

**Tithi Bhattacharya (ed)**, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, London: Pluto Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780745399881 (paper); ISBN: 9780745399898 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786801586 (ebook)

Social reproduction theory, a key contribution of Marxist feminist thought, has evolved over time. In *Social Reproduction Theory*, Tithi Bhattacharya and her contributing authors make a case for a reinvigorated social reproduction theory, or SRT, while showing us exactly what SRT can do. Here then is SRT for the present moment, a moment when class is all too relevant but also too often under-theorized vis-à-vis other forms of identity. As the chapters of this collection demonstrate, SRT isn't any one, agreed-upon thing: on the contrary, the book showcases the expansive utility of a theoretical frame like SRT to explain myriad social problems and oppressions. Contributors not only suggest but effectively exhibit how a nuanced understanding of class can cut across those oppressions. More than an intervention into ongoing Marxist, feminist, and, indeed, Marxist-feminist conversations (which it is), SRT is also a conversation in itself – something this book brings to life.

Bhattacharya's introductory chapter adeptly frames the collection. As she poses it, SRT fundamentally asks the question: "If workers' labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker?" (p.1). As such, SRT seeks to develop and theorize what Marx "leaves undeveloped and undertheorized"; namely, "the production and reproduction of labor power" (p.13). In doing so, SRT "is primarily concerned with understanding how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus value" (p.14). Feminist geographer Cindi Katz (2001: 711) famously defined social reproduction as the "fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life". One has to read between the lines somewhat to locate a definition of social reproduction in this text, and, as Lise Vogel points out in her foreword, the contributors do not always agree or, at the least, do not always employ the term in the same way. For Marx, as Bhattacharya and others point out, social reproduction refers to the reproduction of society as a whole; subsequent theorists have developed social reproduction in relation to the reproduction of the individual

worker, and contributors to this collection move between the two poles. Carmen Teeple Hopkins contributes to the collection a concrete, three-part definition of social reproduction as “the biological reproduction of people (e.g. breastfeeding, commercial surrogacy, pregnancy), the reproduction of the labor force (e.g. unpaid cooking, caring and cleaning tasks), and individuals and institutions that perform paid caring labor (e.g. personal home care assistants, maids, paid domestic workers)” (p.131). However, this definition seemingly overlooks, or at least does not make explicit, public systems of social reproduction – education, infrastructure, housing, etc. – which other authors take on in their discussions (Serap Saritas Oran, in a later chapter, also offers a tripartite definition that seemingly includes this latter point, so in the end, perhaps we’re back to the “fleshy, messy, and indeterminate” after all – I’d add “slippery” to the list).

So, for these authors, SRT is at once theory, strategy, and method alike, and various contributors position or employ SRT in varied ways. The first half of the book works through big theories, histories, and meta-histories. Framed around care work, Nancy Fraser’s chapter expertly foregrounds the contradictions and crisis tendencies embedded in the reproductive realm as well as in the constitutive boundary between the productive and reproductive realms, exposing how so-called “crises of care” actually reveal much deeper tensions and contradictions in capitalism itself. She insightfully periodizes capitalism vis-à-vis social reproduction, charting three “epochal transformations” that culminate in today’s era of globalizing financialized capitalism, and showing how social reproduction has been reworked in each (p.25). Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman make a strong case for centering SRT in our histories of capitalism and of social struggle under capitalism, and then they do so: demonstrating how shifting from a strict focus on production to one on reproduction illuminates important struggles that have taken place outside of traditional workplace and, in turn, contributed to class formation. Picking up where they leave off, Bhattacharya’s chapter seeks to correct what she sees as a “shared misunderstanding of exactly what the working class is” (p.68). To counter this, she positions SRT as a political strategy that opens up new sites (theoretical and material) for struggle in the workplace and beyond. David McNally argues for a dialectical mobilization of

SRT to conceptualize the interaction of multiple social oppressions, as opposed to a more static (or so the critique goes) intersectionality theory.

The second half of the collection transitions to more niche topics and applied cases, showing how SRT can be deployed usefully across a range of contexts and issues. In her chapter on children and childhood, Susan Ferguson argues that “the social reproduction of labor cannot be separated from the social reproduction of life” (p.129), so children and their activities are part and parcel of the reproduction of capitalism, not only as consumers but as (future) laborers, despite their temporal and spatial distancing from the workplace. Teeple Hopkins provides a case study of migrant workers in Montreal, arguing that the division of work and nonwork is more important than ever for migrant women employed in domestic labor, who seek refuge in church spaces. Saritas Oran theorizes pensions as “paid out of the surplus value produced by workers but appropriated by capitalists as a component of the total social product devoted to the social reproduction of the working class” (p.149) and discusses what happens when pensions are neoliberalized. In a nuanced argument especially difficult to do justice to here, Alan Sears writes of sexuality and heteronormativity as products of capitalist social relations: just as the worker is “free” (as Marx would say, ironically) to sell their labor for a wage, so too, Sears argues, is sexuality organized around a “paradoxical double freedom”, by which “control over one’s body is always combined with forms of compulsion” (p.176). Under a capitalist rubric of power relations, sexuality is marked by alienation and dispossession. Finally, in a brief concluding chapter, Cinzia Arruzza juxtaposes the 2016 women’s strike(s) with the 2017 Women’s March on Washington to discuss the limits of liberal feminism. “[I]f feminism and antiracism want to be projects of liberation for all of humanity,” she writes, “then the question of capitalism is unavoidable” (p.195).

In short, this collection *does* a lot, and what it does, it does remarkably, compellingly well. Inevitably, however, there are a few gaps. For a collection whose subtitle includes “Remapping Class”, there is, to this geographer’s view, relatively little engagement with the spatial or geographical throughout the collection. While the authors are quick to use spatial metaphors (“borders”, “sites”, and “spheres”, to name a few), there is little attention to what

*spaces* actually matter to social reproduction today, or to the connections (or lack thereof) between those spaces.

Next, Bhattacharya and at least one of her co-authors adopt the practice of referring to the abstract worker as a “she”, without explanation (the rest avoid gendered language). On the one hand, this move – quite effectively – undoes the longstanding, default masculinization of “the worker”. However, to do so without explanation suggests that such a move requires no explanation, which, if refreshing, also poses problems for a feminist text that purports to engage with gender-based oppressions. Here, SRT’s disconnect from other strands of feminist theory, which engage with the production of gender as such, is most obvious. Following Judith Butler, much feminist scholarship has aimed to deconstruct the “she”, acknowledging that gender itself is performative, situational, non-binary, and constructed. Simply substituting “she” for “he” not only restrains us to a world where there are two genders – and only two genders – but, in a gesture that feels somewhat first wave, suggests that mere substitution is sufficient to remedy past wrongs. If it erases those who might not identify as “she” but who nevertheless experience gender-based oppression, this pronoun usage also erases important differences between woman-identified workers. While Sears’ chapter on sexuality situates sexual identities as products of capitalist social relations, the collection has little to say about the role of such social organization in the formation of gender identities – in particular, the making and re-making of the category “woman”. So, women are both written into the text as a presumed-monolithic and essentialized category, and written out: never explicitly addressed as such. In this way, gender is somehow both taken for granted and rendered irrelevant or secondary.

Despite these shortcomings, the collection overall comprises a robust, much-needed contribution that updates SRT for the current moment and offers a nuanced intervention into Marxist-feminist debates. Contributors make a strong case for an expansive SRT framework that they also enact in a series of strong, compelling chapters that show the reader exactly what this toolkit can do.



## Reference

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