

Social Reproduction: *The Covert Commodification of Women's Reproductive Rights.*

The work of women has always been overlooked and undervalued. Despite the advent of feminism occurring within the twenty-first century, with women's rights and wage equality being on the forefront of social change, there are many elements of female oppression that still go unnoticed. This seeming obliviousness comes as a result not necessarily of the actions anti-feminist agendas but of the conscious and covert efforts of capitalism, as the neo-liberal world heralds face-value feminism while subtly encroaching on women's rights by perpetuating policies and cultures that exploit women. In her book *New Directions in Economic Anthropology*, Susana Narotzky explores this concept through the theory of Social Reproduction, whereby she describes the most overlooked and arguably the most important aspect of economic production which is exclusive to women. The theory of Social Reproduction has gained attention in recent times as a result of increasing class consciousness and feminism in the current capitalist neo-liberal landscape, exposing the deliberate and calculated nature of social norms as covert perpetuations of Capitalism.

Narotzky establishes Social Reproduction as the continuous replenishment of the workforce in both a biological and social sense. Her argument proposes that through childbirth and child rearing, women contribute the most invaluable aspect of the economy- the labour force, while not being fairly compensated or even acknowledged for such contributions (Narotzky, 1997). Narotzky is not the originator of this theory, as the concept of Social Reproduction has been circulating since the 19th Century and has even been mentioned by Karl Marx in some of his work. In his book *Capital*, Marx states that, "If production be capitalistic in form, so, too, will be reproduction" (Marx, 2013). He offers the standpoint that the biological reproduction of humans in a capitalist society inevitably perpetuates Capitalism itself, as the replenishment of the workforce is crucial in the continuation of capital accumulation. He continues on this thought by writing, "...the mere continuity of the process of production, in other words simple reproduction, sooner or later and by necessity converts into capital" (Marx, 2013). Narotzky criticises several of Marx's views in her work on Social Reproduction, particularly stating their differing perspectives of 'use value' and 'exchange value' in relation to labour which are more fundamentally significant in an economic sense rather than anthropologically or socially. A notable difference between Marx's and Narotzky's stances that were not explicitly stated in Narotzky's work, is their differing approaches on Social Reproduction as an operating entity in society's organisation. Marx describes the theory as an inevitable phenomena, whereby labourers, under the forceful wheel of Capitalism, perpetuate it through social reproduction. On the other hand, Narotzky argues that Social Reproduction should not be seen as an objective of society, as it inhibits the possibility of change or dissent within societies.

"In thinking of social reproduction, we must be careful, however, not to imply that the objective of a society is to reproduce itself, to maintain a certain order of things, to perpetuate a concrete form of organisation ... where different limbs with different roles serve together a unique purpose decided by the head ... By presupposing perpetuation as the aim of the social body we also preclude the viability of rupture, of radical change or the mere construction of alternative ways of life and of thinking within a dominant hegemony." (Narotzky, 1997)

In a general and forgiving sense, Narotzky's stance is understandable and perhaps can be interpreted as relating exclusively to society's consciousness of social reproduction as a perpetuation of capitalism. However, the argument is flawed on a more practical level, as realistically, the normative values of capitalism are often overlooked and unrecognised by the average person. Ofcourse, It is completely reasonable to say that the average person does not reproduce solely for the purpose of replenishing the capitalist workforce. However, to diminish the notion that there is a deciding 'head' in society that establishes social norms on family life and child rearing which inadvertently perpetuates the capitalist ideals is dangerous in an anti-capitalist argument. It can be argued that our societies are structured and influenced by a metaphorical head, that is in fact capitalist in nature. In fact, the acknowledgement of this capitalist control and organisation of society could encourage and incite radical change and alternative views within society as the status quo gains criticism amongst the average citizens. In a contradictory manner, this notion is not lost on Narotzky, as she subsequently describes the influence of social norms on reproduction and how reproduction is controlled as a resource of labour.

