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Productive and unproductive labour in  
reproductive work

*Karen Helveg Petersen*



# Productive and unproductive labour in reproductive work: changing modes of exploitation

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*Karen Helveg Peteresen, independent researcher<sup>2</sup>*

**Key words:** *productive and unproductive labour, economic and social reproduction, surplus value, exploitation, feminist Marxist economics*

**Abstract:** The paper discusses modern Marxist theories of social reproduction of the working population in a narrow, economic and broad, societal sense. It finds that their quest to extend productive work to include all labour which contributes to reproduction, falls short both of Marx's theory and evolving empirical realities. Instead, four historical phases can be detected in capital's inroads into reproductive work, corresponding to changing forms and splits between productive and unproductive labour and the class agents (worker, notably male/female division of labour, capitalist firm or state), who are in charge of carrying out or funding reproduction activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Economist, Ph.D. and independent political-economy researcher. Email: zkarenhelveg@gmail.com.

## Introduction

Modern Marxist theory either ignores the distinction between productive and unproductive labour or subsumes service work under the category of productive labour. Marx clearly stated, though, that labour whose services are consumed directly without market intervention is remunerated outside of the capital circuit of surplus value production.

The value of labour power is determined like any other commodity, by the abstract labour measured in the time spent on producing it. However, Marx vacillated between determining the value by the necessities of the individual labourer, including a 'historical and moral element' (economic reproduction), and the wider reproduction costs necessary for the regeneration of the societal labour force over time (social reproduction). Deliberately, he did not unfold these wider requirements for reproduction of society.

Feminist Marxist economics is correct in wanting this omission rectified. It should be done by examining the capitalistically produced goods and concrete work going into the reproduction of those who are involved in or a precondition of productive work and thus setting the bar for the exploitation of labour power and class struggle.

Ever more spheres of life are subsumed, directly or indirectly, under productive surplus-value generating work by the capitalist drive. It is the thesis of this paper that four logical-historical phases, corresponding to evolving forms of exploitation and reproduction, can be distilled in the transformation of reproduction in the tension between productive and unproductive labour since early industrialization.

The arenas are increased productivity and class struggle, legal and political fight for gender equality and equity, mechanization of housework, industrialized food production, the state taking over care for children and the elderly, and explosive expansion of education and health services.

The subordinate role of the Global South is integral to the guiding political-economy question if exploitation is increasing or decreasing.

The paper discusses Marx's concepts as they apply to wider reproduction, by first examining his texts, afterwards looking at modern Marxist elaborations. First, unproductive work must be clarified. The main theoretical question is whether non-market production such as housework is value producing.

Therefore, the split male/female work and roles in reproduction is a constant undercurrent in the paper.

Newer Marxist theory, not least the feminist branch, concludes that domestic work is value producing by the simple fact that labour power has to be produced and reproduced by such work. Some Marxist feminist scholars also argue that 'important reproductive work' should be 'recognized', not only in money terms but in terms of contribution to class struggle.

The approach here is to situate the crux of the discussion in the dynamic and perpetually changing pattern of productive and unproductive labour in reproduction. 'Capital' clearly favours productive work to unproductive, hence its tendency to replace unproductive work with productive or look-alike work, to substitute it with capitalistically produced goods or services or to reduce reproduction costs by rationalizing necessary but unproductive work through state intervention. These developments are traced through four phases in three different dimensions: exploitation, roles in social reproduction and the split productive/unproductive work. Also to note that the progressive bourgeoisie, not least the women, have fought for and brought about legal improvements, which raised the standards of reproduction by setting a bar on exploitation. The specific question of the government's role in social services such as education and health is highlighted subsequently.

New frontiers of reproduction are presenting themselves. Higher standards of living for workers and their families in the most industrialized countries were linked up with the subordination of peripheral countries or outright colonies to the needs of the most developed capitalist countries. Modern imperialism continues old imperialism's procurement of cheap goods for the reproduction of workers, now in the form of industrial goods. Rich countries display national differences concerning the ultimate purveyor of social services, varying from emphasis on the individual or household to the firm and the government. Another aspect is the changing production conditions of the basic foodstuff that is central to reproduction costs, especially in these times of impending ecological and climate crisis. New feminist strands and intersectionalism are discussed for their contribution to or modification of the theory.

### Marx's concepts of reproduction

Marx stipulates in *Capital* Vol 1 that "the value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the

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production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article.” (Marx 1990, p. 274). In the general case, *das Kapital im allgemeinen*, this implies that the owner of labour power, the free labourer, earns enough to maintain himself and his family for a reasonable life span and with the ability to reproduce themselves. This comprises daily maintenance as well as wider reproduction.<sup>3</sup>

Marx goes on to write, “Therefore, the labour-time necessary for the production of labour-power is the same as that necessary for the production of those means of subsistence; in other words, the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner.” (Marx 1990, p. 274). Clearly Marx thinks of the bearer of labour power and value production as being produced by the same type of work that he exercises, viz. work which results in commodities that are reproducible, distinct and divisible and that therefore can be translated to time spent on their production. Such labour is also capital-productive, by yielding surplus value. This is the narrow concept of production of labour power.

The necessary requirements of the owner of labour power are a product of history (Marx 1990, p. 275). The costs of education are included in the value of labour power, but Marx seems to narrow it down to the special education needed which can be reduced to “an equivalent in commodities of a greater or lesser amount.” (Marx 1990, p. 276).

“The ultimate or minimum limit of the value of labour-power is formed by the value of commodities which have to be supplied every day to the bearer of labour-power, the man, so that he can renew his life-process.” (Marx 1990, p. 276). However, labour power cannot be fully reproduced if only the minimal daily supply is delivered, in which case labour power falls below its value (Marx 1990, p. 277).

The domestic work carried out to uphold working class families, such as procuring inputs cheaply and preparing them for consumption, is necessary labour. Women have historically undertaken the family’s domestic work of cooking, cleaning, sewing and repair over and above affective services (to put it cynically). Although this is called necessary but not productive work in Marx as it is only use-value producing, it has costs that are part of the ‘value of labour power’. The fact that domestic labour is non-productive, does not therefore imply

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<sup>3</sup> The subject of labour power in Marx’ writing is the male.

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that productive labour does not go into it. Following Marx, it is a case of infinite regress.

