



One of the advantages of investigating ‘reproductive subsumption’ is that the category keeps the analytical space free: it does not pre-define specific spaces, actors or specific activities (like households, women or domestic work exclusively), therefore allowing us to identify how capitalism reshapes and re-creates reproductive spaces in different times and places by subsuming different peoples and activities differently. Labour is reproduced and replaced in manifold ways beyond households, through labour camps, dormitories, forced/migration, etc. In a nutshell, while the subordination of reproductive to productive activities remains a constant, the concrete forms and variants of these activities and who carries them out vary in time and space, at least to an extent. As it will be shown, in the *history* of capitalism reproductive subsumption has been a central driver of gender-making as gender has represented a formidable ‘raw material’ for the construction of reproductive labour. And because capital’s mobilisation of gender cannot be easily untangled from the creation of other axes of differences – principally race – tracing the manifold histories of reproductive subsumption in different places means always digging up the *specific* articulations and intersections of class, gender, race and other axes of difference at any given time.⁴⁵

Setting an agenda for the historical reconstruction of the subsumption of reproductive labour starts from a crucial *change* that the labour process undergoes when subsumed ('formally' or 'really') by capital: the 'revolution' between productive and reproductive activities. This revolution is twofold: it refers to the *separation* and the *reversal* of the relationship and hierarchy between production and reproduction. Fortunati elucidates this reversal through Marx: whereas in pre-capitalist communities, 'the economic purpose is "the production of use-values, i.e. the reproduction of the individual within the specific relation to the community in which he is its basis", in capitalism it becomes the production of exchange value, the creation of value'.⁴⁶ Thus, while the relationship between production and reproduction characterises different epochs, capitalism creates a new hierarchy between them as the reproduction of labour and life becomes an *instrument* for the self-expansion of value. Elson's value theory of labour is the key to explaining this change, to which I turn below.

The logic of reproductive subsumption

Reproductive subsumption refers to the *separation* and *subordination* of the reproduction of life to the production of value (as surplus value) under capitalism. The reproduction of life includes different living forms, from labour to plants and animals. At the abstract level, reproductive subsumption is the *artificial* separation of two distinct *labour processes* and *forms of labour* – productive and reproductive labour – and their *hierarchical relation* vis-à-vis one another. At this level of abstraction, the lens is on labour as *work* rather than *workers*, and the separation manifests as a conflict of work, specifically work-time and energy: the day is divided between the work done within the labour process and the work/time to recover and 'live' beyond capital. As Massimiliano Tomba puts, 'The relation between the working class and capital is a struggle over time, for time. Every instant that the worker takes from capital is energy subtracted from valorisation'.⁴⁷ At the very same time, every 'instant' and 'energy' stolen from capital opens another realm, the time of social reproduction, and its own temporalities, contradictions and struggles.

How does this separation and subordination occur in the abstract? While productive and reproductive labours

characterise historically all societies,⁴⁸ it is the *specific relation* they acquire in capitalism that becomes a cornerstone of the capitalist system itself. In seeking to understand how labour changes in capitalism, Elson starts by remarking that 'labour is a fluidity, a potential'.⁴⁹ To grasp this further, she follows Marx, who discerns four different aspects of labour working as 'opposing pairs', abstract/concrete and social/private. These different 'aspects' of labour are never independent of one another, they are aspects of a whole, 'one-sided abstractions'.⁵⁰ As she elaborates, to understand any social form in history, one cannot look for external causes (outside history) but must delve inside that social formation: 'going inside the form is achieved by treating it as the temporary precipitate of opposed potentia',⁵¹ i.e. the form of labour in any society is the specific, 'crystallised' relation between different aspects of labour, yet never settled, always transient and becoming. In sum, 'Labour always has its abstract and concrete, its social and private aspects. Marx poses any particular determinate form of labour as a precipitate of these four aspects of labour. What is specific to a particular kind of society is the relation of these aspects to one another and the way in which they are represented in precipitated forms'.⁵² What distinguishes capitalist societies from previous ones is that in capitalism, abstract labour dominates all other aspects of labour.

Building on this insight, I extend this analysis to two further *aspects* of labour, productive and reproductive, to make a central suggestion: in capitalism, the relation between productive and reproductive labour changes because the value relation involves the domination of abstract/social labour over concrete labour in production and simultaneously the domination of concrete/private labour over the abstract/social aspects of reproduction. Domination means the supremacy of a different aspect, or side, of labour towards the other, not a different type of labour, nor the obliteration of the aspect of labour that is dominated. As a result, the social and abstract aspects of reproductive labour are obscured and *seemingly* disappear. Thus, the value relation does not merely envelop and regulate productive labour, disregarding and letting loose reproductive labour in a residual form. Instead, it is a relation that reworks and transforms the relationship between production and reproduction, polarising them in opposite directions. Crucially, the dominance

of the concrete aspect of labour in reproduction is functional to the dominance of abstract labour in production: reproductive work presupposes productive work.⁵³

