

## **Rethinking surplus-value: recentring struggle at the sphere of reproduction**

**Jared Sacks**

### **Abstract**

*Since the 1970s, autonomist feminists have critiqued Karl Marx for failing to appreciate the sphere of reproduction as a key driver of capitalism. They have shown how unpaid reproductive work contributes to the production of surplus-value – something orthodox Marxism has refused to reckon with. This is in part because of a fetishisation of categories such as productive and unproductive labour as the theoretical building blocks of Marxism. However, if we understand Marx’s critique of political economy as a method for understanding capitalism in terms of process, we are forced to rethink our understanding of categories such as surplus-value. Within current debates around the production of value under capitalism, it is useful to make an explicit conceptual distinction between where surplus-value is produced and where it is extracted. In doing so, we are foregrounding the sphere of reproduction and the key role it plays in upholding capitalist social relations.*

*This contrast, then, can inform the struggle against capitalism in the following ways. Firstly, it advocates for social movement unionism that transcend boundaries of production and reproduction. Secondly, it provides theoretical justification for withdrawing and disrupting reproductive labour, supporting a decentred politics of resistance outside the factory. Finally, it speaks to the importance of building autonomous movements for the production of “the commons”. This paper uses examples from recent struggles in South Africa and South America to theoretically valorise the diversity of struggles that have emerged since the 1960s.*

**Keywords:** reproduction, surplus-value, production, productive labour, unpaid labour, commons, social movements, disruption, South Africa, autonomy, Marxism

The labor of a woman, who cooks for her husband, who is making tires in the Firestone plant in Southgate, California, is essentially as much a part of the production of automobile tires as the cooks and waitresses in the cafés where Firestone workers eat. And all the wives of all the Firestone workers, by the necessary social labor they perform in the home, have a part in the production of Firestone Tires, and their labor is as inseparably knit into those tires as is the labor of their husbands.

– Mary Inman, *The Role of the Housewife in Social Production* (1940)

Whatever the shape and direction of black liberation struggle...domestic space has been a crucial site for organising, for forming political solidarity. Homeplace has been a site of resistance.

– bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990)

## Argument

In *Yearning* (1990), feminist author bell hooks takes on the common belief that gender equality must be fought for primarily in the workplace. Her essay, “Homeplace (a site of resistance)”, can be seen as part of a history of feminist de-centring of the factory and re-centring of the sphere of reproduction as part of her call to resist ‘Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy’. While hooks stays clear of Marxist analysis and draws no genealogical linkages with autonomist feminist critiques of orthodox Marxism, her theoretical convergence with feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici helps us spatially reorient the way we theorise the struggle against capitalism.

In this article, I will seek to bring Marx’s theory of value into conversation with non-Marxist thought, such as that of hooks. Understanding capitalist value through a feminist lens not only broadens the scope of the Marxist tradition; it also forces a critique of political economy that is better engaged with the lived experience and living ideologies<sup>1</sup> that emerge out of reproductive struggles.

Using this autonomist feminist critique, I argue that within the debates around the production of value under capitalism, it is useful to make an explicit conceptual distinction between where surplus-value is *produced* and where it is *extracted* and that Marx only made provision for the latter. This will make visible the relationships of exploitation that transcend various spheres of society. In doing so, I will be employing a long line of “open Marxist” and “autonomist feminist” theories with the goal of rethinking Marx’s critique of political economy so that it relates better in practice to existing struggles against

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “living ideologies” seeks to rework S’bu Zikode’s “living politics” that “comes from the people and stays with the people” (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2009) into an expression of ideas, beliefs, and concepts emanating from non-institutional spaces of struggle. This is an important reorientation of the way we understand the source of theory. As Robin Kelley’s puts it, “Revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge” (2002, p. 8).

capitalism. In this way, theoretical abstraction is not an end in itself, but rather a process within organic thought that is meant to engage with, rather than replace, living ideologies.

In this article I first explore Karl Marx's distinction between the "productive" and "unproductive" worker through his understanding of the reproduction of labour and his theory of surplus-value.

Second, I analyse how the scientific materialism of traditional Marxists has used these conceptual categories to privilege the "productive" male factory worker as the revolutionary subject of the working class, thereby creating a false hierarchy in relation to other workers. I will focus specifically on the orthodox approach with its origins in Friedrich Engels' reading of Marx's work, but also show how this way of thinking has often been embraced by other strands of Marxism.<sup>2</sup>

Next, I distinguish Marx's own approach from his interpretation by orthodox Marxists. Although Marx has to a certain extent been misinterpreted by many who followed him – particularly regarding the scientific nature of his theories – he remained committed to certain narrow and rigid categories which contributed to the reification of his theories.

Fourth, I argue that autonomist feminism's decentring of the factory and its recentring around the sphere of reproduction, particularly what is traditionally viewed as women's work, provides an important corrective to this reductionist approach. Orthodox Marxism, and even the work of Marx himself, has not sufficiently valued such work in their theorisation of capitalism. In reformulating Marx's theory of value through a reproductive lens, I propose an alternative definition of surplus-value with respect to productive/unproductive labour. Redefining surplus-value by making a distinction between where it is produced versus where it is extracted will lead to a rethinking of Adam Smith's framework<sup>3</sup> of productive/unproductive labour whereby a further distinction will be made between "directly" productive labour and "indirectly" productive labour. The purpose of doing this is not to contribute to some sort of new Marxist political economy – indeed Marx himself was against such an endeavour<sup>4</sup> – but rather to modify Marx's labour theory of value so that it can engage more thoughtfully with the countless struggles permeating the social landscape.

In the final section, I show that this contrast can inform the struggle against capitalism in the following ways. (A) It champions struggles such as the

---

<sup>2</sup> In some other versions of Marxism, the primacy of the factory worker has been replaced with that of the productive worker – a broader category which nevertheless maintains the same hierarchy in relation to the sphere of reproduction. While my analysis will focus on the former for the sake of simplicity, the critique remains applicable to this broader category.

<sup>3</sup> While maintaining the overall productive/unproductive distinction, it should be noted that Marx extensively critiques certain elements of Adam Smith's definition of productive labour in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1969, pp.144–256).

<sup>4</sup> Marx was pretty clear that his method was a *critique* of political economy rather than an attempt to create a new one. See for instance Smith (1997).

