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How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class

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> Labour-power is a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist. Why does he sell it? It is in order to live.
>
> —Karl Marx, *Wage-Labor and Capital*

Since its very formation, but particularly since the late twentieth century, the global working class has faced a tremendous challenge—how to overcome all its divisions to appear in shipshape, full combative form to overthrow capitalism.[1] After global working-class struggles failed to surmount this challenge, the working class itself became the object of a broad range of theoretical and practical condemnations. Most often, these condemnations take the form of declarations or predictions about the demise of the working class or arguments that the working class is no longer a valid agent of change. Other candidates—women, racial/ethnic minorities, new social movements, an amorphous but insurgent "people," or community, to name a few—are all thrown up as possible alternatives to this presumed moribund or reformist or masculinist and economistic category, the working class.

What many of these condemnations have in common is a shared misunderstanding of exactly what the working class really is. Instead of the complex understanding of class historically proposed by Marxist theory, which discloses a vision of insurgent working-class power capable of transcending sectional categories, today's critics rely on a narrow vision of a "working class" in which a worker is simply a person who has a specific kind of *job*.

In this essay, I will refute this conception of class by reactivating fundamental Marxist insights about class formation that have been

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obscured by four decades of neoliberalism and the many defeats of the global working class. The key to developing a sufficiently dynamic understanding of the working class, I will argue, is the framework of social reproduction. In thinking about the working class, it is essential to recognize that workers have an existence beyond the workplace. The theoretical challenge therefore lies in understanding the relationship between this existence and that of their productive lives under the direct domination of the capitalist. The relationship between these spheres will in turn help us consider strategic directions for class struggle.

But before we get there, we need to start from the very beginning, that is, from Karl Marx's critique of political economy, since the roots of today's limited conception of the working class stem in large part from an equally limited understanding of the economy itself.

THE ECONOMY

The allegations that Marxism is reductive or economistic only make sense if one reads the economy as neutral market forces determining the fate of humans by chance, or in the sense of a trade-union bureaucrat whose understanding of the worker is restricted to the wage earner. Let us here first deal with why Marx often criticizes this restrictive view of the "economic." His contribution to social theory was not simply to point to the historical-materialist basis of social life, but to propose that, in order to get to this materialist basis, the historical materialist must first understand that reality is not as it *appears*.[2]

The "economy," as it appears to us, is the sphere where we do an honest day's work and get paid for it. Some wages might be low, others high. But the principle that structures this "economy" is that the capitalist and the worker are equal beings who engage in an equal transaction: the worker's labor for a wage from the boss.

According to Marx, however, this sphere is "in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham." In this one stroke Marx shakes our faith in the fundamental props of modern society: our juridical rights. Marx is *not* suggesting that the juridical rights we bear as equal subjects are nonexistent or fictive, but that such rights are anchored in market relations. The transactions between workers and capitalists take the form—insofar as they are considered purely from the standpoint of market exchange—of exchange

between legal equals. Marx is not arguing there are no juridical rights, but that they mask the reality of exploitation.

If what we commonly understand as the "economy" is then merely surface, what is this secret that capital has managed to hide from us? That its animating force is human labor. As soon as we, following Marx, restore labor as the source of value under capitalism and as the expression of the very social life of humanity, we restore to the "economic" process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced, and unruly component: living human beings capable of following orders—as well as of flouting them.

THE ECONOMIC AS A SOCIAL RELATION

To concentrate on the surface "economy" (of the market) as if this was the sole reality is to obscure two related processes:

1. the separation between the "political" and "economic" that is unique to capitalism; and
2. the actual process of domination and expropriation that happens beyond the sphere of "equal" exchange.

The first process ensures that acts of appropriation by the capitalist appear completely cloaked in economic garb, inseparable from the process of production itself. As Ellen Meiksins Wood explains:

> Where earlier [precapitalist] producers might perceive themselves as struggling to keep what was rightfully theirs, the structure of capitalism encourages workers to perceive themselves as struggling to get a share of what belongs to capital, a "fair wage," in exchange for their labor.[3]

Since this process makes invisible the act of exploitation, the worker is caught in this sphere of juridical "equality," negotiating rather than questioning the wage form.

However, it is the second invisible process that forms the pivot of social life. When we leave the Benthamite sphere of juridical equality and head to what Marx calls the "hidden abode of production":

> He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labor power follows as his laborer. The one with an

> air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding.[4]

Marx emphasizes here the opposite of "economism," or "free trade vulgaris" as he calls it. He is inviting us to see the "economic" as a social relation: one that involves domination and coercion, even if juridical forms and political institutions seek to obscure that.

Let us pause here to rehearse the three fundamental claims made about the economy so far. One, that the economy as we see it is, according to Marx, a surface appearance; two, that the appearance, which is steeped in a rhetoric of equality and freedom, conceals a "hidden abode" where domination and coercion reign, and those relations form the pivot of capitalism; hence, three, that the economic is also a social relation, in that the power that is necessary to run this hidden abode—to submit the worker to modes of domination—is also by necessity a political power.

The purpose of this coercion and domination, and the crux of the capitalist economy considered as a social relation, is to get the worker to produce more than the value of their labor power. "The value of labour-power," Marx tells us, "is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner" (i.e., the worker).[5] The additional value that she produces during the working day is appropriated by capital as surplus value. The wage form is nothing but the value necessary to reproduce the worker's labor power.