So rather than approaching productive and reproductive labour through the polarity between exchange and use value, by building on Elson's analysis, I explore their relation as established by the difference/identity of abstract and concrete labour. Emphasising how the relationship between productive and reproductive labour develops as an interplay between abstract and concrete labour, recasts reproductive labour as a direct product of the value relation. As such, the dominance of concrete labour in this realm means that labour is less subject to the direct disciplining of abstract labour (than in production) *but neither free nor independent from it*. This exposes the social character of reproductive labour behind its private appearance. Additionally, focusing on labour rather than its objectification into a product (whether a use or exchange value) allows for staying with labour's fluidity, indeterminateness and open-endedness, thus with resistance as an ever-present *potentia*. Following labour rather than its objectivisation opens a greater lens into class struggle and the imperative to overcome the capitalist relation between production and reproduction. To further understand this, I delve next into abstract and concrete labour and their relation in capitalism.

According to Elson, abstract labour becomes an 'abstract truth' only in capitalism as a disciplining compulsion ruling production and life.⁵⁴ Assuming all the logical steps through which abstract labour emerges at the outset of Marx's *Capital*, it is worth delving briefly into its nature: relational, material/temporal and intrinsically antagonistic. Abstract labour is arrived at by deducing what all commodities have in common, i.e. they are products of labour. It is 'what remains there' when comparing all different kinds of work and gradually subtracting all differences: 'undistinguishable labour', 'homogeneous labour', 'labour pure and simple' transferred and deposited in commodities allowing their commensurability and exchangeability.⁵⁵ Thus, it is an abstraction spinning out of comparison, arising from relating all labourers and *detracting* from their heterogeneity to breach their homogeneity. This homogeneity is material:⁵⁶ the physiological expenditure of brains and muscles, an *expenditure* of matter and energy, a metabolism, a bodily

performance, and as such also and inevitably a temporal phenomenon.⁵⁷ As a temporality, abstract labour is inherently dynamic, variable and unstable: in Marx's own words, it is 'A way of seeing labour from the perspective of the "how much", of the *temporal* duration of labour', a form of 'simple, average labour' which 'varies in character in different countries and at different cultural epochs, but in a particular society it is given'.⁵⁸ Thus, abstract labour is always already performative, always spatially 'synchronising' the labour of different workers.⁵⁹ A crucial point is that because of all these characteristics, abstract labour is in permanent tension with concrete labour. Its detractive, relational nature works like a conforming pressure when all the heterogeneity of concrete labour is resumed. Concrete labour therefore reconciles – mediates – this homogeneity and performativity to the world of difference, both the difference of utility and wants, as well as the difference and heterogeneity of nature, labouring bodies and life.

For Marx, concrete labour is 'A way of seeing labour from the perspective of the "how" and "what" of labour'.⁶⁰ It is the qualitative, not the quantitative, side of labour; labour seen from the perspective of its infinite variability: 'Productive activity of a definite kind, carried on with a definite aim', 'Heterogeneous forms of useful labour, which differ in order, genus, species and variety'.⁶¹ It is the distinct work of the baker, the farmer and the driver. It is the seamstress seamlessly threading, piercing, holding, stitching, peddling, sliding, counting, measuring, calculating, cutting, stretching, shaping, sweating and mastering dexterity under the manager's eyes. In the labour process, hers and every other worker's concrete labour channels abstract labour's gravitational pull, a compulsion to work faster, longer and in a standardised fashion. Outside the factory, concrete labour – labour as quality, heterogeneity, utility, subjectivity and creativity – meets depleted bodies and minds, hence the work of reconciliation between capitalist production and life *magnifies*. Here, concrete labour synchronises instead with the inherent heterogeneity of nature, including its assorted temporalities and metabolisms, the time to rest, socialise, and grow plants, animals and of course humans. In sum, the dominance of concrete labour in reproduction opposes/mediates the dominance of abstract labour in production. As suggested below, the tyranny of abstract labour in production – itself emerging out of the

violent separation of workers from their means and conditions of re/production, the generalised development of production for the market, and the establishment of property relations – gives this realm its *façade* of economic compulsion. At the same time, the dominance of concrete labour in reproduction – with its *façade* of natural, private work – springs from the same history of primitive accumulation, although coloured with all the extra-economic compulsions and violence deployed to subsume workers in this realm. The individualisation and privatisation of concrete reproductive work belong to this violent repertoire.⁶²



How does this translate at a more concrete level? In capitalism, the day of the working-class labourer comprises a portion of work done for capital and a portion dedicated to resting, eating, sleeping and regenerating labour power. A conflict of time becomes immediately inscribed in the worker's body as an 'embodied contradiction'⁶³ as capital only valorises labour power, not the labour that comes attached to it. Because work, including intellectual work, is inevitably a material process involving an expenditure of energy through a body, bodies (and minds) need time and energy to restore. This

portion of time is however work too, 'a cart full of "means of subsistence" does not produce labour-power as a ready-made commodity'.⁶⁴ Food does not cook itself; clothes need to be washed, houses need to be cleaned, fields need to be tended to, children need constant care. Therefore, the labourers' working day is much longer than that beginning and ending at the factory gates. Reproductive labour is necessary to counter the complete physical and mental exhaustion of workers' bodies; it is a material requirement of capitalist production, emerging from the material limits of exploitation. Yet, 'the wage (including the lack of it), has allowed capital to obscure the real length of the workday. Work appears as one compartment of life that takes place only in certain areas. The time we consume in the "social factory", preparing ourselves for work or going to work, restoring our "muscles, nerves, bones and brains" with quick snacks, quick sex, movies, all this appears as leisure, free time, individual choice'.⁶⁵

