

# What is social reproduction theory?

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**Tithi Bhattacharya explains the insights of contemporary Marxists that help us link struggles in the sphere of production to those outside it in the sphere of reproduction.**

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ONE OF the most common charges against Marxism is that, as a theory, it is preoccupied with “class” at the expense of gender.

It is important to state at the outset that the history of organizations claiming to be “Marxist” has not always been glorious when it comes to categories of oppression such as gender and race. Everyone knows someone who has been told by a “Marxist” man that “minor” annoyances like sexism or racism will be sorted out “after the revolution,” so in the meantime, we all need to buckle down and work on our class struggle. Incidents of sexual harassment by Marxist men are also unfortunately not uncommon in organizations of the left, both in the past and the present.

Short of actual harassment, women have recounted feeling dismissed, undermined and institutionally written off within organizations. Voices of women activists such as the Indian Communist women involved in the historic Telengana struggle of 1947, British Communists such as Doris Lessing, or Peggy Dennis, a leading member of the U.S. Communist Party, tell a dispiriting story of sexism and disappointment in organizations that such women had seen as their life’s work and source of hope.

This record is particularly horrifying because many of us became Marxists precisely because revolutionary Marxists are supposed to be the most intolerant of gender oppression. We joined revolutionary organizations because we think of Marxism as an insurgent theory—that fights for, but never remains satisfied with, any piecemeal reform the system offers, and that calls for a complete demolition of capitalism—and is thus one of the best weapons to fight for women’s liberation and gender justice.

This is why, if we are serious revolutionaries and not unthinking preachers of dogma, there are two—mutually contradictory—aspects of the Marxism’s history that we have to reckon with. The first is the damage done to the revolutionary cause of gender justice in the name of Marxism, and the second is how the Marxist *framework*, despite the many historical missteps in its name, still remains the best way to understand oppression under capitalism, and hence provides clues as to how to end it.

## Marxist Theory

There is a tremendous underdeveloped insight at the heart of Marx's analysis of capitalism. In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx identifies "labor power" or our capacity to labor, as the 'special commodity' that the capitalist needs to set the system in motion and keep it running. Our labor power, Marx tells us, has the "peculiar property of being a source of value" because with that labor power, we create commodities and value for capitalism. The appropriation of our surplus labor by capitalists is the source of their dominance. Without our labor power, then, the system would collapse.

But Marx is frustratingly silent on the rest of the story. If labor power produces value, how is labor power itself produced? Surely workers do not spring from the ground to arrive at the marketplace, fresh and ready to sell their labor power to the capitalist.

This is where later Marxist scholars such as Lise Vogel, Martha Gimenez, Johanna Brenner and, more recently, Susan Ferguson and David McNally have seized upon Marx's transformative but incomplete insight, and developed it further. It is perhaps important for us to remember in this context, the potential and creativity inherent in the Marxist tradition, rightly referred to as a living tradition, which has allowed new generations of Marxists to examine it critically and expand upon it.

Looking closely at Marx's *Capital*, these scholars argue that the key to the system, our labor power, is actually itself produced and reproduced outside of capitalist production, in a "kin-based" site called the family. In an excellent passage, Vogel explains clearly the connection between class struggle and women's oppression:

*"Class struggle over conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterized by exploitation. In these societies, surplus labor is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the...renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labor process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women's capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class society....In propertied classes...women's oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property...In subordinate classes...female oppression...derives from women's involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production."* (emphasis mine) [1]

This is essentially the main argument of what Vogel and these other later Marxists call "social reproduction theory." Social reproduction theory shows how the "production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process," as Meg Luxton has put it. If the formal economy is the production site for goods and services, the people who produce such things are themselves produced outside the ambit of the formal economy at very little cost for capital.

Labor power, in the main, is reproduced by three interconnected processes:

1. By activities that *regenerate* the worker outside the production process and allow her to return to it. These include, among a host of others, food, a bed to sleep in, but also care in psychical ways that keep a person whole.
2. By activities that maintain and regenerate *non-workers* outside the production process—i.e. those who are future or past workers, such as children, adults out of the workforce for whatever reason, be it old age, disability or unemployment.
3. By reproducing *fresh workers*, meaning childbirth.

These activities, which form the very basis of capitalism in that they reproduce the worker, are done completely free of charge for the system by women and men within the household and the community. In the United States, women still carry a disproportionate share of this domestic labor.

