

The Politics of Social Reproduction. An Introduction

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Abstract: This introduction speaks to political struggle and transformation on the terrain of social reproduction, as presented by the contributors to this special edition of CLCWeb. The concerns of this special issue include critical analysis of international, national and local policies contributing to the gendered, class and racialized dimensions of social reproduction; the articulation of mass movements around social reproductive needs and demands; insurgent forms of care, commoning and autonomous life-making from below and from the margins; the imbrication of immigration, racialization and social reproduction; coalition building between labor and reproductive struggles; ecological and human life between and beyond capitalist forms, and the collective ethical and affective possibilities arising through the lived experience of reproducing struggles.

While our introduction highlights the multiplicity of methods and experiences presented by our contributors, we also offer a synthetic perspective on the politics of social reproduction grounded in both mass struggle and transformative practices of community care in the midst of crisis and possibility.

Cinzia ARRUZZA and Kelly GAWEL

The Politics of Social Reproduction. An Introduction¹

To the memory of Kevin Floyd,
who taught us how to see new potentialities for struggle within a reified world.

This special issue explores social reproduction both as a site of oppression, expropriation and exploitation, and as a site of political struggle and social transformation.² The notion of social reproduction refers to the social organization of what Karl Marx would call the reproduction of labor power, and of what some social reproduction theorists have expanded to include the reproduction of human life more generally. Social reproduction, understood as such, is a primary condition of extraction and accumulation under capitalism, and struggles on its terrains are essential to political resistance against them. Under currently existing conditions, this work of reproducing life is gendered, racialized, and sexualized as well as deeply inflected by social and political trends in migration, the movement and ownership of natural resources, environmental decline and environmental racism, the social construction of ability and disability, state policies and repression, and at the same time, social forms of organizing care, desire, embodiment, collective and familial relations. Social reproduction spans as well as holds together these intimate and structural dimensions of life under conditions of crisis, and under conditions of struggle.

The concept of social reproduction emerges from multiple political and theoretical lineages. These include Workerist Italian feminism, Western European, US and Canadian socialist and Marxist feminisms, autonomous and indigenous political currents in Latin America, Eastern European and postcolonial considerations of the socialist transformation of everyday life, and anarchist formations in the US, Europe, and Latin America. More recently, reflections and analyses centered on social reproduction are deeply influencing the current global tide of anticapitalist feminist movements, particularly the international feminist strikes movement, which has joined together countries as diverse as Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and Poland. Social reproduction

¹ We are finishing this *Introduction* from New York City in March 2020, a current epicenter of the COVID-19 global pandemic. From the vantage of this crisis, we believe that expanding mass struggles on the terrain of social reproduction, and deepening forms of mutual aid and radical care will be even more essential to survival, and also to the possibility of gesturing now at the world in which we *want* to live.

² Among the numerous publications on social reproduction, see: Arruzza, Cinzia. "Remarks on Gender". *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2 September 2014. www.viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/remarks-on-gender/; Arruzza, Cinzia, Bhattacharya, Tithi and Fraser, Nancy. *Feminism for the 99%. A Manifesto*. London and New York, Verso, 2019; Bakker, Isabella and Stephen Gill. eds. *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003; Bezanson, Kate. and Luxton, Meg. eds. *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neoliberalism*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006; Bhattacharya, Tithi (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. London, Pluto Press, 2018; Brenner, Johanna and Laslett, Barbara. "Gender, Social Reproduction, and Women's Self-Organization: Considering the US Welfare State." *Gender & Society*, 5,3, pp. 311-333, 1 September 1999; Cavallero, Luci and Gago, Veronica. *Una Lectura Feminista de la Deuda: Vivas, Libres y Desendeudadas Nos Queremos*, Buenos Aires, Fundacion Rosa Luxemburgo, 2019; Chisté, Lucia., Del Re, Alisa and Edvige, Forti. *Oltre il Lavoro Domestico: Il Lavoro delle Donne tra Produzione e Riproduzione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979; Dalla Costa, Mariarosa and James, Selma. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. London: Falling Wall Press, 1972; Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. New York, PM Press, 2012; Federici, Silvia. *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, PM Press, 2019; Ferguson, Susan. *Women and Work*. London, Pluto Press, 2019; Fortunati, Leopoldina. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. New York, Autonomedia, 1995; Gutiérrez Aguilar, Raquel. *Horizontes comunitario-populares: producción de lo común más allá de las políticas estado-céntricas*. Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2017; "Issue 5: Social Reproduction". *Viewpoint Magazine*. Eds Haider, Asad and Mohandesi, Salar. www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction. 2015; Mies, Maria; *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor*. London, Zed Books, 2014; Nakano-Glenn, Evelyn. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 1-43, Autumn, 1992; Picchio, Antonella. *Social Reproduction. The Political Economy of the Labour Market*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992; Precarias a la Deriva. *A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*. Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2004; Vega Solís, Cristina, Martínez-Buján and Paredes Chauca, Myriam. *Cuidado, comunidad y común. Experiencias cooperativas en el sostenimiento de la vida*. Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2018; Vogel, Lise. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. Chicago, Haymarket, 2013.

analyses have in turn been informed by the new feminist movement's practical experience and political elaboration.