Or to put it otherwise, 'The hidden time of the commodity is nothing other than the difference between the necessary labour time for its production and the necessary time for the reproduction of the labour-power that produced this commodity'.⁶⁶ That is, *separated* from the work done for capital, reproductive work appears as the natural, private sphere of the worker. This separation holds whether visible or not concretely. It is most evident when the workplace and the home are spatially separated and much of the reproductive work is privatised in households. It is less evident, but still operating, when production and reproduction are more difficult to discern as is often the case in petty commodity production or when the home is the workplace, and 'working from home, homing from work' intertwine to ever greater degrees.⁶⁷

What counts as reproductive work? As noted, reproductive labour involves all the work required to allow workers to go to work, the *reproduction of labour power*, and the reproduction of life more generally, daily, generationally and ecologically, so to speak. Reproductive work is quintessentially porous and potentially endless. The list of what it takes to reproduce workers both daily and generationally is long and constantly evolves in time and space. Crucially, this work includes health-care and education systems, community work, leisure and religious centres and many other spaces.⁶⁸ Although separated from production, this sphere constantly cris-

scrosses and feeds the circuit of capital and that of the commodity. Much of this work is marketised, whether through the hiring of a cleaner, dining out, popping to the laundry, or going to the cinema, the list is long. Crucially, the sphere of reproduction also occurs through active, endless capitalist consumption – whether a Netflix subscription, a sachet of *Omo*, a *Maggi* cube, or the electricity bill. The wage goes back to capital via all sorts of commodities; it transits to workers' hands fleetingly and, for many, so intermittently and fortuitously. Yet even for this 'marginal mass', reproductive work hardly shies away from capitalist consumption.⁶⁹ For a huge amount of people, and reproductive workers in particular, when the wage is nowhere to be found, debt steps in. In these landscapes, debt supports or substitutes for wages and further disciplines indebted workers to the harshest and most exploitative forms of work and violence.⁷⁰ Overall, production and reproduction constantly intermingle, many reproductive moments and functions are captured on and off by capital and thus subjected more directly to the compulsions of abstract labour.

However carried out – bought, outsourced, indebted – reproductive labour is never entirely absorbed by the market. Even if the complete commodification of social reproduction can be logically imagined, 'historically we are still very far from that'.⁷¹ There are some bare minimum functions, material and affective, that remain irreducible and cannot be absorbed entirely by the state, the market or by cheap immigrant labour. Life-making, as the realm of difference and incommensurability – an anti-abstraction – inherently resists the *full* disciplining of abstract labour. Thus, there is, and perhaps there will always be, 'this remainder that has to remain outside of market relations, and the question of who has to perform it in the family will always be, to say the least, a conflictual matter'.⁷² This matter is conflictual because this work is *necessarily* unwaged, i.e. for the working classes, it is not entirely covered by the wage. This is intuitive at the most abstract level: in capitalism, it is labour that reproduces capital fully, not vice versa. A portion of labour always works for free in production (yielding surplus value) and reproduction (reproducing labour). Again, the wage, especially the family wage, masks this wage-less work.

Some key contradictions of reproductive subsumption

As a process of fictitious separation and subordination between productive and reproductive work, reproductive subsumption is inherently a contradictory process. That is, reproductive work is fraught with contradictions manifesting at different levels. As pointed out by Lise Vogel, 'from the point of view of capital, domestic labour is simultaneously indispensable and an obstacle to accumulation'.⁷³ Likewise, from the point of view of labour, reproductive time detracts from productive time and the wage. Thus, by its mediating role, reproductive labour exists in structural tension with capitalism, i.e. productive and reproductive times live in a contradictory relation with capital: the labour time of reproduction is necessary to, but simultaneously detracts from the labour of production and therefore direct surplus value extraction. Essentially, by ejecting reproductive labour from the capitalist labour process capital pushes this contradiction to the worker and the working class. In this way, a contradiction of capital appears as an inner contradiction of the worker and in this journey becomes a chief driver of difference and fragmentation, effectively a propellor of *horizontal antagonistic relations* within the working class. Atomised by its internal competition for wage work, the working class is also fragmented by the fundamental *rift* between production and reproduction and the attendant antagonism this generates. As such, a contradiction between capital and labour becomes an embodied contradiction between labour power and labour, which in turn becomes a contradiction between bodies: the uneven division of labour experienced in the worker's body metamorphoses into an uneven division of labour within the working class. Reproductive subsumption becomes therefore the charting of this process, the historical resolution of these contradictions in concrete settings, i.e. how this vertical antagonism between capital and labour is displaced onto the working class.