According to a 2012 survey [2], U.S. women put in 25.9 hours a week of unpaid domestic labor in 2010, while men put in 16.8, a difference of more than nine hours. The survey includes indexable tasks such as child care, cooking, shopping, housework, odd jobs, gardening and others.

According to *Forbes* magazine [3], if unpaid domestic work was included in the measuring the GDP, “it would have raised it by 26 percent in 2010.” But, of course, we also have to add to this already formidable list the additional non-indexable tasks such as providing psychic care and support to both the employed and non-worker(s) within the household. Anyone who has had to soothe a child after a hard day at her own workplace, or figure out care for an ageing parent after a grueling shift knows how important such apparently non-material tasks can be.

The most important insight of social reproduction theory is that capitalism is a unitary system that can successfully, if unevenly, integrate the sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production. Changes in one sphere thus create ripples in another. Low wages and neoliberal cost-cutting at work can produce foreclosures and domestic violence at home.

Why is this the most important insight? Because it gives real historical substance to understanding: (a) who a “worker” is, and (b) in what ways the worker can fight against the system. Most importantly, this theory helps us understand that any gains for gender rights that we make in either the formal economy or outside of it can only be temporary because the material basis of women’s oppression is tied to the system as a whole. Any conversation about the end of oppression and liberation thus needs to draw on a simultaneous conversation about the end of the system itself.

## **The Importance of the Sphere of Production**

If women provide the main support for capitalism outside the workplace through their unpaid labor, does that then make workplace issues men’s issues?

Anyone who is expecting to find the 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotype of a dungaree-clad white male worker wielding his spanner should take a close look at the real picture of the U.S. labor market.

The vast majority of women in the U.S. have to work for a living. This means they sell their labor power in the market and are workers. Women make up half—an even 47 percent—of the U.S. labor force, and the percentage of married mothers who are working has increased from 37 percent in 1968 to 65 percent in 2011. According to a Pew Research study released this year [4], a record 40 percent of American mothers are the primary breadwinner for their families, compared to a mere 11 percent in 1960.

While union membership is low for all workers in the U.S., the number of unionized women is not far behind the number of unionized men. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [5], even after the severe drop in union membership since the recession, the figures for 2012 show that union membership rate was 12 percent for men, compared to 10.5 percent for women. These findings also show that Black workers were more likely to be union members than their white, Asian or Latino counterparts.

It follows that anyone who argues that women’s issues are only to do with what we experience or endure in the home (sexual violence, reproductive health, child care, etc.), or outside the sphere of

production is simply wrong. Any discussion about wages or the workplace, about labor organizing or about fighting for benefits is a highly gendered issue.

But there are two radically contradictory trends that mark all recent news about women. One is the unbearable immiseration of the vast majority of women and the other is the rise of an incredibly prosperous and multiethnic group of ruling-class women.

More than three-quarters of the workers in the 10 biggest low-wage job categories are women, and over one-third are women of color. I have written before on how the U.S. is one of only four countries in the world that lacks paid maternity leaves [\[6\]](#), making it extremely difficult for women to be working mothers. Moreover, one-third of U.S. workers don't have access to paid sick leave, and only 42 percent have paid personal leave. As union activists correctly point out:

*"What's the impact on public health when working people can't afford to take sick days during a flu epidemic? Who takes care of a sick child? Who's home to fix dinner and help with homework? Who can dedicate time to a sick elderly parent?"*

How are women supposed to balance the burden of unpaid labor in the home, with full-time paid labor in the workplace? The real answer is that they cannot.

In 1990, women's participation in the labor force was 74 percent, making the U.S. number six among 22 developed countries in this measure. Thanks to the neoliberal policies of the next two decades, women's participation rose only a fraction to 75.2 percent, while in other industrialized countries, it shot up from about 67 percent to nearly 80 percent.

Not only are women forced to work part-time, but workplace hostility to the gendered nature of domestic work is also why only 9 percent of working mothers work more than 50 hours a week.

Let's think about that for a minute. If mothers worked, say 55 hours a week, then given an average commuting time, sociologists have shown that they would have to leave the house at 8:30 a.m. and return at 8:30 p.m. every day of the workweek! [\[7\]](#)

Despite the vast powers of the Internet, children still have to be picked up from school and fed by a live human, and the elderly parents need to be taken care of by the same. In most cases, in the U.S., this person continues to be a woman.

