

Social Reproduction Theory and the Form of Labor Power

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Recommended Citation

Jaffe, Aaron. "Social Reproduction Theory and the Form of Labor Power." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.2 (2020): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3838>>

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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Volume 22 Issue 2 (June 2020) Article 3

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.2 (2020)**

Special Issue ***The Politics of Social Reproduction***. Ed. Kelly Gawel and Cinzia Arruzza

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/>>

Abstract: Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) centers the production and reproduction of labor power under capitalism. This power to labor is determined individually, socially, and in relation to the totality of capital. These powers are produced and reproduced in and through social relations that, while capitalist, have tremendously diverse local conditions and histories. SRT provides a framework to think through the oppressive logics shaping the production, reproduction, and potencies of labor powers understood as diversely constituted. It argues that SRT is committed to the diversity of these labor powers over and against conditions that constrain both these powers and their actualizations in forms amenable to capital. It shows how SRT can offer resources to value the powers to work to satisfy human needs beyond exploitative and other oppressive social dynamics. Specifically, the paper highlights how a normative commitment to labor power can help SRT respond to charges of productivism, ableism, and narrow versions of workerism that are often leveled against left commitments to labor power. Building upon what I understand to be SRT's normative critique of the form of labor power as constituted through capitalist social relations, the paper concludes by pointing to how SRT can promote struggles for social relations in which labor power could produce, actualize, and reproduce itself in freer ways.

Aaron JAFFE

Social Reproduction Theory and the Form of Labor Power

Introduction¹

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) is a creative but not entirely new way of thinking about the totality of social relations produced and continuously *reproduced* in capitalism. It will therefore be helpful to start by clarifying some terms. As a theory, it is committed to thinking through a social totality that is set on its path by so many local, highly variable, and indeed varying conditions which, in their many combinations, set the options and push the choices that give all acts of production and reproduction their shape. Given that "totality", action, or what might be called "praxis", and "production" are key components in the above definition, this is (despite some poor and rather ungenerous readings of its recent expression) a Marxist theory.

Indeed, in the introduction to the edited collection *Social Reproduction Theory*, Tithi Bhattacharya makes the Marxist commitment abundantly clear. She writes, "the fundamental insight of Social Reproduction Theory is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. The notion of labor is conceived here in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it as 'the first premise of all human history'" ("Introduction" 2).

With Bhattacharya's introduction of "history", the foundational role of human labor in production, reproduction, and their changing conditions is brought to the fore. In this way, SRT provides an expanded and historical unfolding but still unitary social theory that is committed to exploring oppressive logics. It is "unitary" because SRT is committed to linking oppressive logics to the development and actualization of labor powers through which analysis can have a view of social wholes. Yet in developing this unitary view, SRT rejects the reduction of these oppressions to merely functional accounts of capital. For SRT, these logics are constitutive for the locally varying reproductions of capital through the so many different ways they produce, shape, and constrain capacities for labor (Arruzza, "Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist").

This is crucial because any valuable understanding of capital has to understand the social composition of the working class at the root of its changing forms. While capital's imperative to valorize is satisfied by realizing more value from the labor done by the working class than it pays in wages, how this imperative proceeds cannot be only abstractly and logically conceived.³ For this reason, SRT is an extremely valuable framework and program for critical social research. Indeed, SRT offers a frame for the highest quality sociological, political-economic, and activist work.⁴ By showing how oppressive logics constrain labor powers, SRT can provide a pivot between social analysis and the normative commitments that motivate so many approaches to activist work.

While the kind of account provided here might not be motivational for already convinced radicals, just how the theory can support *criticism* of what it can socially analyze so well, and the politics that stem from such critique, is rarely spelled out in detail. So, after the above cursory sketch introducing the framework of the theory, I will now zoom out and develop two core normative commitments that

¹ This paper has its roots in a presentation for the Historical Materialism Conference in Montreal, May 18, 2018. Before the panel the following joint statement was read: "We do not think we need to apologize for being men interested in theorizing gendered relations of domination, but it was disturbing to each of us to discover that this panel had been organized to have *only* 3 men. Given that women and non-binary people not only suffer more from what we'll be thinking through, but also that their suffering so often takes the form of exclusion and implicit silencing, we feel that it is important to firmly signal our disappointment with the fact that this panel *de facto* reproduces a pattern of exclusion. Whether in Toronto or New York, each of us is committed to political work that challenges these logics. We hope that our presentations will help clarify the stakes and provide motivation to struggle against gendered violence in our workplaces, academic conferences, and the world at large." I thank J. Gaster and A. Berman for joining me in co-authoring the statement. I also thank the editors of this special issue Kelly Gawel and Cinzia Arruzza, as well as the anonymous reviewer whose careful readings and trenchant comments significantly improved the paper.