Marikana miners and farmworkers' strikes that transcend the boundaries of production and reproduction, building towards social movement unionism. (B) It provides theoretical justification for road blockades that withdraw and disrupt reproductive labour – a militant decentred politics that seeks concessions from capital and the state. (C) It speaks to the relevance of building autonomous movements, such as the Zapatistas, for the production of “the commons”. In sum, redefining Marx's theory of value in a way that is more dynamic and open helps us engage with non-Marxist analyses as well as with the living ideologies of actually existing struggles. It also forces us to see concepts such as surplus-value as embodied social relations that are not quantifiable or compatible with the futile ambition that is Marxist economics.

### **Marx and the value of work**

Marx's understanding of capitalist accumulation was based on his theory of surplus-value, distinguishing it from David Ricardo's theory of value, a key problem with classical political economy (Marx 1887, p.57). According to Marx, all value accrues from a worker's labour-power. Under capitalism, labour-power is purchased by a capitalist at its value of reproduction – i.e. the subsistence cost at which it would be able to reproduce. Here, the distinction between labour-power and labour-time is essential. Once the worker has completed the labour-time which corresponds to the value of his<sup>5</sup> labour-power, he continues to work and produce for the capitalist. The “exchange” value of what is produced beyond that point is its surplus-value. As Marx puts it, “surplus-value results only from a quantitative excess of labour, from a lengthening-out of one and the same labour-process” (1887, p.137) and further that the worker “creates surplus-value which *for the capitalists*, has all the charms of a creation out of nothing” (1887, p.152). I emphasise the subjective nature of this statement because, from the worker's perspective, surplus-value certainly is not produced out of thin air.

Surplus-value is the capitalist's *raison d'être*; their “one single life impulse” (Marx 1887, p.163). Capital seeks only to maximise surplus-value and it does so through a range of strategies including expanding the work-day, reducing wages and increasing productivity. This capitalist production, thus, not only produces the worker, commodities and surplus-value, but (re)produces the capitalist relation itself, thereby separating the worker from what they produce (Marx 1887, p.407).

---

<sup>5</sup> I use the male gender tongue-in-cheek because theorising the industrial worker as male has a long history in Marxism. This has played an important part in concealing women's central role in the rise of the factory and their eventual relegation to the home through the manufacture of the nuclear family - although both Marx (1887) and Engels (1970b) do write in a limited way about this process. Hereafter, unless making an explicit political point about a person's gender, I use the pronouns “their”, “they” and “them” to refer also to a singular individual without assuming that person's gender. “Him/Her” is insufficient because many people do not fall within such gender binaries.

This is where the difference between “productive” and “unproductive” labour comes in. The content of labour and its use-value is not important here. Rather, labour-power is productive only where it produces capital through the extraction of surplus-value (i.e. where it results in the production of commodities for sale) (Marx 2008, pp.388–392). In *Theories of Surplus Labour*, Marx goes into more detail about this relationship: “Productive labour, in its meaning for capitalist production...reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour-power), but in addition produces surplus-value for the capitalist...Only that wage-labour is productive which produces capital” (1969, p.144).

On the other hand, labour is considered unproductive where it does not work for a capitalist to produce surplus-value. This can include a range of paid work: that of a mercenary, a government worker, or teacher, is unproductive so long as the labour does not produce directly for capital. Put another way, “it is labour which is not exchanged with capital, but directly with revenue, that is, with wages or profit” (Marx 1969, p.147). Following Marx’s discussion of reproduction of capital,<sup>6</sup> this kind of labour is that which is purchased via capitalist profit in the form of consumption or that which an entity such as a government institution is funding through taxes on this profit.

In the same way, the sphere of reproduction – i.e. the unpaid labour of housework or the paid labour of working-class consumption – counts as unproductive labour as well. David Harvie,<sup>7</sup> whose work questions Marx’s definition of productive/unproductive labour, identifies in Marx three types of unproductive labour: (a) labour whose product reproduces labour-power itself, (b) the supervision of others’ labour (e.g. a factory manager), and (c) labour which is involved in the circulation and consumption of commodities (2005, pp.135–136). Because unproductive labour is such a broad category, for Marx it is therefore key to the circulation of capital and to the reproduction of capitalism as a whole.

However, before addressing how feminists have rethought the question of value in Marx, it is important to contrast it with the dominant interpretation of Marx throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **Orthodox Marxism**

There is much contention regarding the methodology Marx employed in his work. Many traditional interpretations of Marx have embraced a highly structured and rigid understanding of categories such as surplus-value, production, reproduction and various “laws” of capitalist society. The origin of the various strands that emerged as orthodox Marxism (such as the work of

---

<sup>6</sup> There are two ways in which Marx uses the term reproduction: the reproduction of labour-power (Volume I) and the reproduction of capital (Volume II). This paper focuses on the former, and reference to the ‘sphere of reproduction’ is that which reproduces the worker.

<sup>7</sup> David Harvie the political economist, not David Harvey the geographer.

Daniel de Leon, George Plekhanov and Karl Kautsky) is generally attributed to the scientific materialism of Friedrich Engels who, in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, linked the natural sciences with Marx's theory of capital:

These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries, Socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations (1970a, p.34)

Furthermore, "Engels tended to focus almost solely and one-sidedly on economic and technological change as factors in societal development" (Brown 2014, p.4). According to Brown, this included capitalism's repression of women, which Engels understood as being driven deterministically by the privatisation of property. Engels therefore implied that patriarchy would not exist in a communistic society sans private property (Engels 1970b).

This approach has not been limited to orthodox Marxism. From this scientific perspective, many other Marxists have focused on the technical aspect of Marx's definition of surplus-value. The work of the Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel is a good example of how value has been used to drive the sole focus on the productive worker as a revolutionary subject. Quoted sympathetically by Ian Gough in *New Left Review*, Mandel claimed that Marx and Engels "assigned the proletariat the key role in the coming of socialism not so much because of the misery it suffers as because of *the place it occupies in the production process*'...Here employment in the process of production, hence involvement in the creation of surplus-value, makes this group of workers potentially revolutionary" (Gough 1976, pp.171–172).<sup>8</sup> The converse is implied: any group of workers that does not produce surplus-value directly for the capitalist, no matter how low their wage, their alienation from the means of production, and the extent by which their labour contributes to the reproduction of capitalism, should not be considered revolutionary. At very least, such Marxists argued, the unproductive worker should be led by the revolutionary vanguard class of productive labour.