We know that there will be downward pressure on the value of the goods that the working classes buy. This phenomenon became prevalent with the imports of food stuff and daily luxuries from overseas in the mid nineteenth century. In our own times we get cheap industrial products from the Global South<sup>4</sup> and China. The plethora of useless junk that can be had cheaply can give the illusion of prosperity for a time.

Another point is important though. Marx seems to assume that the woman in the working-class household has paid work for he explicitly talks about the “worker’s replacements, i.e. his children” (Marx 1990, p. 275) as reproduction costs, not directly about the female partner’s role in it. The female had to reproduce herself and her family through paid work in Marx’s time and thus she was just as exploited (if not more) in the work place as the male, and in addition she endured the burden of household work and particularly of child rearing although this was often scant in the mid nineteenth century. This is vividly illustrated by Friedrich Engels in his *Conditions of the Working Class in England* from 1845. Women were even preferred to men in spinning and weaving.

Proceeding from capital in general, the ‘value of labour power’ manifests itself in wages, the price of labour power that nowadays is complemented by social benefits, education and health services, pension schemes and other transfer income.

Part of the reason for the absence of the costs of wider social reproductive work in the value of labour power in Marx’s oeuvre may be due to the fact that they were so minimal at the stage of capitalist development of his time, often paraphrased as the costs of bread and therefore of corn. A question is if this stage should rightly be identified as *super exploitation of labour power* and not just the period of *absolute value extraction*. The latter implies the attempts by capitalists to stretch the working day to the maximum whereas super exploitation refers to wages and other working conditions that are so miserable that reproduction will

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<sup>4</sup> Broadly defined as the low-income countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa that were previously called ‘developing countries’.

not proceed. Marx mentions the conditions of the Irish labouring class as a case of super-exploitation in his time.<sup>5</sup>

Capitalists can live with that ever so happily as long as there is still ample supply of labour power.

The Factory Acts of 1847 and 1850 restricted women's and young adults' working hours, which furthered the tendency to rely more on machines and make the work more efficient so that surplus value extraction could continue unabated, although in disguised form. Marx called it *relative surplus value* extraction. This productivity increase involved the expansion of consumption options, also for the working classes.

### Productive versus unproductive work – an evolving relationship

The question of unproductive work is contentious among Marxists. In this paper a rigorous Marxist political-economy approach is attempted, extrapolating from Marx's categories. The requirement is that the analysis of productive/unproductive work should be able to combine the basic concepts with capitalism's productivity drive and crisis-prone character in its restless pursuit of profits, or differently put, surplus value appropriated by capital owners.

First, the question is, strictly speaking, not about unproductive or productive workers but labour. Is the labour surplus-value producing or not. Is it capital-enhancing? To get at this, the circuit of surplus-value production starting from money can be summarized as money advanced to purchase inputs and labour power and thereby producing more value than what was put into the process.

This can be presented as:  $M \Rightarrow P(C + V) \Rightarrow P'(C + V + S) \Rightarrow M'$ .<sup>6</sup> Money (M) buys and sets in motion production inputs expressed in money value terms where C = machinery or fixed capital + intermediary goods + raw materials, and V = labour power. The result is more value product in terms of money (M') than entered the process. Thus it can both cover C, which is said to be reproduced in value terms<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class', by Tithi Bhattacharya (2017), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> In practice, the worker does not get an upfront payment. At the end of Chapter 6 of *Capital* Vol 1, Marx categorizes the money form of wages as payment for labour power that has already been expended.

<sup>7</sup> I.e. when it comes to fixed capital, only the part of its value that is transferred to the commodities produced and sold, in accounting translated to depreciation.

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and  $V$ , the labour power.  $S$  = surplus value. Evidently this outcome supposes that the products are sold at their value.

Unproductive labour has the following characteristics according to Marx: it does not yield surplus value, and it does not reproduce capital but is consumed directly and/or is paid out of revenue, not capital.<sup>8</sup> For example, in order to realize the newly produced value, including surplus value, on the market, costs are incurred that are deducted from surplus value. Such costs that do not add value but subtract from it represent unproductive work. But also this work is paid for, the work is evaluated and remunerated by various equivalences and negotiations. In addition, there is a perpetual movement around  $V$ , how much does it involve? Class struggle will change the boundaries but  $V$  must basically ensure economic reproduction and part of social reproduction. The other part of social reproduction will have to come from transfers and taxes on surplus value,  $S$ .

A lot of unproductive work goes into reproducing the workers. Whether a family member or a house servant cooks the family meal, is immaterial for its character of unproductive work. However, some unproductive work can transition to productive, such as domestic cooking being replaced by more and more manufactured ingredients and ultimately the purchase of industrially produced meals, all supposedly to make reproduction easier and thus liberate time for other purposes, be they work-related, domestic or leisurely. The reproduction costs can thus become part of capitalist processes and may be reduced when all is said and done, depending on efficiencies and productivity gains.

In the domestic sphere of reproduction, the workers who contribute are not only unproductive, but also unpaid. Their contribution is not to produce surplus value but to create and maintain labour power. But this unproductive work has a monetary cost which will have to be defrayed by the wage earner(s). One way to manage this is the double work of women, particularly, in the household and in the work place. Throughout capitalism's history ever more capitalistically produced commodities have entered the wage earners' consumption pattern, thus expanding the reproduction needs.

A means to both reduce and expand reproduction costs is the granting of debt to lower-income people to not least open up for owner-occupied housing to the

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<sup>8</sup> The most exhaustive analysis by Marx of productive/unproductive labour is found in *Theories on Surplus Value*, Volume 1, Chapter 4.



point that, in fact, their income at the limit equals the instalments on the debt they have incurred. In this way working-class households become exposed in the extreme to interest-rate changes. In older days the payment of usurious interest on loans and the fretting away of relatively large sums in gambling or betting houses were well-known curses. The poorer segments of the population also pay relatively more than the rich which can better exploit purchases of higher quantities etc.