In order to explain how this theft occurs every day, Marx introduces us to the concepts of necessary and surplus labor time. Necessary labor time is that portion of the workday in which the direct producer, our worker, makes value equivalent to what is needed for her own reproduction, surplus labor time is the remainder of the workday, where she makes additional value for capital.

The ensemble of conceptual categories that Marx proposes here form what is more generally known as the labor theory of value. In this ensemble, two core categories that we should particularly attend to are (a) labor power itself—its composition, deployment, reproduction, and ultimate replacement—and (b) the space of work, i.e., the question of labor at the point of production.

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LABOR POWER: THE "UNIQUE COMMODITY" AND ITS SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Marx introduces the concept of labor power with great deliberation. Labor power, in Marx's sense, is our capacity to labor. "We mean by labour-power or labour-capacity," Marx explains, "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind."[6] Obviously, the *capacity* to labor is a transhistoric quality that humans possess irrespective of the social formation of which they are a part. What is specific to capitalism, however, is that only under this system of production does commodity production become generalized throughout society and commodified labor, available for sale in the marketplace, become the dominant mode of exploitation.[7] Thus, under capitalism, what is generalized in commodity form is a human *capacity.* In several passages Marx refers to this with the savagery that such a mutilation of self deserves: "The possessor of labour-power, instead of being able to sell commodities in which his labour has been objectified, must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body."[8]

Further, we can only speak of labor power when the worker *uses* that capacity, or it "becomes a reality only by being expressed; it is activated only through labour."[9] So it must follow that as labor power is expended in the process of production of other commodities, thereby "a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, etc.," the rough composite of labor power, "is expended, and these things have to be replaced."[10]

How can labor power be restored? Marx is ambiguous on this point:

> If the owner of labour-power works today, tomorrow he must again be able to repeat the same process in the same conditions as regards health and strength. His means of subsistence must therefore be sufficient to maintain him in his normal state as a working individual. His natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing vary according to the climatic and other physical peculiarities of his country. On the other hand, the number and extent of his so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves the product of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country; in particular they depend on the

> conditions in which and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed.[11]

Here we falter and sense that the content of Marx's critique is inadequate to his form. There are several questions the above passage provokes and then leaves unanswered.

Social reproduction Marxists and feminists, such as Lise Vogel, have drawn attention to the "production" of human beings—in this case, the worker—which takes place away from the site of production of commodities. Social reproduction theorists rightly want to develop further what Marx leaves unexamined. That is, what are the implications of labor power being produced outside the circuit of commodity production, yet being essential to it? The most historically enduring site for the reproduction of labor power is of course the kin-based unit we call the family. It plays a key role in biological reproduction—as the generational replacement of the working class—and in reproducing the worker through food, shelter, and psychical care to become ready for the next day of work. Both those functions are disproportionately borne by women under capitalism and are the sources of women's oppression under that system.[12]

But the above passage needs development in other respects as well. Labor power, for instance, as Vogel has pointed out, is not simply replenished at home, nor is it always reproduced generationally. The family may form the site of individual renewal of labor power, but that alone does not explain "the conditions under which, and . . . the habits and degree of comfort in which" the working class of any particular society has been produced. What other social relationships and institutions are comprised by the circuit of social reproduction? Public education and health care systems, leisure facilities in the community, and pensions and benefits for the elderly all compose those historically determined "habits." Similarly, generational replacement through childbirth in the kin-based family unit, although dominant, is not the only way a labor force may be replaced. Slavery and immigration are two of the most common ways in which capital has replaced labor within national boundaries.

Relatedly, let us suppose that a certain basket of goods (x) is necessary to "reproduce" a particular worker. This "basket of goods" containing food, shelter, education, health care, and so on is then consumed by this mythical (or, some would say, universal) worker to reproduce herself. But does the size and content of the basket goods not vary depending on

the race, nationality, and gender of the worker? Marx seemed to think so. Consider his discussion of the Irish worker and her or his "needs" as compared to other workers. If workers lowered their consumption (in order to save), Marx argues, then they would

> inevitably degrade . . . [themselves] to the level of the Irish, to that level of wage laborers where the merest animal minimum of needs and means of subsistence appears as the sole object and purpose of their exchange with capital.[13]

We will have occasion to discuss the question of differential needs producing different kinds of labor powers later; for now, let us simply note that the question of reproduction of labor power is by no means a simple one. As we can see, there is already intimation of a complex totality when considering Marx's "hidden abode of production" and its structuring impulse on the surface "economy." Marx's original outline, enriched now through the framework of social reproduction of labor power, thoroughly complicates, in fundamental ways, the narrow bourgeois definition of the "economy" and/or "production" with which we began.

Beyond the two-dimensional image of individual direct producer locked in wage labor, we begin to see emerge myriad capillaries of social relations extending between workplace, home, schools, hospitals—a wider social whole, sustained and coproduced by human labor in contradictory yet constitutive ways. If we direct our attention to those deep veins of embodying social relations in any actual society today, how can we fail to find the chaotic, multiethnic, multigendered, differently abled subject that is the global working class?

THE TWAIN OF PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

It is important in this regard to clarify that what we designated above as two separate spaces—(a) spaces of production of value (point of production) and (b) spaces for reproduction of labor power—may be separate in a strictly spatial sense, but they are actually united in the theoretical and operational senses.[14] They are particular historical forms of appearance in which capitalism posits itself. Indeed, sometimes the two processes may be ongoing within the same space. Consider the case of public schools. They function both as work places or points of

production and also as spaces where labor power (of the future worker) is socially reproduced. As in the case of pensions, so in the case of public health or education, the state outlays some funds for the social reproduction of labor power. It is only within the home that the process of social reproduction remains unwaged.