³ This is not to suggest that the imperative to valorize is the only way in which the world is reproduced. In capitalism, however it is a guiding, even dominant force in determining which powers get produced in the first place and then how they are set in motion and reproduced.

⁴ This synthesis is represented in an excellent way by Viewpoint Magazine's fifth issue devoted entirely to social reproduction.

can help SRT sponsor a critical position. I will then end by pointing to political conclusions that I argue follow from adopting those commitments.

The Commitment to Labor Power

SRT's primary commitment to labor power can also do double duty as a normative commitment. SRT's commitment to labor power is primary first, in that the *power* or *capacity* to do work is the prerequisite for there being any social organization to analyze and subject to critique. After all, it takes work to maintain any social organization. The concept "labor power" is also prior in that the human power to labor can be enjoined in a tremendous diversity of ways. Every particular instance of laboring is itself just one manifestation of a much broader set of powers. Since keying into labor *powers* allows us to see that diverse potentials lie beneath every actualization, this view allows us to recognize other human possibilities. In other words, centering labor power rather than actual labor allows SRT to recognize possibilities beyond the ways that power is actualized in any given social formation.

My claim is that, on the basis of this approach, labor power can also be considered to have normative priority. Those drawing from a social reproduction analysis can hold that the plural nature of our powers, and the scope of their free development, is valuable in itself. This normative commitment to deepening and broadening our powers could then center our capacities as a key to unlocking further radical political commitments.

By labor power I do not mean, and no one should envision, muscular white men wearing hard hats with union stickers, as if that stereotype was ever acceptable even as an "ideal type" of labor and its power (Ferguson, "Social Reproduction Feminism"). It is also equally important to insist that the concept not be understood only as an abstract category of power, divorced from its real-world organization and actualization. Like all sociological categories that are valuable for critique, theorists need to focus on what it would take to flesh out such concepts with content, determination, and perhaps even more importantly, the ugly realities that get elided in our habitual, dominant patterns of determining concepts.

To move from a negative to a positive determination, labor power does mean the potentiality to call into being an unactualized force for some kind of intended, need-satisfying motion or action. I am using "labor power" to refer to potentialities, and "action" to describe these potentialities' actualizations. Labor power takes particular forms under conditions of capitalism, but the capacity to labor is here understood in the very broad sense Marx gave it in *Capital*, vol. 1: "By labour power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he (sic) exercises whenever he produces a use value of any description" (177). I use "intended" here and "intentional" later because it signals that we have, even if in highly constrained ways, some ability to select amongst our powers and how to use them. This is what Marx means when in *Capital* he defines our labour powers in terms of a "living personality's" powers or capacities.⁵

"Intentional" is a fair short-hand for how Marx conceives of powers in the following passage, also from volume one of *Capital*: "We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement" (188).⁶ This intentional potency or power has the modifier "labor" attached to it because social reproduction theorists are interested in what humans can do, in particular, our capacity to organize and develop socially useful strategies to satisfy our wants and needs. Indeed, in volume one of Marx's *Capital* that is what his definition of labor-power as constituting value amounts to (84). Everything we do to satisfy our historically developing needs can be considered an actualization of our laboring powers. Our powers are "free" in the sense that if we can choose to use them, we can also in some sense choose not to, or to do so in different ways. This is why social reproduction theorists tend to reject so many automatic responses. SRT has little time for the strictly linear potency of unavoidable reflexes - whether the power to kick forward in a doctor's knee-jerk reflex test, or the unavoidable proletariat revolution theorized by too many mechanistic versions of Marxism.

SRT centers our *powers* to work broadly conceived, and does so at every layer of its analysis. This means recognizing the set of capacities latent in individuals, their social organization, and the totality

⁵ The *MECW* translation cite here leaves the German "lebendigen Persönlichkeit" and the French "personnalité vivante," untranslated at vol. 35, p. 572.

⁶ "Intentional" is consistent with Marx's much earlier account of the human as "free" and "conscious" in the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (276).

of labor in its diffuse and highly mediated connections. In capitalism taken as a whole, labor-power in the abstract is what capital exploits in order to valorize itself. Yet labor-power is also the very specific, individual force that every worker needs to replenish after a day of work. Between this individual and the total view, there are myriad social organizations through which labor power is produced and reproduced. The set of capacities that informs the power to work at each level – the individual, the social, and the totality – can be conceptually distinguished, but in reality they are always mutually implicating. Every individual has their powers to work formed and rendered actualizable through their relation to an enveloping social organization.⁷ In their turn, the social forces that determine labor powers take their specific shape from both the combined results of individual actions as well as their position within the totality of capital.