Separating reproductive from productive time and attributing a wage only to the latter holds potentially a further contradiction. It is not just structurally fundamental to securing labour's life and capacity to work, it may contribute to relative surplus value extraction by lowering the cost of living and alleviating the wage from

the high costs of reproduction. The more work is done by reproductive workers for free, the greater relief for the wage, the lighter the bill for capital.⁷⁴ As Federici argues about Europe's industrialisation, 'the devaluation and feminization of reproductive labor was a disaster also for male workers, for the devaluation of reproductive labor inevitably devalued its product: labor-power'.⁷⁵ In this long and tumultuous process of housewifisation of work,⁷⁶ the monumental expenditure of hard-working dexterous bodies, nimble fingers and docile temperaments was pivotal in reducing socially necessary labour time.

The contradictory nature of reproductive subsumption – the contradictory relation between productive and reproductive work/time – deepens when reproductive subsumption is historically solved by assigning reproductive work to women and therefore the *matching* of production and reproduction through a gendered division of labour. In this case, the contradiction tilts disproportionately to women, women's bodies and capital requirements to have women working for wages as well as doing reproductive labour. In such landscapes, 'Since well-situated women are able to afford the services of underpaid female immigrant labourers, we are witnessing a redistribution of, for example, personal care and nursing within the female plane of existence'.⁷⁷ This redistribution, however, is differentiated across racial lines: the contradiction within reproductive workers is 'resolved' historically by pushing differentiation among women.⁷⁸

Perhaps the most crucial contradiction, illustrating vividly the open-ended nature of subsumption as a process, is within the nature of reproductive labour/time as simultaneously a condition of, and a potential threat to, capitalism. Labour reproduction is a cardinal moment of capitalism through which labour power is restored and produced. Thus, reproductive labour/time is essential to production because it continually mitigates the inherently destructive forces of capitalism. So, if capitalism depletes and kills bodies and environments, reproductive labour counters that, i.e. it produces use value and metabolic value.⁷⁹ By constantly undoing what capital does, reproductive labour keeps the system running, preventing its accelerated destruction. Yet, from the point of view of labour, this space is potentially revolutionary. As Susan Ferguson recalls, 'concrete labour can never be fully identical with its abstract form, and the discrepancy

between the two will generally be greater where the direct imposition of value imperatives is not available'.⁸⁰ Here, 'the production of life regularly requires resisting the subsumption of life to capital'.⁸¹ In the momentaneous dwindling of abstract labour's gravitational pull, reproductive labour holds the potential to activate a world against capital. As Elson recalls, the seeds of anticapitalism do not fall from the sky and are always internal to the system. So, from this angle, social reproduction appears as the 'temporary precipitate of opposed *potentia*', it is always 'a moment of co-existent opposed possibilities'.⁸² Bluntly, since reproductive labour oils the system, it can also set the fire to burn it down.

Overall, these contradictions highlight some important points. First, they flag how capital drastically changes the terms and conditions of human life. Holding to the category and analytical instruments of 'subsumption' is fundamental to highlight that the work of reproduction is re-created by capital under new and evolving terms and conditions. Second, these contradictions highlight the extraordinary instability of this system, and the tendency to solve these at the expense of both labour and nature. Third, the separation between productive and reproductive is a permanent act of violence. It creates wedges among labour on multiple fronts. It separates labour power – as an instance and moment of capital – from its bearer, labour as such, as the antithesis of capital. It materially dispossesses the working class from its means and realms of reproduction.⁸³ It thereby entails a fundamental fracture between workers and nature and among the working classes. As reproductive labour is expelled from the wage relation, it follows that the 'dull compulsion of economic forces' is insufficient to keep reproduction in a subordinate position, and while this is true for all workers, processes of naturalisation, institutionalised and non-institutionalised violence and disciplining are paramount in reproductive subsumption. Below, I turn to gender and race as some key 'raw materials' for the historical making of reproductive labour. I do that by drawing some rough historical sketches. Although partial and simplified, they help illustrate more concretely how gender and race were crucial ingredients in the subsumption of reproductive workers on two sides of the Atlantic.⁸⁴

The violence of reproductive subsumption

As explained by Saenz de Sicilia, in Marx, ‘the motif of overcoming the imposition of alien and dominating forms indifferent to the qualitative singularity of the living content they shape figures as a powerful influence on his critique of capitalist societies. The logical and abstract character of subsumption, as highlighted by Hegel, is a perfectly apt figure for the oppressive character of capital, as an alienating and one-sided form of social relatedness’.⁸⁵ The subsumption of labour under capital is thus a story of compulsion to adhere to capital’s social form. As a subsumptive relation, reproductive subsumption is no different, hence central to the long history of primitive accumulation *and* beyond. Therefore, the violence necessary to separate, subordinate and devalue reproductive work needs to be historically investigated, and the dominance of concrete labour in reproduction needs to be interpreted as an artefact of capitalism as a mode of production rather than a transhistorical feature of reproductive work.⁸⁶ The vignettes below hint at these processes in the intertwined transitions in Europe and the Atlantic.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici traces an overarching history of reproductive subsumption in Western Europe’s transition to capitalism. The lynchpin of this four-century story is capital and states’ violent struggles to divide the emerging working class and craft women as reproductive workers. It is well known that forcefully separated from ‘the farm, the fen, and forest ecosystems’⁸⁷ and amidst the crumbling of the subsistence economy, peasants found themselves bonded to the market. Less acknowledged, is that the separation from the ‘land’ was magnified by an unparalleled process of ‘social enclosure, the reproduction of workers shifting from the open field to the home, from the community to the family, from the public space (the common, the church) to the private’.⁸⁸ The overall privatisation of reproductive work hinged on the parallel expulsion of women from the wage and the general devaluation of their work: ‘if a woman sewed some clothes it was “domestic work” or “housekeeping”, even if the clothes were not for the family, whereas when a man did the same task it was considered “productive”’.⁸⁹ Divorced from the land and married to a wage, male workers found in women’s devalued/unpaid labour