It seems from the above survey that any issue to do with the workplace is actually also about women and gender. Policies that govern workplaces have the power to affect women both at work and at home. But what should we fight for? Should we be fighting for equal wages with men in a low-wage economy? Should we be fighting for universal health care, which will ease our care-giving burden? Should we fight as "women" or should we fight as "workers"?

There is a particularly vocal group of women who have emerged in the media in recent times to make the case for women's rights. Joan C. Williams is a very insightful sociologist, whose work on class and gender ought to be read widely. But she recently made the disappointing observation that "executive feminism is just what we need to jump-start the stalled gender revolution." [\[8\]](#) By "executive feminism," she literally means the "feminism" of chief executive officers of large multinationals. She names Sheryl Sandberg and Princeton professor Anne Marie Slaughter as leaders on this "new frontier of feminism."

Many may take delight in the storming of corporate boardrooms by a handful of women. These boardrooms and their adjoining golf courses have been the bastions of upper class male privilege for centuries. But it brings us to a central question: What do gender rights look like if we sever them

from the question of class. Will the female CEOs act in the interest of all women?

The best policies that further the interests of a majority of women are also the very same policies that cut into the profits of capitalism as a system of production.

For instance, free universal health care would ensure that every man, woman and child, whether they are in paid employment or not, have free medical care on demand. This would reduce unemployed women's dependence on her employed partner and could potentially allow her control over reproductive health and choices, not to mention, support for their family's health and care. She could choose when and whether to have children, and get home help—free of cost—for aging family members, thus drastically reducing her own labor in the home.

But the medical industry is a multibillion-dollar business that would fight this tooth and nail. Similarly, it is in the interest of women that we have a decent wage for all workers, since women are disproportionately among the lowest-paid in the economy. There, too, we run into capitalism's profits, and it will be a hard battle to win.

The Sheryl Sandbergs of the world are clear class warriors, using the language of women's rights to bolster a system that only benefits their class. The millionaire Sandberg even refused to pay her own interns until a public outcry made her change her decision.

The central message coming from this new generation of female CEOs is that work and more hard work will liberate women.

It is certainly true that economic independence for women is a hard-fought right and needs to be constantly reinforced through struggle. This is why we find in the writings of early Marxists, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, a strong emphasis on women's work in the sphere of production and its liberating potential.

But economic "independence" looks so much better on Sheryl Sandberg than on the mother who works at Taco Bell—because Sandberg's relationship to capitalism, as a boss, is one of control, while the working-class mother's is one of complete loss of control. In the latter's case, her job brings her limited economic independence from her male/female partner, but complete dependence on the vagaries of the market.

When Sandberg says that women need to work harder to achieve rewards, she is asking for a certain class of women—hers—to wrest more control away from the men of her class, while keeping the system intact that functions via the paid and unpaid labor of the majority of women.

Indeed, scholars such as Karen Nussbaum have argued that the system created a few spaces for ruling-class women at the top in order to stave off deeper institutional changes that would transform the relationship of the majority of women to labor:

*"To contain the growing demands of working women, employers created opportunities for some women, opening up professional and managerial jobs for college graduates while resisting the demands for institutional changes that would improve jobs for all women. Women at both ends of the workforce continued to share common concerns of equal pay and work-family policies, but the intensity of the issues differed as the conditions of the two groups changed. Employers had created a safety valve. College-educated women who had been bank tellers were becoming branch managers; clericals in publishing companies were becoming editors. The percentage of women who were managers or professionals doubled between 1970 and 2004, from 19 to 38 percent." (Nussbaum 2007: 165)*

It is reductive to say that the battles over gender in our society are the same battles as those about class. But it is correct to say: (a) following Lise Vogel, that class struggle represents the “central dynamic” of social development, and (b) that it is in the interests of capitalism as a system to prevent any broad changes in gender relations, because real changes to gender will ultimately affect profits.

## **The Importance of the Sphere of Reproduction**

It stands to reason then that the best way to fight for women’s rights in the sphere of production is through our labor organizations. There are some truly inspiring moments of labor history where trade unions have fought for abortion rights, equal wages and against homophobia.

But the working class doesn’t only work in its workplace. A woman worker also sleeps in her home, her children play in the public park and go to the local school, and sometimes she asks her retired mother to help out with the cooking. In other words, the major functions of reproducing the working class take place outside the workplace.

Who understands this process best? Capitalism. This is why capitalism attacks social reproduction viciously in order to win the battle at the point of production. This is why it attacks public services, pushes the burden of care onto individual families, cuts social care—in order to make the entire working class vulnerable and less able to resist its attacks on the workplace.

