

Long Summary

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

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Marx' concepts of reproduction

Marx stipulates in *Capital* that “the value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article.” (*Capital* Vol I, chapter 6, 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 production and maintenance as well as wider reproduction.¹

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 executioner of 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, therefore in turn yielding surplus value. This is the narrow concept of production of labour power.

We know, however, that a lot of unproductive work goes into reproducing the workers. 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.² 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 it easier and thus liberate time for other purposes, be they work-related, domestic or leisurely.

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, again through an equivalent in commodities. But Marx seems to narrow it 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.

In the first place, the domestic work carried out to uphold working class families, such as procuring inputs cheaply and preparing them for consumption, is necessary. Women have historically

¹ The subject of labour power in Marx' writing is the male.

² The most exhaustive analysis by Marx of productive/unproductive labour is found in *Theories on Surplus Value*, Volume 1, Chapter 4.

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

In the second place we know that there will be a downward pressure on the value of goods that go into popular or mass consumption, i.e. in theoretical terms, the goods that the working classes buy. We have seen it with cheap industrial products coming from the Global South 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 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. This female work can be inferred as subsidiary exploitation.

Proceeding from capital in general, the 'value of labour power' manifests itself in wages,³ the price of labour power that nowadays is complemented by social benefits, education and health services, pension schemes and other transfer income. These services include the reproduction of the whole family and the costs are either defrayed out of taxes on the same beneficiaries or out of surplus value as taxes on profits, rent and capital income. In order to increase profits after taxes, capitalists have every interest in also reducing these costs, even while – sometimes - recognizing that they fund necessary preconditions of exploitation.

Historical phases

There are historical ramifications for this. In rough outline, in early capitalist days industrial and agricultural labourers worked themselves to the bones, not least through excessively long working hours. After long battles in Britain, change came with the Factory Act of 1850, reducing the hours of work for women and adults to a maximum of 10 per day. In 1853 child labour was further restricted but still allowed. Nevertheless, this had two significant consequences or at least corollaries, enforcing productivity increases and also opening up for the specialization of labour within the family.

The living conditions of the working class 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 lower-middle class employees. The consequences are two-pronged. 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, and obviously the full-time housewife could save on out-of-pocket expenses.

After World War II reproductive roles were increasingly taken over by the public sector and regulated by law, in the build-up of the 'welfare state', which can be seen a way of rationalizing the

³ In the end of Chapter 6 of *Capital* Vol 1, Marx touches on the money form of wages as payment for labour power expended. The worker gives credit.

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reproduction costs of working families. This was facilitated by the introduction of 'labour-saving' devices into the home, all of which reinforced the mass (re)integration of women on the labour market, both factory and all kinds of services including those previously performed in the home.

In this movement, like in earlier ones, there is feminist struggle. Today's continued battle for full equality in 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. At the same time radical changes are taking place in the family structure.

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. Secondly, because it fails to pay heed to the distinction between productive and unproductive work by imputing a value to the labour power performing domestic work from the importance of this work.⁴ Admittedly, Marx explicitly says that "The utilization of these different sorts of labour-power [men and women, children and adults], 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 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.

As stated above, part of the reason for the non-inclusion of the costs of reproductive work in the value of labour power (i.e. the commodities consumed by the household) is due to the fact that they were so minimal at the stage of capitalist development of Marx' time, often paraphrased into the costs of bread and therefore of corn. A question is if this stage should rightly be identified as super exploitation of labour power. When therefore better conditions came about through the expansion of consumption possibilities jointly with extraction of relative surplus labour, was this in fact linked up with the subordination of peripheral countries or outright colonies to the needs of the most developed capitalist countries? Another aspect is that the basic foodstuff necessary to feed the workers is not produced under typical capitalist conditions, but under rent-yielding agriculture. How does this pressure to reduce the reproduction costs of labour power influence rent and agriculture?

Marx of course was 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 an integral part of exploitation. Federici wavers between wanting to see reproductive work 'recognized' and to see it as the battleground for women's liberation. Agreed that these are

⁴ Mainstream economics perfects methods to impute such values. What is the use? To pay for domestic work, by the government, by family members? To include it in GDP and thereby blowing it up? Or, as Marxists, to see these relations as critical to capital and as integral parts of exploitation, often both at the individual level, especially in the past, and at the social level? Or maybe even as nests of liberation by being partly outside of the main capitalist sphere?

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moments of feminist struggles. Still they do not present the need for revisions of Marx' critical political-economy points about the forms of capitalist exploitation, only for their roll-out.

Literature

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