
The Historical Evolution of the Cost of Social Reproduction in the United States, 1960-2016

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Résumé

The Marxist-feminist tradition of social reproduction theory emphasizes that capitalist production would not be possible without the social reproduction of labor-power, but that much of socially reproductive labor is unremunerated (Benería 1979, Bhattacharya 2017, Federici 2017, 2012, Folbre 1982, Fraser 2013, Himmelweit 2007, Humphries 1977, Humphries and Rubery 1984, Quick 2018, Vogel 2013). Members of working-class households, particularly women, provide unpaid work that is essential to capitalist production but that is uncompensated by capital. While unwaged domestic labor is outside the direct relations of production and does not produce surplus value (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977), economists have imputed monetary equivalents for unwaged household labor (Bridgman 2016, Bridgman et al. 2012, Duffy et al. 2013, Folbre 2006). Furthermore, Marxian analysis of the state's role in managing labor-power (de Brunhoff 1978) and Marxian accounting methods for analyzing the social wage (Shaikh and Tonak 1987, 2000) demonstrate that the state plays a crucial role in the reproduction of labor-power (Harman 2008, Miller 1989, Moos 2019). This interpretation of social reproduction theory implies that the actual cost of reproducing labor-power is necessarily greater than the value of labor-power. Indeed, unwaged household work and the social wage supplement, and in some cases supplant, earned incomes and employer-based benefits. Using data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA)-including a BEA satellite account which imputes monetary values for unwaged household production-this paper provides a basic framework for estimating the annual cost of social reproduction in the United States from 1960-2016. The estimates show that while real wages and employer-based benefits have stagnated, the real cost of social reproduction continues to rise. These trends have important implications for understanding the full extent of the exploitation of U.S. workers and working-class families in the context of neoliberal reforms which have cheapened the value of labor-power and increased precarity. The role that the U.S. state plays in subsidizing social reproduction processes while enabling the degradation of working standards and wages is explored.

Mots-Clés: social reproduction, wages, Marxian accounting, U.S. income distribution, care work, social wage, household production

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