

Social Reproduction Theory  
and the Socialist Horizon

# Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon

Work, Power and Political Strategy

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Foreword by Cinzia Arruzza

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# Introduction:

## Why Theorize Social Reproduction?

The role of women, it's funny you said that because I've always viewed myself as a teacher, and I remember when through this process ... there have been so many interviews with different people and I remember one of the interviews someone sent me, and they had put at the bottom of the screen "activist". And I laughed, I was sitting with one, you know, one my best friends and I said, "activist?", and she was dead serious and she looked at me and she said, "you are," and I said, "I am! You're right, yes, I am not just a teacher, I'm an activist!" And so, a lot of women have really led this movement ... We learned that you don't have to have a title, you don't have to have a position, you just have to have courage and a backbone to stand up for yourself, your state, and your kids, and that's what we did! (Katie Endicott, on the West Virginia public school employees' strike)<sup>1</sup>

Social Reproduction Theory (hereafter SRT) has recently emerged as a vehicle offering social analysis, critique, and strategic political orientation. But what exactly is it? What need does "social reproduction" as a concept respond to, and what theoretical consistency lies beneath the theory's wide-ranging expressions? How do its analytical, critical, and political commitments hang together?

Beyond traditional left circles, there is increasing awareness that anti-capitalism in theory and practice must be informed by women's, anti-racist, Indigenous, anti-colonial and LGBTQIA+ struggles. Migration and disability have also become widely understood as key features when analyzing the harms produced by our class societies. Socially, there is an increasing openness to exploring the ways exploitation must be considered alongside and even a part of so many distinguishable oppressions. Those already organized in left groups are less and less committed to dogmatic economism. These developments are precarious, but have already begun to transform movements for social change.

With roots deepening in response to the growing power of the right around the world, there are substantial gender, race, sex, labor, and

immigration status-centered social mobilizations. Black Lives Matter has contested unchecked police violence. Feminist demonstrations have agitated for abortion rights, and against gendered violence. Indigenous struggles have asserted self-determination against resource extraction and pipeline construction. Waves of militant support for immigrants have resisted deportations of migrants through airport shutdowns and disruption of enforcement raids. These campaigns have all generated pointed social analyses that offer theoretical reflections arising from political work. Diverse and radical knowledge has emerged through persistent organizing across these movements. These theories and bodies of knowledge are not limited to the formal teaching and research in academic contexts. Activists share well-crafted reading lists, engage in strategic debates between themselves, and find other means of thinking about struggles and their histories.

As they link insights together, today's radical thinkers can draw on a rich inheritance. From Engels and Zetkin on, Marxist feminists have developed Marx's social theory to criticize social relations that exploit (use workers to grow capital) and oppress (systematically harm some) at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Pioneering theorists helped show how women's oppression is a key to the social relations that capital both shapes and draws on as a resource in its incessant drive to grow.<sup>3</sup> Theories of social reproduction draw from ways Marxist feminists tried to connect women's oppression to exploitation. Insight into these connections are a definitive feature of social reproduction conceptualization and informed strategizing.

But this is not a necessary limit: the basic structure of these theories can often be used to explore and explain other oppressions beyond women's as well. SRT shifts our gaze to concentrate on those agents and forms of work through which abilities to satisfy life's needs are produced, set in motion, and reproduced. Whether training their focus on individuals and their labor power in the family or the enveloping social relations through which different labor powers are produced and reproduced, theories of social reproduction help us see how experiences and histories of oppression and exploitation are mutually determining.

There is increasing openness and desire to develop accounts that tie social movements and labor struggles together. Since 2013, Black Lives Matter emerged in the US not only as an anti-racist struggle, but as an anti-racist struggle with significant class dimensions. Further, activists frequently reminded interpreters who reduced the movement to race alone that the network was itself founded by three Black women, and

its stance on queer and trans politics was largely welcoming and liberatory. Likewise, teachers' strikes cannot be understood without attention to their gendered dimensions. As Katie Endicott made clear in the quote at the start of this introduction, coming to see oneself as an "activist" was made possible by the mass involvement of working class women (the majority of public school teachers in every US state). In a similarly gendered vein, finding, maintaining, and reproducing the courage to stand up for "your kids" was crucial for the success of the West Virginia public employee strike of 2018, and Chicago teachers' strike of 2019.

