

DOMESTIC LABOUR AND LIVING LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

The following discourse seeks to engage with the theoretical framework espoused by Michael Heinrich in his book, with a particular focus on the issue of domestic work and the oppression of women under capitalism. The discussion herein questions the feminist theoretical framework with which Heinrich chooses to engage, and his responses to feminist criticisms regarding the determination of the value of labour power and the defining characteristics of domestic and care work in capitalist systems.

KEYWORDS

Value of labour power; domestic and care work; production; reproduction; domestic labour debate

Economically and socially, the women of the exploiting classes are not an independent segment of the population. Their only social function is to be tools of the natural propagation of the ruling classes. By contrast, the women of the proletariat are economically independent. They are productive for society like the men. By this I do not mean their bringing up children or their housework which helps men support their families on scanty wages. This kind of work is not productive in the sense of the present capitalist economy no matter how enormous an achievement the sacrifices and energy spent, the thousand little efforts add up to. This is but the private affair of the worker, his happiness and blessing, and for this reason nonexistent for our present society. As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. From this point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer's pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive. This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy. And seeing this brutal reality clearly and sharply is the proletarian woman's first task."

Rosa Luxemburg, 1912, *Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle*¹

¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1912/05/12.htm>

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many compelling insights presented in Heinrich's significant book, I will focus on those pertinent to the feminist debate, which remains relevant today: the relationship between labour in capitalist production and labour involved in social reproduction. This immediately gives rise to the question of whether labour for social reproduction is "productive" of value and, consequently, what the defining characteristics of domestic and care work are in capitalist society.

In section 1 of chapter 7 of the Italian edition, Heinrich dedicates a subsection to the specificity of labour power and the determination of its value. Marx's theory of surplus value is presented there as a fundamental element in addressing a critical question: namely, how does the valorisation of capital occur on the basis of the exchange of equivalents? Specifically, if labour power is exchanged at its value (and thus there is no "unequal" exchange), where does surplus value originate? The answer, while well-known, is of fundamental importance for the subsequent reasoning in this text. The surplus value appropriated by the capitalist arises from the difference between the value generated by labour power and the value required to reproduce that labour capacity. This is where the mystery emerges. Labour power is a distinctive commodity for two primary reasons. Firstly, it is traded on the market at its value, despite not being produced in a capitalist manner. Secondly, it is the only commodity that, when consumed in the production process, generates value. Consequently, while labour power is not produced as a commodity, it is nevertheless exchanged as one.

In the ensuing discussion, Heinrich addresses feminist critiques of Marx's theories concerning the determination of the value of labour power: Marx's theoretical framework fails to account for the labour involved in social reproduction, which is unpaid and performed within the household. It is only by incorporating this type of labour that the unique nature of the commodity labour power can be fully understood. It is important to note that not all labour time necessary for the production and reproduction of labour power is reflected in its value. A substantial proportion of this necessary labour is not consumed in the form of commodities, but rather, it directly produces use-values consumed within the household, without ever being validated in the market. This labour is domestic work and caregiving. Conversely, the value of all other commodities is represented by the total labour time necessary for their production.

The focus of this discourse is not to interrogate the manner in which Heinrich presents Marx's theory of surplus value, but rather to examine the selection of feminist theoretical perspectives with which he engages, as evidenced by his responses to feminist critiques. Two key points emerge from Heinrich's replies: (i) the claim that the exploitation of male workers in factories is made possible only

through the exploitation of women in the household² seems to conflate specific historical conditions with the general possibility of exploitation; (ii) the persistence of a significant portion of reproductive labour being carried out within the family is interpreted as a pre-capitalist residue, characteristic of underdeveloped capitalism, rather than a fundamental condition of exploitation under capitalism. The implication of the latter argument is that the liberation of women from domestic labour and their subjection them to direct capitalist exploitation would enable capital not only to appropriate a greater mass of surplus value, as well as to increase the rate of surplus value. This phenomenon occurs because the costs of family reproduction would then be shouldered by the wages of two workers, thereby reducing the value of labour power.

2. WOMEN AND CAPITAL: EXPLOITATION OR OPPRESSION?

Heinrich's first objection is noteworthy for its caution against drawing comparison between the exploitation of factory worker, predominantly male, and that of domestic and care worker within the family, predominantly female. This is based on the assertion that such a comparison obfuscates the specific historical contexts (particularly in the so-called Third World countries) and conflate them with the broader concept of exploitation in general. However, this critique is limited in its scope, addressing only a particular strand of feminist thought. During the 1970s, feminist debates on the condition of women under capitalism reached a fever pitch, culminating in the so-called *domestic labour debate* (Molyneux 1979; Vogel 2000). The perspective that Heinrich critiques is exemplified in the seminal works of Dalla Costa (1972) and Dalla Costa and James (1972), who argue that housework, predominantly performed by women, is exploited in the same way as factory work, predominantly performed by men, and therefore should be paid. This argument underpinned the *Wages for Housework* campaign. This standpoint asserts that unpaid domestic and care labour directly generates value for capital, and that the social dynamics surrounding it are subject to the same capitalist ones: a social subject, the husband, who, like the capitalist, appropriates the labour of another social subject, the wife, who, akin to the wage worker, is both exploited and alienated.