The question of separate spheres and why they are historical forms of appearance is an important one and worth spending some time on. A common misunderstanding about "social reproduction theory" is that it is about two separate spaces and two separate processes of production, the economic and the social—often understood as the workplace and home. In this understanding, the worker produces surplus value at work and hence is part of the *production* of the total wealth of society. At the end of the workday, because the worker is "free" under capitalism, capital must relinquish control over the process of regeneration of the worker and hence of the *reproduction* of the workforce.

Marx, however, has a very specific understanding and proposal for the concept of social reproduction. First, this is a theoretical concept he deploys to draw attention to the reproduction of society as a whole, not only with the regeneration of labor power of the worker or reproduction of the workforce. This understanding of the theater of capitalism as a totality is important because, at this point of the argument in *Capital* Volume 1, Marx has already established that—unlike bourgeois economics, which sees the commodity as the central character of this narrative (supply and demand determine the market)—in his view labor is capitalism's chief protagonist. Thus what happens to labor—specifically, how labor creates value and consequently surplus value—shapes the entirety of the capitalist process of production. "In the concept of value," Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, capital's "secret is betrayed."[15]

Social reproduction of the *capitalist system*—and it is to explain the reproduction of the system that Marx uses the term—is therefore not about a separation between a noneconomic sphere and the economic, but about how the economic impulse of capitalist production conditions the so-called noneconomic. The "noneconomic" includes, among other things, what sort of state, juridical institutions, and property forms a society has—while these in turn are conditioned, but not always determined, by the economy. Marx understands each particular stage in the valorization of capital as a moment of a totality that leads him to state clearly in *Capital*: "When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole,

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and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction."[16]

This approach is best outlined in Michael Lebowitz's *Beyond Capital*. Lebowitz's work is a masterful *integrative* analysis of the political economy of labor power, in which he shows that understanding the social reproduction of wage labor is not an outer or incidental phenomena that ought to be "added" to the understanding of capitalism as a whole, but actually reveals important inner tendencies of the system. Lebowitz calls the moment of the production of labor power "a second moment" of production as a whole. This moment is "distinct from the process of production of capital" but the circuit of capital "*necessarily* implies a second circuit, the circuit of wage-labor."[17]

As Marx sums it up, rightly, and with a bit of flourish:

> The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.[18]

Here, by *social reproduction* Marx means the reproduction of the entirety of society, which brings us back to the unique commodity, labor power, that needs to be replenished and ultimately replaced without any breaks or stoppages to the continuous circuit of production and reproduction of the whole.

There is a lot at stake, both theoretical as well as strategic, in understanding this process of the production of commodities and the reproduction of labor power as unified. Namely, we need to abandon not just the framework of discrete spheres of production and reproduction, but also—because reproduction is linked within capitalism to production—we need to revise the commonsense perception that capital relinquishes all control over the worker when she leaves the workplace.

Theoretically if we concede that production of commodities and the social reproduction of labor power belong to separate processes, then we have no explanation for why the worker is subordinate before the moment of production even takes place. Why does labor appear, in Marx's words, "timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market"?[19] It is because Marx has a unitary view of the process that he can show us that the moment of production of the simple

commodity is not necessarily a singular entry point for the enslavement of labor. Therefore, "in reality," Marx tells us,

> the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage is both at once mediated through, and concealed by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labour.[20]

But this link between production and reproduction, and the extension of the class relationship into the latter, means that (as we will see in the next section) the very acts where the working class strives to attend to its own needs can be the ground for class struggle.

EXTENDED REPRODUCTION: THE KEY TO CLASS STRUGGLE

What binds the worker to capital?

Under capitalism, since the means of production (to produce use values) are held by the capitalists, the worker only has access to the means of subsistence through the capitalist production process—selling her labor power to the capitalist in return for wages with which to purchase and access the means of her life, or subsistence.

This schema of capital-labor relationship is heavily predicated upon two things: (a) that the worker is forced to enter this relationship because she has needs as a human being to reproduce her life, but cannot do so on her own because she has been separated from the means of production by capital; and (b) she enters the wage relation for her subsistence needs, which is to say that the needs of "life" (subsistence) have a deep integral connection to the realm of "work" (exploitation).

So far we are more or less in undisputed territory of Marxist theory.

The exact delineations of the relationships between the value of labor power, the needs of the worker, and how those in turn affect surplus value are, however, neither undisputed nor adequately theorized in *Capital*; it is on this that we will spend the remainder of this section.

Let us revisit the moment in *Capital* where even the individual consumption of the worker is also part of the circuit of capital because the reproduction of the worker is, as Marx calls it, "a factor of the production and reproduction of capital." A central premise that Marx offers us about labor power is that the value of labor power is set by the "value of the

necessaries required to produce, develop, maintain, and perpetuate the laboring power."[21] But there is something else to this formulation. For the sake of making a logical argument (as opposed to a historical one), Marx treats the *standard of necessities* as constant: "In a given country at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a known *datum*."[22]

In *Capital*, the *value* of labor power on the basis of the standard of necessity (U) is taken as constant and the changes in *price* of labor power are attributed to the introduction of machinery and/or the rise and fall of the supply and demand of workers in the labor market. As Lebowitz has pointed out, taking this methodological assumption as fact would put Marx at his closest to classical economists: endorsing the formulation that supply shifts in the labor market and the introduction of machinery adjust the price of labor to its value, *just as it does for all other commodities*.