While Lenin, too, renounced certain orthodox positions he still centred the productive worker as the revolution's vanguard. John Holloway explains it thus: "the concept of scientific socialism has left an imprint that stretches far beyond those who identify with Engels, Kautsky or Lenin" (2002, p.132). This methodological approach had serious consequences for how Marxism has understood, not only capitalism, but the revolutionary position of the worker.

---

<sup>8</sup> Gough's emphasis

## Questioning the revolutionary subject

Marx's understanding of the production of surplus-value has long informed the way Leftist intellectuals, particularly orthodox Marxists, have struggled against capitalism. While this economic reading has not been the only reason for this prioritisation of the "productive worker", it has certainly been an important one. Since, as some Marxists have understood it, only labour directly hired by a capitalist produces surplus-value, it was only within this sphere that capitalists exploit the worker through extracting a portion of their labour value as profit (Marx 1887; Marx 1969).

In contending that only this sphere produces value for capitalists, such theories framed the "productive" factory worker as the revolutionary subject of the working class, therefore orienting a hierarchy of struggle around him. As I have already pointed out, theorising the revolutionary industrial worker as male has a long history. Much traditional Marxist theory has gendered the factory worker as male even while many of the first factories including workplace organising were dominated by women and children<sup>9</sup>. Beyond the factory, those whose only knowledge of the Paris Commune came from Marx (1871), increasingly understood the revolution in terms of male factory workers. What had to be rediscovered, as Manuel Castells and Kristin Ross have shown, was how the insurrection was organised around the territorial neighbourhood because the Communards' link to the factory was precarious and because mobilisations were primarily driven by women (Castells 1983; Ross 2008). Not only did this mean that many Marxists and communists tended to privilege the factory and the trade union in organising resistance, but, occasionally, struggles autonomous from the factory were on this basis isolated and even destroyed (Federici & Caffentzis 2007).<sup>10</sup>

However, it was incorrect for them to imply that non-workplace struggles were ineffective. In fact, although unacknowledged by many orthodox Marxists, the majority of 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary struggles were first and foremost peasant struggles – a group many had relegated to the back-burner of theory, even sometimes considering them counter-revolutionary. As Federici explains: "starting with the Mexican and the Chinese Revolution, the most antisystemic [and anti-capitalist] struggles of the last century have not been fought only or primarily by waged industrial workers, Marx's projected revolutionary subjects, but have been fought by rural, indigenous, anticolonial, antiapartheid, feminist movements" (Federici, 2012, 92).

---

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the struggle staged by the Lowell Mill Girls (Robinson 1898).

<sup>10</sup> An additional point of clarification may be necessary here. Even though orthodox Marxists tended to centre the male factory worker in his discussion of productive labour, Marx's categorisation still holds for all non-factory workers who are productive. That said, while Marx's abstract categories can theoretically be extended beyond the factory as well as to women who are doing productive labour in the workplace, over the years most Marxists and even Marx himself have empirically and theoretically centred their analysis on the male factory worker.

Thus, while most orthodox Marxists posited the factory worker as the revolutionary subject, when anti-capitalist revolutions actually took place, including in places like China and Cuba, the centre was overwhelmingly outside the factory and primarily based among the peasantry and urban underclass. Yet, how does Marx's work actually stack up against orthodox interpretations of it?

### **Marx in relation to orthodox Marxism**

Even though Marx first situated the industrial worker as the revolutionary subject, he was more ambiguous as to whether his theories are indeed "scientific". On the one hand, his numerous chapters on various "laws" of capitalism lend credence to Engels' claims; on the other hand, Marx also asserted that his methodology was primarily process oriented. He was therefore against the idea of a scientific method as such. Marx explained this to Lassalle in 1858:

"The work I am presently concerned with is a Critique of Economic Categories or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system." (Marx & Engels 2010, p.270).

In an important journal article on this topic, Cyril Smith goes further into detail on this point and against interpreting Marx's *Capital* using the scientific method that Engels had prescribed: "Marx's critique of political economy was not a proposal for a new, 'socialist economics' – for Marx, socialism implied the withering away of economics." (1997, p.124).<sup>11</sup> Selma James makes a similar point in her critique of Mandel: "Marx negated political economy in theory and the working class negates it in practice" (2012, p.52).

Holloway, similarly, points out that much of Marx's later work (including Volumes II and III of *Capital*) were edited by Engels with, he claims, the purpose of promoting a certain scientific interpretation of Marx. In Engels' supplement to the "Law of Value and Rate of Profit", for instance, he "presents value not as a form of social relations specific to capitalist society but as an economic law" (2002, p.133). Engels' interpretation by orthodox Marxists finds resonance even today. Contemporary Marxist economists, such as Mohun, assert that the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is one of Marx's "fundamental building blocks" (1996, p.31), misunderstanding Marx's methodological critique of political economy.

---

<sup>11</sup> "I believe that the reason for these controversies is not so much the different ways in which Engels' own work has been interpreted, but that the Marxist tradition has fundamentally misunderstood what Marx was trying to do in his life-long critique of political economy. I shall argue that, even after all these years, Marx's fundamental insights have not really been grasped, and that, despite all his devotion to Marx's chief work, this misunderstanding actually begins with Engels himself" (Smith 1997, p.123).



But if Marx's method understands capitalism in terms of process, then the fetishisation of such categories are curtailed. Indeed, following Holloway's point, Marx himself warns against the reification of categories such as the commodity because it obscures the underlying social relations of production (Marx 1887, pp.47–48,52; Holloway 2002, pp.138–139). This process-oriented understanding, in contrast to Mohun's "building block" approach, is essential to Marx's theory of value. It sees production under capitalism as a "continuous connected process...[that] produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage labourer" (Marx 1887, p.407).

From this perspective, reproduction is not only understood as the "sine qua non of capitalist production" (1887, p.403), but it also underscores a relationship that is continuously evolving and reciprocal. Or as Marx puts it more eloquently: "The conditions of production are also those of reproduction...If production be capitalistic in form, so, too, will be reproduction" (1887, p.401).<sup>12</sup> This is a more open way of understanding surplus-value and distinctions such as productive and unproductive labour. It implies resisting the fetishisation of theory into hard and fast categories by keeping concepts living and fluid.