However, within feminist thought, an alternative perspective exists: domestic labour indirectly generates value for capital by providing indispensable use-values (namely, the maintenance of labour power and the "production" of the living

² This position reflects the condition of society in the years of the second wave of feminism, when the debate on the importance of housework began, and when the gender division of labour was quite clear: the man works outside the home in paid work, the woman at home as a housewife.

bearers of labour power³), thus remaining fundamentally distinct from wage labour (Gardiner 1975; Himmelweit and Mohun 1977). Firstly, domestic and care labour produce use-values (e.g., clean clothes, prepared meals) which are consumed directly by the family, rather than commodities for market exchange. The goods and services generated are intended solely for the satisfaction of the family, which means domestic and care labour does not participate in the process of value creation, inherently tied to commodity production and market transactions. Secondly, within capitalism, labour generates value only when operating within the “law of value”, which equates socially necessary labour-time through market mechanisms. Domestic and care labour, being private and outside the sphere of market exchanges, is not governed by this law. This results in an inherent incommensurability of concrete labour-time. Attempts to quantify domestic and care labour in comparable units of labour-time alongside wage labour are methodologically flawed. The concept of reproductive labour, in this context, is distinguished by its absence of social reduction to abstract labour, a phenomenon that occurs through market exchanges in capitalist production. Finally, domestic and care labour do not experience the productivity pressures inherent to wage labour because they are not directly controlled by capital. This absence of dynamic evolution further distinguishes these forms of labour from the processes typical of the capitalist mode of production. The conclusion drawn from these observations is that, while domestic labour is vital for the reproduction of labour power, it exists outside the realm of value creation.

In summary, while concurring with Heinrich’s critique of the feminist position that regards domestic labour as productive of value (and therefore comparable to wage labour), an open question remains. The alternative feminist perspective, which, while denying the value productivity of domestic labour, argues that Marx failed to acknowledge or adequately recognise the critical importance of labour for social reproduction in determining the value of labour power, remains to be addressed. Furthermore, in this context, can we still speak of exploitation, or does the concept shift solely to oppression? If exploitation is deemed to be non-existent and oppression is recognised as the sole phenomenon, can social subjects engaged in the production of use-values rather than exchange-values for capital – such as public sector workers – be considered part of the revolutionary subjects?

3. SOCIAL REPRODUCTION LABOUR

In his second critique of feminist thought Heinrich challenges the centrality, or at least the significance, of reproductive labour. He posits that the pervasive

³ The centrality in Marx of the distinction between labour power (*Arbeitskraft*), living labour (*lebendige Arbeit*), and living labour power (*lebendige Arbeitskraft*) is a distinctive trait of Bellofiore’s interpretation of Marx, reminded also in the essay included in this issue.

continuation of a significant share of reproductive labour within the family can be ascribed to a vestige of pre-capitalist social structure or the residual effects of an underdeveloped capitalism system. In a more advanced stage of capitalist development, social reproduction would be assumed by either the state or the market, thereby liberating women from domestic labour and enabling their integration into wage labour.

The concept of reproductive labour as a pre-capitalist legacy disregards the historically specific nature of the mode of the reproduction of labour power (Coulson, Magaš, and Wainwright 1975; Dalla Costa and James 1971; Seccombe 1974; Vogel 1983, chapter 9). The theoretical concept of the family and its concrete manifestations are not universal. The material conditions of family life, its emotional bonds, and its relations with society vary significantly depending on whether a family exists within a slave-based system, a medieval context, or a capitalist society. The family, therefore, cannot be considered universal and timeless; rather, the form of kinship relationships is determined by the prevailing social conditions and the specific mode of production. The manner in which families provide care for their members is also subject to historical contingencies, as is the gendered division of labour that assigns distinct societal roles to women and men.

In pre-capitalist systems, where production was primarily geared towards use values, the home and family played a central role in agricultural and artisanal activities. The processes of production and consumption were intricately intertwined within a unified labour process. Although a gendered division of labour existed, this was more about different concrete tasks or stages of the labour process rather than a clear distinction between men producing for the market and women serving within the home. Furthermore, women's labour was considered a necessary social complement to that of fathers and/or husbands, albeit sometimes regarded as inferior. Conversely, a historical prerequisite for the establishment of the capitalist mode of production was the transformation of the proletarian family from a self-sufficient, self-reproducing unit into one dependent on the sale of labour power for survival. The emergence of capitalism was contingent on the mass of producers being deprived of independent means of subsistence, thereby rendering them reliant on the sale of labour power in exchange for a wage. This shift resulted in the separation of labour processes: on the one hand, labour producing commodities for the market, based on wage labour and generating value for capital; on the other, labour within the family producing use-values immediately consumed for the reproduction of living labour-power — i.e., workers exploited by capital. This transformation of individuals into wage labourers creates a rupture between labour for capitalist production and labour for social reproduction.