In 2017, the call for an international feminist strike was born from brutal necessity - that of responding to extreme violence against cis and trans women - but also from transformative desire: from a living collective voice that refused to isolate embodied intimacies and interpersonal violence from structural social power and domination. This was particularly evident in the call for the 2017 feminist strike by the Argentine movement *Ni Una Menos*. Rather than following the individualized, liberal narrative of 'domesticity,' individual pathology and victimhood surrounding violence against women, trans and queer people, *Ni Una Menos* framed its opposition to gender-based violence within a social and political critique of the totality of social relations. In locating their analysis and politics in relation to the trauma and brutality they confronted in the reality of femicide, they were able to make connections between interpersonal and systemic violence (for example, political rapes, the violence of the State or the relation between machista abuse and economic crisis). A similar approach also characterized - three years later - the Chilean song and performance, *El Violador Eres Tu* ("The Rapist is You"), which addressed the misogynistic violence of the Chilean State and spread like wildfire across the globe, inspiring hundreds of public performances in dozens of countries.

It is not coincidental, then, that the Argentine slogan *vivas nos queremos* ("we want ourselves alive") is frequently followed by another: *nos mueve el deseo* ("we are moved by desire"). It is impossible to separate these two rallying cries, because the same desire to prolong and care for each other's lives foment the desire and power to "create here and now the world in which we want to live" (*Ni Una Menos* Collective, "How Was the March 8th International Women's Strike Woven Together?"). This is a social and political desire, one that has been elaborated through deep shared experience on the terrain of social mobilization. It has ignited collective forms of care, refuge, healing, joy and power, as well as capacities to sever ties and form oppositions to those social forms, institutions and individuals reproducing violence. It is the animating force of a global tide of massive feminist movement across social sectors rarely united under prior constellations of struggle. Argentine activists from *Ni Una Menos* even speak of the need for a *sensible* revolution, which is also and inseparably a material revolution. Such a revolution in corporeal and affective life, as well as material and social conditions, is arguably what is required in the face of systemic femicide.

The experience of the Argentine feminist movement informs Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago's "10 Theses on Feminist Economics (or the Antagonism Between the Strike and Finance)", which offers an account of feminist economics grounded both in popular economies dating from the 2001 crisis and the *piqueteros* movement, and in the feminist strike in Argentina. The perspective of feminist economics reveals how feminist organization has emerged from but also radically altered the landscape of various interconnected loci of crisis. Through militant research and genealogy rooted in these "bodies and territories in struggle" their project "is able to redefine labor and exploitation, communal and feminized modes of doing and resisting, and popular innovation in moments of crisis" Grounded in experiences and organizational capacities for *reproduction* that radically disrupt the capitalist logic of the "domestic" sphere by politicizing and extending it into the streets, Gago and Cavallero interrogate the territorial organization of state reproductive infrastructures and predatory capitalist accumulation and dispossession, investigating the "crisis of the patriarchy of the wage", generalized precarization, ever increasing regimes of dispossession, financialization and debt as well as the reactionary moralities associated with them. Feminist economics is a political *achievement* that must be fought for and continually re-constituted in struggle. The demand for a feminist wage is an example of such a contested terrain, revealing possibilities for disrupting "the hierarchy between the productive and the reproductive" and "constructing a shared horizon of struggle that reformulates the very notions of body, conflict, and territory."

Zapatista women have termed this shared horizon a *struggle for life itself* (Zapatista Women's Opening Address at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport and Culture for Women in Struggle). This language has been used in various locations, and can be seen to form a thread common to movements against the violence of racism, patriarchy, capital, colonialism and ecocide³. For Zapatista women, it is struggle itself which holds the potential for agreement across difference. At first perhaps a small flame is lit in individuals and collectives. Such a commonality forged through struggle signifies something like: "we agreed to live, and since for us to live is to struggle, we agreed

³ The struggle for life is a refrain common to many recent struggles: from Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives, Standing Rock, transnational climate justice and anticapitalist feminist mobilizations, and the numerous wildcat strikes and other forms of refusal to work to demand a stop to non-essential production during the COVID-19 pandemic around the rallying cry: "Our lives are more important than their profits".

to struggle, each according to her way, her place and her time" (Zapatista Women's Opening Address).