But there is a reason why Marx deems the worker's labor power is deemed a *unique* commodity, unlike, say, sugar or cotton. In the case of labor, a reverse process can and may take place: the *value* of the worker's labor power may adjust to *price*, rather than the other way around. She may adjust (lower or raise) her needs to what she receives in wages.

According to Lebowitz, Marx *does not have a generalized concept of constant real wages* (means of subsistence, U) but only adopts it as a "methodologically sound *assumption*."[23] In contrast to bourgeois political economists, Marx always "*rejected* the tendency . . . to treat workers' needs as naturally determined and unchanging." It was patently mistaken, Marx thought, to conceptualize subsistence level "as an unchangeable magnitude—which in [bourgeois economists'] view is determined entirely by nature and not by the stage of historical development, which is itself a magnitude subject to fluctuations."[24] Nothing could be "more alien to Marx," emphasizes Lebowitz, than "the belief in a fixed set of necessities."[25]

Let us consider a scenario where the standard of necessity (U) is fixed as Marx dictates, but there is an increase in productivity (q). In such a case, the value of the set of wage goods (our original basket of goods, x) would fall, thereby reducing the value of labor power. In this scenario, Marx says that labor power "would be unchanged in price" but "would have risen above its value." This means that, with more money wages at their disposal, workers can go on to buy more goods or services that satisfy their needs. But, according to Lebowitz, this never happens. Instead, money wages tend to adjust to real wages, and capitalists are

thus able to benefit from the reduced value of labor power. Lebowitz proceeds to explain why capitalists, rather than workers, benefit from this scenario.

Briefly put, he points out that the standard of necessity (U) is not invariable but is actually "enforced by class struggle." Thus, with a rise in productivity (q) and a "decline in the value of wage goods providing slack in the workers' budget, capitalists . . . [are] emboldened to attempt to drive down money wages to capture the gain for themselves in the form of surplus value."[26] But once we see that the standard of necessity is variable and can be determined by class struggle, then it becomes clear that the working class can fight on this front as well. Indeed, this is one of the consequences of understanding the expanded sense in which the economic is actually a set of social relations traversed by a struggle for class power.

Once we acknowledge class struggle as a component of the relations of production it becomes clear, as Lebowitz shows, that there are two different "moments of production." They are composed of

> two different goals, two different perspectives on the value of labor power: while for capital, the value of labor power is a means of satisfying its goal of surplus value…for the wage-laborer, it is the means of satisfying the goal of self development.[27]

Reproduction, in short, is therefore a site of class conflict. However, this conflict is inflected with certain contradictory tendencies. For instance, as the orchestrator of the production process, the capitalist class strives to limit the needs and consumption of the working class. However, to ensure the constant realization of surplus value, capital must also create new needs in the working class as consumers, and then "satisfy" those new needs with new commodities. The growth of workers' needs under capitalism is thus an inherent condition of capitalist production and its expansion.

A further complication in this class struggle over the terms of reproduction is that the growth of needs for workers is neither secular or absolute. The position of the working class under capitalism is a relative one; that is, it exists in a relationship with the capitalist class. Hence any changes in the needs and in the level of satisfaction of workers are also relative to changes in the same for the capitalists. Marx uses the memorable example of how the perception of the size of a house

(its largeness or smallness) was relative to the size of the surrounding houses.[28] Thus one generation of a working class may earn, in absolute terms, more than the previous generation; however, their satisfaction will never be absolute, as that generation of capitalists will always have more. Since the growth of workers' needs, then, is part of the process of capital's valorization and their satisfaction cannot take place within the framework of the system, *workers' struggle to satisfy their own needs* is also an inherent and integral part of the system.

If we include the struggle for higher wages (to satisfy ever-increasing needs) in the argument in *Capital*, is it an exogenous, hence eclectic, "addition" to Marxism? Lebowitz shows this not to be so.

What *Capital* lays out for us is the path of reproduction for capital. Marx represents capital's movement as a circuit:

$$M - C\,(M_p, L_p) - P - C' - M'$$

Money (M) is exchanged for commodities (C): that is, a combination of means of production (M_p) and labor power (L_p). The two elements combine through capitalist production (P) to produce new commodities and surplus value (C') to then be exchanged for a greater amount of money (M'). Such a circuit is both continuous and complete upon itself, ruling out any exogenous elements.

But what about the circuit of reproduction of wage labor?

The "uniqueness" of labor power lies in the fact that, although it is not produced and reproduced by capital, it is vital to capital's own circuit of production. In *Capital* Marx does not theorize this second circuit, but simply notes that "the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital" and that "the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drive for self-preservation and propagation."[29] This is where Lebowitz argues there ought to be acknowledged a *missing* circuit of production and reproduction, that of labor power. Marx perhaps would have addressed this in later volumes of *Capital*, but it remains incomplete as the "Missing Book on Wage Labor."

Once we theoretically integrate the *two* circuits: that of production and reproduction of capital and that of the same for labor power, commodities themselves reveal their dual functions.

Commodities produced under capitalist production are both means of production (bought by capital for money), and articles of consumption

(bought by workers with their wages). A second circuit of production then must be posited, distinct from that of capital, though in relation with it. This circuit is as follows:

$$M - A_c - P - L_p - M$$

Money (M), in the worker's hands, is exchanged for articles of consumption (A_c) which are then consumed in a similar process of production (P). But now what is produced in this "production process" is a unique commodity—the worker's labor power (L_p). Once produced (or reproduced), it is then sold to the capitalist in exchange for wages (M).