SRT is well-suited to the moment. This is because it is broad enough to recognize and value differing motivations for struggle, yet focused enough to offer a non-reductive anti-capitalist way of unifying them. Through this combination of flexibility and precision, SRT satisfies an emerging theoretical need. As Tithi Bhattacharya has made clear, it achieves this by mapping the class-based harm of exploitation through oppressions, then offering a socialist horizon of emancipation.<sup>4</sup> Socialism here would be both overcoming the social relations that exploit and oppress at the same time, and replacing them with an organization of social relations that is truly conducive to freely developing our needs and capacities.

This book will develop and defend what I take to be the best, most powerful version of SRT. I mean to develop an argument showing that SRT is the best approach at first, grasping the harms suffered in capitalism and second, providing a full-throated justification for socialism. The philosophical reconstruction I offer will show how SRT motivates socialism as the organization of social reproduction most conducive to the benefit of life-making from the standpoint of individual and collective freedom.

But, if SRT is itself a powerful *theory*, why does it need the kind of defense I plan on offering? Can't the existing work, whether movement or scholarly, oriented by SRT speak for itself? What, in other words, might a theoretical defense and justification of SRT amount to? These are not idle or unmotivated concerns. Theory is assumed to be abstract and conducted from a position of privilege. For theory skeptics, it is at best a nice extra flourish, a topping that sweetens. At worst, theory is seen as a distraction from important practical struggles and their study.

When a social theory offers a set of principles to develop a picture of the world, those principles always highlight some parts of the picture while allowing other parts to fall into the background. Different theories provide differing ways of picturing the world and conceiving valuable

points of intervention into it. Since there can be different theories, the choice of which theory one works with is actually practically quite important. For instance, consider a social theory offering principles that help explain the necessity of conflict, and assesses agents in terms of political/military formations put in tension by rising and falling powers. This is not a theory we can use to explore the way the division of labor is highly gendered. Likewise, a social theory assuming that hierarchies are divinely ordained or are biologically intrinsic will have a hard time highlighting potential avenues for any revolutionary aspirations of a dominated class.

And this is precisely where the relevance of deepening Social Reproduction *Theory* comes in. Exploring the “theory” of SRT is therefore a way of taking a step back from empirical research, and instead exploring what makes this theory such a coherent and valuable approach. SRT is not, in other words, just one among many frames for developing an understanding of the world. This book argues that SRT’s commitment to socialism flows from a frame that develops good, clear-sighted social analysis.

There are three reasons why SRT is so helpful at developing social analyses. The first is that SRT offers a framework that, when put into practice, generates a wide range of accurate analyses. For instance, SRT can be used to zoom in and develop detailed accounts of the family-structured care work in the contemporary context.<sup>5</sup> Or, the theory can zoom out and develop much broader analyses of the capital-inflected changes in how “childhood” is constructed and experienced.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, the theory has the tools to develop rich linkages between these micro and macro levels.

The second reason is that SRT’s social analyses can, at the same time, develop social criticism. Standards for criticism are most compelling when they flow not from a knock-down logical argument, but through the norms and values that unfold, even if in frustrated form, in the world that SRT strives to account for. Indeed, SRT is so valuable precisely because its program for research centers the ways our powers are constrained. We are limited to produce and reproduce a very narrow set of values, and often quite oppressive forces.

As Katie Endicott said, teachers caring for “your kids” was made impossible by how states underfunded public schools. SRT works by tracking our needs, how we try to satisfy them, and how we are limited and constrained when other, better, freer possibilities are available. By



uncovering avoidable frustrations, tensions, even social contradictions, SRT does more than show what is the case. It shows how what is the case is contradictory, and known or at least knowable as wrong and bad. Since theory is often used to show what's wrong, SRT serves a valuable social function that goes a step beyond providing clear pictures.

The third reason SRT is valuable is its practical consequences. After all, the values of a theory should, at least in part, lie in what it reveals as a task as well as the resources and opportunities to accomplish this task. Of course, many social theories do not aim at tasks, but merely at understanding. SRT, however, is different. Since the theory helps identify the ways our capacities are formed in violent and highly limiting ways, it also points towards a socialist horizon of emancipation.<sup>7</sup>

To develop its argument, the book is developed in seven chapters that build from each other by design. Each chapter, just like this introduction, is preceded with testimony from striking workers involved in either the International Women's Day Strikes (US) or from participants in the wave of public school teachers' strikes. These epigraphs by radical working women motivate the distinct themes of each chapter. They remind us that, ultimately, theory stems from struggle, and has its purchase in how it can help us think about live political problems.<sup>8</sup> The epigraphs are not the results of qualitative research, but serve as points of departure for each chapter and provide real-life motivation for theory. They are often only a few lines from larger stories which deserve careful attention in their own right. I strongly encourage readers to explore these and other interviews and testimonies in full at <https://publicseminar.org/author/iwsnyc/> and [www.nyctransoralhistory.org/](http://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/). Though unavoidably condensed, the voices I rely on, to borrow from Patricia Hill Collins, are "both individual and collective, personal and political ... reflecting the intersection of (their) unique biography with the larger meaning of (our) historical times."<sup>9</sup> As stories of working class struggle, I hope they call us to re-commit to pursuing full social emancipation.