In the words of Raquel Gutiérrez, such a struggle for life involves horizons of transformation concerning "our most intimate and decisive creations, everything that allows us to care for and regenerate life as a whole, both human and nonhuman life" ("Because We Want Ourselves Alive", Along similar lines, in her essay for this issue, "Toward an Ecology of Life-Making: The Remembering of Meridel Le Sueur", Rosemary Hennessy questions the capitalist division of ecological from human social relations, connecting the reproduction of life and labor to the non-human world and our relationship to its powers and temporalities. In conversation with feminist political ecology and Native feminist authors, she calls for widening and deepening the critical frames of social reproduction theory with a view to the mutual interrelationships, obligations and dependencies essential to generative life-making. As she explains: "... gestures toward the reproduction of life signal that social reproduction entails a broader network of relations even as it raises questions about how we understand the structural relation of that labor to capital." This shift in perception and historical orientation regarding reproduction amounts to a kind of *re*-remembering⁴ of relationalities and temporalities dismembered and attacked by capitalist reproduction and its bio-deregulation of bodies and ecologies. Recuperating Meridel Le'Sueur's aesthetic method and form, Hennessy emphasizes the importance of affective attention to lived experience in the politics of remembrance and resistance to capitalist and settler colonial reproductive forms. In presenting Le'Sueur's own fraught position vis a vis colonial histories and narratives, she attends to "gaps, silences, and contradictions" of brutal histories of oppression while presenting a feminist ecology of life-making as a way to forge "possibility from history's incompleteness."

As is likely evident in our discussion of these essays by Cavallero, Gago and Hennessy, the primary aim of this special issue is to bring the political dimensions and stakes of social reproduction into relief. From the perspective of multiple struggles and varying methodologies and practices, the articles collected here address mass strikes within the social reproductive sector, transformative practices of care, commoning and autonomous life-making from below and from the margins, as well as international, national and local policies contributing to the gendered, class and racialized dimensions of social reproduction.

Several of the articles featured here, for example, illuminate processes of racialization that occur within the sphere of social reproduction through the management of state infrastructure and immigration policies. Brian Whitener's contribution, "Detroit's Water Wars: Race, Failing Social Reproduction and Infrastructure", illustrates how racialization moves through the organization and distribution of state infrastructures, which, following Daniel Nemser, he understands to be constructed by and reproductive of racialized and class-based regimes of power. Detroit's water wars are an example not simply of the well documented privatization of public infrastructures, but also, in this case, of the state's (local politicians and economic elites') power grabbing redistribution of infrastructures of social reproduction along racialized and class lines, which, at the same time, corresponds to specific forms of "coercion, repression and social control" (Whitener). Whitener contextualizes this maneuvering on the part of the state, under the pretext of the city's bankruptcy, in terms of years of legal and political struggle on the part of the city's largely African American population to maintain control over their infrastructures and resources. Indeed, such politicized control over, attacks upon and expropriation of marginalized peoples' means of social reproduction are an essential element of US white supremacist social reproduction. For Whitener, this politics of "failed social reproduction" points to the need for a complex and articulated anti-state politics of social reproduction in response.

Zhivka Valiavicharska also grounds her "Social Reproduction in the Making: Recentering the Margins, Expanding the Directions" in expanded notions of social reproduction, bringing Black feminist, postcolonial, migrant and diasporic forms of critique to discussions of social reproduction. Valiavicharska argues that the historical experience of many marginalized peoples (regarding the family, the domestic sphere, paid vs. unpaid labor, political agency, culture) does not fit the narratives of social reproduction taken up largely by white Western women. She brings this critique to bear on understandings of the social reproduction of migrant communities, specifically on brutal immigration policies⁵ and their effects on the social and cultural life of migrant peoples. Arguing that the constant

⁴ Understood as a "critical assessment of remembering as representation of past time that also aims to reckon with the relations of life-making that have been dismembered under capitalism" (1).

