Robbers, Takers, and Givers

written by Ann Ferguson | July 11, 2020

Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression
Tithi Bhattacharya, ed.
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As Tithi Bhattacharya puts it in the introduction to her edited collection, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, the central insight of the recent coalescing of a group of influential Marxist-feminist theorists around social reproduction theory is "that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. … The framework thus seeks to make visible labor and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and politically denied by policy makers" (2). The ten essays in this book are rich and fascinating attempts to understand the relations between capitalist production and reproduction relations and practices, both theoretically and historically. In the process they capture feminist insights from earlier debates about the role of unpaid domestic labor in women's oppression as well as how both gendered and racial divisions of labor have contributed to institutional racism and sexism in the overall system of class exploitation in the capitalist system.

There are tensions among these authors in terms of how they theorize the relations between the historical processes of production and reproduction within our contemporary neoliberal, racialized, patriarchal, capitalist order. In what follows, I organize my remarks around some of the key debates as I see them from my own socialist-feminist perspective. One issue I will focus on is determining the most helpful way to analyze the perceived "spatial separation between production/public and reproduction/private" that Bhattacharya and others argue is a "historical form of appearance" of capitalism (9). We know that previous pre-industrial-capitalist modes of economic subsistence on farms or fiefdoms, in which both productive and reproductive labor were done in the same space of the family household, were gradually destroyed by industrial capitalism as workers were dispossessed from the land into wage labor.

So, how now do we "theorize integratively," in Bhattacharya's words, the unpaid reproductive labor still required in the household with the paid labor in capitalist production? Do we see this unpaid reproductive labor, which is socially necessary for the reproduction of labor power, as exploited work that is producing exchange value and hence should be paid (as argued by the 1970s autonomous Marxist-feminist Wages for Housework campaign of Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James (1975), by Silvia Federici (2012), and by the dual-systems theory of Christine Delphy (2016)? Or do we see it as a precapitalist feudal system of production between husband/male kin and wife/female kin in the household that, like slavery, is a subordinate mode of production that comes to be subsumed under the dominant industrial capitalist social formation (Benston 1969)? Or, a third possibility: Do we perhaps take the dual-systems approach of Gayle Rubin (1975) and Heidi Hartmann (1981) and maintain that the reproduction of labor power in the home is governed by

various male-dominant forms of the sex/gender system, which, as Rubin theorizes, used to be a part of the kinship mode of organizing both production and reproduction but now in advanced capitalism have been separated from capitalist production relations? And yet, according to Rubin, Hartmann, and Ferguson (1989, 1991), this sex/gender (or sex-affective) system continues to produce and reproduce compulsory heterosexual male-dominant sexual and caring relations in which men as a gender exploit women's unpaid caring labor and sexuality. Nancy Folbre (2001) continues a version of this argument when she contrasts the "invisible hand" of the economic market with the "invisible heart" of family care in advanced capitalist systems.

The authors in this collection skirt the so-called dual-systems way of posing the Marxist-feminist housework debate, assuming perhaps the Hegelian Marxist interpretation put forward by David McNally in his chapter, titled "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory." McNally writes that the institutional racism and sexism embedded in our contemporary class relations of advanced capitalism have become necessary features "of the historical capitalism in which we live" (107). He critiques those 1970s Marxist- and socialist-feminists who tried to historicize forms of social reproduction as being the material base of male domination, agreeing with Lise Vogel and Iris Young that they "lapsed into a fundamental dualism which posited distinct modes of production and reproduction" (108). Instead, he allies with what he terms "the most sophisticated theorists in this debate," presumably Lise Vogel and unnamed others, who theorized processes of production and reproduction "as two moments of a complexly unified social process" (108). Citing Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, he argues that their historical analyses of class-, race-, and gender-based divisions of labor show that "the enslavement of black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women are 'systematically related'" (110, cf.; Davis, 66).

But McNally fails to be convincing to those of us who utilize versions of dual- (or multi-) systems theory, and also use Angela Davis' thought as well as Omi and Winant's theory of racial formations (1986), to incorporate historical racialization processes into our analyses (cf. Ferguson, 1991). Much seems to ride on the question of what it means for social processes to be "complexly unified." McNally provides a Hegelian metaphor having to do with the concept of life, which needs "dialectical," not merely "formal," categories to understand the becoming of things, "the coming to be of the object." Hegel's view is that "living systems—from the body to the objects in a household to systems of knowledge—are all informed by purposes" and that this is true not just for organs in a living body but also "for social collectivities, from the family to the state" (102).

