



Book review

Social reproduction theory, T. Bhattacharya. (Ed.), Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression, Pluto press, London (2017). 250 pages

In a time when precarity has become a normalized condition for many and rampant financialization has entered almost every aspect of our lives, a strong theoretical framework capable of better understanding and critiquing the capitalist mode of production in its neoliberal form is needed more than ever. To achieve this, it is crucial to recognise not only the ways in which economic activities affect the so-called 'noneconomic' ones, but that both spheres are integrative parts of the same system: the struggle over living conditions, or the ways we reproduce ourselves, is an integral part of the battle against the capital. As such, theories of social reproduction can provide us with useful tools to grasp the heterogeneity of a racialised, gendered, multi-ethnic and differently abled working class that occupies many different positions and types of labour, whether they are waged or not (Bhattacharya, 2017:74). Ten essays in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, have three main goals: defining social reproduction theory (SRT), applying it to contemporary debates, and deepening Marxist theory using the framework of SRT (p. 6).

Although Marx rightly recognises that labour power is a unique commodity in the sense that, unlike other commodities, it is produced non-capitalistically, on the question of its replenishment he is rather ambiguous, leaving it undertheorized (p.72). Marxist and social reproduction feminists have tried to explore this other facet of production, emphasising the gendered and racialized aspects of reproductive labour. However, as Bhattacharya writes in her chapter, the fact that labour power is produced non-capitalistically yet is also essential to the capitalist mode of production poses many questions that cannot be so easily resolved (p.73). One way to explain the reproduction of labour power is to look at the sites of production and reproduction as two separate spheres, associating the latter with women and the former with men (p.7). But as we know, these two spheres cannot be neatly divided; it is enough just to recall paid services of social reproduction provided in schools, hospitals or even homes.

Whereas the household and family kinship are still important sites of reproduction, this has not been the only way of replacing the workforce. For instance, slavery and migration are one of the most common ways capitalism has replenished labour power (p.73). Moreover, there is a whole range of institutions and facilities such as education, health care and leisure activities that are implicated in the process of social reproduction (Ibid.). Those institutions, accompanied by various forms of families and communities, by ensuring the reproduction of human populations as a valuable resource of labour, play a crucial role in sustaining the system as a whole.

As well as workers' daily reproduction, social reproduction refers to generational reproduction responsible for sustaining the non-working members of society such as children, the elderly and/or disabled. Being

spatially and temporally separated from the direct circuit of production, albeit simultaneously disciplined to become proper capitalist subjects, children, at least to some extent, are granted an opportunity to explore their creative and sensuous potentialities usually suppressed at the workplace (p.121). Going beyond common discussions of children that either emphasise their victimhood or praise their agency, Susan Ferguson offers a more robust analysis of childhood, pointing to the negotiations between play and disembodied alienation that children have to make while growing up under capitalism (p.130). Hence, it could be argued that capitalist childhood encapsulates the contradictory nature of capitalism - its constant struggle between meeting human needs and producing labour power for capital.

Writing about the opposite end of the age spectrum, Serap Saritas Oran in her essay on pensions explains how, since the level of pensions does not correspond entirely to individual income, the amount of resources retirees get depends on the wider aspect of social and economic production. Therefore, the resources for social reproduction are part of the total surplus value produced by workers and appropriated by capitalists (p.162). Together with insecure working conditions and flexible labour markets, privatisation of communal goods and social services is one of the main characteristics of neoliberal financialized capitalism, where provisions for the elderly, once provided by the government, are now in the hands of financial actors, becoming a sphere of profit-making and individual responsibility (p.163–4).

Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman highlight that in the US, depriving large populations of the means of both production and reproduction while forcing many people to enter capitalist relations has eradicated many forms of material support and thus, leaving the majority of the working class, in the authors' words, 'without reserves'. What are the consequences for our social order when the labour power is left without reserves? Does that mean that the system is left without reserves as well? Nancy Fraser argues exactly this. Since capitalist economy is not self-sustaining and relies on social reproduction, systematically diminishing the resources necessary for the regeneration of labour power consequently destabilizes the sphere of production (p. 24). This contradictory tendency, Fraser writes, although today appearing in a specific historical form is an integral element of capitalism as such, inevitably leading to its crisis. Fraser situates the contemporary crisis of care within the crisis of capitalism, which for the sake of unlimited accumulation destroys the conditions for its own existence (Ibid.). It is not surprising that struggles over substantial needs have been a crucial part of the battle against the economic system, and the contributors to this volume make it clear how the site of class struggle expands the terrain of the workplace: the attack on social reproduction is at the same time the attack on production, and vice versa.

Beside the useful insights this book provides, it is important to mention that the essays are mostly centred on the Global North. Moreover, some chapters require a deeper understanding of political economy and this may discourage readers who do not have a background in this field. Nevertheless, for those looking for an original approach to Marxist theory and those interested in understanding interlocking systems of oppression, *Social Reproduction Theory*, by

widening the category of labour and troubling the common distinctions between production and reproduction, public and private, and work and play, is an indispensable piece of literature on the bookshelves of critical theory.

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