

ANASTASIA KALK

New School for Social Research, New York, USA

ORCID: 0000-0001-7358-2337

Feminist Care, Socialist Politics
A Review of the Social Reproduction
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Among the key feminist debates of the last five years, the discussions about *care* and *social reproductive labor* are among the most promising. For the first time since the 1980s and the publication of the classic book by Carol Gilligan *In a Different Voice* [Gilligan 1982], the category of care reenters the primary stages of feminist thinking. The feminized practice of care is increasingly discussed by such philosophers as Sarah Ahmed or Judith Butler both emphasizing the centrality of caring work for society's functioning. The collection of essays *Social Reproduction Theory* edited by Tithi Bhattacharya presents another compelling attempt to introduce care and social reproductive labor as the constitutive elements of human life and the current sites of political resistance to capitalism.

The book aims at inscribing the social reproduction sphere, practices of social care, into the understanding of capitalism's survival. It follows the older generation of militant Marxist feminists, who discovered back in the 1970-80s the inalienable role that female reproductive work plays in the capitalist economy. Almost half a century ago, socialist feminists, including Lise Vogel [Vogel 1983] and Sylvia Federici, began explaining the importance of reproductive work to their political allies, orthodox Marxists and other male left activists. They were fierce and convincing.

Anastasia Kalk — PhD Student, Department of Politics, New School for Social Research, New York. Research interests: History of Modern Political Thought, Feminist Theory & Social Movements, sociology of labor, theories of the commune, private sphere. E-mail: akalk@newschool.edu

Кальк Анастасия — аспирант факультета политики Новой школы социальных исследований, Нью-Йорк; Научные интересы: история политической философии, феминистская теория и общественные движения, социология труда, теории коммуны, частная сфера. E-mail: akalk@newschool.edu

However, as the authors of *Social Reproduction Theory* notice, there still remains a burning need to repeat that capitalism is not reducible to the world of wage labor and that the system, in fact, largely rests on free care labor predominantly performed by women. Far from being brand new, the idea that social reproductive work matters still could sound provocative, if not revolutionary, to Marxist and feminist ears.

In groundbreaking theory books about identities, sexualities, performatives, and even intersections published in previous decades, queer and feminist theorists have hardly ever analyzed gendered labor practices. Talking about labor has not been particularly attractive for third-wave writers. Both notions of «caring labor» or «social reproduction» have had a lot of bad references in the post-structuralist philosophy that associated the latter with *Marxist economic determinism*, *second-wave, structuralism*, and other well-known symptoms of the forgotten past. Postmodern feminist critique with its fear of economism that was once so productive, in a sense, went too far — ultimately moving theoretical focus away from any labor issues and protests.

On the one hand, *Social Reproduction Theory* pushes feminist readers to overcome their anti-Marxist allergies and finally take a bold step forward: to pay attention to the most devalued everyday experience, i.e., caring labor of mothers, teachers, political organizers, housewives, domestic workers, and nurses. On the other, the book asks contemporary left scholars continuously looking for a true revolutionary subject to consider reproductive female workers and their movements to be a part of the broader global working-class struggle against neoliberal capitalism.

Ten very different essays of the book tell stories about the International Women's Strike of 2017, domestic labor, childhood, pensions, and the history of the divide between production and social reproduction spheres. In her introductory chapter, Tithi Bhattacharya, one of the main organizers of the International Women's Strike in the US, following Kathi Weeks, Kate Bezanson, and Mex Luxton [Weeks 2011; Bezanson and Luxton 2006], urges scholars and activists to include multiple forms of reproductive labor into their social analysis. What kind of processes enable the worker to arrive at her workplace every day? — Bhattacharya asks. In addition to home care, workers, she writes, receive public education, health care, and other kinds of social benefits that make each of them «normally» functioning. Society members care about each other on an everyday basis, even though most of this vital work keeps being poorly paid if paid at all. This feminized social care keeps the capitalist system running, and the lack of it might lead to a severe political crisis.

Social Reproduction Theory consists of two main parts. In the first three chapters, feminist scholars explain *how* the capitalist market gradually created the boundaries between productive and reproductive/caring spheres, while symbolically associating women with the latter. The

authors featuring in this part, as different as Nancy Fraser, Sarah Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman, David McNally, Tithi Bhattacharya all unite in their desire to provide a systemic critique of capitalism. Fraser warns that the current stage of financialized neoliberal capitalism has squeezed our caring capacities to the breaking point. Working three or four part-time jobs to survive, people are no longer able to sustain social bonds, care about children, relatives or friends, let alone building any broader communities. They simply don't have enough resources and cannot afford hours of free labor. Such a society of isolated and constantly exhausted individuals could not last long.