However, the most "sophisticated" multi-systems theorists would agree with McNally that the United States at every stage of its development as a nation has been a complex social formation that has importantly involved structural racism and sexism as well as capitalist accumulation and worker exploitation, but those theorists would oppose McNally's functionalist (and Hegelian teleological) Marxist explanation of this history. A key question obscured in the rush to see our U.S. historical social formation as a complex unity is to what extent there are semi-autonomous logics involved in capitalist exploitation, racist appropriation by certain racial-ethnic communities of others, and sexist appropriation of affective caring energy by dominant men who appropriate more care than they give from gender-subordinated caregivers. Theorizing at least these three social sites (class, race, gender) of exploitation/appropriation, domination, powerlessness, and violence (to borrow vectors from Iris Young 1990) may give us a better understanding of how both progressive changes and reactionary responses are involved in our social dialectic of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy than the functionalist "internal relations" mantra of McNally.

For example, if the overall "purpose" or "logic" of the capitalist system is to grow so as to increase capital (profits), how does this explain historical contradictions that occur with the "logic" of male domination, which capitalism weakens by bringing women into the work force, thus providing a

material base for greater independence of women from men, or when the "logic" of white supremacy based in racial slavery and colonial expropriation of native lands is undermined (briefly) by the Civil War, which represents the victory of Northern capitalists over white slave-owning planters? As a multi-systems socialist-feminist, I would argue that the evidence for the semi-autonomy of the systems of male domination and white supremacy is precisely in their reactive ability to retrench and reorganize in the face of these capitalist contradictions, for example, by male trade unions who supported the family wage and protectionism to exclude women workers (Hartmann 1981, Federici 2004) and by Southern white supremacists creating segregationist sharecropping, schooling, policing, and Jim Crow laws to reframe structural racism and reclaim power.

If we take the semi-autonomous multi- (or at least tri-) systems approach, we can reframe important insights offered by Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya in their chapters here. Nancy Fraser, in "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism," argues that there is a crisis of care in neoliberal capitalism in its quest for unlimited accumulation, since the system's ability to reproduce itself as welfare state protections are dropped is being challenged (12). She claims that the resolution to the crisis of care can only proceed through a rectification of the inherent injustice of the system as a whole by "reinventing the production/reproduction distinction and reimagining the gender order." Fraser provides a particular historical dialectical analysis as to how capitalism as a mode of production tends to undermine the social reproduction of its working class. Her claim is that capitalism's "economic subsystem depends on social-reproductive activities which are external to it" (23). I assume she means something similar to what I mean (Ferguson 2018) by claiming that the reproduction of sex and gender in modes of sex/affective production has a different logic from capitalism since it aims to promote sexual satisfaction, love, care, and solidarity not simply as means to serve the accumulation of capital but as ends for their own sake. And although Fraser disagrees with Bhattacharya as to whether the reproductive labor in this system or set of activities is external to the capitalist economy/processes of production, the content of this set of reproductive activities seems to be similarly not guided by the capitalist profit motive. In her chapter "How Not to Skip Class," Bhattacharya, referring to Michael Lebowitz's analysis in *Beyond Capital*, characterizes waged and non-waged activities as involving two different "moments of production," which are composed of "two different goals, two different perspectives on the value of labor power: While for capital, the value of labor power is a means of satisfying its goal of surplus value, … for the wage laborer, it is the means of satisfying the goal of self-development (my emphasis)." (Lebowitz quoted in Bhattacharya, 79) For Lebowitz and Bhattacharya, this is an internal contradiction of capitalism with respect to the reproduction of labor power, because on the one hand the capitalist class seeks to limit the needs and consumption of the working class (to increase profit), but on the other it also must create new needs of the working class as consumers and satisfy these new needs with new commodities (79).

I do not deny that the capitalist system has an internal contradiction based on these two tendencies involving working-class consumerism and consumption. What I want to suggest is that a feminist analysis must go further to uncover the exploitative relations between women and men in systems of capitalist patriarchy. Since there is a different logic involved in the reproduction of labor power that involves not only meeting material reproductive and sexual needs but also self-development, then we need to bring into the analysis the other kinds of domination relations between humans and human communities connected to our human need for self-development that are embedded in socially created gender differences. Self-interest and the profit motive are ends that are different from those sets of needs we have as social beings to give and receive love/affection/care and attain social status and power in relation to others in our household and community(ies). In systems structured by gender and racial divisions of labor, the affective energy we exchange with others in these cooperative arrangements is key to whether we gauge that we have achieved our goals of self-development, as women or men (or gender queer, androgynous) or as members of a racial or ethnic

group. Rita Manne argues (2018) that in patriarchal misogynous societies, the norms of masculinity and femininity create different self-development goals for most women (that of being givers, those who give more than they receive) than for men (that of being takers, those who take more than they give). In patriarchal reproductive systems this creates a psychological tendency for men to exploit women in the exchange of positive caring (affective) energy, which in turn undermines women's self-esteem if they choose self-development goals such as success in careers or gender parity in politics (cf. Ferguson 1989, 1991).