the lost common: ‘in the new organisation of work *every woman (other than those privatised by bourgeois men) became a communal good*, for once women’s activities were defined as non-work, women’s labour began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe and the water we drink’.⁹⁰ This continental gendering, naturalising, privatising and downgrading of reproductive work required the sustained disciplining of women on all fronts. Women became ‘scolds’, ‘spinsters’, ‘witches’, ‘whores’, ‘shrews’; their bodies served to restock the working class, pacify its riotous spurs, or ultimately burned at the stake to eradicate magic, traditional knowledge and working-class power. Ultimately, their onslaught was key to reversing the relation between production and reproduction.

The Atlantic side of this primitive accumulation took violence to ever greater heights. The formation of workers took a different trajectory here than in Europe.⁹¹ A key to understanding this difference resides in Jairus Banaji’s distinction between ‘modes of production’ and ‘forms of exploitation’. For him, ‘*historically*, capital-accumulation has been characterised by considerable flexibility in the structuring of production and in forms of labour and organisation of labour used in producing surplus value’.⁹² By highlighting that in capitalism, wage labour takes multiple forms as ‘capital-positing labour’, i.e. ‘abstract, value-producing labour’,⁹³ this perspective allows recasting the making of a working class beyond so-called ‘free wage-labour’ and spreading from African coasts through the Atlantic and its plantations.

For Stephanie Smallwood, along African coastal forts and in slave ships ‘traders reduced people to the sum of their biological parts, thereby scaling life down to an arithmetical equation and finding the lowest common denominator’.⁹⁴ To realise this transformation into commodities – functional to slavery as a form of exploitation – millions of ‘Venuses’ were dispossessed of land, kinship, culture, memory and ultimately any epistemic possibility.⁹⁵ Their formation as ‘capital-positing labour’ required the most violent expansion of labour power at the expense of labour, whose ‘reproductive need’ was denied together with all subjectivity. Constantly ‘probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within’,⁹⁶ this specific subsumption implied a form of racialisation aimed at turning humans into labouring machines, specifically a

class of workers with liminal reproduction, one flattened to an intermittent caloric intake. Here, the separation between production and reproduction entailed an unprecedented squeeze, an attempted erasure of the latter by the former: for captives, any meaningful notion of reproductive labour remained in the concessions, villages and cities from which they had been uprooted. In this landscape, class-making implied an entire rewriting of the enslaved, their cultural unmaking, de-humanising and un-gendering: 'we might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, nor "counted"/"accounted", or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure'.⁹⁷

On American and Caribbean shores, this human cargo powered the plantation economy. The plantation epitomised the crudest reversal between production and reproduction. Here, women did not find themselves tending to planters' domestic needs but instead crowded tobacco, sugar and cotton fields, undertaking endless, shattering physical work.⁹⁸ Their subsumption as quintessential productive workers, however, never erased their reproductive *potential*. Women were also the potential *increasers* and pacifiers of the slave population, at once 'productive and reproductive commodities',⁹⁹ their belly 'a factory of production incommensurate with notions of the maternal, the conjugal or the domestic'.¹⁰⁰ Thus, if women in Europe were formally distanced from the market, the enslaved woman's 'reproductive potential ensured that her capacity to gestate a child meant that she carried the market inside her body'.¹⁰¹ Subjugated by the market at the most intimate level, any protection of enslaved private lives, their corporal and cultural integrity, was a permanent site of class struggle. In the latter, the nature of reproductive labour as a 'temporary precipitate of opposed *potentia*' comes again to the fore.¹⁰²

For Sylvia Wynter, as the plantation marked 'the reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land', the fracture between production and reproduction followed the boundary between the plantation and the plot,¹⁰³ where an uneven and volatile 'shadow world of cultivation' had developed since the first generations of enslaved Africans.¹⁰⁴ Thus, if plots represented crevices to plant yams, 'folk culture' and 'recreated traditional val-

ues – use values',¹⁰⁵ living quarters permitted 'a retrieval of the man and the women in their fundamental humanity'.¹⁰⁶ In these precarious interstices of reproduction, women's labour was key: by performing the only labour unclaimed by the planter, and alongside continuous and open acts of counterinsurgency, 'her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance'.¹⁰⁷ Thus, in the most brutal landscape of capitalist subsumption marked by the *attempted* obliteration of social reproduction, incipient reproductive work – as simultaneously the condition for, and a threat to, the plantation economy – still interspersed the plantation, literally and figuratively cultivating the seeds of resistance at its margins.