The production of labor power then takes place outside the immediate circuit of capital but remains essential for it. Within *capital's circuit*, labor power is a means of production for capital's reproduction, or valorization. But within *wage labor's circuit*, the worker consumes commodities as use values (food, clothing, housing, education) in order to reproduce herself. The second circuit is a process of *production of self for the worker or a process of self-transformation*.

The second circuit of production encloses a purposeful activity, under the workers' own self-direction. The goal of this process is not the valorization of capital, but the self-development of the worker. The historically embedded needs of the worker, which themselves change and grow with capitalist growth, provide the motive for this labor process. The means of production for this circuit are the manifold useful values that the working class needs in order to develop. These are more than just means to simple biological reproduction; they are "social needs":

> Participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste etc., his only share of civilization which distinguishes him from the slave, [which] is economically only possible by widening the sphere of his pleasures at the times when business is good.[30]

Whether the working class can access such social goods, and to what extent, depends not only on the existence of such goods and services in society but on the tussle between capital and labor over surplus value (which reproduces capital) and the basket of goods (which reproduces the worker). The worker consumes use values to regenerate fresh labor

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power, but the reproduction of labor power also presupposes, as Lebowitz perceptively shows, an *ideal* goal for the worker:

> The second aspect of the worker considered as a labor process is that the activity involved in this process is "purposeful activity." In other words, there is a preconceived goal, a goal that exists ideally, before the process itself . . . [and this goal] is the worker's conception of self—as determined within society. . . . That preconceived goal of production is what Marx described as "the worker's own need of development."[31]

However, the materials necessary to produce the worker in the image of her own needs and goals—food, housing, "time for education, for intellectual development," or the "free play of his [or her] own physical and mental powers"—cannot be realized within the capitalist production process, for the process as a whole exists for the valorization of capital and not the social development of labor. Thus the worker, due to the very nature of the process, is always-already reproduced as *lacking* in what she needs, and hence built into the fabric of wage labor as a form is the struggle for higher wages: class struggle. Here, finally, we arrive at the strategic implications of social reproduction theory, or why an integrative sense of capitalism is necessary in our actual battles against capital.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FRAMEWORK AS STRATEGY

The "actual degree" of profit, Marx tells us,

> is only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labor, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction.

This struggle "resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants."[32]

Note that as he lays out here the inner logic of the system, Marx does not talk of individual capitalists and the workplaces they command, but capital as a whole. Indeed, Marx is clear that although the system appears to us as an ensemble of "many capitals," it is "capital in general" that is the protagonist; the many capitals are ultimately shaped by the inherent determinants of "capital in general."

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If we apply what I call this *method* of social reproduction of labor theory to the question of workplace struggle, we can now have a few givens:

1. That the individual capitals, in competition with each other, will try to increase surplus value from the worker.
2. That the worker will pull in the opposite direction to increase the time (quantity) and wages, benefits (quality of life) she can have for her own social development. This most frequently will take the form of struggle for a shorter work week or higher wages and better work conditions in the workplace.

What is the ideal situation for the worker? That she pulls all the way in the opposite direction and annihilates surplus value altogether—that is, she only works the hours necessary to reproduce her own subsistence, and the rest of the time is her own to do as she pleases. This is an impossible solution, in that capital will then cease to be capital. The struggle for higher wages, benefits, and so on in a workplace, against a boss, or even in a series of workplaces and against specific bosses, then is only part of the pivotal struggle of capital *in general* versus wage labor *in general*. The worker can even "leave" an individual boss, but she cannot opt out of the system as a whole (while the system as it stands exists):

> The worker leaves the capitalist, to whom he has sold himself, as often as he chooses, and the capitalist discharges him as often as he sees fit, as soon as he no longer gets any use, or not the required use, out of him.
>
> But the worker, whose only source of income is the sale of his labor-power, cannot leave the whole class of buyers, i.e., the capitalist class, unless he gives up his own existence. He does not belong to this or that capitalist, but to the capitalist class; and it is for him to find his man—i.e., to find a buyer in this capitalist class.[33]

Most trade unions, even the most militant ones, are typically equipped to fight against the individual boss or a collective of bosses, which in Marx's terms takes the form of "many capitals." Trade unions leave the task of confronting "capital in general" alone. There is a very good reason why this is so.

As Lebowitz shows, capital's power "as owner of the products of labor is . . . both absolute and mystified"—this ultimately undergirds its ability to buy labor power and submit workers to its will in the production process. If the worker is to transcend the partial struggle for better work conditions and direct all social labor to producing only use values for social and individual development, then it is this underlying power of capital as a whole that must be confronted. But capital's power in this arena is qualitatively different from that in workplace struggles:

> There is no direct area of confrontation between specific capitalists and specific wage laborers in this sphere comparable to that which emerges spontaneously in the labor market and the workplace. . . . [Instead] the power of capital as owner of the products of labor appears as the dependence of wage labor upon capital-as-a-whole.[34]

Consider the two ways surplus value is increased: by the absolute extension of the workday, and by cutting wages or reducing the cost of living, thereby reducing the necessary labor time. While Marx is clear that absolute and relative surplus are related concepts, it is quite clear that some aspects of this process of realization (the boss's efforts to reduce wages, for instance) are more easily confronted in the workplace than others.