Finally, this capitalist totality growing from labor power is neither mystical nor expressive in the sense that Althusser was worried about (*Reading Capital* 17). It is, rather, the historically developing totality of dead labor in its single-minded imperative to valorize itself through the homogenizing alienation of so many distinct forms of living labor. For Marx, capital's "general value form is the reduction of all kinds of actual labour to their common character of being human labour generally, of being the expenditure of human labour power" (*Capital* 77-78). That this homogenization proceeds through so many socially different labor powers means that SRT determines "capital" through careful investigation into the social relations that transform so many differing potentials for work into their actualities. It requires studying the actuality of real patterns of work and the further possibilities such actualizations (or unrealized potentialities) entail, in turn, for all three layers of labor-power in their subsequent potencies and actualizations.

In this way, SRT is "unitary" in that it provides the theoretical frame to unite tremendous diversity in a synthetic account that links together the logic of capital with its locally different conditions. The unifying basis around which any concrete investigation can congeal is, in each instance, the power to labor. With this approach to SRT, I am following the Marxist-feminist idea that labour power is the condition and latent potential for both our lives as well as all of our enveloping social conditions.⁸ In such a view, social reproduction reproduces working individuals, the working class as a whole (including all of its internal differentiations), as well as those unable to work or work in officially recognized ways. While other approaches to SRT focus on the effects and power of ideology (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*) or offer different constructions of "capital" (Bourdieu), by centering the power to labor the Marxist-feminist version of SRT can explore the ways we move powers to labor to the problematic ways they are actually set in motion.

Centering the power to labor in this way is justified since actively satisfying needs is necessary in all social arrangements. To be clear, to claim a unitary grounding in labor-powers that are set in motion is not the same as claiming homogeneity across all social conditions. Need-satisfying activities are enjoined in historically specific social locations to satisfy specific needs and therefore must be described and explained in relation to these specificities and their social histories. Against the tendency of capital to increasingly make all labor-power homogeneously exchangeable according to the value expressed by a wage, my claim is that SRT can insist on thinking through and, crucially, *valuing* the production and reproduction of diverse capacities even if they are excluded from capital-valorization. This value is possible because labor and the powers that set it in motion are never and could never be purely homogenous not despite, but in large part because of the division of labor powers appropriate to capitalist social relations.⁹

Whereas Marx's analysis of capital begins with the commodity as bearer of both abstract and concrete labor, social reproduction theorists can track abstract and concrete labor *power*. There is the homogenized labor power that is bought for a wage, and whose exploitation forms the basis of capital's valorization, and there are the specific and incommensurate powers that each individual possesses as part of their living personality. Tracking both would require concrete analyses of how labor-powers are formed by capital's imperative to valorize on the one hand, and so many different dynamics of social oppression on the other. Instead of contrasting these more local social dynamics with the abstract logic of capital-valorization, such a stance would sponsor research into how local dynamics are the mediating

⁷ Dalla Costa, for instance, applies this approach in her analysis of the changing conditions through which women reproduced labor power in *Family Welfare and the State: Between Progressivism and the New Deal*.

⁸ Here I am drawing, in particular, on the way that Lise Vogel developed her Marxist-feminism in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* as well as Sue Ferguson "Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism"

⁹ See, for instance, Howard Botwinick's *Persistent Inequalities*.

force through which the abstract logic of capital is realized in so many oppressive ways. In other words, SRT can provide a framework through which oppressive social dynamics can be linked together in a capitalist totality rather than being analyzed as absolutely independent logics. While distinguishable in their effects, they would, in fact, be understood as constitutive of a totality that is determined and set on its path through the day to day labor of social production and reproduction under quite specific and specifically criticizable conditions.

Yet without centering the *actualization* of labor-powers, theorists risk replacing the study of social dynamics with merely symbolic, linguistic, cultural, or recognitive determinations of power. This is not to say that these symbolic, linguistic, cultural or recognitive frames are sociologically meaningless or irrelevant. It merely amounts to insisting that these potentially substantive and theoretically compelling frames lose their abstraction and allow their rubber to hit the road precisely when the systems, relations, and behaviors in their sights are analyzed from the standpoint of potentials for acting to satisfy needs. Do these local social dynamics free up our powers so that they can be actualized in need-satisfying ways, or do they sideline, even radically constrain, need-satisfying powers?