Overall, these historical sketches provide some concrete examples of the emergence of a global working class that is differentiated and fragmented from the outset: they illustrate how the construction of reproductive work and workers follows different, interlinked trajectories East and West of the Atlantic. As sketches, they remain necessarily general, simplified and unfinished. They overlook detailed regional and local histories highlighting different tendencies and countertendencies operating in capitalism. Crucially, they omit the multiple colonial trails stretching through Africa and beyond, through the Pacific,¹⁰⁸ for which more research is needed.

Cannibal gaze

This article has sought to explain and historically trace key internal fractures within the working class – chiefly the one between productive and reproductive labour – by drawing on Elson's analysis of the specific *form* labour assumes in capitalism. As argued, this *form* takes shape through a chasm between productive and reproductive work, i.e. the artificial separation and domination of the production of value for capital over the reproduction of the individual and life. The category of reproductive subsumption is built to explain theoretically and historically this essential separation as a subsumptive process, a violent relation between capital and labour that is co-determinative, historically contingent and open-ended. At the most abstract level, this separation occurs as abstract labour dominates productive work while concrete labour dominates reproductive work. In this polarising relation, the 'dominating' form of labour always exists in *tension* and *continuity* with the dominated form. Thus,

the concrete labour of social reproduction is never entirely free from the pressures and compulsion of abstract labour.

By detailing some of the specific forms of violence deployed to separate (abstract) and devalue reproductive work, histories of reproductive subsumption locate the ‘production of difference’ in historical processes of class formation, showing how ‘the social relations of gender, race and sexuality are held as internally constitutive of class, rather than external to it’.¹⁰⁹ Specifically, within these diversified processes of class-making, race and gender represent violent *subsumptive forces* – ‘abstracting devices’¹¹⁰ – *forming* reproductive workers in context-specific ways, reallocating them differently across the productive/reproductive divide and ‘scaling their humanness’ along the way. This illuminates again how the prism of social reproduction throws new light on different processes of racialising and gendering operating at different points and the legacies these might carry over the present.

Like other forms of labour subsumption, reproductive subsumption is never a finished project, i.e. subsumption is constantly repositied by the struggle of those subsumed and by the internal contradictions emerging from their subsumption. So, while the long period of primitive accumulation set processes of reproductive subsumption in motion, these processes remain open-ended even when capital is no longer in a state of ‘becoming’. The requirement of reproductive work – whether outsourced, marketised, squeezed, or infinitely stretched to make up for erratic and thin wages – does not fade when the ‘dull compulsion of economic forces’ is in full swing. Albeit constantly evolving, extra-economic violence remains a pillar of reproductive subsumption, as evidenced by the recalcitrance of pervasive forms of gendered and racialised violence throughout the history of capitalism. Therefore, exposing the historical process and dynamics perpetually bundling the majority of the world’s workers with ‘natural work’ or as ‘closer to nature’ remains critical. Following Suzanne Césaire, this ‘great camouflage’ of capitalist social relations and hierarchies needs to be exposed and rejected. And to do that, one’s historical gaze needs to be ‘cannibal’.

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Notes

1. Diane Elson, ‘The Value Theory of Labour’, in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 2015). I am deeply grateful to my dear friends and colleagues Liam Campling, Gerard Hanlon, Edward Legon, Matteo Mandarini, Amit Rai, Jack Sargeant and Shreya Sinha. Their insights, conversations, patience and suggestions over previous versions of this article have been invaluable. I would also like to thank the editors of *Radical Philosophy* and, not least, the ISRF, which provided much-needed time and space to undertake this project.
2. Diane Paton, ‘Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery’, *The American Historical Review* 127:2 (2022), 726–754.
3. Nicole Leach, ‘Transitions to Capitalism: Social-Reproduction Feminism Encounters Political Marxism’, *Historical Materialism* 24:2 (2016), 11–137, 114.
4. This work sides with, but differs from, the recent and important adoption of a feminist approach to subsumption by Elizabeth Portella and Larry Alan Busk, ‘The Formal and Real Subsumption of Gender Relations’, *Historical Materialism* (2024), 1–34.
5. Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, ‘Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989), 381–404, 383.
6. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling World Press, 1972); Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen* (New York: Wages for Housework Committee and Falling Wall Press, 1975); Rohini Hensman, ‘Wage-Labour: The Production and Sale of the Commodity Labour-Power’, *Historical Materialism Blog*, originally published 1977, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/wage-labour-the-production-and-sale-of-the-commodity-labour-power-1977>; Leopoldina Fortunati, *L’arcano della riproduzione: casalinghe, prostitute, operai e capitale* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1981); Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).
7. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 199; Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993).
8. Marcel van der Linden, *The World Wide Web of Work*

(London: UCL Press, 2023), 11.