To develop social reproduction as a radical framework for social research we can draw on Marx's notion of "labour power." This is understood broadly as the human capacity to actively satisfy needs, and which must be set into motion if any society or individual is to survive. Since labor is needed for production and reproduction, labor power must also be produced and continuously reproduced over time. Both need-satisfying activity and our powers to engage in such activity evolve through work that itself changes as our social conditions and relations change

alongside them. In this continuously shifting whole SRT focuses in particular on the changing patterns of labor power. Our powers can grow or decline throughout the day, change over a lifetime, and evolve through the changing strategies we deploy to satisfy social needs.

SRT trains its lens on labor powers and their continuous reproduction. It is not concerned with how many hours of sleep or how many thousand calories are required to get up and go to work each day. Instead, it sheds light on the social inputs that give our powers their particular form. And then, it focuses on the outputs: the way those powers are actually set into motion. It asks what forms of work done by which workers produce labor power, and then what social constraints push those powers to being set in motion (or idled) in various ways. Following Marx, SRT sees labor power as key to producing capital. But it also sees labor powers as the keys to capitalist social relations more broadly. The work people do sets their individual trajectories in motion, and when taken together sets societies in motion as well.

SRT thus widens Marx's lens, expanding the narrow aperture through which the logic of capital's valorization, and *only* this logic, can be seen clearly. By "logic" I mean that we can discern and understand capital's need to continuously expand. I do not mean that this never-tiring demand to grow is itself "rational" or even sensible from the standpoint of human needs or the ecological conditions for the earth's long-term habitability. It is no contradiction to hold that capital's logic is deeply irrational. This logic unfolds in different social environments made up of physical structures and geographies, legal regulations, non-governmental organizations, economic opportunities, state/trans-national apparatus, customs, and histories of oppression and resistance. In short, SRT's framework provides a strong approach to understanding the social forces that generate capitalist social relations, in all their diverse forms.

This focus on labor power makes SRT critical, as well as analytic. Our unrealized potentials to satisfy needs justify criticism. In other words, what labor power *can* do but is constrained from doing leaves us with unmet need, and unmet need can be appreciated as a kind of violence. When a set of social relations develops needs and powers to satisfy them, but simultaneously restrains those powers from being actualized, it can be roundly rejected. SRT shows how the reproduction of labor power is both formed *by* and formative *of* needlessly stunted labor powers. SRT values a wealth of strategies for need-satisfying activity over and against the way capital's narrow demand for self-valorization dominates all other

possibilities. And SRT illuminates how capitalism constrains and distorts the development of human powers, thereby preventing them from satisfying our needs. For SRT capitalist social relations not only make and rely on labor powers, they do so in *disempowering* ways.

Yet, generating a critical perspective from the potentialities of labor power risks making SRT appear beholden to privileging labor in its fully employed, able-bodied, and stereotypically industrial forms. In truth, however, SRT is necessarily committed to rejecting such a position. This is because SRT's criticism of disempowered labor rejects the ways some capacities are sidelined or seen as "disabled" and therefore devalued in capitalist societies.

SRT's commitment to labor power values those capacities that can satisfy human needs here and now. But it also brings into view the emancipatory powers that, when developed and set in motion, would help develop socialism. Capital's profit-driven ableism and productivism can be replaced by a social logic that values the different ways that powers are embodied, and the many different kinds of work people can do. By the same logic, SRT can reject the idea that all powers should be actualized. Carbon-extractive capacities are, for instance, inconsistent with the glaring need to secure habitable ecological conditions. Since our needs are historically and socially changing, what counts as a valuable power is socially determined. SRT accepts neither a promethean overstepping of all bounds nor naturalist determinations of needs and capacities.

Naturalistic strategies are particularly dangerous when used to think the sexed body and women's gender. Yet some prior versions of SRT did move in this direction, or at least opened the door to these kinds of developments. Gender and gender oppression are neither entirely biologically rooted nor a stable, natural existence that was harmed yet could itself serve liberatory ends beyond the violences of capital. Rather, both gender and the multiple forms of gender oppression are something we make. SRT is on firmer footing when it includes gender and the sources of gender oppression, as well as gender resistance, within its account of reproduced powers and social relations. Doing so will make more space to think trans, non-binary, and intersex oppressions and resistances than naturalistic versions of SRT can allow.