When social dynamics constrain our abilities to develop and direct our need-satisfying powers, we experience these dynamics as causing so many species of unnecessary suffering. We have powers, or could have powers, to satisfy our needs - but something either stifles our ability to set our powers into motion or limits the ways in which that motion can be realized. We can understand underlying social dynamics that constrain our powers as violent because they produce and reproduce our needs but make us incapable of satisfying them. The normative commitment to labor power is a commitment to socially reproducing our needs and our powers for satisfying them in a freer fashion, that is, in a social whole not set on its path by constraining dynamics. Yet in the midst of capitalist social relations, so many of our needs are malformed, that is, produced and reproduced in constraining ways, or they go unmet despite the fact that we have the ability to either satisfy them, or develop the tools to do so. Following Rosemary Hennessy, we can ask how some needs are "outlawed" by the constraining dynamics of capitalist social production and reproduction (22 and 215).

The Form of Power and the Pitfalls of Workerism, Productivism, and Ableism

This way of describing SRT risks a series of understandable though ultimately misplaced criticisms. The strong focus on labor powers may risk making SRT look like a version of "workerism" that takes traditionally "powerful" kinds of work as the most valuable or as a model to judge other, less "potent" kinds of work. The emphasis on, and then the possible normative commitment to labor powers, in other words, could be read as resting on some conservative assumptions about what powers should look like and who holds them. This is not, however, the case as the notion of "work" and the powers to do it that SRT relies on are much broader than these conservative assumptions. For the Marxist-feminist version of SRT at play here, the breadth of what counts as a labor power is wider by far than traditionally industrial, masculine-held, and value-productive powers.

As emphasized earlier, it is even broader than the merely "productive" labor that, in Marx, creates surplus value congealed in commodities that, in being sold, directly contribute to capital valorization. Labor here refers to *all the intentional activity* that directly or indirectly conditions capacities for labor, which may or may not, when set in motion, directly augment capital. Here "intentional" simply signals that we have, even if in highly constrained ways, some ability to select amongst our powers and how to use them. This is what Marx means when in *Capital* he defines each of our labor powers in terms of a "living personality". For this reason, the division between unproductive and productive work, mapping as it does the work that does not produce surplus value and that which does, can be encompassed in a broader third category: the socially reproductive activity that stems from and reflects back on our living personality's capacities for intentional activity.

To be sure, in their own ways nearly all need-satisfying actions contribute to producing and reproducing labor power individually, socially, or from the standpoint of the totality. Waged or unwaged, service or extractive, affective or bean-counting, stealing or hoarding, care-giving, disciplinary, or carceral, and so much more: every kind of activity either directly conditions labor powers or does so in more or less mediated ways. Not incidentally, in centering the power to labor rather than work itself, social reproduction theorists can have a lot to say about *withholding* this power, though this will be developed in the following section on political commitments.

This framing helps clarify SRT's ability to sponsor a normative commitment to the freedom and expansion of labor powers. It also allows me to explore two further problems that have more bite than the mistaken charge of conservative workerism. The second problem can be put in this way: if all labor reproduces the totality, what justifies valuing only some capacities for labor over others? And the third problem is even more pointed: if SRT can value labor powers, what allows it to move beyond lionizing

labor power as constituted under conditions of capitalist oppression and exploitation and to demand instead, that labor-power should be constituted under radically, revolutionarily different conditions?

The former can be put more starkly. With labor power centrally valued in a theory that thinks the reproduction of the totality, what allows the position to hold, for instance, that the capacity to ruthlessly exploit migrant labor is less valuable than the expert capacity to harvest fruit? Or, why are the capacities to heal, care for children, or teach more valuable than the capacity, so masterfully developed by managerial specialists today, to engineer such capacities in ways that make it easier to valorize capital? Or, in a different vein and more forcefully, if SRT has a deep-rooted commitment to labor power, what can it say to those who, through "disability" are disempowered and marginalized if not excluded from acting to satisfy their own and social needs?¹⁰ Since "work" has been broadened from value-producing work to include all socially reproductive activity, something more than valuing labor power *tout court* is going to be necessary if SRT is to value powers that challenge the activity of racist, misogynist, transphobic, and exploitive dynamics and bosses while problematizing the social conditions that disempower the potentialities of so many in the first place.

One possible solution that has appeared on the horizon, and which is taken up far too quickly, is to zoom in on socially reproductive labor within the context of the modern, bourgeois family. Now, whether waged or not, if socially-reproductive forms of labor are construed as the only ones that make, sustain, and remake labor-power without directly producing commodities to be exchanged on markets, then the problem of which labor powers SRT ought to value might seem to be solved. As a way of pushing back against narrow Marxist attempts to only value "productive" labor, this kind of socially reproductive labor could be valued insofar as it produces and sustains the power to work as such. Some have also been politically attracted to the idea that this highly gendered work first forms and then offers up human labor power to the circuits of capital-valorization without *itself* being entirely subsumed by these same circuits. The affective, care-centered, and, in radical families and communities, the capital-challenging forms this work sometimes takes also may seem to hold some promise. Yet, this kind of solution moves too quickly. It risks valuing some socially reproductive work without challenging either the oppressive familial and social logics that it is subject to, or the exploitative logics its work sustains.

