

What's New about Social Reproduction?

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

What's New about Social Reproduction?

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Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017)

Simon Black, *Social Reproduction and the City: Welfare Reform, Child Care, and Resistance in Neoliberal New York* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020)

Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020)

Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work, Power and Political Strategy* (London: Pluto Press, 2020)

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS DISRUPTED not only capitalism's production and distribution mechanisms but the reproduction of life from day to day. In 2020, as nursing home deaths mounted, hospitals were swamped by patients, schools and daycares emptied, grocery store shelves were depleted, and home deliveries by some allowed others to stay safely at home, many workers were stretched to the breaking point by the double burden of caring for children at home and working in essential services. For other employed people – who depend on daycare workers, home care workers, teachers, cleaners, and commercial food workers to do some of the work necessary to maintain their household members – the shift to doing without these workers and doing the work themselves was incredibly difficult. Disproportionate infection, death, economic hardship, and state violence continue to devastate Black, Indigenous, newcomer, and low-income communities, and women have been particularly hard hit. So-called frontline workers – a group that overwhelmingly consists

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of women and includes large numbers of low-wage immigrant and racialized workers – were touted as pandemic heroes in the press and on window signs.

These conditions revealed a fundamental contradiction in capitalist societies. While capitalism's circuits of production rely on a capable labour force able to both work and consume, capital accumulation depends on maintaining that labour force at the lowest cost possible. The result is clear. The waged and unwaged social reproductive work to maintain the working population and those who do it remain undervalued, usually taken for granted and, at the same time, necessary. Further, this work and these workers produce not only survival and labour power but our lives, in all their dimensions.

COVID-19 has produced a social reproductive crisis. In high-income countries, governments have varied in their efforts to keep services going, to provide public health interventions, and to support social reproduction through basic income support programs, infection control measures, and staffing and pay increases in health care, long-term care, and childcare programs. As a result of increasingly difficult working conditions, disillusionment, and burnout, many essential workers in these sectors have quit, while governments have balked at improving conditions and pay.

Instead, many governments are touting training and immigration as answers to deepening care-labour shortages around the world, offering free tuition for some care-related college training and targeted immigration programs. Aiming to entice low-waged workers from a ravaged Global South where vaccines are in short supply and the resulting infections and deaths are attributable to ongoing capital accumulation, immigrant workers are often restricted from permanent migration, either through temporary migration policies or by policies that prevent or delay their families from emigrating with them. Their lives are lived along the global social reproduction tension lines, the so-called global care chains that leave social reproductive depletion in their wake.¹ Also implicated are capitalism's environmental damage and the rise of autocracies and right-wing governments that violently support capital accumulation, shaping increasingly difficult conditions for social reproduction around the globe.

At this critical juncture, *social reproduction* is emerging as a promising basis for solidarity across anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and feminist organizing. While the inequitable gendered and racialized divisions within social reproductive labour can and do divide people, a spate of recent writing argues that thinking about, and organizing around, social reproduction can provide a powerful basis for activism. In this review essay, we consider recent writing on social reproduction by Sue Ferguson, Aaron Jaffe, and Simon Black, along with a collection edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, to ask, what's new about social

1. Nicola Yeates, "Global Care Chains: A State-of-the-Art Review and Future Directions in Care Transnationalization Research," *Global Networks* 12, 2 (2012): 135–154; Shirin M. Rai, Catherine Hoskyns and Dania Thomas, "Depletion: The Cost of Social Reproduction," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16, 1 (2014): 86–105.

reproduction for studies of work and labour?² What potential does it hold to shape solidarities that do not foreground some people's oppressions at the expense or dismissal of others?

For most feminist political economists, "social reproduction" refers to the necessary work involved in reproducing the working class from day to day and from generation to generation. Although definitions vary, most refer to the work involved in birthing, raising, feeding, cleaning, educating, caring for, and maintaining working-class people from conception to death.³ Social reproduction captures both the unpaid social reproductive work people do in their own households, families, and communities and the paid social reproductive work that is done in households, markets, states, and community organizations. Conceptualized in this way, social reproduction overlaps with production, allowing for analyses that compare how social reproduction is organized in different societies, at different moments in history, and under various conditions. This conception of social reproduction relies on an expanded understanding of "working class" that includes all those who rely on wages to live, including those who collect public income supports and pensions, who beg and scrape by, and who are supported by a household/family member's wages.