Marxist economist Ben Fine (2018) characterizes the inroads of financial or outside capital into reproduction by three categories, commodification, commodity form and commodity calculation. The first is simply an expansion of the dominance of the commodity under capitalist conditions. For example, the purchase of precooked meals from a supermarket where productive work producing the food goes into it. The second term presents charges for services such as health care, which thus assumes the form of a commodity. The third phenomenon means that the commodity logic is introduced through pseudo-revenue streams. An example could be universities' calculation of the subsidies they get from the state according to their 'products', number of students passing exams and the like. The two latter types imply that capitalist logic and parasitic practices combine when the private sector takes over unproductive services with the public sector limping along.

There is a dynamic of waged and unwaged unproductive work within reproductive work. Of course capital interests would prefer that unproductive work was unwaged, but if some unproductive work can be transformed into productive work, then waged unproductive work for e.g. day care for children can be accepted if the net result is more surplus value. The condition at the household level is that the salary obtained will be higher than the cost of the care and the costs associated with work. If a day-care facility has a ratio of one employee to three infants, then the parents who work instead of taking care of a child in the hours of daycare, must earn enough to justify one third of the salary of the day-care assistant and associated costs. If paid for by the government, the taxes on workers and capital must cover the costs, but in addition capital may – in both cases – extract more surplus value from the additional labour input. Certainly, this gain is not always correctly assessed and by far exceeds the extra costs incurred by capital.

Public expenditures on transfer payments and public services going to the reproduction of the whole family are either defrayed out of taxes on the same

beneficiaries or out of surplus value as taxes or levies on profits, rent and capital income. In order to increase profits after taxes, capitalists have every interest in reducing the expenditures paid for out of taxes, even while – sometimes – recognizing that they represent necessary preconditions of exploitation.

### Newer Marxist approaches to economic and social reproduction

The writers discussed in this section are rather well-known in the literature, but by no means exhaust the field. I have, however, looked for the most advanced and interesting thinkers and all propose pertinent arguments. I will leave it to others to judge if the selection is up to the job.

The so-called autonomist Marxist, George Caffentzis, takes a longer and broader view by discussing the entire process of social reproduction, including procreation, sociality, political manifestations, the forming of the mind, i.e. non-market relations. But “Marx’s vision of capitalist economy is that of an immense collection of exchanges, with individually coherent circuits, where value is conserved, increased or decreased, and where commodities and money leap back and forth to other circuits in the course of each exchange, transmitting impulses in every direction.” (Caffentzis 2002, p. 5).

According to Caffentzis, Marx’s theory not only suffers from being too limited in terms of reproduction, but it also gets into conflict with reality because it only addresses the role of what has since become relatively fewer waged workers in developed economies. It cannot explain the subsistence farmers in the Third World, housewives, students and their radical movements, the informal economy,<sup>9</sup> in other words, the either unproductive or non-capitalistically engaged population. Or those working in extremely harsh conditions.

Again according to Caffentzis, all of these have various but different roles in exploitation. The subsistence farmer partly lives off her own produce, partly sells it in order to defray out-of-pocket expenses. The informal sector is constituted by small-scale sales, nourishing a layer of middlemen, all living off very small

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<sup>9</sup> Caffentzis does not use the term ‘informal sector’ as it is now understood, of being a monetized exchange that does not conform to the norms and rules of company registration and paying taxes. He includes in it subsistence agriculture in poor countries, which is based on traditional land rights that in thwarted form have survived to this day.

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margins. The housewife proper depends on personal arrangements for survival for her and the family.

Agreed that relations do not always change for the better, but can lead to more marginalization of large groups. A valid theory needs to pay heed to these developments. But, leaving aside for now the other categories, the housewife is disappearing rapidly in western societies,<sup>10</sup> the institutionalization of children is part of the reduction of domestic work, etc. Saying that non-market work is also producing value does not explain the economic logic between shifting emphases on non-market in-house reproductive work and public delivery, increasingly in private (outsourced) guise. In the sense of use value and comfort we all know that a lot of non-market effort is expended on the daily upkeep. Also waged workers do a dose of housework.

The Marxist point is that capitalism may be reproduced by all these structures and strictures, but for its own trajectory and crises it is surplus value and its distribution that counts. The tendency is to extend this over the globe and into the bedroom, even where the effect may only be further marginalization. In that sense all the groups mentioned by Caffentzis as not being covered by Marxist theory, are indeed included although the empirical specifics are under constant development. To keep in mind, though, that capital has a drive but not a plan.

A number of writers make a point of distinguishing between the broader concept of reproduction, social reproduction or even societal reproduction, and economic reproduction, the narrow concept of reproduction as maintenance and (re)creation of labour power. This distinction can be understood as if there are two spheres, a narrow production/work sphere and another where people reproduce their social existence. Are they related and how?

Federici (2010) reproaches Marx for not dealing with these issues, "Marx failed to recognize the importance of reproductive work because he accepted the capitalist criteria for what constitutes work and believed waged industrial work was the scenario where the destiny of humanity would be shaped." This criticism is not unusual but is strictly speaking beside the point. Firstly, because for Marx value production was not just a capitalist ploy, but a stark reality. And male workers were certainly also exploited. Secondly, because it fails to pay heed to the distinction between productive and unproductive work by imputing value

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<sup>10</sup> No radical 60's woman looked forward to conducting the life of a housewife! Some would want to live entirely outside of society though.

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production to domestic work – and implicitly to domestic workers - from the importance or revolutionary potential of this work. In this case, one can ask: how about surplus value: does the domestic worker, housewife, produce more than her own remuneration? Presented in this way, it is clear that the question is absurd.

Admittedly, Marx explicitly says that “The utilization of these different sorts of labour-power [men and women, children and adults, ed.], which is in turn conditioned by the mode of production, makes for great variations in the cost of reproducing the worker’s family, and in the value of the labour-power of the adult male.”(Marx 1990, p. 655). He just simply does not deal with these questions in the unfolding of the fundamental relations while at the same time writing that there is a natural diversity between the labour power of these groups. A diversity, one might add, which is no more ‘natural’ than that it changes importance and relevance through history, to the point of disappearing or being put to the use of more effective capital valorization (capital reproduction and expansion). Marx maybe saw that, maybe not.

Taking his cue directly from Marx, Fine (2018) points out that the value of labour power has two specifications: 1) the bundle of consumer goods necessary to produce it, 2) the socially necessary labour time (relative to the working day) it takes to produce these commodities. Especially the latter notion has some fluffy elements, socially necessary labour time not exactly being a handy concept. As Fine points out, this ‘time’ can also relate to many different bundles of goods.