A more general view of social reproduction then will help. For Sue Ferguson, social reproduction must be neither be too "loose" nor narrowly functional ("Building on the Strengths" 4). Along with David McNally, Ferguson holds that SRT should be committed to showing "that labor-power cannot simply be presumed to exist, but is made available to capital only because of its reproduction in and through a particular set of gendered and sexualized social relations that exist beyond the direct labor/capital relation, in the so-called private sphere. It also sharpens our understanding of the contradictory position of labor-power with respect to capital – identifying all aspects of our social reproduction – of our quest to satisfy human needs, to *live* – as essential to, but also a drag on, accumulation" (Social Reproduction Beyond Intersectionality). A response to the problem of how to value only some labor powers, while recognizing that under conditions of capital almost all labor contributes to its social reproduction, could draw on the tension between accumulation on one side and, on the other, "our quest to satisfy human needs" or even more simply, "to live". The key is to recognize that capitalist social relations, in their totality no less than in their diversely social, and individual/subjective experiences violently constrain, and foreclose opportunities to actualize powers in ways that could really support and satisfy our needs and our lives. It does so through so many painful, visceral experiences of lost powers, of being trapped, or of not being able to develop and enrich powers in the first place.

A simpler way of developing this point is to reflect on just how persistently and increasingly aware we are of constrained or limited powers. The intuitive appeal of the idea can be felt in so many versions of, "If I only had more free time", "If I only had 'x' more dollars", or "if we just had more comfortable access to this or that social institution." While specifying how even just one of time, money, and institutional access shape and co-constitute human powers is far beyond the scope of this paper, SRT provides the theoretical frame to think these as constraints or fetters on developing and then actualizing our living powers to satisfy needs. SRT, in other words, can see capital as a logic of constraint, set on its path by the combined effects of an abstract though persistent imperative to valorize and the shifting social institutions harnessed to that yoke.¹¹

SRT recognizes that nearly everyone is highly constrained from developing and using the power required to satisfy our needs, and can suggest different, more humane arrangements. Rearranging

¹⁰ I want to thank Rosa Patterson for helping recognize the danger of a social theory that naively values "powers" and "capacities" taken from the existing ableist social framework.

¹¹ That these processes are intelligible via a *logic* brings the account on offer here close to that offered by Tony Smith in *The Logic of Marx's Capital* (28-42).

access to our powers and reconfiguring how they are produced would, in turn, reconfigure lived experience and thus also the nature of needs and powers themselves. To rely on Marx in "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844", under existing arrangements our life activity frequently appears as a means to satisfy our most simple and immediate needs, rather than as a vehicle for their rich exploration and proliferation (274-275). Since humans are not and, despite homogenizing tendencies, can never be, pre-programmed machines, human powers can be freed to realize themselves in even more creative, diverse and free ways than we can imagine today. We know this is true because even today's constrained powers can be actualized in thousands of different ways and can produce the satisfaction of needs that far surpass what previous eras could even dream of.

So, when a theory of social reproduction values the power to intentionally act, what is being valued is this richness, diversity, and the historical open-endedness and self-direction of powers fully freed to develop and satisfy needs. SRT can promote a normative commitment to this rich plurality of powers even, or more precisely, *especially* when they appear as an *unrealized* and constrained set of potentials under conditions of capitalism. This normative commitment would be a challenge to the ways the richness of human powers and activities is form-determined and alienated by the requirements of capitalist social reproduction.

This way of centering and valuing labor powers, that is, the in-principle diversely realizable power to satisfy richer needs, allows us to see the ways capitalist social relations produce and reproduce labor power not in rich but in poor, and highly disempowering ways. By centering labor power, SRT can displace the question of which and whose labor is to be valued, and instead focus on the higher order question: how does the production and reproduction of the power to satisfy needs produce workers' powers in a form that is needlessly constrained and impoverished?

Exploring how the strength, self-direction, and diversity of these powers is weakened, directed by alienating forces and logics, and homogenized when not outright denied of course requires paying close attention to the ways race, gender, ability, cultural patterns, family form, immigration status, and so many other capacity-informing social relations either free up or limit the development and actualization of richer powers. So, more than most other versions of Marxist social analysis, SRT demands that oppressive social logics not only be studied, but integrated into its critique of capitalist social relations for the violence they do to the powers for need-satisfying activity.