This concept has been critical to anti-racist socialist feminist scholarship and organizing conducted by both ardent anti-capitalists and others whose aim is for a social democratic state. For these groups, who often work together, the concept has fuelled women's emancipation efforts through recognizing, valuing, and socializing social reproductive work, whether paid or unpaid. The concept has also been used in scholarship that shows women's coercion into social reproductive work and especially poor, Black, racialized, and Indigenous working-class women's coercion into social reproductive work for dominant groups.⁴ Perhaps most importantly, a focus on social reproductive

2. Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020); Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work, Power and Political Strategy* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Simon Black, *Social Reproduction and the City: Welfare Reform, Child Care, and Resistance in Neoliberal New York* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020); Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

3. On definitions of social reproduction, see Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, "Social Reproduction at Work, Social Reproduction as Work: A Feminist Political Economy Perspective," *Journal of Labor and Society*, advance online publication (15 November 2021): 1–28; for discussions of what constitutes social reproduction, see Antonella Picchio, *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Meg Luxton, "The Production of Life Itself: Gender, Social Reproduction and IPE," in Juanita Elias and Adrienne Roberts, eds., *Handbook on the International Political Economy of Gender* (Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2018), 37–49.

4. Sedef Arat-Koc, "Whose Social Reproduction? Transnational Motherhood and Challenges to Feminist Political Economy," in Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 75–92; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and*

work reveals it as a contradictory process within capitalist relations. Without a reliable, renewable labour force supplied at low cost, capitalism will grind to a halt. Yet most social reproductive work aims to produce life, not profit, and is not easily subsumed by capitalist managerial strategies even when paid. Further, social reproductive work is life-making, an activity that generates both needs and possibilities for living, and thus holds potential for anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist resistance and organizing.

But how?

The four books discussed in this essay go some distance to answer this question, calling for renewed and broad attention to social reproduction and its potential for solidarities across movements. The authors mine and build on long-standing and rich international left feminist scholarship, including important contributions from feminists in Canada. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of each volume and assess each contribution's perspective on social reproduction. We then focus on their joint contribution to analyses that can contribute to anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist initiatives.

These contributions vary in their approach and evidence. One book is a collection of loosely connected contributions that offer a variety of approaches to social reproduction in conversation with many audiences. Two volumes are theoretical arguments based on historically situated textual analyses of Marxist and feminist scholarship. The fourth book is a theoretically sophisticated empirical research study, offering cogent lessons in anti-racist feminist historical materialist research that aims to inform change. What is perhaps most interesting is these contributions' different definitions and understandings of social reproduction and how these understandings influence their analyses of its potential for organizing.

These four books are united not only in their discussions about social reproduction but in their engagements with long-standing and well-developed feminist approaches, debates, and insights. Their work brings feminist historical materialisms to the attention of a wide contemporary scholarly and activist audience in new ways, with the hope and expectation that its time has come.

In *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Bhattacharya presents an edited collection of historical materialist takes on social reproduction. With chapters from US academics Nancy Fraser and Cinzia Arruzza, Canadian scholars David McNally, Susan Ferguson, and Alan Sears, and British/Turkish scholar Serap Saritas Oran, among many others, the book offers a conversation on social reproduction, beginning with "the fundamental insight of sRT [social reproduction theory] ... that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole."⁵

Caregiving in America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010); Mignon Duffy, *Making Care Count: A Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

5. Tithi Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," in Bhattacharya,

Introducing the collection, Bhattacharya notes that “all the essays in this volume are in some way engaged in the task of sketching out the contours of what exactly social reproduction theory is and what kinds of questions it seeks to answer.”⁶ The authors’ different answers to these questions are informed by their disparate disciplinary backgrounds and methods that range from historical studies and purely theoretical engagements to contemporary empirical research of various kinds. Our impression is that the chapters also vary in their intended audiences. Some, like McNally’s chapter, seem to have been written to convince “malestream” Marxists to take on anti-racist feminist insights, while others, like the chapter by Carmen Teeple Hopkins, push anti-racist socialist feminists to consider the implications and possibilities of social reproduction. The result is a thought-provoking but inconclusive discussion that reflects a long-standing lack of consensus about social reproduction as a concept and/or a theory.⁷ We discuss just a few chapters from this volume to illustrate both the breadth of and differences among these contributions.