Fine mentions this as an incompatibility, but instead it is at the very bottom of the duality or dialectics (if you so will) of the determination of the value of labour power. If the labour time of producing the standard bundle decreases through productivity increases, the labouring classes can fight for and obtain better conditions – a better standard bundle - while capital maintains hefty rates of surplus value. Sometimes a win-win for capitalists and workers may prevail.

Famously, over a long period after World War II in the western world, the opposite forces capital – labour with the state as arbiter by and large worked to the benefit of labour which got its fair share of productivity increases. This stopped in the ‘neoliberal period’ where government policy took a 180 degree turn and instead of promoting better working conditions and welfare, focused on aiding capital profitability.

## Capitalism's phases

A more constructive approach is to look at developments within capitalism that can be linked to its basic drive. Over the life of historical capitalism, social relations as they appear in reproduction have undergone transformations, always to the benefit of the reproduction of capitalist relations themselves. These transformations are due to the development of productive forces and physical and material conditions of people's lives and livelihoods. Typically, their appearance is related to crises or wars but they are basically driven by productivity changes (technology) and, increasingly, ecological phenomena as well as class struggle around necessary social reproduction costs in the midst of capitalism's turns.

Fine (2018) defines the following phases: the competitive, monopoly and state monopoly periods. The two first correspond respectively to the predominance of absolute surplus value extraction (extension of the working day) and relative surplus value (increasing productivity, typically by introducing labour-time saving machinery). The third period involves a situation of state intervention associated with mass production/consumption and 'Keynesian welfarism'. Here Fine leaves the connection to surplus value extraction and instead goes on to talk about neoliberalism and financialization which could qualify as a fourth phase where "socialisation of economic and social reproduction (and state intervention to promote it) has continued apace through the unanticipated process of financialisation that does itself underpin neoliberalism." No doubt, but I will try to be a little less cryptic below.

Feminist Marxist Nancy Fraser (2017) equates social reproduction work with a background condition of capitalism, which free rides on it, like it does on nature and public powers.<sup>11</sup> She sees this unproductive work as women's destiny, productive work as that of men, the first unpaid for, the second waged. But she does not engage in Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labour.

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<sup>11</sup> Public powers are endogenous to the capitalist system, though.

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Much like Fine, Fraser sees three periods, each of which characterized by its own internal contradictions:

The competitive liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the movement to limit factory work for women and children and domesticate female labourers. Emancipation was meant to avoid the double whammy of being protected under male dominance or becoming marketized as unskilled workers. Emancipation took the form of fighting for women's rights and equal role in society including access to work.

State-managed capitalism is then the second phase, going from the 1930's to the neoliberal period.

She identifies the third phase as financialized capitalism. In this phase states are forced to slash social spending and a crisis in care sets in, "best interpreted as a more or less acute expression of *the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized*

Indskrivning på lokale colleges, 2005

*capitalism*" (italics by Fraser, p. 21 in Bhattacharya 2017). Social reproduction is dualized, i.e. either commodified or privatized. By which she means that either external care is paid for or care is provided by low-paid workers (Bhattacharya, p. 32). She does not seem to include public provision in this scheme, as if it has ceased to exist. Household exploitation also comes about through debt, is another point of Fraser's.

### *The historical phases and dimensions of social reproduction*

Following the lead of Fine and Fraser, four phases that are directly related to developments in reproduction can be distilled in capitalism: i) early capitalism until around 1850, ii) the period from 1850 until World War II, iii) World War II until around 1980, and iv) 1980 until today.

These will be analyzed in three dimensions for each period: i) the type of surplus value extraction that prevails, i.e. the exploitation of labour power as per working hours and technological change, ii) the changing roles of agents within child rearing, education, health services and taking care of the elderly, iii) the relative share of productive and unproductive labour in reproduction and the source of funding.

Please note that this takes as its point of departure the working class. It also focuses on the divide men/women and the role of the government.

A short form of the findings concerning the phases/dimensions is presented in the following table.

Phases	Exploitation, surplus value form, wages	Roles in social reproduction	Share productive/unproductive labour and funding source
Early capitalism – 1850	Expansion of the working day, inclusion of women and children in work force – absolute surplus value or superexploitation.	Household work held at a minimum, children had to fend for themselves.	All reproductive work in the private domain.
1850 – World War II	Relative surplus value, productivity increases, women's and children's working hours restricted, eventually also men's. Better living conditions. Male industrial workers better paid than female.	Working class housewife emerging supported by the male breadwinner, rights of women articulated by bourgeois women.	More monetary expenditures spent on the home and clothing. More time devoted to bringing up children, who go to schools that are increasingly publicly funded.
World War II – ca. 1980	Expansion of work force, both more absolute and relative surplus value produced, working class and middle class women entering the work force in greater numbers, particularly doing paid care work, equal pay for equal work slowly on the agenda.	Welfare state increasingly taking over pre-school education and domestic chores alleviated, but women still primarily in charge of household work. Female-headed households increasing. Family law improved.	Education and public health services massively improved. State increasingly takes over as employer of care and education
1980 – today	Less surplus value created relative to capital apparatus, falling rate of profit. Profit being extracted by the private sector taking over public services. Surplus value transfer from Global South to the North enhanced through outsourcing, super exploitation of workers in the South widespread. Equal pay for equivalent work demanded in the North.	Pre-school and other public services that are taken for granted come under attack or are outsourced to private care providers hiring low-paid workers. Men increase their contribution to domestic work. Family structures and gender roles become more fluid.	Capital set free, downward pressure on pay for reproduction work sets in. Increased commodification of domestic work (takeaway, pre-cooked meals).



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## Explanation of the table

### *Exploitation*

In rough outline, in early capitalist days industrial and agricultural labourers worked themselves to the bone, not least through excessively long working hours. After long battles in Britain, change came with the Factory Acts of 1847 and 1850, reducing the hours of work for women and young adults to a maximum of 10 or 10.5 per day. In 1847 and 1853 child labour was restricted but still allowed. This had two significant consequences or at least corollaries, enforcing productivity increases and at the same time advancing the specialization of labour within the family. As the necessary commodities for the workers' consumption could be bought more cheaply because of higher productivity, a small 'surplus' above naked existence emerged that the male breadwinner could spend on better reproduction conditions for the family.

