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

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## Résumé

Modern Marxist theory has difficulty coming to grips with the distinction between productive and unproductive labour. It tends either to ignore it or to subsume evermore service work under the category of productive work, including family reproduction. Marx clearly stated, though, that domestic workers, be they servants or family members whose service or product is consumed without market intervention, are remunerated out of revenue and unproductive of capital.

Arguably, owing to the appalling conditions of the working class at Marx' time, family reproduction work had not achieved economic importance (Silvia Federici 2010). This has changed and feminist economics claims the recognition of the economic value of reproductive, still predominantly female, work.

Marx' thinking does show a gap. The value of labour power is determined as any other commodity, by the abstract labour measured in the time spent on reproducing it. However, he vacillated between seeing this as "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" (Capital Vol I, p. 276) and the wider reproduction costs necessary for the regeneration of labour power, defined in terms of "the means necessary for the worker's replacement, i.e. his children" (p. 275). But Marx expressly excluded discussions of the expanded notion from his further analysis (p. 655).

Feminist economics is correct in wanting this omission rectified. But it should be done by including the costs of upkeep of all the parties involved in necessary reproduction work and setting the bar for the exploitation of labour power. In so doing, the changing relations of production of consumption goods and care must be examined.

The paper tracks the lines from the basic concepts to the empirical-historical phases in the transformation of reproductive work since early industrialization:

i) the period of hard working conditions and low pay for all workers, including women and children (super exploitation in fact);

ii) the introduction of laws restricting working hours spurring increases in productivity and relative surplus value - and the emergence of the full-time housewife (Federici);

iii) the massive (re)integration of women into the labour force after WWII facilitated by

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the accessibility of machines alleviating household chores and the welfare state taking over large chunks of the care of dependents, as well as improving education and health;

iv) the striving for complete gender equality in work and reproductive tasks and increased reliance on capitalistically produced consumption goods while public services are cut.

The starting point is the Global North, but the subordinate role of the Global South is integral to the guiding political-economy question if exploitation is increasing or decreasing. The paper examines Marx' own writing on the subject and lays out the conceptual evidence of a modern Marxist theory of capitalist reproduction.

**Mots-Clés:** productive labour, unproductive labour, reproduction costs, value of labour power. feminist economics