Pushing back on malestream historians in their chapter, Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman offer an engaging feminist historical materialist sketch of capitalism and class struggle in the United States. Deploying a broad conceptualization, Mohandesi and Teitelman argue that social reproduction has “helped us refine how to think about the relationship between gender, sexuality, race, and class: better understand women’s oppression; recognize capitalism’s dependence on unpaid labor; and highlight the diversity of class struggle, among many other things.”⁸ They outline a feminist counter-history of “capitalism, class formation and state formation in the United States from the perspective of social reproduction.”⁹ Their account begins with shifts to household reliance on wages in the 19th century, takes us through household/labour changes during the Great Depression and the New Deal, and ends with modern-day financialized capitalism and its related crisis of social reproduction. Attending to class, gender, race, and a politics of scale, this chapter takes aim at how class struggle is often conceptualized. Arguing that households are not only “bulwarks against capitalism” but also “organizational nodes in class struggle,” Mohandesi and Teitelman present social reproduction as not only a “terrain of struggle,” but as an emerging “site of class recomposition.”¹⁰ With

ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, 1–20, 2.

6. Bhattacharya, 6.

7. Braedley and Luxton, “Social Reproduction at Work”; Meg Luxton, “Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction,” in Bezanson and Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction*, 11–44.

8. Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman, “Without Reserves,” in Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, 37–67, 37.

9. Mohandesi and Teitelman, 38.

10. Mohandesi and Teitelman, 40, 52.

stories of activism and unionism woven into their discussion of the complexities of class divisions, including the racialization of paid social reproductive labourers, the authors conclude by asking whether and how the crisis in social reproduction, if it is indeed global, can produce possibilities for international resistance and solidarity.¹¹ They are clear that their counter-historical work is not just an academic exercise but important information for anti-capitalist movements. As they state, “if the present resembles the past in crucial ways, then perhaps inherited strategies, organizations and forms of struggle are still appropriate.”¹²

In her contribution, geographer Teeple Hopkins asks us to consider how social reproductive workers reproduce themselves, showing that the circuits of social reproductive work have dimensions of time and space that exceed the household. She draws on the domestic labour debates and Black feminist thought to develop her concept of social reproduction as “the biological reproduction of people (e.g. breastfeeding, commercial surrogacy, pregnancy), the reproduction of the labor force (e.g. unpaid cooking, caring, and cleaning tasks) and individuals and institutions that perform caring labor (e.g. personal home care assistants, maids, paid domestic workers).”¹³ Note that this definition leaves to one side child care, health care, food services, and other kinds of paid work in the public, for-profit, and charitable sectors, cleaving closely to the domestic sphere. However, Teeple Hopkins’ empirical work stretches her narrow definition, by inference if not overtly. Drawing from her empirical research with live-in caregivers, Teeple Hopkins argues that in conditions where these workers live in the homes of their employers, their own social reproduction depends on church communities as physical and temporal spaces where workers experience renewal in faith-based friendships outside of the employment relationship. She argues that we need to “theorize the temporal and spatial aspects of the relationship between reproductive and productive work.”¹⁴ Although opening possibilities, Teeple Hopkins does not take her argument further to argue that this social reproductive work in religious and spiritual communities may lead to political opportunities for organizing resistance to capitalist colonial processes.

Incorporating insights from the fields of metaphysics, philosophy, and science in his chapter, McNally issues a challenge to leftists who reject intersectionality theory, asking them to practise “dialectical criticism” by “absorbing the strengths of a theoretical perspective in the course of overcoming its internal

11. Mohandesi and Teitelman, 67.

12. Mohandesi and Teitelman, 38.

13. Carmen Teeple Hopkins, “Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal,” in Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, 131–147, 131.