Furthermore, Heinrich's hypothesis that, in the phase of advanced capitalist development, labour for reproduction will either be carried out collectively through a welfare system or produced by the market in the form of private services fails to

take into accounts several critical issues. I am not convinced that this represents the future of reproductive labour. Firstly, a considerable proportion of reproductive labour necessitates a direct and personal relationship with family members. For instance, although children may be raised in daycare, they will always require a relationship with their parents. Consequently, it can be argued that reproductive labour cannot be wholly supplanted by the welfare state or the market. Additionally, the question of the reproduction of the living bearers of labour power remains unresolved, as the female body is still necessary for this task.

Furthermore, it is evident that capitalism evolves in cyclical patterns, thereby signifying that a unidirectional correlation between the extent of reproductive labour and the accumulation process is invalid. In general, reproductive labour exhibits fluctuations in response to the business cycle: during periods of economic growth, and provided there is political will, it is possible to expand welfare provisions, thereby reducing the burden of private reproductive labour. The capacity of working-class households to acquire commodities and services from the market, which can substitute part of the reproductive labour performed within the domestic environment, is a key factor in this dynamic. Private capitalist firms, for their part, have a vested interest in producing these goods and services. Conversely, during periods of economic crisis, the opposite occurs. Consequently, the time allocated to reproductive labour is subject to fluctuations in accordance with the business cycle.

In conclusion, I argue that social reproduction exposes a fundamental contradiction within the system: the capitalist accumulation process relies on the reproduction of labour power, yet this is something beyond its direct control. Labour power is “attached” to human beings as living bearers of labour power, and it is these individuals who perform living labour. This observation gives rise to several significant inquiries. For instance, it is important to consider whether the substantial amount of unpaid work within the household is a prerequisite for capitalist exploitation, or whether it act as an obstacle, given that a significant proportion of the working class is tied to the household and cannot be exploited in the factory. Furthermore, it is crucial to ascertain whether the development of capitalism itself tends to reduce this unpaid labour, or if this reduction is contingent upon the business cycle.

4. THE INTERNAL OTHER OF CAPITAL AND DOMESTIC LABOUR

My final point is more of a suggestion. It is my conviction that Heinrich's position would benefit from engagement with the arguments presented by Christopher J. Arthur in Chapter 16 of his recent book, *The Spectre of Capital*⁴.

I take the liberty of referencing some of the key ideas put forth by Arthur. He identifies specific issues that arise when elements external to capital — namely “labour” and “land” — become necessary conditions for its existence. These elements are appropriated by capital through specific forms of value, such as wages and rent. In the terminology of Bellofiore, to get living labour as “internal other” to capital, which is dead labour, capital must include in its body “living labour power”, that is to say workers. While capital mediates itself through labour and land, the peculiar material effectivity of these elements on capital is equally significant.

As Arthur contends, labour power constitutes the most important “other” to capital. The internal “other”, the living bearers of labour power, as the carriers of valorisation, are essential to capital accumulation; however, they originate from outside the capitalist system, specifically from the domestic sphere. Two errors must be avoided in this context. The first is the erroneous supposition that labour power possesses an exchange value that represents the productive labour of the domestic worker, who is most often a woman. Heinrich's argument is pertinent here, as I have previously discussed. Arthur's position is that domestic labour does not contribute to value creation, as it is not employed by capital, “it is as simple as that”. The second error, according to Arthur, is the assumption that, since domestic workers are not remunerated, capital appropriates their labour for free. In reality, the wage paid to the employed worker should be sufficient to cover the subsistence costs of the entire family, including the subsistence of the domestic labourer.

Capital reduces the domestic sphere, where it cannot directly profit, in two primary ways. Firstly, capital commodifies domestic labour through the provision of services such as fast food preparation, laundries, and other household services. Secondly, it introduces time-saving commodities, such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and other labour-saving devices. However, what would occur if all domestic labour were to be outsourced? The costs charged by service-sector firms would necessarily include surplus value, making these services more expensive, and consequently, wages would have to rise. Consequently, industrial capital would now share its surplus value with the newly emerged service-sector firms. However, the former domestic labourer, now liberated from household duties, would have the opportunity to seek paid employment, thereby securing their own subsistence.

⁴ The chapter of Arthur (2022) is available on line: <https://brill.com/display/book/9789004522138/BP000022.xml>.

In conclusion, Arthur asserts that, from an ontological perspective, the reproduction of labour power represents a fundamental flaw within the sphere of capitalist production and circulation. This is due to the fact that capital is unable to directly produce labour power, but instead relies on a non-capitalist mediation. Initially, capital requires the commodification in form of labour power to make productive labour available to it. However, capital becomes a self-constituted power only insofar as this “other” is posited as capital’s internal other, reproduced within capital’s circuit as an exploitable resource. Nevertheless, even though labour may be considered capital’s internal “other” within the capitalist relation, it retains its own independent actuality.

Bellofiore may offer a clearer perspective on this issue. The fundamental premise is that, in order to get living labour as activity, labour power must be employed by capital, which signifies the incarnation of workers within capital’s body. However, workers may resist this subsumption: as Étienne Balibar asserts, capital is constituted by class struggle in the production process. Without the domestic sphere and domestic labour, capitalist production would simply not be possible.

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