To highlight this type of exploitation relation it is not enough for Marxist-feminists like Bhattacharya to acknowledge that those who do unpaid caring/reproductive labor are part of the producers of capital and hence of the working class (cf. Bhattacharya, 89), nor to acknowledge that neoliberal capitalism has made such labor more precarious while "simultaneous[ly] unloading the entire responsibility and discourse of reproduction on individual families" (90-91). Of course this is true, as Fraser also points out in her article: Since neoliberal financial capitalism requires public disinvestment from social reproduction, thus undermining the state protections of the stage of capitalist social democracy, the emerging precarity of reproductive workers creates both right-wing populist movements as well as new leftist social movements opposed to gender, sex, race, ethnic, and religious hierarchies (Fraser, 33). What Fraser's analysis does not allow her to highlight is how these latter movements are fighting both gender and race/ethnic exploitation practices in gender, sexual, and racialized systems with their own reactive tendencies to maintain material advantages—through exploitative practices—for example, of white communities to communities of color, and heteronormative men to heteronormative women in kin and sex/affective relationships (as couples, parents, and fellow workers). Since Fraser only theorizes exploitation as a relationship between capitalists and workers, she also tends to downplay the historical exploitation relations (not just domination or failure of recognition) that white communities have in their greater ownership of capital as compared to communities of color, who are historically disadvantaged because of the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman take an insightful approach to the changing relation of the capitalist state to the demands of social reproduction in their chapter "Without Reserves." They claim that "the history of capitalism can be understood as a complex process of subsuming forms of social reproduction under capitalist relations" (63). While industrial capitalism went hand in hand with workers' formation of trade unions, because of the crisis of social reproduction that low wages and long working hours created, working-class struggles involved not only the factory floor but also food riots and bread, meat, and milk strikes against high prices by working-class women during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Indeed, the authors argue, struggles around social reproduction, over food, housing, and relief, were a key way the "American working class began to articulate themselves into a broader class unity," not only by rent strikes that united black and white workers in Northern cities but also in the South by connecting unemployment to struggles against racism (52). The New Deal was a grand (class) compromise, in which capitalists headed by Roosevelt expanded the welfare state to accommodate these worker demands, but still in a way that created hierarchialized wage labor marked by racial and sexual divisions between more and less privileged workers, so as to undermine the precarious class unity achieved by Popular Front organizing strategies. Today this historic grand compromise is being undermined in the crisis of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century caused by neoliberal capitalism, which acts to defund previous state subsidies for social reproduction (in welfare, unemployment, health, housing, and social security payments). The authors end their chapter with sobering points: Since the current crisis in social reproduction is not a uniform condition, the world's heterogeneous working classes are reacting to it in different forms, including attempts to rebuild communal life, social-democratic currents, and right-wing populism. World-wide, U.S. military interventionism and neoliberal capitalist processes have created world slums and migrant populations who come to the United

States and take low-paying jobs in social reproduction—domestic labor, child care, food preparation, sex work, and personal-care health work. What are the key points on which political organizing can create working-class unity in disarticulated transnational processes of dispossession, crises of social reproduction, and patterns of capital accumulation (67)?