Let us take a historical example of how the system as a whole will sometimes increase relative surplus value by reducing the cost of living of the working class as a whole. During the eighteenth century, a section of the working class in Britain was put on a diet of potatoes, a cheaper food option than wheat, such that the cost of feeding workers was forced down, thereby cheapening the cost of labor as a whole. One of the best and undoubtedly one of the most lyrical historians of working class life, E.P. Thompson, called this a "regular dietary class war" waged for over fifty years on the English working class. What concrete forms did this class war take? While the cheapening of labor increased surplus value at the point of production and hence benefited the bosses in the workplace, it was not just in the workplace or at the hands of the bosses that the cheapening of labor took place. Thompson gives us a moving account of how "landowners, farmers, parsons, manufacturers, and the Government itself sought to drive laborers from a wheaten to a potato diet."[35] The ruling class, as a class, then forced the increase of potato acreage over wheat, prompting the historian Redcliffe Salaman to rightly claim that

"the use of the potato . . . did, in fact, enable the workers to survive on the lowest possible wage."[36] Similarly, Sandra Halperin has shown how, in the late nineteenth century, British overseas investment and control over colonies, with its railways, harbor and shipbuilding for Baltic and North American grain, "produced a backflow of cheaply produced . . . raw materials and foodstuffs that did not compete with domestic English agriculture and drove domestic working class wages down."[37]

Trade unions, even the best ones, by nature struggle against specific and particular capitals, but the above examples show the need to confront capital in its totality. Lebowitz accurately concludes that "in the absence of such a total opposition, the trade unions fight the effects within the labor market and the workplace but not the causes of the effects."[38]

To his comrades in the First International, Marx pointed out precisely this caveat in trade-union struggles. The trade unions, he argued, were "too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital" and had "not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself." The proof of their narrowness? That "they had kept too much aloof from general social and political movements." Marx's advice was to overcome this narrowness and go beyond the purely economic struggle for wages:

> They must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural laborers, rendered powerless [the French text reads: "incapable of organized resistance"] by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large [the French and German texts read: "convince the broad masses of workers"] that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.[39]

If we take our lead from Marx himself, then it is utterly unclear why *only* the economic struggle for wages and benefits at the workplace must be designated as class struggle. Every social and political movement "tending" in the direction of gains for the working class as a whole, or of challenging the power of capital as a whole, must be considered an

aspect of class struggle. Significantly, one of the greatest tragedies of the destruction of working-class power and the dissolution of proletarian living communities in the last forty years has been the loss in practice of this insight about the social totality of production of value and reproduction of labor power.

At any given moment of history, a working class may or may not be able to fight for higher wages at the point of production. Labor unions may not exist or may be weak and corrupt. However, as items in the basket of goods change (fall or rise in quality and quantity of social goods), the members of the class are acutely aware of such changes to their lives; those battles may emerge away from the point of production but nevertheless reflect the needs and imperatives of the class. In other words, where a struggle for a higher wage is not possible, different kinds of struggles around the circuit of social reproduction may also erupt. Is it then any wonder that in the era of neoliberalism, when labor unions agitating at the point of production (for wages) are weak or nonexistent in large parts of the globe, we have rising social movements around issues of living conditions, from the struggles for water in Cochabamba and Ireland, against land eviction in India, and for fair housing in the United Kingdom and elsewhere? This pattern is perhaps best summarized by the antiausterity protesters in Portugal: *Que se lixe a troika! Queremos as nossas vidas!* (Fuck the troika! We want our lives!)

THE WORKING CLASS: SOLIDARITY AND "DIFFERENCE"

We should then reconsider our conceptual vision of the working class. I am not suggesting here a concrete accounting of who constitutes the global working class, although that would be an important exercise. Instead, leading from our previous discussion about the need to reimagine a fuller figuration for "economy" and "production," I am proposing here three things: (a) a theoretical restatement of the working class as a revolutionary subject; (b) a broader understanding of the working class than those employed as waged laborers at any given moment; and (c) a reconsideration of class struggle to signify more than the struggle over wages and working conditions.

The premise for this reconsideration is a particular understanding of historical materialism. Marx reminds us that

> the specific economic form, in which unpaid *surplus labor* is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element.[40]

Under capitalism, wage labor is the generalized form through which the rulers expropriate the direct producers. In the abstract, capital is indifferent to the race, gender, or abilities of the direct producer, as long as her or his labor power can set the process of accumulation into motion. But the relations of production, as we saw in the earlier section, are actually a concatenation of existing social relations, shaped by past history, present institutions, and state forms. The social relations outside of wage labor are not accidental to it but take specific historical form in response to it. For instance, the gendered nature of reproduction of labor power has conditioning impulses for the extraction of surplus value. Similarly, a heterosexist form of the family unit is sustained by capital's needs for the generational replacement of the labor force.

The question of "difference" within the working class is significant in this respect. As mentioned before, Marx gestures toward differently "produced" sections of the working class in his discussion of the Irish worker, where the English worker is "produced" with access to a better basket of goods—his or her needs adjusted to this higher level—while the Irish worker remains at a brutal level of existence with only "the most animal minimum of needs." Obviously Marx did not believe that the value of the labor power of the Irish worker was a constant that remained below that of her English counterpart due to ethnicity. Instead it was a result of class struggle, or lack thereof, and it was English workers who needed to understand the commonality of their class interest with the Irish against capital as a whole.

Incorporating class struggle as a crucial element that determines the extent and quality of social reproduction of the worker then enables us to truly understand the significance of a Marxist notion of "difference" within the class. Acknowledging that at any given historical moment the working class might be differently produced (with varying wages and differential access to means of social reproduction) is more than simply stating an empirical truth. By showing how concrete social relations and histories of struggle contribute to the "reproduction" of labor power, this framework points to the filaments of class solidarity that must be

forged, sometime within and sometimes without the workplace, in order to increase the "share of civilization" for *all* workers.