At the same time, Holloway warns us that, "It is convenient to see the positivisation of science as being Engels's contribution to the Marxist tradition, although there are certainly dangers in over-emphasising the difference between Marx and Engels: the attempt to put all the blame on to Engels diverts attention from the contradictions that were undoubtedly present in Marx's own work" (Holloway 2002, p.119). The key tension in his work was this: the desire to build a universal theory that explains all of capitalism versus the recognition that attempting to do so removes it from its particular material and process-oriented foundation. The very fact that Marx has been interpreted in so many different ways attests to the unresolved tension between 'fetishism' and 'process' within his theoretical paradigm.<sup>13</sup> In attempting to resolve this tension, one can see a long history of attempts to decentre the factory and defetishise Marx's concepts.

---

<sup>12</sup> In more recent work on social reproduction theory, Bhattacharya – following Lise Vogel – has argued differently, claiming that Marx understood labour power as being "produced outside the circuit of commodity production" (2017, p.73). Similarly, Hopkins, in drawing on Paul Smith, claims that the reproduction of labour power "takes place outside the capitalist mode of production" (2017, p.135). In the same volume, however, Mohandesi and Teitelman seem to have hedged this point, underscoring the way reproductive work has become part of this capitalist process: "We might say that the history of capitalism can be understood as a complex process of subsuming forms of social reproduction under capitalist relations" (2017, p.62). However, I think that these arguments miss the point of what Marx was trying to get at; the capitalist relation is one that traverses imagined boundaries between the factory and the home, between paid and unpaid work – an argument that I will take up later in this article.

<sup>13</sup> Because of the limitations of this article, I will not be able to go into more detail in order to demonstrate this tension. Instead, I will be relying on the work of others, particularly that of John Holloway and the wider tradition of Open Marxism.

## Decentring the factory

In the 1950s and 60s, a range of theorists drawing especially on Mao and Gramsci, and informed by popular struggles at the time, began critiquing the theoretical situating of the factory as the primary site of anti-capitalist organising. In the struggle against colonialism, intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon resurrected Marx's *lumpenproletariat* – the slumdweller urban-underclass – as the more promising revolutionary subject of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements (Fanon 1963). This influenced a range of movements from the Algerian revolution to the Black Panthers. Similarly, intellectuals such as CLR James and George Padmore began centring race in their theories around the revolutionary potential of workers.<sup>14</sup>

Italian Workerism (*operaismo*) was influenced by many of these currents, particularly James' previous work in the Johnson-Forest Tendency (Wright 2008). It was Workerism which set the stage for a re-evaluation of Marxist interpretations of the value theory of labour, extending the analysis of workers' struggle outside the shop-floor and into the community to connect with students around a range of working class issues (Fortunati 2013). This became known as the "social factory". According to Mario Tronti:

The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus-value penetrates everywhere, the more the circuit production-distribution-exchange-consumption inevitably develops...At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society (Cleaver, 1992, 7).<sup>15</sup>

However, this concept, while expanding struggle outside the traditional factory, ignored the home as a key site of the production of surplus-value and therefore a key site of revolutionary resistance to capitalism. This is the contribution that a feminist analysis has brought to such previous debates about labour value.

---

<sup>14</sup> They defined the worker more broadly. For instance, CLR James (2001) argued that we should consider Haitian slaves as a revolutionary proletariat despite them not being "free" labour.

<sup>15</sup> Marxist economists might argue that this interpretation of Marx flattened out the specificity of the commodity as a bearer of value under capitalism. In a sense, then, Workerism can also be understood as a critique of the utility (of at least traditional forms) of Marxist economics that focus on the calculation of commodity value – preferring to see Marx's work less as a science and more as a political tool of struggle.

## Redefining surplus-value

Influenced by the decentring of the traditional factory worker as the revolutionary subject, Italian autonomist feminists<sup>16</sup> began writing critiques of Marx that turned the relationship between labour and value on its head. Militant intellectuals such as Dalla Costa, Selma James and Leopoldina Fortunati argued that surplus-value was also produced in the sphere of reproduction – including the unwaged work of producing the worker.<sup>17</sup> James has expressed it even more simply in her critique of trade union’s blindness to housework: “When capital pays husbands they get two workers, not one” (2012, p.66). In other words, the capitalist system did not *just* rely on the exploitation of the worker in the factory to extract surplus-value, but *also* on the exploitation involved in the reproduction of the worker in the home (Dalla Costa & James 1975; Fortunati 1996).

Whereas previous feminist theory tended to see the movement of women from the home into the workforce as the solution to patriarchy,<sup>18</sup> this re-theorisation of value production understood the social experience of women<sup>19</sup> as being constituted, controlled and exploited by capital through the patriarchal family structure itself. Federici put it thus:

At the the center of this critique is the argument that Marx’s analysis of capitalism has been hampered by his inability to conceive of value-

---

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that well before this strand of feminism emerged, Mary Inman had made a similar critique. Her “The Role of the Housewife in Social Production” (2015, originally 1940) got her chased out of the Communist Party USA.

<sup>17</sup> There has been some debate over the details of whether in fact reproductive labour produces value or merely produces the productive worker. Whereas Fortunati (1996) asserts that value is produced from within the reproductive sphere, Dalla Costa, Selma James (1975) and some others imply that it is enough to show that the reproductive sphere produces the productive worker. James in particular, as part of a different intellectual tradition, has refused to see her approach as a critique of Marx himself, but rather an extension of what Marx had actually intended regarding the importance of the reproduction of labour-power (2012, pp.143–160). The journal *Aufheben* has a searing critique of Fortunati on this point arguing that she misrepresents Marx in claiming that labour-power is a commodity like any other. They assert “labour power as a special commodity different from others” (2005). Maya Gonzalez tackles this question, and *Aufheben*’s critique, by asserting its irrelevance: “if the debate revolves around whether reproductive labor is value-productive, we are still missing the point” (Gonzalez 2013). To her, the issue is that the wage relation is structured both in terms of those who are paid, but also in terms of those workers who are unpaid. While sympathising with Gonzalez’s stance, I argue later in this article that redefining surplus-value to be inclusive of the reproductive sphere remains relevant and politically useful in rethinking Marxism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is precisely because it foregrounds surplus-value as a relationship and breaks down a rigid distinction between productive and reproductive labour.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (2001) among others.