9. Andrés Saenz de Sicilia, 'Being, Becoming, Subsumption: The Kantian Roots of a Marxist Problematic', *Radical Philosophy* 2:12 (2022), 35–47.

10. Patrick Murray, *The Mismeasure of Wealth: Essays on Marx and Social Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 296.

11. Murray, 296.

12. Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

13. Henry Bernstein, 'Where is population in "surplus population"?', *Focaal* 97, 79–88 (2023), 83; emphasis mine.

14. Saenz de Sicilia, 'Being', 38.

15. Banaji, *Theory as History*, 3.

16. David McNally, 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference in the Constitution of Wage Labour: On Internal Relations and Working-Class Formation', *Capital & Class* 39:1 (2015), 131–46, 142.

17. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014), 63.

18. Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

19. Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, 50.

20. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 143

21. Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

22. On this, see the debate in *Viewpoint Magazine* (2015): 'Gender and Capitalism: Debating Cinzia Arruza's "Remarks on Gender"'; and Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, 'Is Capitalism Structurally Indifferent to Gender?: Routes to a Value Theory of Reproductive Labour', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 53:7 (2021), 1749–69.

23. Saenz de Sicilia, 'Being'; and Andrés Saenz de Sicilia, 'Subsumption', in *The SAGE Handbook of Marxism*, eds. Beverley Skeggs, Sara R. Farris, Alberto Toscano and Svenja Bromberg (London: Sage, 2022).

24. Saenz de Sicilia, 'Subsumption', 614.

25. Saenz de Sicilia, 'Subsumption', 612.

26. Karl Marx, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', Appendix to *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

27. For space reasons, I omit the less-known categories of hybrid and ideal subsumption, see Murray, *The Mismeasure of Wealth*, and Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013). While Marx somehow conveys a linear development from formal to real subsumption, he also recognises the possibility of forms of formal subsumption emerging side-by-side with forms of real subsumption (Marx, *Capital*). Formal/real subsumption and relative/absolute surplus value can be co-dependent and co-determinative and non-linear. See

also Raju J. Das, 'Reconceptualizing Capitalism: Forms of Labour, Class Struggle, and Uneven Development', *Review of Radical Political Economics* 44:2 (2012), 178–200.

28. Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1021; emphasis in original.

29. Banaji, *Theory as History*, 280.

30. Marx, *Capital*, 1025, 1020.

31. Marx, *Capital*, 1035.

32. See Saenz de Sicilia, *Subsumption*, for an excursion over some of the key evolutions of this category, including Negri's. On total subsumption, see also Endnotes, 'The History of Subsumption', *Endnotes* 2 (2010), accessed July 16, 2025, <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-history-of-subsumption>. In a recent book, Saenz de Sicilia discerns three forms of subsumption: 1) via commodification, 2) via production and 3) via social reproduction. Andrés Saenz de Sicilia, *Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx: From the Critique of Reason to the Critique of Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2024). The latter refers to the social reproduction of the capitalist system and thus differs from the concept of reproductive subsumption developed here. Although Saenz de Sicilia situates subsumption 'both within and beyond the bourgeois economic totality' (iv, 214), he does not systematically extend his analysis beyond production. Instead, through the concept of 'reproductive subsumption', I seek to venture into this terrain by investigating the contradictions set in motion by capitalism not at the total societal level, but between production and labour reproduction.

33. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1984), 114.

34. Real subsumption is also the most unstable, hence fragile phase of capital, characterised by the peaking antagonism between 'social capital' and 'social labour'. See *Marx Beyond Marx*; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

35. Samir Amin, 'Contra Hardt and Negri: Multitude or Generalized Proletarianization?', *Monthly Review* 66:6 (2014).

36. George Caffentzis, 'The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery?' (1998), accessed July 16, 2025, <https://fadingtheaesthetic.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/george-caffentzis-the-end-of-work-or-the-rennalsance-of-slavery-common-sense-24.pdf>.

37. Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'Subsistence Production and Extended Reproduction', in *Of Marriage and the Market*, eds. K. Young et al (London: CSE Books, 1981).

38. Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'Subsistence Production and Extended Reproduction', 26.

39. Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'Subsistence Production and Extended Reproduction', 27.

40. Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'Subsistence Production and Extended Reproduction', 27.
41. For Banaji, capitalism works 'through a multiplicity of forms of exploitation based on wage-labour', 'these "forms" may reflect the subsumption of labour into capital in ways where the "sale" of labour-power for wages is mediated and possibly disguised in more complex arrangements' (Banaji, *Theory as History*, 145).
42. Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcana of Reproduction, Housewives, Prostitutes, Workers and Capital*, (London: Verso, 2025), 220.
43. Sébastien Rioux, 'Embodied Contradictions: Capitalism, Social Reproduction and Body Formation', *Women's Studies International Forum* 48 (2015), 194–202, 195.
44. Stuart Hall, 'Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance', in *Essential Essays*, vol. 1, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980).
45. Hall, 'Race, Articulation'.
46. Fortunati, *The Arcana*, 13, quoting Marx's *Grundrisse*.
47. Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, 135.
48. All labour is always inherently productive, in the sense that it is always an expenditure of energy, muscles and brain that change form, a metabolism of matter and energy, a material process. By the same token, because all labour is an expenditure of something, to secure its existence it must also be to some extent reproductive. It is difficult to draw a precise line between what work is and is not reproductive, given that reproduction includes satisfying one's needs beyond immediate, bare physical survival. In sum, productive and reproductive labour 'share a continuity as well as difference' (Elson 2015), 142.
49. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 128.
50. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 144. Also building from Elson's value theory, Mezzadri describes abstract, concrete, private and social labour as 'varied sides of the same multidimensional coin'. Her analysis extends the inseparability of these forms to the inseparability of the use/exchange-value of labour as labour/labour-power. See Alessandra Mezzadri, 'Value Theories in Motion: Circular Labour Migration, Unfinished Land Dispossession and Reproductive Struggles across the Urban-Rural Divide', *Environment and Planning F* (2024).
51. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 142.
52. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 149.
53. The dominance of private, concrete labour over reproductive work as a value relation has received different interpretations. Key representatives of the Wages for Housework movement (Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati, among others) have interpreted reproductive work as surplus value producing. In *The Arcana*, Fortunati argued that in capitalism, the disguising of domestic work as unproductive work is precisely what allows capital to extract surplus value from it. Slightly earlier, Rohini Hensman flagged the inconsistencies in Marx's analysis around the reproduction of labour power as a process of individual or productive consumption (Hensman, 'Wage-Labour'). Alessandra Mezzadri has developed and extended this view more recently. See Alessandra Mezzadri, 'A Value Theory of Inclusion: Informal Labour, the Homeworker, and the Social Reproduction of Value', *Antipode* 53:4 (2021), 1186–1205; and Mezzadri, 'Value Theories in Motion'. Countering this interpretation is the work of Lise Vogel, taken up by many contributors to Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2017). Both interpretations agree that reproductive labour is never entirely waged, it is precisely its naturalisation as reproductive work that is a necessary condition for capital. Reproductive subsumption traces this process of worker formation and reproductive naturalisation in historical perspective.
54. Following Marx, Elson argues that in capitalism 'abstract labour comes to have a "practical truth" because the unity of human labour, its differentiation simply in terms of quantity of labour, is not simply recognised as a mental process but has a correlate in a real social process, that goes on quite independently of how we reason about it'. Elson, 'The Value Theory of Labour', 150.
55. Marx, *Capital*, 128, 134.
56. Kohei Saito, *Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).
57. It is temporal in several senses. A material process is inherently a temporal one, an unfolding of matter and energy, a metabolism occurring in time. Abstract labour is also labour seen not from a qualitative but from a purely quantitatively perspective, and the unit of quantification is time, the substance of socially necessary labour time.
58. Marx, *Capital*, 136.
59. Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*.
60. Marx, *Capital*, 136.
61. Marx, *Capital*, 132.
62. Marnie Holborow, *Homes in Crisis Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).
63. Rioux, 'Embodied Contradictions'.
64. Endnotes, 'The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection', *Endnotes* 3 (2013), 4, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-logic-of-gender>.
65. Silvia Federici, *Revolutions at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 35–36.
66. Stavros Tombazos, *Time in Marx* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 85. Tombazos further specifies that 'The latter is, as a matter of course, "necessary" in the historical sense of

the word, and not in its physiological sense. Social needs evolve’.

67. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 22.
68. Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*.
69. Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*.
70. Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago, *A Feminist Reading of Debt* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).
71. Oksala, ‘Capitalism and Gender Oppression’, 6.
72. Endnotes, ‘The Logic of Gender’.
73. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 163.
74. Wilma A. Dunaway, ‘Through the Portal of the Household: Conceptualizing Women’s Subsidies to Commodity Chains’, in *Gendered Commodity Chains*, ed. Winifred A. Dunaway (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 55–71.
75. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 75.
76. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986).
77. Roswitha Scholz, ‘Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body’, in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, ed. Neil Larsen et al (Chicago: M-C-M, 2009), 137.
78. Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).
79. Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Post-Modern* (London: Zed Books, 2017).
80. Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 139.
81. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 138.
82. Elson, ‘The Value Theory of Labour’, 142.
83. Separation refers here to ‘market mediation’: production for the market becomes the chief vehicle to reproduce oneself. According to Mau, market ‘mediation’ always already implies domination and compulsion: ‘what is actually transmitted through the market is not *information* but *compulsory commands* communicated through the movements of things’. Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion* (London: Verso, 2023), 186. See Nichols, *Theft is Property*, for a sophisticated reading of ‘dispossession’.
84. My current work, not included here, investigates in detail processes of reproductive subsumption in Western Africa.
85. Saenz de Sicilia, *Subsumption*, 614.
86. Hall, ‘Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance’.
87. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Wildwood House, 1980).

88. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 84.
89. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 92.
90. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 97.
91. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Penguin Books, 2022).
92. Banaji, *Theory as History*, 145.
93. Banaji, *Theory as History*, 54–55.
94. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 43.
95. Saidiya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe* 12:2 (2008), 1–14.
96. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 36.
97. Hortense J. Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics* 17:2 (1987), 64–81, 72.
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