Since SRT thinks gender oppressions in relation to class, it is in some ways quite close to intersectional theories. Yet there is often mutual dismissiveness between the two. Marxist social theories have rejected intersectional theories as "bourgeois" for the way they theorize

agents through distinct identities, oppressions, or social logics. Others question whether intersectional accounts of oppression have a view of social organization as a whole, whether class is appropriately included in that whole, and whether it has a proper model for how oppressions are combined. Patricia Hill Collins' use of "matrices of oppression" in her development of intersectionality, however, avoids the force of many of these criticisms. Still, there are good reasons to prefer the way SRT develops a notion of class through oppressed powers.

SRT's approach to "class" is valuable because it can combine the logical conception of class with the social forces and lived experiences that flesh it out. The logic of class relations points to the ways society is generally divided. As a Marxist view, SRT distinguishes those who need to exchange their powers for a wage, or rely on those who do, and those who buy labor powers, or otherwise own enough to satisfy their needs. This class division is essential first because it describes the framing conditions for developing and turning powers into activities and second, because this power imbalance is what sets capital on its valorizing paths. The class relation is what permits capital to exploit workers and thereby grow. The logic of the class relation can therefore be understood as the causal or motor force, and one that enables the historical reproduction of capitalist societies.

Yet this absolutely necessary notion of class tells us next to nothing about the specific paths valorization proceeds through. Nor does it account for the wide-ranging forms of social oppression that characterize capitalist societies. For this reason, SRT ties the logical notion of class to other social forces of domination that help determine it. Doing so allows us to see that working class powers are produced and reproduced in ways that are also gendered and racialized, to name just two powerful social forces. SRT can therefore recognize differences within working class populations as essential parts of class experience. Class itself then refers to *both* the logical relation of the working class to the capitalist *and* the set of highly varying and mutable class experiences of working class people.

Since SRT sees the working class as shot through with so many oppressions, it orients struggle towards what I am calling the socialist horizon of emancipation. In this emancipatory sense, "socialism" is nothing other than the set of relations through which powers for need-satisfying activity, and the ways they are reproduced, could be self-guided by

the needs of human beings. This provides a way to object to capitalism and the twentieth century's "actually existing socialisms." Both failed to establish the social relations through which developing, actualizing, and reproducing powers would be truly liberating. Socialism is therefore the positive response to manifold disempowerments set into relief by the way SRT pictures the world.

As a horizon of emancipation, socialism must be approached from a given terrain. Meaningful socialist politics follow a grounded appraisal of existing powers. Like any system of social relations, socialism cannot be fully inaugurated and completed in one fell swoop. Like any society, socialism would need to be built and reproduced over time. Yet, the socialist horizon of emancipation is not an infinitely receding horizon, always just beyond reach.

For SRT, socialism is a *political* project. One that requires a clear, class-based strategy for orienting and growing the radical potentials that exist in the here and now. Understanding class in this way shines a light on the necessity of working class solidarity against exploitation not despite, but *through* the working class' differing powers and experiences. To get at the radical potentials of this solidarity SRT asks who reproduces labor powers, and what, beyond labor for capital, these powers can do. The working class is made possible by the class relation, but the powers for socialism are always specifically produced and reproduced through oppressions tied to race, gender, immigrant status, sexuality, ability, and more. Frequently, through their own self-reproduction groups subject to such oppressions develop novel and solidarizing relations that foster radical potentials.

By highlighting the way need-satisfying powers of the working class are formed in impoverishing and constraining ways by capitalist social relations, SRT develops pictures of the world that double as criticisms of it. At the same time, centering these powers provides a clear analysis of the agents who, through solidarity, have the needs and the powers to fight for a radically different, freer and empowering set of social relations.

Finally, a word about Marx. Throughout this book I will be showing how the version of SRT I am developing is a direct development of Marxism. I do not, however, assume that merely showing a theory to be Marxist amounts to an argument for it being a better account than alternatives. While I hold that SRT is an extension of Marxist theory, this is not a dogmatic account which treats Marx's work as a finished

article that need only be glossed to arrive at a truth. I rely on brief references to Marx for two different reasons. First, to show those committed to defending Marx that SRT is not a threat, but in fact has its deepest roots in fundamentally Marxist commitments. Second, I quote Marx in elaborating SRT to show readers who enter with a healthy dose of skepticism that Marxist commitments are compelling, even necessary, today.