<sup>19</sup> In this article I employ the term “women” similarly to James: “Women act as a group because they are treated like one” (2012, p.25). “Women”, in other words, are not a mere essentialist category, but are the expression of a social relation.

producing work other than in the form of commodity production and his consequent blindness to the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work in the process of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2012, 92).<sup>20</sup>

If, however, Marx's theories are truly opened up in an attempt to put them in conversation with real-life social processes, what would it look like? If we are to take seriously Marx's insistence that the reproductive sphere is an essential condition of capitalist development and Federici's insistence that reproductive work produces value for the capitalist that is indispensable for capitalist accumulation, then we would be forced to re-define the concept of surplus-value in such a way that housework and other reproductive work are appreciated.<sup>21</sup>

Cleaver, in re-reading Dalla Costa, attempts to underline how Marx's theory of value is not a theory of the value of labour in general, but specifically of value of labour *in relation* to capital. Its production in the home isn't merely a thing to be measured, but a social relation. He writes, "value is that quality of the labor/work [capital] imposes that consists of its means of social control" (2011); value is a social relation, not a quantifiable category. Dalla Costa further points out that as a critique of bourgeois capitalist accounting, Marx's work also needs to "account" for the way labour reproduces labour power. This can be done by thinking of how reproductive social relations actively produce surplus-value.

I will resist taking Harvie's sweeping approach and asserting only that "all labour produces value" (2005) thereby losing the important distinction between different kinds of value. Rather, in order to see surplus-value as a process rather than a category, it would be useful to make a distinction between where surplus-value is "produced" and where it is "extracted". The latter is already pretty clear: according to Marx, surplus-value is extracted from the work of the labourer at the point of production (such as, but not limited to, the factory).<sup>22</sup> Here, Marx is not very discerning in his terms since he uses production and extraction interchangeably, and sometimes (though inconsistently), he even makes a strange distinction between the production of surplus-*value* and the extraction of surplus-*labour*.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Hopkins, thus, misreads Federici's argument as being about unpaid labour directly producing commodities (2017, p.134). One does not have to directly produce commodities or exchange value, in order to produce value for capital through the capitalist social relation.

<sup>21</sup> Some critics claim that Federici uses value simply as a moral category rather than as an analytical one. One of the aims of redefining surplus-value within this paper is to show how Federici's approach is useful both politically and analytically.

<sup>22</sup> Technically, as Cleaver points out, value isn't "produced" in the way commodities are. Rather, value is the accounting inherent in the relation of labour to capital (2011) – it is our conceptualisation of the flows of labour in relation to capital. The distinction, therefore, between production and extraction is a *political* one that helps us better understand these flows analytically without necessarily quantifying them economically.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance his use of the terms on pages 153, 194, 231, 400 and 420 (1887).

If one were to think critically in terms of process, however, one could make three related points regarding labour under capitalism:

- a) Surplus-value is not a thing that a person has, nor is it a number that can be quantified. Rather it is a relation that a person can embody at particular points in time.
- b) The production of surplus-value necessarily, by definition, precedes its extraction.
- c) Finally, and most importantly, the production and existence of surplus-value is contingent upon its eventual extraction (and not solely the other way around).

In other words, surplus-value can only exist as a relation to capital on the basis that it is eventually extracted and turned into capital through the sale of commodities. If this relation is disrupted at any point, surplus-value ceases to exist.

Or put more generally, Marx's surplus-value can only be produced for the capitalist within social relations that are capitalistic. If then, as Marx points out, the sphere of reproduction is necessarily capitalistic (1887, p.401),<sup>24</sup> it must follow that surplus-value (understood as a social relation) *can* be produced at any point in the process of reproduction and conveyed, in terms of labour-power, through the exploited worker (who can then store it and embody it as a relationship on behalf of system of capitalist social relations<sup>25</sup>) in anticipation that it is eventually extracted from their labour-power.<sup>26</sup>

This makes sense, as Fortunati (1996) as well as Dalla Costa and James (1975) point out, from the perspective of an unpaid worker doing housework. *She* not only feeds her husband who labours for a capitalist, but also bears children and raises them to also become productive and reproductive labourers for capital. She is producing labour-power and therefore simultaneously also producing a relationship which embodies surplus-value for potential extraction by capital.

---

<sup>24</sup> That is, the sphere of reproduction can produce for the capitalist even if the capitalist relation may not be immediately evident and may *seem* to be "non-capitalist" (for example relations of slave, subsistence, unpaid and communal labour, etc.)

<sup>25</sup> The worker stores or embodies surplus-value only in a conceptual sense since it really only exists within the entire set of capitalist social relations. That said, because the worker exploited directly by the capitalist can conceptually embody surplus-value, it does imply a certain (patriarchal) relation of exploitation between the unpaid houseworker(s) and this (usually male) paid worker. Recognising this has important implications regarding whether the male worker can be considered an exploiter of labour in *his* own right.

<sup>26</sup> Marx does not make this distinction between production and extraction of surplus-value with regards to the reproduction of labour-power. However, in *Capital* (Volume III, Chapter Nine), he does say that, with regards to the different sectors of production, surplus-value can be accrued in one (where it is in surplus) and realised in another (where it is lacking). This is not the same thing as saying it is produced in the sphere of reproduction and extracted from directly productive labour. However, this does demonstrate Marx's point that surplus-value is best understood, not as a number, but as an accounting of social relations.

This also makes sense from the perspective of the capitalist who often knows that, in purchasing an individual's labour-power, they are also potentially purchasing the labour-power of an entire family. For the capitalist, "the value of labour-power was determined, not only by the labour-time necessary to maintain the individual adult labourer, but also by that necessary to maintain his family" (Marx 1887, p.272). In other words, though Marx didn't recognise this, the family not only produces value in general, but specifically produces surplus-value for the capitalist. The surplus-value is then embodied as labour-power via capitalist social relations so that it can eventually be extracted by capital.