⁵ In particular, the illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) of 1996.

threat of deportation and attacks on their means of survival is a condition for funneling migrants into regimes of extreme exploitation, she warns that accounts which exclusively focus on the link between immigration and labor fail to capture the immigration system's imbrication with racist and colonial biopolitical forms as well as "the traumatic effects of disruption, displacement, and loss that often accompany migration and organize the collective and personal experience of migrant people." Through this focus on marginalized histories and experiences of reproduction, Valiavicharska draws attention to the importance of learning from the "insurgent forms of social reproduction" (to adopt Amanda Armstrong's phrase) that can be found in these communities' modalities of survival, collective care and physical and emotional support. According to Valiavicharska, these intimate, cultural and social bonds are at the frontlines of struggle against capitalist and state extraction and enclosure, and the relations, skills and modalities forged there are of crucial political importance.

Jaleh Mansoor's article, "Readymade, or Made [to be] Ready", addresses the imbrication of immigration, racialization and social reproduction by taking a different angle: art and its ability, or inability, to illuminate the structural mechanisms of racialized exploitation. More specifically, Mansoor offers an in-depth discussion of Santiago Sierra's performance, "133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blonde", at the 2001 Venice Biennale. In this performance, Sierra paid dozens of undocumented migrants to have their hair dyed blonde and then scatter around the city of Venice: the hair dye made them thus highly visible, and by the same token, more exposed to police repression. In Mansoor's analysis, the "cruel praxis" of Sierra's performance manages to represent in a striking way the deepest social contradictions involved in racialized global extractive economies and the centrality of racialization for exploitation. Mansoor contrasts this kind of artistic intervention, which makes visible the structural dimension and dynamics of racist capitalism, with the turn toward positive prefiguration in social justice inspired art. In her analysis, what Sierra manages to achieve, and social justice prefigurative art cannot, is to illuminate the real abstractions covering over and furthering the extractive logics of contemporary social life.

The essays featured in this issue reflect a plurality of political sensibilities and approaches to the meaning of struggles over social reproduction and struggles for life; they issue from different theoretical and political traditions, which have, at the same time, been articulated through cross pollination and collaboration. Our hope here is to recall and connect various lineages of struggle on the terrain of social reproduction and in doing so, to present a constellation of critical, generative thinking that politicizes crises and conflicts on this terrain, and speaks to possibilities for political and social transformation. While we are aware that not all perspectives and topics are represented in this issue and that much more could, and should, have been included, we hope that bringing these texts together illuminates the range and specificity of the forms of violence endemic to contemporary social reproduction, and points, with inspiration and urgency, to oppositional forms rising up against them.

Several articles here draw attention in particular to practices of commoning from below. Susana Draper's essay, "No Estamos Todas, Faltan Las Presas! Contemporary Feminist Practices Building Paths toward Prison Abolition", for example, points to the need and challenges, but also possibilities, in building alternative knowledges and forms of life from within current conditions. Calling on legacies of transformative justice emerging from US Black feminism in concert with Latin American politics of the commons, Draper points to radical modalities of feminist prison abolition practice built in the anti-prison organizations *Yo No Fui* and *A New Way of Life*. In linking transformative praxis and structural critique, these organizations speak to the ever-pressing question of *how* to forge cultures of resistance, care and healing that do not reproduce the violence and hierarchies they intend to overcome. The formation of collective language and imaginaries - what Draper terms "*reconfiguring a language and poetics of justice*" - are central to this process. These collectives of and for incarcerated women found ways of imagining and enacting a *way out* of the reproduction of structural violence through modalities of collective history making, poetics of struggle, and material and emotional forms of support. Generated in the process of active confrontation with the carceral state, these poetic forms, in the famous words of Audre Lorde, are not a luxury: they not only link systemic trauma and abuse to structural and state violence, but do so through forms of commoning, mutual aid and community care that remedy these historical and intimate harms and offer ways of being contrary to them.

Other articles emphasize mass struggle and coalition building between labor and reproductive struggles, and relatedly, the relation between mass movements and prefigurative practices. Recent feminist mobilizations around social reproduction across the globe have revealed the importance of a mutual articulation of mass struggle and solidarity building on the one hand, and the emergence of new forms of social association and subjectivities on the other. For example, the political power of the wave of international women's strikes (including their ability to foster solidarity between different

organizations and social positions in previously unimaginable ways) is arguably held up and maintained by local organizational capacities for community care, material reproduction, and the generation of collective experience, which in turn have been cultivated and transformed through the massive political process brought about in the form of the strike. In this sense, the capacity for the self-organization of care and material support could not have been conceived without the alternative spaces and forms of relation that came about through the common cause and necessity for strike, nor would the latter have been possible without new social bonds capable of holding and performing in different ways the reproductive work withdrawn.