The living conditions of the working class thus slowly improved, and Silvia Federici (2010) rightly states that, "In Marxian terms, we can say that the development of reproductive work and the consequent emergence of the full-time housewife were the products of the transition from absolute to relative surplus." Strictly speaking it can be debated if reproduction costs fell or rose with this change, which may, truthfully, have affected working-class families less than their lower-middle class counterparts.

The value of labour power, the part of the working day that was required to reproduce the worker may have been the same, i.e. reduced by productivity increases, counterbalanced by letting the worker take home the same share as before through material improvements. Or maybe on a net basis the share going to the workers was decreasing but, given the growth of affordable material goods, the perception of a better life was created. The content of this better life, the consumption associated with it, was a win-win because it offered new opportunities for capital.

To overcome the crisis of the 1930's, during the war and especially after World War II, reproductive roles were increasingly taken over by the public sector and regulated by law. This build-up of the 'welfare state' can be seen as a way of rationalizing the reproduction costs of working families, aided by the introduction of 'labour-saving' devices in the home, all of which reinforced the mass (re)integration of women on the labour market, both factory and all kinds of services, not least those previously performed in the home. The outcome was

that the work force expanded and more surplus value could be extracted altogether, also creating new markets for capitalist goods such as automobiles. The 'cost' was that some of the tasks taken on in the home now were externalized and included in the state budget and thus funded out of surplus value taxes or out of the income of the workers themselves.

The benefit to capital was that new competencies and capabilities could be imposed on the labour force through schooling and education. Noteworthy also that, whereas 'in the beginning' public education was a bad copy of the upper classes' curriculum and modes of teaching, increasingly education should be directly geared to the needs of the sectors of the economy that were or seemed to be going full speed ahead.

In the fourth phase there is pressure on profits due to less surplus value created relative to the capital apparatus and its productivity, i.e. a falling rate of profit. The pressure to outsource public services to the private sector, as a means of extending profit generation without surplus value creation, is increasing. This is concealed by surplus value extraction from the Global South. Remunerated unproductive work intermingled with productive work in the work places of the developed part of the world and the distinctions between previously male and female work were blurred, although typically female and male occupations persist. Working-class and middle-class women started to demand full equality in all aspects of the labour market, in fact equal pay for equivalent work.

### *Roles in social reproduction*

The miserly conditions of early industrialization meant that household work was held at a minimum. Children in working-class households to a large extent had to fend for themselves and older children should take care of their younger siblings.

The working class housewife emerges in the second phase when living standards improved. Children should attend school and mothers took care of all aspects of domestic work. They could also economize on out-of-pocket expenses. Bourgeois women articulated equal rights for women, in politics gaining voting rights and improved rules of inheritance.

In the third phase women were still predominantly in charge of household work and child rearing, but the welfare state increasingly took over pre-school

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education and domestic chores were alleviated. Working and middle-class women were both in charge of the housework and working outside the home. Female-headed households increased with divorce rates going up and women's rights over their own body started to improve (family law).

Now, in the last phase, pressure on the reproduction costs set in, not least on public services and through cut-downs or stagnation in transfer incomes. Pre-school and other public services are taken for granted in most modern states, but the welfare state comes under attack and all layers of services have to justify their usefulness for the labour market.

Today's continued battle for full equality at all echelons of the labour market, in capitalist board rooms, in the management of mega corporations as well as in the home is a mix of different aspirations, from self enrichment and self realization to genuine solidarity and quest for gender liberation. Family structures and gender roles are becoming more fluid, but the pressures on the family do not abate. Demands for men to participate equally in domestic work are widespread and in 'modern countries' taken for granted, in principle. As an example, the demand that parental leave should be equally shared by the partners is gaining ground.

### *Productive and unproductive work in reproduction*

Finally, the third dimension where productive and unproductive work enters reproduction in different fashions.

All domestic work was unpaid and in the private domain of the working classes in the first phase. Most of the wages went to the purchase of food. Unproductive work was held to a minimum in the hotbed of early capitalism, at least for the toiling classes. Of course domestic work was carried out to excess in the bourgeoisie and aristocracy by multiple servants, paid (in principle) and overworked.

In the second period, more was invested in the home, women got support through the male's wages for the upkeep of the household. Mothers were getting more time to bring up children, and slowly 'the childhood' also for working-class children was recognized.<sup>12</sup> Children went to school, perhaps minimally, in public

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<sup>12</sup> The idea of childhood goes further back though, to Rousseau and Enlightenment, but as always the upper classes realized it first.

or charity schools, but the state did not commence to invest in workers until the latter part of the nineteenth century at the earliest. So in this phase the woman was dependent and reproduced by the male's wages and so were the children. Unproductive household work was increasing as part of better living conditions.

In the third period, education and public health services were massively improved. Here the state entered as the employer of expanded unproductive labour on behalf of both capital and workers. Therefore a certain balance, 'class compromise', between capital and labour was aimed at and the most successful countries were those who found that balance, like the Nordic countries. In this period mass consumption articles, capitalistically produced durable goods, entered the households in the form of appliances that could alleviate the domestic workload. Mobility was enhanced by the affordability of cars for the ordinary worker's budget. More 'things' and better clothing could be had. The other side was that the materials were perpetually cheapened. Many working-class families came to own their own houses through access to credit.

It was at this time that plastics and all types of chemically transformed raw materials came into mass use. Materials whose damaging effects only became known later on. In this way capital expanded its range enormously. So the material wealth was to a large extent capitalistically-engineered through exploitation and exhaustion of the natural environment.

In the fourth period capital was set entirely free, financial as well as investment capital, and the globe was engulfed in its machinery. This unleashed national capitals from their boundaries and made them less interested in protecting and developing labour power, rather exploiting it where it found it liberally available. Commodification of household tasks such as cooking accelerated. But also, unproductive work within the family itself is increasing rather than the opposite, taking a turn back in history. For example, grand parents are playing an increasing role in the care of children.

## Class developments and the role of the government

### *Class distinctions and legal progress*

The better-off bourgeoisie deals with reproduction differently than the typical working-class or lower middle-class family. For the upper middle-class no costs can be spared on children in order to make them fit to enter the modern world.