Even though Marx asserts that for the Capitalist, this "is a process which occurs behind his back, one he does not see, nor understand" (1999, p.123), this does not seem to always be the case. Recognising the value of reproduction in the home is why, for instance, apartheid era mining capital was so supportive of segregation through the Group Areas Act. In South Africa, subsistence farming in the "Bantustans" reproduced Black labour thereby making its purchase much less expensive (Wolpe 1972). Wolpe shows that, in this context of internal colonialism, the capitalist is aware that cheap labour-power (and therefore, as I argue, surplus-value) is produced in the sphere of reproduction. But this argument can be posited beyond the South African colonial context to all forms of reproductive work. As Cleaver puts it, "Capital can achieve higher rates of surplus-value if it can shift the burden of meeting the reproduction needs of the working class from commodity production to domestic work" (2011). This process should certainly be seen beyond mere value production, and specifically as the contribution to higher rates of surplus-value extraction for capital thereby demonstrating why reproductive labour in the Bantustans should be considered "productive" – even if only indirectly. Consequently, contrary to Hopkins' argument (2017, p.135), unpaid domestic labour actually effects and is affected by changes in the market price of directly productive labour power.

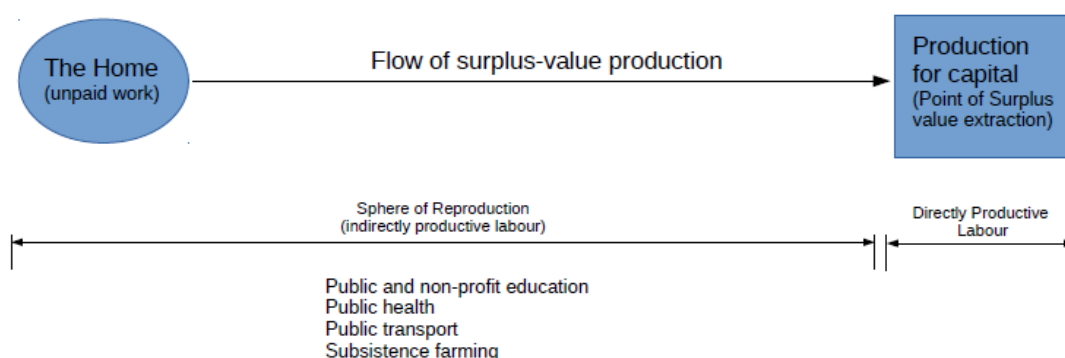
Given the reformulation of surplus-labour, the productive/unproductive distinction also needs to be retheorised. Some, such as Antonio Negri, advocate doing away with the distinction altogether (Harvie 2005, p.132). On the other hand, Harvie himself attempts to expand productive labour to include all labour that produces and reproduces for capitalism; the struggle to make such labour unproductive is part of the struggle against capitalism itself (2005, p.133).

Still, I would suggest taking a third approach whereby one would make a tripartite distinction<sup>27</sup> between "directly" productive labour, "indirectly" productive labour and unproductive labour. The first fits well with the more traditional definition of productive labour. On the other hand, the concept of indirectly productive labour suggests the existence of labour that contributes to

---

<sup>27</sup> This would necessarily be a soft distinction that would err towards being more conceptual than material. It would resist the idea that these boundaries are rigid and impermeable – that labour can simultaneously embody productive and unproductive elements in tension with one another.

surplus-value production while not being directly extracted by the capitalist.<sup>28</sup> Being “indirect”, it flags for us the way surplus-value is hidden in the reproductive relationship with the productive worker. Unproductive labour,<sup>29</sup> therefore, would include any labour that has not been made to produce for capital, or which has refused/resisted capitalist forms of production and reproduction altogether.<sup>30</sup> In making these distinctions, it then becomes easier to conceive of a theoretical centring of the sphere of reproduction.



## Centring social reproduction

Through this redefinition, a few points become clear. Firstly, there is a difference between directly and indirectly productive labour, but, while that is worth engaging with, this distinction is limited by the very fact that both remain part of the same social relation. It is not worth hardening this distinction: the difference is therefore not a value-laden one implying a hierarchy in the realm of struggle. Secondly, the indirect nature of productive labour in the sphere of reproduction tends to *further* obscure the capitalist social relation in comparison with directly productive labour. This means that those struggling in the sphere of reproduction need to also struggle for their labour to be seen and ideologically valued in the first place. Finally, both types of productive labour suggest different but overlapping and complementary ways of resisting capitalism. This suggests a feasible confluence of, for instance, labour union and other social movement struggles.

<sup>28</sup> Marx was clearly against considering this type of labour as productive. Following Adam Smith, he writes that doing so “would open the flood-gates for false pretensions to the title of productive labour” (1969, p.158).

<sup>29</sup> This, of course, does not make such labour ‘unproductive’ in a material sense, but only ‘unproductive’ in relation to capitalism.

<sup>30</sup> I provide examples of such resistance against producing surplus-value near the end of this article. Contrary to Harvie’s assertion, “we” do not struggle against value in general, but against the production/extraction of surplus-value in particular because it is the latter which produces the capitalist social relation within the current system.

Theoretically, one could then trace value extracted by capitalists back to every site where it is produced thereby exposing the way it operates within the capitalist social relation.<sup>31</sup> Contrary to counter-critiques, this does not corroborate Ricardian theories of value, wherein one can add up different types of labour in varying sectors and measure them against one another (Ricardo 1817). Rather, the factory itself becomes decentred - being better understood as a collection of social relationships throughout society mobilised for profit by the capitalist.<sup>32</sup>

The re-articulation of value theory requires understanding that the logic of capitalism - or as Tronti put it, the 'social factory' - pervades most aspects of life. When the capitalist purchases the labour-power of the worker, this person is purchasing more than their hours worked. The capitalist is also indirectly purchasing the labour of entire families who produce the worker, of the teacher who educates the worker, and of the doctor who ensures the worker's adequate health to work.<sup>33</sup>

I distinguish between the locations where surplus-value is extracted by capital and where it is produced to demonstrate how capitalist work flows operate in practice. Whereas surplus-value can be extracted from a single node, it is social relations within society (within the community, various institutions and the home) that allow for this value produced in the social factory to circulate. Understanding that surplus-value is produced before it is extracted forces us to centre the sphere of social reproduction in our understanding of the workings of capitalism.