As a response to what Fraser calls *the crisis of care* under capitalism a series of new grassroots movements (led by women) already began to emerge. Social reproductive workers: female migrants, domestic workers, nurses, teachers organize massive strikes demanding better pay. Furthermore, all around the world, protesters vigorously campaign for public care: affordable housing, free health care, clean water, and food security. In the US alone, once providing a certain relief for poor workers (and, of course, capitalists and politicians afraid of the revolution), as Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman write, state care programs of the New Deal and later those from the 1970s had declined by the 90s. In the 2010s,

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rents became too expensive. Water supplies were contaminated. Millions of Americans found themselves behind bars [...] a wave of social struggles has exploded in the US, many — unsurprisingly — on the terrain of social reproduction. American workers are fighting to keep their water from being turned off and struggling over their rents, their cost of living, and the state of transportation and education. They fight to keep their neighborhoods safe from racist police. They fight for access to welfare, health care, and child care. They are organizing against climate change. (Mohandesi, Teitelman, p. 65)

Like Fraser, Mohandesi, and Teitelman, Tithi Bhattacharya reveals capitalism's great dependence on unpaid gendered and racialized reproductive labor. Opposing Marxists who claim that the working class consists exclusively of wage workers, Bhattacharya explains that «it is utterly unclear why only the economic struggle for wages and benefits at the workplace must be designated as class struggle» (Bhattacharya, p. 85). She proposes instead to search for the seeds of class struggle not only in the «places where the working class works but the spaces where workers sleep, play, go to school.» (Bhattacharya, p. 91). Joining the previous contributors, the author wants to closely examine «extra-workplace struggles such as those for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies» as they exemplify the new wave of anti-capitalist working-class insurgency.

The second part of the book is much less clear and united. First, there is an essay by Susan Ferguson recovering some creative protest potential in children and their teachers. Although hazy, the chapter brings children into the world of reproductive labor discussions which is by itself a promising theoretical gesture. Similarly, another author Serap Sarita Oran introduces the elderly as another often disregarded group participating in the social reproduction process. Carmen Teeple Hopkins discusses two Marxist feminist traditions of talking about care labor, one of the autonomist Marxists (Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Sylvia Federici) and the other of socialist feminist writers (Margaret Benston, Lise Vogel, Paul Smith) having disagreements about whether the social reproductive labor has any use-value. In addition to her review of the debate, Hopkins briefly talks about neoliberal gendered and racialized migration of care workers from Global South to Global North describing how immigrant Filipina women experience exhaustion, danger, stress and search for support in church communities. Finally, in the concluding piece, Cinzia Arruzza insightfully recalls the history of International Women's Strike of 2017, i.e., the one-day women's strike from the loads of both productive and reproductive labor that initially began in Poland and then spread all across the globe, including the US.

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Social Reproduction Theory draws attention to a lot of neglected subjects in contemporary feminist and political theory: care workers, women's strikes, struggles for housing and ecology. Moreover, it shares an ambition to explain recent social mobilizations. That is why I find this collection exceptionally timely. This is the first political book that argues that care (female) workers fight at the front of today's anti-capitalist struggle. Yet, the project has its issues.

First, it is hard to say what exactly unites all the contributors beyond the common desire to study undervalued *care and social reproductive labor*. If there is a discussion around the *Social Reproduction Theory Project*, as Bhattacharya suggests at the beginning, I could not grasp its sides. I did not get a sense of the theoretical tradition, with both agreements and disagreements, that brings all these scattered essays together. What makes a Social Reproduction Theory a project beyond similarities in topics (housework, care)? And in what sense do today's social reproductive thinkers differ from the *classics*: Lise Vogel, Sylvia Federici, or Angela Davis? I got puzzled by these questions while reading. Authors of the book do not engage in dialogue with each other. Neither do they discuss works of other previous or contemporary theorists of social reproduction or care. I find this feature of the book quite disturbing especially given the fact that *Social Reproduction Theory* is not the only text raising the questions of female reproductive labor today [see, e.g.: Katsarova 2015; Nadasen 2016; Ticktin 2011].

The second book's issue is closely related to this first one. The authors of *Social Reproduction Theory* use the terms *care* and *social reproduction* very differently from each other; and the book neither maps nor questions those non-systematic ways in which feminist thinkers tend to employ these two concepts.¹ Instead, the project of the book encourages its readers to call almost every practice and social institution caring/reproductive as long as the latter keeps the capitalist machine running: unpaid housework, child-rearing, political movement organizing, teaching at school, working at a hospital, shopping, caring about elderly parents, working at state administration, yoga training, etc. — all these practices could count as reproductive. Formulating such a broad and all-inclusive definition of social reproductive work, the book, in my opinion, fails to provide analytical tools that would help to differentiate, for example, between individual/family (housework) and institutional care (schooling) representing two structurally separate spheres of social reproductive labor. Finally, is there any conceptual distinction between *social reproductive work* and *care* or, we could, following the authors of *Social Reproduction Theory*, just use them interchangeably? These are all important theoretical questions the book leaves rather open.

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Despite the aforementioned difficulties, this collection is definitely worth reading for anyone interested in contemporary feminist discussions and political theory. It opens a rare conversation about the recent wave of female-led protests while also bringing a new life to the forgotten socialist feminist tradition. Arguing primarily against orthodox Marxists and some union activists, *Social Reproduction Theory* draws left political attention back to the fact that capitalist society's functioning heavily relies on unpaid or poorly paid female reproductive labor; and that working women all around the globe are increasingly protesting against their exploitation.

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1 Rada Katsarova very aptly describes this particular feature of social reproductive labor discussions of the last fifty years in her text: "In other words, the range of writings on social reproduction, which appeared more or less coevally in the late 1960s and the 1970s, were not necessarily in dialogue with each other and do not form a coherent theoretical or political body of work. However, they all came to the concept of social reproduction at the particular juncture of the crisis of Stalinist Marxism, to criticize orthodox Marxist analyses of labor and exploitation and expose the blind spots in orthodox conceptions of working-class struggle" [Katsarova 2015].

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