This bourgeoisie is increasingly making itself independent of public offerings of services and will as a counterclaim demand lower taxes.

In this way, the children of the rich have a path carved out for them that will as a matter of course make them successful. As a manner of speaking they are continuing the tradition of attending top schools like Eton and Harrow followed by Oxford and Cambridge in the British Isles. The college-entry scandals of select Hollywood celebrities is but the outward manifestation of this.

Obviously, it is also the higher echelons of the bourgeoisie that hire paid domestic workers, a trend that has strengthened in recent years. The richest of the rich have a host of personal assistants and staff and will themselves engage in select charities, thereby *inter alia* determining who are the deserving and the non-deserving poor.

But another point is worth making. It was mostly bourgeois women who formulated and fought for the liberation of women through equal political and civil rights, access to better education and health care at the level of society's means and eventually to jobs of all types and at all levels. Many better-off women expressly fought for bettering the lot of working-class women. But they also wanted and largely succeeded in modelling working-class women in their own image. The bourgeois nuclear family became an ideal and ownership of the family house was seen as a sign of arrival. Higher education of all children was a goal and upward mobility was forever the new creed, particularly after World War II. In some parts of the world it looked as if success was achievable and as if the inevitably created and recreated reserve army of capitalism was a case of bad upbringing. Economists developed tools to measure upward mobility and advised on how to achieve it.

The progressive bourgeoisie not only worked to improve the legal status of women but also on giving rights to citizens. Some of these achievements can be seen as ways to put a floor under the reproduction costs of labour power, fully in line with Marx's statement that the value of labour power contains a historical and moral element (Marx 1990, p. 275). Unfortunately, some of the constitutional provisions and international covenants ensured are too vague to be of much use in practice, but stalwart defenders try to interpret and uphold the right to work, for example, which is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This right can be extended to cover the right to safe transportation and better working conditions, in turns used to fight vulnerable

employment. Health care was introduced as a human right by the progressive wing of the Democratic party in the 2020 US primary election campaign.

### The changing role of the government in social services

That the household is subject to capital's inroads is obvious, more surprising that theorization about it is scant. 'Consumerism' is criticized for dulling the working classes. On the other hand underconsumption theories claim that too low wages will create insufficient demand to keep the system afloat, an insight which can be used to conclude either that capitalism is crisis-bound or that wages should be raised. Although I disagree with the assessment of consumption as the determining field of capitalism, it is obvious that consumption goods such as food, clothing, household items and means of transport shape the daily experience of capitalism's unfolding.

Reproduction in a wider sense is also part and parcel of capital's endeavour. It is a condition for upholding the worker, but the worker and working class's needs are changing over time and cyclically. On the cyclical upside, the working class can fight for better conditions and thus better reproduction. When the cycle turns down and layoffs are happening, there is pressure not only on wages but also on reproduction, both through the offerings of the employers and the state. So whereas the welfare state should operate counter-cyclically to the private sector's downturn and ensure the basics in hard times (economists talk about 'automatic stabilizers'), this has more and more shown itself to be delusional. There is pressure on social services and the welfare state when profitability decreases. The 'labour supply' policies of recent years, suppressing social benefits, have meant that wage demands could be ignored. The rhetoric has been turned on its head though: In order to give the unemployed - and those outside the labour force of working age - incentives to look for employment, work should offer better take-home pay than non-work. And therefore benefits should be decreased.

In the fourth phase, capital also started to capitalize on government services. Home care for the elderly, cleaning of public institutions etc. have been outsourced to firms who launched their bid by pretending they could perform the services better and more 'efficiently'. As they also need profit, they will procure extremely cheap labour. Often enough this labour is provided by

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immigrants, even immigrants who are not legally in the country and who are looked down upon to boot.

The household does not only buy capitalistically produced goods, but also services. These services can be private, i.e. hair cutting, or public such as education. In turn, public education can be provided by the private sector and paid for by parents wholly or partially, the rest being taken up by the government.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that more education is needed as productive forces develop, particularly directed at the higher echelons of the work force, including skilled labour power that adds more surplus value. In that sense education is not only necessary but also directly aiding in surplus value. Conversely, at times there are cuts in education, the study length is reduced, numbers of students per class is growing, teachers including university staff are dispensed with ... because there seems to be no direct benefit of the outcome.

For women's liberation, if 1968 changed everything for the better for women, how come that the welfare state started to come under attack some ten-fifteen years later? Or was the movement rather a climax of the previous liberation and freeing up of women's social forces in the midst of prosperity? The paradox is that now, so many years later, a new increased exploitation seems to emerge, but still leaning on some of the achievements of the 1960's movement. This comes about because the juxtaposition of shared domestic work between the partners and cut-down in many public services for working households – or less expansion than would have been optimal – is both an improvement in equality but also in many ways a decrease in freedom. This is tied up with a pressure to earn more money to obtain the life style craved, among others to defray the cost of housing, which takes up an ever larger share of earnings for most households, even after the financial crisis and the subsequent extremely low interest rates.

There is obviously a crisis of care. The tendency to copy unproductive waged work from productive work has led to demands for higher efficiency, which is difficult to achieve in care where more and better care is invariably labour-intensive. In fact, most of this is due to austerity prefaced on the poverty of the public purse and the need for budgetary discipline, reinforced after the 2008 financial crisis. Among the countries of the Global North, the US is a special case since social expenditures are traditionally modest and in addition, where they

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<sup>13</sup> In Denmark the government supports private schools through some equivalence to the costs per pupil in public schools.

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exist, are made up of a patchwork of specific narrowly defined programs. Even in a country like Denmark, which is outside the Eurozone and has a low public debt/ GDP ratio and, the EU budget rules are rigorously observed. The truth of the matter is of course not the need for the government to save, one can agree with MMT (Modern Monetary Theory) people on that, but rather capital's pressure to cut down on social reproduction costs.

At this point the tide may have turned and parents are demanding – even demonstrating – for better norms for children per properly trained staff member in daycare and kindergartens. This was an essential plank in the platform of the Social Democratic Party and its allies when it came into office in 2019. The corona crisis opened the public purse widely, especially to ensure income maintenance reinforcing the claim for more government social spending, even post corona.