This is not because of a hierarchy in struggle or because factory work is no longer important,<sup>34</sup> but because of the fact that such social relations are doubly obscured. Not only are such social relations hidden by capitalism as a whole, they are also concealed by the fact that its work is unpaid and therefore not

---

<sup>31</sup> Fortunati is sometimes mocked for writing that a mother smiling at her child can be considered value producing work (*Aufheben* 2005). The relevant question, however, is to what extent "mothering" produces value in the child that at some stage in the future can be extracted from them. This depends not only on the act of mothering, but also on socio-economic circumstance and the relationship of the mother and child to current and future capitalist production.

<sup>32</sup> Quantifying surplus-value runs into a number of problems including the fact that such values cannot be fixed or aggregated – hence the necessary distinction between understanding the social relation as a process which produces value and futile Ricardian attempts to measure it. This, likewise, questions economistic attempts to use Marx's method to do the same.

<sup>33</sup> Under "socialised" education and health systems, the teacher and doctor are paid by taxes on profit (realised surplus-value). The liberal capitalist rationalisation for such forms of welfare is that this redistribution of profit ends up producing a more productive worker and therefore assisting in the extraction of more surplus-value in the long run.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, despite de-industrialisation in the Global North, the factory has become a central part of the working experience in much of Asia - most prominently within China. While valuing the reproductive sphere, this should not be undervalued.



officially recognised.<sup>35</sup> Centring social reproduction allows us to challenge exploitation and other forms of oppression at the same time. Seen this way, the entire social factory as re-articulated above, starting from “point zero” (the kitchen, bedroom and home), becomes recentred as a potential site of resistance to capitalism (Federici 2012).

This reformulation, then, serves a political function: on the one hand it demonstrates that capital has an interest in *coopting* and *managing* all value-producing work and, on the other hand, it implies that those resisting capitalism must be able to understand how capital uses and benefits from this work. Understanding how and where one can create obstructions to the circulation of value produced for extraction and ways one can reorient value production away from such purposes is key to theorising resistance today. In evaluating strategies of anti-capitalist action, we must also evaluate whether such action is preventing the continued production and circulation of surplus-value for capital.

### **Recentring anti-systemic struggle**

In seeking an alternative to bourgeois political economy, orthodox Marxists have created a new form of crude positivism under the rubric of “scientific socialism”. However, challenging this entails more than returning to a strict fidelity with Marx.

One alternative has been to challenge Marxist claims to universalism: despite being based on real abstractions, Marx’s method can never fully capture the complex diversity under which capitalism works throughout the world. New approaches that rethink Marxism have sought to go beyond the assumption that scientific materialism is capable of articulating the essence of capitalism. This, for instance, is the method undertaken by thinkers in the Subaltern Studies tradition such as Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) and by those in the Black radical tradition, such as Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* (2000).<sup>36</sup>

Although I share much affinity with this approach, the goal of this article has been to take on Marx’s theory of surplus-value using his own categories of analysis as per a libertarian Marxist tradition (thereby taking this universalist project for granted). From there, I have attempted to re-work Marx’s theory of

---

<sup>35</sup> While the capitalist often comprehends the value of this unpaid work, he is simultaneously interested in making sure it is not *recognised* as such.

<sup>36</sup> In Alberto Toscano’s “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction” (2008), he engages with Finelli’s assertion that Marx’s method of theoretical abstraction is “capable of articulating an entire society” (2008, p.276) simply because it is drawn from the real abstraction of labour under capitalism. But such a claim, I would argue, is a fool’s errand. A deeper discussion of this cannot be the focus of this article – suffice acknowledging Subaltern Studies and Black radical critiques. As Robin Kelley points out in his new Foreword to *Black Marxism*, “Eventually, Robinson came to the conclusion that it is not enough to reshape or reformulate Marxism to fit the needs of Third World revolution; instead, he believed all universalist theories of political and social order had to be rejected” (Robinson 2000, p.xvi).

value in such a way that it is brought back into conversation with actually existing struggles against capitalism.

Re-evaluating where surplus-value is produced has centred the reproductive sphere as an important space of struggle because, without it, extraction by capital simply cannot take place. If in the old conception, disrupting the production of surplus-value could only happen at the site of extraction (such as in the factory), this new formulation understands that the surplus-value mobilised through the worker is produced, and therefore could be challenged and disrupted, in all spheres of capitalistic work. This informs at least three overlapping ways of conceptualising anti-systemic struggle: (a) combining struggles in all value producing spheres through social movement unionism, (b) disrupting surplus-value production at various levels of society, and, finally, (c) building alternatives that operate against the production of value for capital.

### **(A) Linking the chain of value production**

Autonomist feminist decentering of surplus-value production has the ability to illuminate the linking of social movement and union struggles. If the ‘housewife’, as an unpaid worker, produces value that is then extracted by capital, social movement approaches to unionism would not treat her as a mere member of the organisation; rather, it would actually centre strike action around working-class homes and communities. In doing so, the power of strikes and other actions are strengthened – forcing capital to contend with labour withdrawal and surplus-value disruption from multiple angles.

For instance, South Africa has a long history of this type of struggle driven specifically by workers doing unpaid labour in the home. During the 1960s, the well-known boycotts of Simba Chips and of Colgate were synchronised with strikes in those factories. As Camalita Naicker notes, it was women in the home who were “at the centre of these activities and [made] decisions about which household good to buy and where to buy them. They are certainly the ones who keep these boycotts alive” (2014, p.54).

Boycotts, of course, are linked to the other side of the productive sphere where the collective goal is to disrupt the circulation of commodities which allow for the realisation of extracted surplus-value as profit. However, it is no coincidence that women who make decisions about what to buy as part of their reproductive work in the home have historically driven most boycotts. In this sense, when women take ownership over strike and boycott action, they are recognising the centrality of their own labour in linking commodity consumption to the home and in coordinating (and often bearing the brunt of) the withdrawal of labour of various family members. This recognition of the power of the reproductive sphere usually happens without explicit reference to surplus-value; still, their understanding of how their work is central to the realisation of profit and the reproduction of the factory worker is clear.