Who else understands this process best? Revolutionary Marxists. This is why we can be the link between the sphere of reproduction, the community where the school is being closed, the home where the woman is subjected to violence; and the sphere of production, where we fight for benefits and for higher wages.

We do it in two ways. We (a) provide the analytical linkage between the “two spheres” of the single system, through Marxist theory; and (b) act as a tribune of the oppressed, particularly when the fight has not generalized to the workplace. For it is not true that the working class cannot fight in the sphere of reproduction. It is, however, true that it can only win against the system in the sphere of production.

Some of the major fights in working-class history began outside the sphere of production. The two most significant revolutions of the modern world, the French and the Russian, began as bread riots, led by women.

An understanding of capitalism as an integrated system, where production is scaffolded by social reproduction, can help fighters understand the significance of political struggles in either sphere and the necessity of uniting them.

Let us take the case of reproductive rights, one of the critical fights of our times, which is not directly a workplace struggle. Are reproductive rights simply about women’s ability to have access to abortion and contraception?

In reality, reproductive rights ought to be called reproductive justice. A women’s right to choose is not just about the right not to have babies but the right also to have them.

The history of African American women and other women of color in America is bloodied by instances of forced sterilization by the state. Throughout the 1960s, the states of Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Virginia and Tennessee considered compulsory sterilization laws for Black mothers on welfare. When the contraception drug Norplant was first released in the market, an editorial in the

*Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested that it was a solution to Black poverty. A similar fate awaited women in Puerto Rico [9]. When U.S. industry, under the economic program of “Operation Bootstrap,” went to the island in search of cheap labor in the 1930s and 1940, many factories ran on-site birth control clinics for women workers, and some refused to hire women unless they had been sterilized.

Moreover, reproductive choice cannot be just about control over our ovaries. It is about control over our lives: about whether and when to have children, how many children to have, to have time to take care of them, to have public schools to send them to, to have them and their fathers not be behind bars, and most importantly, to have a decent wage to be able to make decisions about all those things.

The *New York Times* reported this week [10] that there was a 9 percent decline in the fertility rate from 2007 to 2011, a drop that demographers believe “began after the recession took hold and Americans started feeling less secure about their economic circumstances.” In other words, the Times has just figured out that most ordinary women prefer to have babies when they feel that they have the economic means to feed and raise them!

So the question of reproduction is tied to the most fundamental questions of our society: Who labors, for whom and for how long.

### **For An Integrated Fight against Capitalism**

At this particular moment of neoliberal crisis, gender is being used as the weapon of class struggle by capital. Repeated defense of rape by establishment figures, the severe attack on reproductive rights and growing transphobia are all results of capitalism trying in various ways to resolve the economic crisis through attacks on working-class lives, both at work and at home.

Our solution as Marxist revolutionaries is not to simply talk about the importance of class struggle, but to link the struggles of the formal economy to those outside of it. For this to happen, it is less important that we “win the argument” with oppressed identities. It is more important that we win their trust, by being the most intransigent fighters at home and at work.

This is why in the organizations where we fight for wages (e.g., our labor unions), we need to raise the question of reproductive justice; and in our organizations where we fight against sexism and racism, we need to raise the question of wages.

We need a generation of unruly women and men to make that connection in our workplaces, on our campuses and on the streets. That is the real tradition of revolutionary Marxism.

**Tithi Bhattacharya**, September 10, 2013

*Thanks to Sharon Smith for providing comments on a draft of this article.*

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/what-is-social-reproduction-theory>



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## Footnotes

- [1] Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, p. 129
- [2] [http://www.bea.gov/scb/pdf/2012/05%20May/0512\\_household.pdf](http://www.bea.gov/scb/pdf/2012/05%20May/0512_household.pdf)
- [3] [http://www.forbes.com/fdc/welcome\\_mjx.shtml](http://www.forbes.com/fdc/welcome_mjx.shtml)
- [4] <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>
- [5] <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>
- [6] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/03/14/marissa-mayer-and-the-family>
- [7] <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/05/why-men-work-so-many-hours/>
- [8] <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/03/the-rise-of-executive-feminism/>
- [9] <http://www.albany.edu/celac/LRR%202010.pdf>
- [10] [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/health/fertility-rate-stabilizes-as-the-economy-grows.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/health/fertility-rate-stabilizes-as-the-economy-grows.html?_r=0)