An emerging policy debate is the provision of a basic income for all members of society, either to supplement or replace specific transfer incomes or to ensure decent lives for all. Although the idea is sympathetic it ignores the capitalist basis and assumes that a clean slice can be cut from it. As always, such attempts risk to be thwarted, *vide* the British universal credit, which merged six transfer schemes and at the same time reduced the sum total per family.

## Frontiers of reproduction

In the following I will address broader issues or new frontiers that are often overlooked in debates about reproduction because they are colonized by the male/female or, in recent times, 'identity' or section splits (more on that below). These frontiers concern, first, the relative prosperity of workers of the North compared with the South, although mighty changes are taking place, secondly, the differences in the funding of public services among western countries and, finally, the impending changes to be induced by the fight against climate change.

### *Imperialism*

Consumption of cheap agricultural produce and luxuries (tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, sugar in part) has been part and parcel of the working classes' diet in imperialist countries. Adding cotton, wood, oil, spices, tropical fruits and minerals makes it clear that the wealth extracted from the subdued countries had a dual purpose: to generate rent or profits for the colonial owners but also to offer exotic products at prices which made them affordable for ordinary people. It is



true that the sugar beet in part replaced sugar cane after the Napoleonic wars but dependency on tropical sugar has continued.

In our times the costs of reproduction have been eased by an enormous expansion of the range of consumer goods, not least electronic ones, affordable for practically all households of the Global North. These gadgets are not just replacing previous entertainment and education/knowledge tools but represent new additions to communication, leisure, politics, logistics, health - and offering possibilities of data mining, surveillance and control. At the same time, clothing and food have become relatively cheaper. These developments depend heavily on the outsourcing of industrial production to countries with lower reproduction costs of labour.

This takes place in a vertical value chain where the basic manufacturing takes place in the Global South and unproductive tasks are undertaken in the developed world. The current trade wars show uncertainty as to what serves whom. When Trump imposes tariffs on Chinese goods he thus hurts American manufacturing depending on subcontracting to China, and higher costs will be transferred to consumers. At the same time new production methods and higher value-added goods change the geography of where it pays to produce considering costs and risks of transport and distribution. The corona crisis faced by the world at the time of final editing of this paper may further this tendency.

### *National differences*

It is not yet a thing of the past that some Americans call countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway socialist. However, the differences between the European welfare state (Denmark is not that different from Germany or France in that sense) and the US really concern whether citizens have to defray major costs for education, particularly higher education, and health services out of their own pocket, i.e. salaries, or that of their employers or whether the costs are borne by the government (called single-payer system in the US). Both solutions can be used to pressure reproduction costs of workers. Overall, high net-worth individuals can of course insure themselves to obtain better services.

It is a sign of a richer country that it centralizes and unifies education and health under a government umbrella. It is also cheaper overall than individual solutions because services are rationalized. Individualizing social expenditures invariably fails. The US for a long time left it to firms to solve these questions for their

workers which has turned out not to be sustainable. In very poor countries parents have to pay even for primary schooling, if not officially, then unofficially.

There is a gliding transition from domestic unpaid unproductive work to paid unproductive work, be it defrayed by individuals/households, groups or by the public sector. Common for all solutions, capital will find inroads and try to exploit labour power in new ways. Whether achievements in government provision of public services are irreversible is an open question.

### *The environment and climate frontier*

The environment has traditionally been treated as a passive receptacle of capitalism's unsavoury cast-offs. However, a healthy environment and access to 'nature' (forests, swamps and lagoons, mountains, the sea, lakes and waterways) – in addition to directly economically exploited resources - is a condition of recreation and regeneration of life itself. Beaches and forests have become exploited to the point of abuse as money is earned off them. Overall, the environment has been treated stepmotherly by not paying sufficient attention to its fine balance. Regulations in EU countries are being stepped up a bit, but have not reached the point of hurting capitalist interests directly to this day.

Not to forget that reproduction covers food and drink, in the first line. Over the years, agricultural produce has become ever cheaper relative to wages in the Global North, but the quality has diminished with increasing industrialization, not only in the processing part but also in the basic cultivation methods and particularly breeding of domestic animals. In Denmark the pressure has been to produce more and more pigs to the world market, 34 million annually all told, both slaughtered and live.

This huge production takes place in confined circumstances where every detail of the pig's life is circumscribed. The sows are forced to give birth to more piglets than they can nurse and in ever-faster cycles. The CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are dramatic. The bottom line is that this aggressive production mode is keeping costs down to allow low consumer prices and thus holding reproduction expenditures of workers at a minimum. The middle classes spearhead the current revolt against agricultural pollution, abusive methods and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in favour of ecological production, and many consumers/workers seem to be willing to prioritize higher-quality foodstuffs.

When environmental legislation is passed, large firms complain. In agriculture, the pesticide question is illustrative. Roundup (glyphosate) is a case in point. Despite court cases in the US awarding huge compensations to the first plaintiffs in a series of lawsuits, the US Environmental Protection Agency continues to declare Roundup safe. The fight is ongoing in the EU, permitting the use of glyphosate until the next approval round at the end of 2022.

A forceful citizen's lobby is organized to attack a number of other pesticides, first of foremost neonicotinoids, destroying bees. The EU banned their use as of the end of 2018, but the prohibition is not universally observed.

Another concern is improved seed varieties that are monopolized by the like of Monsanto-Bayer who force poor farmers to buy them every year.

Should climate and environmental concerns be taken seriously, reproduction costs due to food will go up, but there is also a countertendency. If less meat is going into the daily diet, demand for animal feedstock will decrease. This will open up for increased cultivation of plant food for human consumption. The consequences of the transformation for reproduction are far from clear. The more so as the agrochemical giants are working hard to create GMO seeds that will obviate the need for the disputed chemicals. Agricultural rent is already low in the most highly developed countries, which should facilitate that more land could 'go back to nature' and become public - if industrialized agriculture does not win the day again.

### *Feminism and intersectionalism*

Policy-wise feminism has two main strands, one is that women should be remunerated for their particular contribution to child birth and rearing, the other is that women should have the same work, the same pay and the same share in work and reproduction as men. For tasks that only women can perform, they should have extra benefits. The idea of paying for reproduction tasks in the home is not in line with capitalist production logic, especially since a lot of tasks within the home have been reduced by that very logic. At most it is a political welfare-state battlefield, part of the basic income debate, with the same risks when translated to policy. Equal pay for equal or equivalent work is a fight within capitalism, on its own turf. Nothing precludes this from happening except old habits and norms.