Kate Doyle Griffiths' "Labor Valorization and Social Reproduction: What is Valuable about the Labor Theory of Value" criticizes the conflation of productive and unproductive labor from both theoretical and political perspectives, and insists on the need to maintain and address the specificity of various sets of social relations as either indirectly contributing to value production or as directly generating value. This critique leads her to articulate two main points. On the one hand, from the viewpoint of struggles and political strategies, Doyle Griffiths emphasizes the need to combine multiple forms of struggle involving different and specific sets of social relations and forms of labor, while at the same time maintaining the crucial importance of workplace mass strikes. On the other hand, her critique of the conflation of productive and unproductive labor leads her to stress the relevance of a critique of the family form, understood as a *specific* social form which cannot be analyzed in the same way as a workplace or production process. In her account, the critical and emancipatory potential of social reproduction theory depends on an inclusion of the family form into its theoretical and critical framework. Insofar as "the family is where labor-power is made available to be valorized", an account of reproduction that includes both a queer critique of normative conceptions of the family and the imagination of new forms of family life and organization will allow for a critical class politics, which can truly address crises of care and reproduction.

The politics of social reproduction involves both the critique of oppressive, exploitative and extractive social relations, and the reproduction of struggles capable of attending to material and intimate needs, and fomenting revolutionary joy and desire. Blanca Missé's "Fourier, Marx and Social Reproduction" takes up such an expansive stance on struggle, strategy and prefiguration, in relation to human laboring capacities. Missé argues for a concept of social reproduction that includes life-affirming concerns and demands that constitute more than a simple addendum to orthodox Marxist theories and categories. Rather, the possibilities for a radical politics of social reproduction are exemplified in Fourier's emancipatory conception of labor, in which a *critique* of abstract labor is inseparable from the reclamation of those elements of labor excluded, rejected and rendered invisible by its capitalist form: pleasure and the joyful dimensions of reproductive labor in particular. In Missé's analysis, Fourier's socialism should not be dismissed as merely "utopian", insofar as it illustrates both the critical *and* emancipatory potential of a social reproductive politics inclusive of the liberation of desire and the "possibilities of social changes through the reactivation of affect and a reconnection with nature in the sphere of social reproduction." As she concludes, "Marxism also needs to cultivate forms of labor and modes of the labor process where pleasure is not completely negated, and where desire can find fertile grounds to re-imagine a different society and push back against the rule of capital."

Aaron Jaffe's contribution, "Social Reproduction Theory and the Form of Labor Power", addresses the politics of social reproduction from a different angle, namely the necessity of articulating its ethical dimensions, and unpacking the often implicit normative critique of capitalism which is involved in these different practices of struggle as well as in social reproduction theorists' analyses. The urgency of such an ethical reflection has emerged even more strikingly during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of early 2020, which has seen the renewed proliferation of neo-Malthusian ideas as well as utilitarian dismissal of elderly and disabled lives as disposable for the sake of the "growth of the economy". Jaffe articulates and conceptually develops the normative dimension arising from a radical politics of social reproduction by focusing on the way in which capital limits and thwarts our power to labor, that is, our differing abilities to transform the world and ourselves through our practices. His ethical discussion is centered on a commitment to the realization and development of our capacities and potentialities within an emancipatory horizon. It offers not only a descriptive and analytic perspective on the ability and inability to enact our power to labor, but also a prescriptive one, which takes as a starting point both the concrete specificities and the totality of laboring activities under capitalism. His piece thus offers an expanded account of labor that includes the ethical through a commitment to the practical and visionary conditions of labor's emancipation.

Such ethical and visionary horizons are revealed in the experience of struggle itself, and in the forging of new social relations and realities therein. Politicizing the locations and labors of social

reproduction entails that the invisibilized, draining, yet joyful and life-generating work of reproducing struggles must be reclaimed in its centrality and importance: as what defines the shape, scope and possibilities of these struggles themselves. What Silvia Federici describes as a refusal to divide the time of reproduction from the time of organizing (*Re-Enchanting The World* 5) concerns politicizing and collectivizing social reproductive work *and* transforming structures of care and desire so as to attend, attune to and motivate the needs of our struggles. As many of the articles presented here make clear, this multidimensional reproductive work is also what holds, shelters, generates and defends the brilliant possibilities of resistance.

The work of reproducing struggles requires forms of relating and modes of practice and learning that, in and through this complex political work itself, link together and illuminate the differences between legacies and histories of struggle: histories of class struggle, and histories of struggle against oppression in all its forms. Doing so, we believe, might generate collectivity in ways that open space for the singularity of transformation as well as the possibility for new collective and massive forms of struggle in our era of extreme crisis.

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