Yet, as with the issue of "workerism", this does not have to take on a dangerously productivist faith in the supposedly inherent value of an infinitely expanding set of powers always and automatically oriented towards their actualization. This ideology has justified global climate change and ecological devastations which magnify and further stress already constraining social logics in ways that, in turn, produce and reproduce gendered, racist, and increasingly xenophobic disempowerments. SRT can object to any social relations that make exercising our powers produce impoverishing consequences (private ownership over the energy sector for instance), as well as the particular activities that would be impoverishing (extracting carbon for energy).

Further, and in the great tradition of providing radical accounts of labor powers, social reproduction-informed accounts can focus on and value labor powers organized *against* their actualization. These self-restrained powers can take the form of work slow-downs, work-to-rule, and the most powerful form: the strike. Through withholding actualization, labor powers can be recognized as powers in stark tension with the ways they are forced into being actualized in highly disempowering ways.

Critique of the Form of Labor Power

This perspective can inform SRT's response to the charge that it would be reproducing an ableist normative framework. Yet, the stress on power, capacity, even potency at the root of SRT's value-commitments may indeed give some reason to pause. There really must be some response to the challenge that, without further explanation, would be due from those theorists and activists who remind us to never conflate valuing workers' powers with the violent normalizations that render those with fewer or different powers as if they were *valueless*.

An SRT response here cannot take the same tack as the above responses to the challenges posed by workerism and productivism. For those who have socially diminished or unrecognized powers to satisfy needs, theorizing and practically developing powers to *not* work does not hold the same promise as it does for those who have socially confirmed capacities. The radical potential to withhold the power to work is not, in other words, held in the way same by those who are embodied and immersed in social relations that reduce their ability to wield this radical weapon.

Yet, more than most other theories, SRT is well positioned to investigate the social relations and dynamics that produce some abilities as *disempowered*, one prominent form of which is greater difficulty accessing formal, waged labor markets. By focusing less on individuals and more on the ways social

logics organize how powers can be actualized, SRT avoids the tendency to pathologize or accept existing, purportedly natural determinations of ability and disability. What any individual can and may be permitted to do to satisfy needs is not a brute, biological or physical fact, but is socially determined in ways that SRT can see as open to being critically challenged and actively replaced.¹²

Crucially, Marx's rallying cry in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* demands "from each according to his abilities," only *after* overcoming bourgeois relations' constraints on the social development of ability (87). Indeed, in the same text, Marx called any approach "obsolete verbal rubbish" that would, instead of changing the social relations determining what people can do, focus on returning to workers just what they can produce given existing social determination of their powers (87). In stressing how social relations of production are constraining, SRT can extend Marx's valuable insight and frame a normative commitment to labor power as a critique of social logics that institutionalize, normalize, and reify disempowering ableisms.

So, when SRT holds that the locus of its theorizing is need-satisfying labor power, the current organization and scope of that power as immersed in and reproducing power for capitalist social relations is *entirely* thrown into question. The form that need-satisfying power takes in its appearance as labor power in capitalist societies is not a simple, natural fact. This means labor power's form-determination is subject to being challenged. In the same way, none of the facets that give labor-powers' individual and social determination are simple, natural facts, and they too can be challenged. Race, gender, ability, family, immigration status, and so much more are all mutable social determinations. They are reproduced and have power by being actualized in ways that often constrain how individuals have powers that can be actualized and needs that can be satisfied.¹³

Recognizing social constraints on need-satisfying power also means recognizing that these powers vary depending on social conditions. In one of the *Grundrisse's* discussions of the many-sided human, Marx put it this way: the "creation of new branches of production, i.e. qualitatively new surplus time, is not only the division of labour, but also the separation of a definite kind of production from itself as labour of a new use value; the development of a constantly expanding comprehensive system of different kinds of labour, different kinds of production, with a corresponding system of ever more extended and ever more varied needs" (306).¹⁴ If capital's expansion changes the relations and value of labor power, then radically different, non-capitalist, relations would not merely create different paths to satisfy infinitely expanding needs. They would alter the very form of needs as well as the very form of powers required to satisfy them.¹⁵

Whereas our existing social organization form-determines powers in ways that orient their actualization towards capital-valorization, a freer organization of power would disrupt this dynamic. It would replace this violence with an order that develops and actualizes robust human powers as themselves the very point of socially reproductive activity. Such an inversion of social relations would, in other words, sponsor labor power as a vehicle for its own further empowerment.