Several other chapters in the book offer insightful approaches to social reproduction that I can only touch on here. Susan Ferguson's chapter on childhood and capitalism considers childhood learning through play and the extent to which, in capitalist schooling, it can be considered (socially reproductive) work. She refers to the concept in Marx's *Grundrisse* of a liberating activity as one in which "merely external natural urgencies … become posited as … self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labor" (Marx 1973, 544). Thus the image of the child, and the historical bourgeois creation of the concept of "childhood," creates a liminal figure and historicized concept that shows the contradictory nature of how we understand the division in capitalist society between leisure/play/reproduction of self, and work (for others and necessities). Teeple Hopkins, in "Mostly Work, Little Play," gives vignettes from the lives of two Filipina racialized domestic workers in Canada to show how church-based community activities are an important support for their ability to do their ongoing social-reproductive work, but those activities are not easily categorized as either work, leisure, or play. This study of racialized migrant social reproduction workers therefore fits in an oblique way into the domestic work debate between the autonomous Marxist-feminists Dalla Costa and Federici, who argue that it does produce exchange value, and those Marxist-feminists, such as Himmelweit (1995) and Smith (1978), who argue that although it is socially necessary labor, it fits into a new category between work and non-work. The ambiguous nature of what counts as socially necessary labor is also brought out in the essay by Serap Saritas Oran, which considers the role of workers' retirement pensions in the realm of social reproduction, pointing out that like housework, such state services have use value but not exchange value and hence must historically be struggled for as part of the standard of living for the working class.

Alan Sears, in his chapter "Body Politics: The Social Reproduction of Sexualities," provides a good Marxist-feminist analysis of how sexuality is alienated in capitalist society in a way similar to the way wage work is alienated (183). Rather than the shallow, liberal view that sees the so-called 1960s sexual revolution in advanced capitalism as true liberation, Sears takes a Foucauldian line that capitalism is organized as a "paradoxical double freedom, in which control over one's own body is always combined with forms of compulsion" (11). He uses Foucault's analysis of the bio-political disciplining of bodies in heteronormative and gender binary body training, using as historical examples different "same sex regimes" as they have defined and controlled non-heterosexual sexuality. He supports the analyses of Silvia Federici (2004), Angela Davis (1983), and Rosemary Hennessy (2013) that capitalism is a process of continued violent dispossession, not only of farmers off the land but by women's initial exclusion from wage labor and the devaluation of their paid and unpaid care work in relation to men, and that racial slavery dispossessed black women's labor even more than white women's.

Drawing on Marx's theory of human nature as differing from animals, Sears notes that

> sexuality is part of the way we realize our humanity: It is part of the work on nature (internal and external) through which we make our mark on the world. Alienated life conditions link sex to compulsion and make it a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This is fairly obvious in the case of paid sex work, but we are often put in the position of using sexuality to meet our life goals. (183)

He points out that in capitalism after the sexual revolution, the norms of hetero-masculinity "work as a cultural scaffolding for rape" (184), so that the line between consensual sex and sexual assault is

problematic. And socially constructed toxic masculinity fosters aggression, which has often been used as a tool in organizing the male working class against capitalists (and, I would add, by white workers against workers of color, immigrants, and those of different ethnicity). But if white supremacist patriarchal capitalism involves multi-systems of domination, our praxis question needs to take a critical look at how this tool of resistance to capitalism may be reactionary by harming all working-class women as well as people of color.

One of the advantages of a socialist-feminist multi-system analysis for understanding the phenomena of the 2014 (and forward) Black Lives Matter marches and the 2017 (and forward) U.S. women's marches is that in globalized neoliberal capitalism there is no coherent working-class agent that is easily constituted. For this reason, solidarity around working-class social reproduction rights (to health care, housing, security from police oppression, a safe climate, freedom from racial and gender violence, reproductive justice, and income security) can be more easily achieved by leftist organizing around other identities than class per se, while still making sure that class issues are a part of the content of the demands. This is one way to interpret what Cinzia Arruzza finds in her analysis, in Chapter 10, of the historic international women's strike organizing that began with big marches in Poland in 2016 against wage inequality, in Argentina that same year protesting male violence, and in Italy in November 2016 around the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. All of these marches led up to yearly March 8 women's strikes in more than 50 countries, and although they may have general demands that appeal to women across economic class, such as freedom from male violence, the strikes have also featured specific socialist-feminist content aimed at mobilizing working-class women, such as gender equality in wages, living wages, affordable housing, and health care. Arruzza's work here suggests that the classic Marxist critique of identity politics organizing is a misguided way to look at the political possibilities of coalescing such politics. In fact, semi-autonomous social movements against gender, racial, and ethnic oppression may give us stronger ways to challenge the toxic genderized and racialized modes of cooperation in the present racist capitalist patriarchal order, since historically, class and racial solidarities of movements resisting capitalism have continued to oppress women, queer people, and racial minorities.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this Marxist-feminist anthology of essays for its novel and engaging debates and research on the relevant history, theory, and politics of neoliberal, patriarchal, racialized, capitalist social reproduction that socialists, feminists, and anti-racists must engage with both our research and political work.

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