Writing in the Britain of the early eighties, when the working class was being physically brutalized by Thatcherism and theoretically assaulted by a range of liberal theories, Raymond Williams understood very well the dangers of a false dichotomy between "class struggles" and "new social movements":

> All significant social movements of the last thirty years have started outside the organized class interests and institutions. The Peace movement, the ecology movement, the women's movement, human rights agencies, campaigns against poverty and homelessness . . . all have this character, that they sprang from needs and perceptions which the interest-based organizations had no room or time for, or which they simply failed to notice.[41]

Today, we can add to the list the recent anti-police-brutality struggles in the United States.

While these struggles may arise outside the workplace or be understood as struggles for extra-class interests, however, Williams points to the absurdity of such a characterization:

> What is then quite absurd is to dismiss or underplay these movements as "middle class issues." It is a consequence of the social order itself that these issues are qualified and refracted in these ways. It is similarly absurd to push the issues away as not relevant to the central interests of the working class. In all real senses they belong to these central interests. It is workers who are most exposed to dangerous industrial processes and environmental damage. It is working class women who have most need of new women's rights.[42]

If, for whatever historical reasons, organizations that are supposed to champion "class struggle," such as trade unions, fail to be insurgent, it does not mean then that "class struggle" goes away, or that these struggles are "beyond class." Indeed as Williams astutely observes, "there is not one of these issues which, followed through, fails to lead us into the central systems of the industrial-capitalist mode of production and . . . into its system of classes."[43]

[redacted]

Understanding the complex but unified way the production of commodities and reproduction of labor power takes place helps us understand how the concrete allocation of the total labor of society is socially organized in gendered and racialized ways through lessons capital has learned from previous historical epochs and through its struggle against the working class. The process of accumulation thus cannot be indifferent to social categories of race, sexuality, or gender but seeks to organize and shape those categories, which in turn act upon the determinate form of surplus labor extraction. The wage-labor relation suffuses the spaces of nonwaged everyday life.

"A DEVELOPMENT OF THE FORCES OF THE WORKING CLASS SUSPENDS CAPITAL ITSELF"

If the social reproduction of labor power is accorded the theoretical centrality that I propose it should, how useful is that to my second proposal—rethinking the working class?

Social reproduction theory illuminates the social relations and pathways involved in reproducing labor power thereby broadening our vision of how we ought to approach the notion of the working class.

The framework demonstrates why we ought not to rest easy with the limiting understanding of class as simply those who are currently employed in the capital versus waged labor dynamic. To do so would restrict both our vision of class power and our identification of potential agents of class solidarity.

The "waged worker" may be the correct definition for those who currently work for a wage, but such a vision is, again, one of "the trade-union secretary." The working class, for the revolutionary Marxist, must be perceived as everyone in the producing class who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society—irrespective of whether that labor has been paid for by capital or remained unpaid. Such an integrative vision of class gathers together the temporary Latinx hotel worker from Los Angeles, the flextime working mother from Indiana who needs to stay home due to high child-care costs, the African American full-time schoolteacher from Chicago, and the white, male, unemployed erstwhile United Automobile Workers (UAW) worker from Detroit. But they come together not in competition with each other, a view of the working class still in terms of the market, but in solidarity. Strategic organizing on the basis of such a vision can

reintroduce the idea that an injury to the schoolteacher in Chicago is actually an injury to all the others. When we restore a sense of the social totality to class, we immediately begin to reframe the arena for class struggle.

What has been the form of the one-sided class struggle from the global ruling class in the past four decades of neoliberalism? It is crucial to understand that it has been a twin attack by capital on global labor to try and restructure *production* in workplaces and the social processes of *reproduction* of labor power in homes, communities, and the niches of everyday life.

In the workplace, the assault has primarily taken the form of breaking the back of union power. The neoliberal edifice, as I have argued elsewhere,[44] was built on the back of a series of defeats for the global working class, the most spectacular examples being those of the air-traffic controllers in the United States (1981), the mill workers in India (1982) and the miners in the United Kingdom (1984–85).

If the ruling-class attack in the workplace or on productive labor took the form of violent antiunionism, it certainly did not end there. Outside the workplace, the attack on reproductive labor was equally vicious. For specific countries, this second line of attack may be said to have been even greater. In the case of the United States, several scholars, including David McNally, Anwar Shaikh, and Kim Moody, have shown how an absolute decline in working-class living and working standards built the capitalist expansion of the 1980s. Key areas of social reproduction were attacked through increased privatization of social services and the retrenchment of important federal programs such as Aid to Dependent Children, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, unemployment insurance, and Social Security. In the Global South this took the form of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank forcibly raising the price of imports—the bulk of which for these countries were food grain, fuel, and medicines.

This was open class war strategically waged on the entire working class, not just its waged members; it became so effective precisely because it extended beyond the confines of the workplace. By systematically privatizing previously socialized resources and reducing the quality of services, capital has aimed to make the work of daily regeneration more vulnerable and precarious while simultaneously unloading the entire responsibility and discourse of reproduction onto individual families. These processes of degrading the work of social reproduction have

worked most effectively in social contexts where capital could bank on, create anew, or reenergize practices and discourses of oppression. From racist clarion calls against "welfare queens" to new ways of sexualizing bodies that diminished sexual choices to rising Islamophobia, neoliberalism has found increasingly creative ways to injure the working class. It has destroyed class confidence, eroded previously embedded cultures of solidarity, and—most importantly in certain communities—succeeded in erasing a key sense of continuity and class memory.