A Normative Commitment to the Horizon of Emancipation

Now that what it means to value labor power over and against its constrained forms has been unpacked, SRT's second possible normative commitment is much easier to develop. As should be clear, SRT is committed to a social order that sustains and develops human powers in ways that do not subject them to needless social constraint. Such a social order cannot be one in which a segment of those who work are pitted against and reliant for wages on those who either do not, or do so by controlling and directing the process by which power is actualized. On the other side, the foundation of this social order cannot be one in which those who do not work, or do so with greater life-chances, benefit from oppressive

¹² See Jenkins, "Disability and Social Stratification". A social reproduction frame can respond to Jenkins' resistance to class analysis. We can follow the way Garland-Thomson describes the "misfit" disjunction between "bodies with particular shapes and capabilities" and "the particular shape and structure of the world," while centering capitalism as a structuring this disjunct (594). For instance, see Russell and Malhotra, "Capitalism and Disability".

¹³ In "Gender and Social Reproduction" Amy De'ath suggests pursuing the social reproduction of gender and gendered labor through the question of value-form. Maya Gonzalez tracks this gendered logic through indirect, unwaged market mediation in "The Gendered Circuit: The Arcane of Reproduction".

¹⁴ Here and in what follows I refer to *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, a preparation for *Capital*, by its more common name, *Grundrisse*.

¹⁵ Since SRT problematizes the very form of labor powers, its critical edge is close to Postone's in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Labor powers are commodities and therefore have their form, at least in part, determined by the homogenizing logic of capital. This holds whether they are actualized in productive or unproductive manners.

logics that require disempowering others.¹⁶ Taken together and pushed to its conclusion, this just amounts to saying that SRT is committed to a social order that is organized around the liberation and self-development of powers for need-satisfying activity.

Now, after these two possible normative commitments: labor power, and the conditions that would really free them, there remains the question of political strategy. How can we move from the first normative commitment to the second? To be sure, even if all social reproduction theorists are committed to the power to organize and satisfy needs, and have some horizon of emancipation in their sights as the key to freeing such power, the political strategies to span the yawning divide between the first and the second are quite diverse. Different social reproduction theorists themselves will have different accounts of what a free society looks like and different positions on the political strategy best suited to realizing their goal. Like any theory, SRT cannot be reduced to a singular practical strain. That said, there are a few broad practical consequences of the theory that can be developed assuming the two normative commitments I have developed are taken on board.

The first is a methodological point about labor power that departs, however briefly, from Marx's account of labor as such. Marx held that:

The fact that the particular kind of labour is irrelevant corresponds to a form of society in which individuals easily pass from one kind of labour to another, the particular kind of labour being accidental to them and therefore indifferent. Labour, not only as a category but in reality, has become here a means to create wealth in general, and has ceased as a determination to be tied with the individuals in any particularity. This state of affairs is most pronounced in the most modern form of bourgeois society, the United States. It is only there that the abstract category 'labour, 'labour as such', labour sans phrase, the point of departure of modern [political] economy, is first seen to be true in practice (*Grundrisse* 41).

Social reproduction theorists tend to insist that Marx here overstates the ease of passage from one form of work to another, and that particular kinds of work are neither natural, nor are they accidental and indifferent.

While accepting that an economic account of capitalism requires abstract labor and the socially average labor time theorized in *Capital*, social reproduction theorists key into Marx's recognition, also in *Capital*, that, "The equalisation of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz., expenditure of human labour power or human labour in the abstract" (84). This abstraction is necessary to understand the nature of capitalist economy and labor power in its commodity-form, but it leaves off the more concrete, particular forms of constraint on our labor powers. Fortunately, this birds-eye view can be connected to a social reproduction approach that allows both, in a combined way, to provide a completer and more compelling picture.

Each instance of laboring activity is a specific and specifically constrained actualization of the totality of labor powers. No matter how analysis requires that specific instances be seen as abstract, fungible, homogenous, and part to the total expansion of value, labor powers are always also actualized in a specific, concrete activity.¹⁷ But the opposite view also holds. It does not matter whether the actualized labor power in question prepares others' labor powers without itself being exploited or if it directly produces surplus value, because all concrete labor is dominated by the abstract logic of capital. The home health-care aid working for a for-profit company relies on the same powers and may perform the same activities to help infirm strangers as they do when helping an infirm relative at home. Both instance are subject to domination by commodities, money, and capital generally.¹⁸ Those who focus *solely* on abstract human labor can construe social reproduction only in an abstract, zoomed-out sense, while those focusing on the particularities of concrete labor zoom in and risk missing the evolving forest for the trees. SRT, however, offers a variable lens, which can synthesize accounts of social processes that highlight their violence.