14. Teeple Hopkins, 146.

weaknesses.”¹⁵ Reviewing the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and other intersectional theorists, McNally argues that while intersectionality has helped us account for and understand oppressions, the spatial metaphors of intersecting lines, axes, vectors, and matrices of oppression are “haunted by social Newtonianism.”¹⁶ In his view, this limits the theory’s utility by atomizing or mechanizing oppressions as separate entities that enter into interaction. McNally argues that “rather than standing at intersections, we stand in the river of life, where multiple creeks and streams have converged into a complex, pulsating system.”¹⁷ Applying a Hegelian dialectical analysis, McNally offers *teleology* as a way to address this problematic; he then turns to Angela Davis, arguing that her historical materialist work on gender, race, and class offers an alternative to “enumerating discrete axes and vectors” by “showing the systematic interrelations in and through which racial and gender domination are utterly interwoven with capitalist exploitation” – a spirit and analysis shared by McNally’s conception of social reproduction theory.¹⁸ McNally argues that in this sociopolitical moment, historical materialist ideas are being revived to transform, rather than fix, capitalist society. In his view, social reproduction theory could help this effort, building solidarity via analyses that show the interweaving of oppressive relations.

In her chapter “How Not to Skip Class,” Bhattacharya persuasively challenges identity politics, narrow labour politics, and conceptions of class associated with waged labour alone. For Bhattacharya, the promise of social reproduction lies in its capacity to theorize a dynamic understanding of class formation that considers workers’ “existence beyond their workplace.”¹⁹ She begins by explaining that the economy must be understood as an “animating force” of human labour. Bhattacharya eloquently states, “we restore to the ‘economic’ process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced and unruly component: living human beings capable of following orders – as well as flouting them.”²⁰ She begins by offering a concise overview of Marx’s labour theory of value and the relationship between social reproduction and production as intertwined aspects of a unity. Next, Bhattacharya argues for expanded notions of both the working class and class struggle, arguing that the working class must be perceived as a revolutionary subject, more than only waged workers, and class struggle must “signify more than the struggle over wages and working

15. David McNally, “Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory,” in Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, 94–111, 95.

16. McNally, 99.

17. McNally, 107.

18. McNally, 111.

19. Tithi Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class,” in Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, 68–93, 69.

20. Bhattacharya, 70.

conditions.”²¹ Asserting that “every social and political movement ‘tending’ in the direction of gains for the working class as a whole, or of challenging the power of capital as a whole, must be considered an aspect of class struggle,” she uses the concept of social reproduction to show that movements outside of places of waged work, “such as those for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies ... are also class struggles.”²² While Bhattacharya is not hoeing new ground in this contribution, her clear prose and careful engagement with Marx offer these insights to new readers. Overall, the collection, from a group of accomplished and thoughtful scholars, provides a solid introduction to historical materialist approaches to social reproduction, including differences in its conceptualization and application.

Over a decade ago, Sue Ferguson coined the term “social reproduction theory,” building on the conception of social reproduction developed by socialist feminists in Canada including Meg Luxton, Bonnie Fox, Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, Wally Seccombe, Himani Bannerji, and more, who, interestingly, are barely mentioned in Ferguson’s *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction*.²³ Aiming to advance “a way forward for those of us interested in building a broad-based, pluralist socialist movement” that can “create a world that prioritizes need over profit, that dislodges labour for capital with labour for life,” Ferguson’s new book traces developments in feminist thought about women, work, and capitalism in the context of Euro-American feminist politics.²⁴ Sometimes tucking her feminism into the background, Ferguson has been arguing for decades that anti-capitalists should take social reproduction seriously. In this book, she places feminisms front and centre, addressing a contemporary anti-capitalist audience more attuned to feminist thinking. She argues for the potential of “social reproduction feminism” as a way forward in resistance and organizing.

21. Bhattacharvya, 86.

22. Bhattacharya, 85–86, 92.

23. Susan Ferguson, “Building on the Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition,” *Critical Sociology* 25, 1 (1999): 1–13; Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women’s Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1980); Luxton, “Two Hands for the Clock: Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home,” *Studies in Political Economy* 12, 1 (1983): 27–44; Bonnie Fox, *Hidden in the Household: Women’s Domestic Labour under Capitalism* (Toronto: Women’s Educational Press, 1980); Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, “Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism,” *Studies in Political Economy* 10, 1 (1983): 7–43; Wally Seccombe, “The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 83 (1974): 3–24; Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (London: Verso Books, 1992); Himani Bannerji, *Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism, and Anti-racism* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1995).

24. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 2, 139.

The scope of her discussion is ambitious. Beginning with precapitalist European feminists of the medieval period and ending with *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, Ferguson's choices and interpretations of texts are open for critique but offer a sweeping historical canvas.²⁵ Through close readings of selected feminist writing, contextualized by brief historical discussions on the politics of women's work that gave rise to these ideas, Ferguson argues that what she calls social reproduction feminism "offers a way out of the theoretical conundrums that have characterized the socialist feminist tradition."²⁶

Divided into two sections, the book offers first a selected history of feminist thought on work and labour from those Ferguson renames "equality feminists" (liberal feminists), "critical equality feminists" (socialist feminists), and anti-racist feminists. Ferguson reviews developments that led to the positions taken by equality and critical equality feminists, who located women's oppression in women's dependence on men due to their unpaid domestic labour. For equality feminists, emancipation could evolve through women's education, training, and entry into waged work, while critical equality feminists took a further analytic step by perceiving women's domestic labour as an activity "hived off" from productive labour under capitalism, having no economic value to the capitalist. According to critical equality feminists, women's entry to paid work would both refuse women's dependence on men and confront capital. At the same time, according to Ferguson, this move problematically rendered women's liberation secondary to undoing capitalism.

Next, she briefly discusses early developments in Black anti-racist feminism in the United States, beginning with Sadie Alexander and Claudia Jones. Showing that undervalued, low-waged, paid social reproductive work has its roots in long histories of racialized, gendered slavery and Black women's ongoing coercion into domestic service, these feminists argued that escape from unpaid domestic labour would not advance the liberation of Black women, who were oppressed in their devalued, low-waged, paid domestic work. This insight into the co-constitution of gender, race, and class as "triple oppressions" interwoven with paid social reproductive work was often ignored by white feminists.²⁷

In the book's second section, Ferguson begins her articulation of social reproduction feminism and its development from the theorizations advanced by equality, critical equality, and anti-racist feminists. She dives into the domestic labour debates of the 1960s and 70s, which focused on the relationship between working-class women's unpaid domestic labour and the creation of surplus value, to determine how both capitalists and men were implicated

25. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

26. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 5.

27. Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!," *Political Affairs* (June 1949): 3–19, 7, quoted in Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 78.

in women's oppression. Reviewing positions taken by Margaret Benston, Sheila Rowbotham, and the Wages for Housework theorists, Ferguson points out their agreement that capitalism is a sociopolitical form of power and not merely an economic one, their insistence on a broad definition of labour that includes social reproductive work, and their focus on the contradiction between capitalism's drive to totally subsume labour and its reliance on labour's self-conscious, embodied, thinking qualities. Ferguson also notes the common weakness in their focus on unpaid housework as the key to women's oppression, which ignored the realities of many women's lives, particularly the lives of Black and racialized women, as Angela Davis and the Combahee River Collective pointed out.²⁸ Drawing on these texts, and on the work of Lise Vogel and many others, Ferguson recounts the development of a socialist feminist integrative or unitary theory that can explain capital's domination and degradation of working-class people's existence via social oppressions that divide and subjugate bodies according to 'race,' gender, sexuality and more."²⁹ Further, she argues that people resist their domination through the activities of social reproduction. Social reproduction feminism is a perspective in which "social oppressions are systemic, grounded in capitalism's necessary-but-contradictory relation of productive to social reproductive work."³⁰

Drawing again on the domestic labour debates, Ferguson discusses differences among those she names "social reproduction feminists." On the one hand are the Wages for Housework theorists, Mary Inman, and others who argued that unpaid domestic labour produces value for capitalists. This group argued that those who do unpaid social reproductive work are exploited by capitalists and described capitalism as a system of total domination.³¹ Taken up within autonomous Marxist circles, this perspective has led to work refusal as a chief anti-capitalist strategy and, further, to building anti-capitalist movements outside of capitalist relations, in spaces and times outside of capitalist control. Ferguson points to past and current scholarship in this camp, with Silvia Federici supporting communal kitchens, farms, and land occupations, and Kathy Weeks supporting campaigns for a universal basic income.³² To

28. Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977), https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

29. Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women toward a Unitary Theory* (1983; reiss., Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 115.

30. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 119, 121.

31. Ferguson, 125.

32. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012); Kathy Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

resist capitalism, then, is to withdraw from it “to develop a new classless economic system,” to build outside of and beyond capitalism.³³

On the other hand, Ferguson points to those she calls “Marxian social reproduction feminists,” who argue that Marx had it right: surplus value is determined in producing products for exchange. While capital may depend on social reproduction, unpaid domestic work involved in the production of labour power cannot be given a capitalistic value. Ferguson argues that social reproduction tends to be “less subsumed” to capital for many reasons, including that much of this work takes place in times and places beyond capitalism’s direct control yet at the same time is constrained by the conditions imposed by capitalism’s wage relationship. Ferguson’s analysis of this point would be improved by including Antonella Picchio’s insights here.³⁴ Although not Marxist, Picchio’s political economy analysis carefully shows that the cost of social reproduction is the wage, with the result that demands on social reproductive labour expand and contract as wages fall and rise. According to Ferguson’s “Marxian social reproduction feminists,” then, social reproduction is not totally subsumed to capitalism. While the argument is enticing, Ferguson does not discuss the degree of possibility in different social reproductive conditions of subsumption, leaving us with lingering questions.

Ferguson argues that social reproduction feminism makes “claims for democratic and collective control of the conditions of (re)production,” and while strikes and work stoppages are a strategy, they are not a withdrawal from capital relations.³⁵ Working toward wide solidarities, this camp supports conventional workplace strikes and campaigns that make demands on the state and support social reproductive workers in the public sector. These politics emphasize the importance of building solidarity for collective struggle among labour and anti-oppression activists. In Ferguson’s view, by emphasizing the “distinction between life and labour power,” the Marxian social reproduction school stimulates the possibility for alliances across paid and unpaid workers and productive and social reproductive sectors, to “forge new ways of life-making while also confronting capital on its own terrain.”³⁶ The goal is organizing with others to improve working and living conditions, including building solidarity while respecting the autonomy and integrity of different projects.

Informed by both Bhattacharya’s and Ferguson’s (earlier) books, Aaron Jaffe’s *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon* sketches out and expands upon social reproduction theory to point to a “socialist horizon” of emancipation. For Jaffe, social reproduction is more useful as a theory than a

33. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 132.

34. Picchio, *Social Reproduction*.

35. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 133.

36. Ferguson, 125, 130.

concept, with potential for understanding all social activity. Arguing against those who maintain that white supremacy, male domination, and capitalism operate as separate systems, he calls for a unified theory of social relations that can account for and confront oppressions of race, gender, gender identity, sexuality, disability, and class. Yet, at the end of the day, Jaffe locates class relations at “the heart” of the body politic, making us question the bodily locations of race, gender, gender identity, disability, and sexuality.³⁷

In lieu of a detailed conceptualization of social reproduction, Jaffe provides brief testimonials offered by women involved in International Women’s Day and in strikes by public schoolteachers in the United States as epigraphs to begin each chapter. He weaves these stories into his discussion to demonstrate the ways in which capitalist and social relations constrain our “need-satisfying powers.” The text maintains a high level of theoretical abstraction as it sets out to provide an articulation of the “unified framework” developed by socialist feminists and its application to all social arenas and “diverse disciplines and methods of investigation.” Jaffe’s goal is to take a step back from empirical research to explore what makes social reproduction theory “a coherent and valuable approach.”³⁸

The first five chapters outline this framework, maintaining that social reproduction theory provides a practical critical analysis at both micro and macro levels that can illuminate “the ways our powers are constrained” and how “we are limited to produce and reproduce a very narrow set of values, and often quite oppressive forces.”³⁹ This version of social reproduction theory puts Marxist labour theory in conversation with intersectionality and particularly Collins.⁴⁰ In some ways echoing McNally’s contribution to Bhattacharya’s *Social Reproduction Theory*, discussed above, Jaffe reviews left criticisms of intersectionality: that intersectional approaches reinscribe identities ahistorically; that they fail to account for the causes of oppression; and that they are inattentive to class. He argues that these critiques do not apply to Collins’ framing, in much the same way that Ferguson argues for Angela Davis’ theoretical approach. Jaffe suggests that when “generously interpreted,” intersectionality theory and social reproduction theory have much in common, as both are “concerned with how oppressed groups reproduce their existence under deeply unfavorable circumstances.”⁴¹

Jaffe is particularly interested in fleshing out the ontological underpinnings of his theory. Drawing on Marx, he offers a detailed discussion of how human

37. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 42.