SPACES OF INSURGENCY: CONFRONTING CAPITAL BEYOND THE FACTORY FLOOR

One of the leaders of a recent factory occupation in India explained to a shocked business reporter: "The negotiating power of workers is the most in the factory, but no one listens to you when you reach Jantar Mantar" (the traditional protest square in the Indian capital of Delhi).[45]

The experiential discernment of this rebel worker is often the political-economic common sense of revolutionary Marxism about capital-labor relations. The "dominant" reading of Marx locates the possibilities for a critical political engagement of the working class with capital chiefly at the point of production, where the power of workers to affect profits is the most.

This essay, so far, has been a counterintuitive reading of the theoretic import of the category of "production"; we must now consider the strategic import of the workplace as a pivotal organizing space. Recent scholarship on the Global South, for instance the "coolie lines" in India or the "dormitory labor regime" in China, brings to striking analytical prominence not only the places where the working class works, but the spaces where workers sleep, play, go to school— in other words, live full, sensual lives beyond the workplace. What role do such spaces play in organizing against capital? More importantly, do point-of-production struggles have no strategic relevance anymore?

The contours of class struggle (or what is traditionally understood as such) are very clear in the workplace. The worker feels capital's dominance experientially on an everyday basis and understands its ultimate power over her life, her time, her life chances—indeed, over her ability to exist and map any future. Workplace struggles thus have two irreplaceable advantages: one, they have clear goals and targets; two, workers are concentrated at those points in capital's own circuit of

reproduction and have the collective power to shut down certain parts of the operation. This is precisely why Marx called trade unions "centers of organization of the working class."[46] This is also why capital's first attack is always upon organized sections of the class: in order to break this power.

But let us rethink the theoretical import of extra-workplace struggles, such as those for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies. These reflect, I submit, those social needs of the working class that are essential for its social reproduction. They also are an effort by the class to demand its "share of civilization." In this, they are also class struggles.

Neoliberalism's devastation of working-class neighborhoods in the Global North has left behind boarded buildings, pawnshops, and empty stoops. In the Global South it has created vast slums as the breeding ground for violence and want.[47] The demand by these communities to extend their "sphere of pleasure" is thus a vital class demand. Marx and Engels, writing in 1850, advanced the idea that workers must "make each community the central point and nucleus of workers' associations in which the attitude and interests of the proletariat will be discussed independently of bourgeois interests."[48]

It is our turn now to restore to our organs and practices of protest this integrative understanding of capitalist totality. If the socialist project remains the dismantling of wage labor, we will fail in that project unless we understand that the relationship between wage labor and capital is sustained in all sorts of unwaged ways and in all kind of social spaces—not just at work.

When the UAW went to organize a union at the Volkswagen plant in the US South, its bureaucratic leaders maintained a religious separation between their union work at the plant and the workers' lived experience in the community. The union leaders signed a contract with the bosses that they would never talk to workers in their homes. But these were communities that had never experienced union power, had never sung labor songs or held picnics at union halls. Unions played little role in the social texture of their lives. In such a community, devastated and atomized as it was by capital, the union movement could only be rebuilt if doing so made sense in the total aspect of their lives and not just in a sectoral way at work alone.

Contrast this tactic to the one the Chicago teachers used to rebuild their union. They did what the UAW did not: they connected the

struggles in the workplace with the needs of a wider community. For years, every time they were about to lose a school to the privatizers, they brought their union banner to one grieving neighborhood after another and protested school closures. In the deeply racialized poverty of Chicago, the struggle of a union trying to save a working-class child's right to learn made a difference. So when this very union went on strike, it had already established a history of working and struggling in extra-workplace spaces, which is why the wider working class of Chicago saw the strike as their own struggle, for the future of their children. And when striking teachers in red shirts swelled the streets of the city, working-class people gave them their solidarity and support.

We want working-class insurgents to flood city streets like they did in Chicago during the Chicago Teachers Union strike. To prepare our theory and our praxis to be ready for such times, the first stop should be a revived understanding of class, rescued from decades of economic reductionism and business unionism. The constitutive roles played by race, gender or ethnicities on the working class need to be re-recognized while we reanimate the struggle with visions of class power broader than contract negotiations.

Only such a struggle will have the power to rupture capital's "hidden abode" and return the control of our sensuous, tactile, creative capacity to labor, to where it truly belongs—to ourselves.

5

Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory

David McNally

> In reproduction life is *concrete* and is vitality. . . . Each of the individual moments is essentially the totality of all; their difference . . . is posited in reproduction as concrete totality of the whole.
>
> —G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*

> The leaders of the women's rights movement did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women might be systematically related.
>
> —Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*

We are at an inflection point in the development of materialist theories of multiple social oppressions. The most influential approach in the area—intersectionality theory—has been struggling to overcome the atomism that appears to be foundational to its conceptual outlook, as I show below. At the same time, social reproduction theory, which grew out of historical materialist analyses of gender relations, is being renovated in part as a response to critical challenges from intersectionality and antiracism. In what follows, I suggest that a dialectically revitalized social reproduction theory—one that rises to the critical challenges posed by intersectional analysis—offers the most promising perspective for those interested in an historical materialist theory of multiple oppressions within capitalist society.

Moving in this direction will require a fundamental protocol of dialectical theory: *immanent* criticism. It is all too typical for critical analyses to engage in wholesale rejection of alternative approaches,

[illegible]