¹⁶ Sara Farris explores a classic instance of this dynamic with a social reproduction framework in *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*.

¹⁷ Posner and Gonzalez develop the view that abstract and concrete labor are co-extensive and co-constituted in "Capitalist Production and Social Form".

¹⁸ In *The Logic of Marx's Capital*, Tony Smith writes "the logic of unpaid domestic labor...leads us back to, not away from, value theory. Even though such labor is not itself produced as a commodity and does not participate in the valorization process, it is still subjected to the commodity form, the money form, the capital form," and these forms, "structure domestic labor in a society of generalized commodity production quite as much as they structure wage labor, despite the fact that the latter is commodified and the former is not" (111).

To be sure, specific actualizations of labor power do contribute to social regimes of value and the generation of capitalist "wealth in general". But their specific embodied work also shapes possibilities for actualizing further labor powers in ways that depend on such concrete labor *not* being the labor Marx described in *Capital* as being "sans phrase" (68). So when Marx then immediately insists that the concrete form by which labor appears in capitalism is really just a cover for its unavoidably abstract fungibility (69), SRT can take this appearance of concrete diversity as a pale, distorted, reflection of a normative commitment to valuing labor power and the social relations through which it would be empowered. The forced smile of the affective laborer tokens, in its specifically contorted way, the violence of constraining labor power to appear in the guise best suited to a specific industry's demands for abstract labor. It also reminds us that every capital-coerced smile is embodied, which is also to say that the violence of abstract labor is visited upon gendered, sexed, and raced bodies in ways that directly push profitability at the cost of twisted emotional lives. Of course, this contorted existence is unevenly borne by a highly segmented working class.

SRT thus provides a frame to magnify disempowered workers' struggles, which are most often the struggles of women, queer, and racialized people as they respond to the limited and disempowering ways their potentials are oriented towards actualization. This is the case recently in the wave of U.S. teachers' strikes that began in West Virginia in 2018, and which spread like wildfire in the following months. A social reproduction frame allows us to understand the striking workers as gendered—not as an identity add-on somehow divorced from their work, but as constitutive for their labor power, now transfigured into resistance. As Tithi Bhattacharya describes it, "Their gender is not incidental to this strike, their narratives of fear about their families and health, are not backstories to what is merely a wage struggle. It is time to consider these "backstories" as central and constitutive of the strike wave" ("Women Are Leading"). It is not incidental that these strikes are strikes by women because it is not incidental that worsening labor conditions, compensation, benefits, and security are realities for public-sector jobs like teaching that are disproportionately held by women.

What would we miss if we understood the public school strike wave to be simply a strike of education workers? What, in other words, would we miss if we dropped the gendered reality of the attack on teachers' powers and their response to their disempowering situation? SRT can suggest that we would be slipping into the absurd idea that amorphous and indeterminate "education workers" were doing the political work of confronting capitalism's hollowing-out of public institutions. By acknowledging how "educational workers" tend to be gendered, and that they can be fleshed out with further determinations, such as race, sexuality, and ability, we can gain deeper insight into ways in which "women's work", for instance, is socially constrained. We can also further specify how these constraints can be challenged by working class struggle, while simultaneously attending to the ways in which working class response is comprised of racialized, gendered, and so many other determinations of labor power.

In this light, SRT holds that in order to transform workers' power from its diminished state to a vehicle for realizing its freedom, committed radicals have to first clarify the different ways the potential for work is determined by more than the mere fact of being a worker. In organizing powers as a force for freedom, the "key insight," for Cinzia Arruzza, is that

the question of whether class struggle should take priority over 'identity-based' struggles [is] not only obsolete but ultimately misleading. If we think of the class as a political agent, gender, race, and sexuality should be recognized as intrinsic components of the way people concretize their sense of self and their relation to the world, and are therefore part of the way people become politicized and engage in struggle. In lived reality, class, race, and gender inequality are not experienced as separate and compartmentalized phenomena that intersect in an external way (From Social Reproduction 195).

This means that working class struggle for power within and beyond capitalist constraint need not always be enjoined by a self-conscious working class organizing explicitly and exclusively on the basis of that consciousness. Social theorists and radicals committed to supporting such struggles ought to have the strategic goal not simply of injecting workers with a consciousness appropriate to their powers, but of uncovering and supplementing labor powers – in all their varied forms – as the keys to fighting for a different, more freeing set of social relations. And in the end, freer social relations are just those through which labor powers and the social dynamics of their actualization would be transformed from circuits of exploitation and oppression to causes of their greatest possible freedom.

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