“In fact in human societies no fertility is 'natural' and social practices -forms of marriage, rituals, patterns of food allocation-influence fertility and the demography of human populations. On the other hand, the control of human reproduction should be studied in the context of a society's complex means of controlling the resource of labour power.” (Narotzky, 1997)

This acknowledgement of the intentional control of human reproduction is just as relevant as it was in the 20th century when originally written, as it is in the current 21st century. The longevity of this phenomenon can be attributed to the covertness of economics and capitalism as it operates in a social context. This covertness can be examined through the theory of 'Embeddedness' by economic historian Karl Polanyi. Polanyi describes Embeddedness as the differing degrees in which the economy is integrated into non-economic (social) aspects of life. He proposed that in non-capitalist traditional societies, there are higher levels of embeddedness of economics in social structures and activities, whereas in 'modern' capitalist societies, this level of embeddedness is significantly decreased which he describes as 'Disembeddedness'(Podolny et al., 1994). In many ways, disembeddedness can be viewed as the natural result of industrialisation, through which the production of commodities has become so isolated from an individual's work, that it eliminates any real connection between labourers contributing to the production of a final product. In contemporary times, the economy is dependent on more than just the production of goods and services, but also fictitious markets like the financial market that further isolate economic processes from the average citizen's everyday life (Dale, 2016). As such, it seems only fair that there is a level of disembeddedness that exists within today's society. However, the existence of such disembeddedness may not be merely a natural and coincidental occurrence, but instead a strategic development of capitalism that allows for continued exploitation, simply under a less noticeable guise.

In the context of social reproduction, the benefits of having a labour force that is disconnected from economic processes is crucial in the attempt to prevent rising class consciousness and social dissent. To encourage the notion that the economy operates entirely outside the scope of social activities such as women's reproduction and child rearing,

discourages the possibility of consciously linking these two entities that are in fact connected in their operations. Fortunately, increasing levels of class consciousness and feminism have unrooted this issue, allowing it to gain more popularity in current discourse.

Contributing to current discourse is the controversy of the U.S.A's Supreme Court overthrowing crucial abortion rights legislation, *Roe v Wade*. Through the overturning of this important piece of legislation, women in America no longer have the constitutional right to choice in regards to abortion, allowing for more states to deem abortions as illegal entirely. *Roe v Wade* was initially implemented into the legislature in 1973, as a result, it seemed to many that the strides that were made for women's rights within the past two decades have been futile and an effective step backwards was taken in regards to women's rights. Reasonably, the revelation that the U.S.A's government might have been more progressive for women's rights in 1973 than in 2022 is shocking and disheartening. American Philosopher Nancy Fraser tackles this issue, writing that it is not necessarily a fluctuation of support for women's rights that causes such landmark interventions and setbacks on women's reproductive rights but rather an inherent contradiction in capitalism's reliance on women's reproduction as a resource of labour. Fraser describes this contradictory relationship as defined by capitalism's lack of care in supporting female reproduction while still fundamentally relying on it as a resource of labour (Fraser, 2016). As a result, this neglect of female reproductive processes is what encourages crises of labour, as women are more autonomous of their reproductive processes and more aware of the unsupported role of motherhood, causing fertility rates to decrease which ultimately poses a threat for the future of the labour force.

In contemporary times, the awareness of this cycle is crucial in understanding Social Reproduction Theory and its implications on women's reproductive rights. According to The Guardian, "About 60% of the global population live in places where fertility rates have dropped below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman, the point at which a country's population would remain stable" (The Guardian, 2022.) As a result, more governments are implementing pronatalist policies that would increase fertility rates and population size. A population activist Robin Maynard who is the head of the NGO Population Matters, commented on this issue stating, "Coercive pronatalism is not simply a manifestation of patriarchy or misogyny but can be a product of political and economic forces entirely indifferent to women, for whom they exist simply as productive or non-productive wombs." (Madawi, 2021.) While taking this into account, the motivations behind the overturning of *Roe v Wade* became more obvious as more than just anti-feminist but rooted in the operations of Capitalism, and the exploitative nature of Social Reproduction Theory is elucidated.

As the feminist movement continues to progress, a determining factor of its success and effectiveness lies within its ability to crucially assess and analyse the structures that attempt to prohibit it, that lay far below the surface level of issues. Through Narotzky's discourse on Social Reproduction theory, yet another deep rooted form of women's oppression is uncovered and like in most cases of social inequality, Capitalism is identified as the perpetrator of this issue. In the attempt to not only understand this issue, but to create and enact change and justice for women, the relationship between the economy and social practices should be examined more closely and a critical reevaluation of the exploitative economic structures that exist must come forth. Human reproduction is arguably one of the

most basic and natural experiences of human beings, and under Capitalism it is being commercialised and exploited. Contrary to what capitalist propaganda might proffer, a world of true equality should prioritise human rights over economic gain. The creation of human life should not be commodified, and neither should women's rights.

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