Marx dealt with slavery but not with race as an independent issue, even less did he take on the other 'sections' such as ethnicity, sexuality etc. In fact, he treated the roles of men and women in *Capital* as they presented themselves in the working class of his time.

In order to give the theme of 'sections' full credit, the difference between oppression and exploitation should be clarified. Oppression is linked to historical factors and prejudices which handicap the designated groups in the job market or other spheres of social existence. Oppression does indeed go along with exploitation but not in a static fashion. It belongs rather in the socio-political field, hence its dominant role in the media, not least social media, and public debates.

Women were oppressed by patriarchal structures long before capitalism became dominant. Are women or other gender/section characteristics ever free and equal with 'men' or perpetually oppressed? Is this oppression built into capitalism or is equality possible within capitalism, i.e. can a form of equal exploitation obtain, subduing racial and sexist oppression?

Identity politics has been on the agenda in recent years. Intersectionalism is not a political-economy category but rather a sociological one, especially as it can include a host of different sections that are variously oppressed or marginalized (minority groups: racial and ethnic, religious, certain nationalities, handicap, LGBTQIA, besides the all-pervasive gender) and it is postulated that these cross each other. In the first place, one should recognize the differences in the categories, some are biological, some are identity-related as defined by the individuals, some are imposed on groups by hidden or overt social norms or prejudices, and others have to do with socioeconomic roles. A lot of interplay between these aspects takes place, but gender is the most all-encompassing, having biological, identity and social connotations. Religious groups are not biologically defined and are not a socioeconomic category either (normally), but perhaps act in ways considered suspicious by other members of society, who claim to uphold basic societal 'values', whichever they are.

The term 'sections' thus has its own ambiguities. Typically, the ultra-right considers certain historically disadvantaged groups as being biologically rather than socially defined whereas the left will maintain that historical and other disadvantages related to the sections magnify each other. The latter perspective is behind the birth of intersectionalism.

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David McNally gives intersectionalism a philosophical overhaul in the *Social Reproduction Theory* book where he points out that it depends on rigorous concepts of separate vectors (sections) that somehow intersect, i.e. they are not part of an organic whole. "Rather than standing in intersections, we stand in the river of life, where multiple creeks and streams have converged into a complex, pulsating system."<sup>14</sup> To be added: and where the current is capital. Along with the famous Black Panther icon Angela Davis he urges us instead to see the typical differences in the US between blacks in the south, northern workers and female oppression as a whole.

This said, no doubt capital exploits differences to its own benefit, or rather marginalizes minorities, but this does not mean that evolution does not take place in the treatment of these differences that may even cease to be important. After all, it is under capitalism in its later days that queer theory has flourished and the breakdown of many family, gender and sexuality barriers taken place particularly in the Global North.

One branch of feminist economics sits uneasily with Marxism. In fact it is methodologically and theoretically mainstream, although often associated with the left. It takes the shape of always pointing to the particular 'impact' of measures on women or children. If women use public transport more than men do, then public transport improvement is seen as a means to bettering the lot of women. Participatory budgeting can help to identify women's interests related to their particular role in production and reproduction in a given society. This is of course valid in many settings but can also become a bit far-fetched when generalized equally to all societies.

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate that roles in reproduction change but capitalist exploitation remains. No doubt, women's conditions have improved along with prosperity but overall, new arenas of exploitation have emerged alongside.

Reproduction costs are not only an integral part of exploitation, but of the value of labour power. And in this, the evolution of unproductive services plays a

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<sup>14</sup> 'Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory', op. cit., p.107-108.

major role. Domestic unpaid work was first increasing in the working classes, then complemented by public delivery of education and better health services, which in turn were paid for individually or by society at large. In addition, new devices in the home diminished the burden of household chores. This in due course freed up labour power. Some of the thresholds reached are perceived as lasting changes improving the lives for all. Nothing can be taken for granted, though.

Marx was most likely aware of the potential of increased unproductive reproduction work even in the working class and one can surmise that he saw its social non-valorization as a critical point of capitalism. Nor would Marx fail to recognize the revolutionary potential of reproductive work, which is indeed a condition of successful exploitation and capitalist production development. But these admissions do not present the need for revisions of Marx' critical political-economy points about the forms of capitalist exploitation, only concern their roll-out. A critical political-economy angle frames reproduction in the context of capitalism's processes and inroads into all spheres of life, not necessarily by considering one category of political economy as being 'better' than another. The term 'recognition' is also odd in this analysis.

Contrary to understandings where an exploitative capitalism only gives in to struggle, capitalism itself entails dynamic forces that change the lots of workers to its own benefit. The dynamics of these changes are not unidirectional but under perpetual renegotiation.

One can agree with Caffentzis that the share of workers engaged in productive work is decreasing, in the West at least, but Marx's point is that this is a problem for capitalism itself. It has therefore found smart ways to overcome this dilemma by also subsuming social reproduction under its direct reign, or indirectly through the government, in changing ways through the last couple of hundred years. The marginalization of the Global South, which takes on new and refined forms in recent time, is also not outside of capitalism, but part of its core drive to hold down labour costs, if necessary by dominating the world.

One can also easily agree with feminist Marxism that a host of extra-market activities are important and even life-giving, but the fundamental problem is capitalism as a system, not its rewards and micro justices or injustices. Fighting against them is laudatory but should not be scaled up in importance.

The pitfalls of adopting the revisionist value approach (domestic work produces value as much as ...) lie not only in the point that it is simply not reflecting capitalism's own driving forces, but that it tries to argue against capitalism on moral grounds while basically accepting it. Furthermore, the rigorous perception of a women/men dichotomy in reproduction is just not the case anymore. The revisionist-progressive analysis has a tendency to freeze situations and not be sufficiently willing to pay heed to the modifications and changes, not least of how 'capital' redirects its attacks on reproduction.

Roles and economies are changing rapidly in capitalism's drive to reinvent itself in the dramatic changes it undergoes, not least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its overthrow is on the agenda. In which case, there would be no productive or unproductive work. The end goal of abandoning exploitation altogether should not be lost from sight.

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