38. Jaffe, 27, 4.

39. Jaffe, 4.

40. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

41. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 80.

labour powers are constrained in ways that enact violence upon our “living personalities.” His use of “living personalities” is suggestive of the concept of the “lived body” as theorized by Toril Moi, who adapted Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of the body as a “situation.”⁴² Although Moi’s work has been criticized for wanting to do away with the concept of gender, her theorization of the “lived body” offers a “way of articulating how persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints they produce.”⁴³ Jaffe’s theorization is similar, but with a Marxist perspective that aligns the violence done to our “living personalities” through capitalism’s constraints on our human capacities. Developing this emphasis, Jaffe takes up issues of disability, sexuality, gender, and gender identity to argue that social reproduction theory offers an approach that can advance solidarity without prioritizing some people’s emancipation over others.

Jaffe’s socialist emancipation advances a vision of freedom in which “we need to be the authors of our own social reproduction,” for “how we work, refuse to work, or are prevented from working in trying to satisfy our needs is socially formative and transformative.”⁴⁴ His approach to realizing this socialist horizon is two-pronged; he argues that it can emerge through making universal demands for the human dignity owed to all and, at the same time, making demands based on particular experiences. He states, “by recognising that we are unique and that this uniqueness is socially produced, socialist freedom must be the freedom to participate in producing and reproducing both ourselves and our societies.”⁴⁵

Jaffe deploys a socialist, rather than libertarian, concept of freedom, which makes this book a fascinating read in the context of the 2022 Freedom Convoy in Canada. In her foreword to this work, Arruzza states, “Jaffe’s book is ultimately a book about freedom ... contrary to widespread mistaken assumptions – Marx’s central concern and guiding problem throughout his life and work was, indeed, freedom, rather than equality.”⁴⁶ Jaffe’s concept of freedom has some similarities to Linda Zerilli’s freedom-centred feminist politics.⁴⁷ Jaffe states, “Freedom is not simply a universal fact, it describes how our capacities can be or are restrained from being actualized.” He points out, however, that identities are historically situated and can evolve. His notion of freedom is not about “preserving what we are through resistance” but about “empowering

42. Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

43. Iris Marion Young, “Lived Body vs Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity,” *Ratio* 15, 4 (2002): 410–428.

44. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 98, 28.

45. Jaffe, 103.

46. Cinzia Arruzza, “Foreword,” in Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, vii–xii, xi.

47. Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminist and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

us to freely create what we wish to be.”⁴⁸ Jaffe briefly discusses the tools and agents needed in this struggle, including strikes and other actions to increase our “political powers.” Drawing on examples from recent teachers’ strikes in the United States, Jaffe argues for social unionism.

What slips away in this book, perhaps by design, is discussion of social reproduction itself. For example, Jaffe does not point out that teachers are social reproductive workers, nor does he discuss the social relations involved in social reproductive work as a site for politics. For us, as two feminist political economists engaged in parallel conversations about social reproduction, reading this book felt like hearing only one half of a conversation – we were not always clear on whom Jaffe is addressing, or what he assumes his readers know about social reproduction.

Ferguson’s and Jaffe’s contributions articulate their visions of the current and future political potential of social reproduction through engagements with the history of ideas. In *Social Reproduction and the City: Welfare Reform, Child Care, and Resistance in Neoliberal New York*, Simon Black takes a different approach. He considers the relations of social reproduction in the context of specific struggle to address a pressing, contemporary political question: How can working-class people fight back in a time when “right-wing forces undermine not only the welfare state but also, as Boris and Klein put it, ‘the union movement that had become intertwined with it’”?⁴⁹ Showing how the welfare state is entwined in the social reproduction of those most oppressed in liberal democracies, Black turns our attention to how cities in advanced political economies have become laboratories for neoliberal policy moves, producing oppressive urban neoliberal welfare regimes.

While Black’s case is New York City, it has salience in the Canadian context. Federal and provincial downloading, coupled with austerity measures, have ensured that Canadian municipal policies are deeply involved in restructuring social reproduction in urban contexts, including public child care and municipally owned nursing homes. Applying a feminist political economy analysis, Black argues that while many cities were once sites of “postwar urban liberalism” and “a laboratory for social democracy,” they have increasingly become experiments in “an aggressive project of urban neoliberalism,” or fiscal revanchism.⁵⁰ As his analysis shows, “myriad struggles have emerged ... in which poor and working-class women’s activism is central, including grassroots community movements for housing, health care, and food security, efforts to defend workers in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals, and child care centres, struggles for safe neighbourhoods free from police violence, and the fight for

48. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 59, 65.

49. Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Care Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press), 220, quoted in Black, *Social Reproduction*, 165.

50. Black, *Social Reproduction*, 14.

sanctuary cities in which undocumented migrants can access essential services without fear.”⁵¹ These struggles, Black points out, are all about social reproduction. In examining and understanding these struggles, including the connections among them and the strategies, losses, and victories involved, there is hope for those who struggle on.

Black delivers a careful dialectical historical materialist analysis that uncovers the contemporary forms of contradiction between social reproduction and capital as they have emerged at the urban municipal level, while placing relations of gender, race, and class at the heart of his analysis. Black’s impressive methods include archival historical research, policy review, extensive interviews with people from all sides of the struggle, secondary statistical analysis, and media analysis, to produce a tightly argued history of struggles over child care for low-income families in New York City from the Depression through to 2010. Attentive to both conflict and change, he carefully dissects activist positions and strategies, showing poor, Black, and racialized working-class women not as victims but as leaders in resistance struggles against the press of neoliberalization tactics.

Black’s contribution turns our attention to the specifics of contemporary struggles over social reproduction, including how these struggles are different from those in other times and places. His conception of social reproduction and anti-capitalist struggle are contextualized in the material conditions of New York’s recent past and present. His arguments are based in the details of ongoing resistance and thoughtfully informed by theoretical engagements. Black does not advance a vision of a utopian post-capitalist city or a coherent political program to advance socialism; instead, he points to strategic possibilities for social unionism and solidarity building with an empirically informed, dialectical perspective on action.

So, what’s new about social reproduction in these new books? The answer is both “not much” and “quite a lot.” All of them mine the work of generations of anti-racist, feminist, and socialist thinkers. Some excavate old debates and theoretical impasses. For those familiar with the literature involved and, in the case of more recent debates, the people and the contexts that gave rise to them, these arguments will not offer many new ideas but provide fresh reworkings and insights in light of contemporary politics.

At the same time, these four books have animated debates about social reproduction among contemporary thinkers and activists, raised old questions in new contexts, and worked toward broad solidarities and collective struggle. The slippages within their work, and the differences among them, suggest that theorizing social reproduction is not “done,” as Ferguson points out. Rather, this theorizing, including emerging debates and points of tension discussed in this review, present “an opportunity to unpack those confusions and work toward

51. Black, 168.

a more robust theoretical grounding for a transformative politics.”⁵² And much is happening. In 2021, academic activists and labour organizations mobilized theorizations and debates about social reproduction by using phrases like “the care economy” that, in turn, were picked up by politicians and media, shifting public conversations about gender, race, and undervalued social reproductive work.⁵³ This ferment of intellectual activist activity is energizing and exciting. We look forward to continuing the discussion.

52. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 140.

53. For examples, see “The Care Economy,” International Labour Organization, n.d., accessed 7 December, 2021, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/lang--en/index.htm>; “The Care Economy Statement,” Care Economy Initiative, n.d., accessed 7 December 2021, <https://thecareeconomy.ca/statement/>; “An Economist’s View on the Care Economy,” *US Department of Labour Blog*, August 11, 2021, <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/08/11/an-economists-view-on-the-care-economy>.