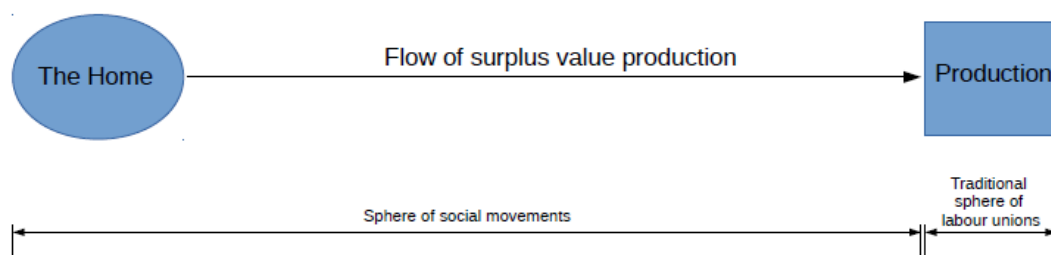
A similar recognition was also at play during the 2012 Marikana miners’ strike in South Africa. As the primarily male workers of Lonmin went on a wildcat

strike, the action grew into a general strike in the shack settlement of Nkaneng that included both waged and unwaged women and children as well as informal traders and minibus taxi operators. The women's association, Sikhala Sonke, not only fed strikers occupying a nearby hill, but led their own actions such as shutting down local commerce and organising women's marches against police brutality (Naicker 2015).

Likewise, during the 2012/2013 wildcat farmworkers' strike in the Western Cape, South Africa, whole communities erupted in protest around wage and service delivery issues. Blocking roads, protesters convinced even petty traders and minibus owners to join, thereby making it difficult for other workers to get to the farms. Women were key in expanding the strike to include reproductive issues such as housing and service delivery. When established trade unions attempted to end the work stoppage, it was the poor and unemployed – i.e. those doing reproductive work – who refused to toe the line, pressuring farmworkers to maintain the strike (Davis, 2013; Sacks, 2012).

As with the boycotts, these community actions drew on the recognition that reproductive strikes prevent labour-power from reaching the site of surplus-value extraction (e.g. the mine or the farm). In preventing the operation of public transport and shutting down local businesses in these towns, along with the rank-and-file organising women were doing in the community, this was not simply a matter of striking at the point of production. Rather, it was the recognition by reproductive labour that their work in the community had value for capital. In particular, taxi operators and informal traders should be understood also as providing reproductive services, circulating the surplus-value embodied in the directly productive worker. Without such services, strike-breaking workers would have to do more reproductive work themselves in order to reach the the point of extraction at the mine or farm. In other words, these general strikes contribute to the disruption in the flow of surplus-value.

Because women, as Federici explains, are especially oppressed and exploited within the reproductive sphere, the home and community constitute a particularly effective space for organising resistance through disrupting the production of surplus-value (2012). What these struggles have in common, what drove their ability to pressure both capital and the state to negotiate, was the linking of different sites of surplus-value production. In all these cases, it was the *combined* pressure of a strike in the spheres of production and reproduction, not merely the withdrawal of labour by the 'productive' workers, that eventually forced capital's hand.



Strategy #1: Social movement unionism. The power to disrupt the flow of surplus-value can happen throughout both spheres of reproduction and production. It can also happen beyond the production process where commodities need to circulate.

## **(B) Disrupting surplus-value production**

Even where social movement unionism is not present to drive struggles, the concept of new social movements has been used to understand the proliferation of community-based struggles outside the factory. These are usually driven by women who have focused on reproductive issues such as housing and service delivery. Whereas orthodox Marxism tended to relegate such concerns to the periphery, centring the sphere of reproduction, or “point zero” (Federici 2012) can show how disrupting value production puts pressure on the extraction of surplus-value. One general example should suffice in making this point.

The road blockade is a common protest tactic of the world’s poor and unemployed. As Anne Harley explains, “these [tactics] are the functional equivalents of factory workers downing their tools...Instead of directly stopping production, they stop input and outputs from production” (2014, 9). Her article specifically refers to the struggle of unemployed *piqueteros* in Argentina and the shackdwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa. Both movements utilise road blockades to disrupt the normal workings of capitalist society. The road blockade can not only undermine factory production and prevent goods being delivered to the market, it can also keep children from getting to school, create shortages of food, and can prevent workers from getting to their jobs (Harley 2014).<sup>37</sup> In other words, the road blockade specifically acts to disrupt reproduction on a societal level by putting a spanner into the works of surplus-value production.

This is why the road blockade (and relatedly: the barricade) has become a powerful tool of resistance in many societies, particularly in Latin America (Zibechi 2012; Zibechi 2010). In Bolivia, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar has documented its extensive use by Aymara movements to not only make their

<sup>37</sup> Even disrupting logistics in the productive sphere can affect reproduction at the community level. If the petrol stations or supermarkets are empty, reproduction is disrupted.

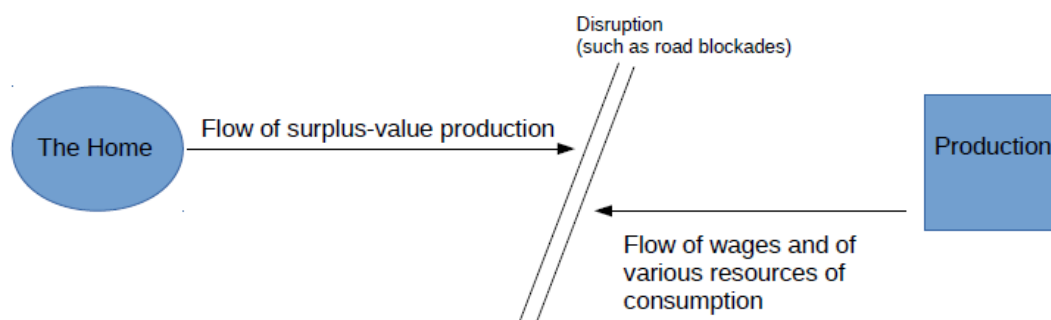
struggle visible but also disrupt the normal functioning of the state and the capitalist economy while laying the groundwork for the assertion of indigenous autonomy (2014). Even more recently, the road blockade has emerged as one of the most powerful protest tools of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States (Badger 2016).

This tactic can be particularly effective if the target goes beyond a specific business sector and attempts to force concessions from capital in general and its representatives in government. In preventing the general circulation of commodities, it disrupts the systematic realisation of surplus-value as profit. However, at the very same time, it prevents the consumption of these commodities which effects the sphere of reproduction, making it also difficult for the reproduction of labour to take place in targeted spaces. Further, in disrupting the normal reproductive processes, such as grocery shopping, schooling and transport to work, significant pressure is put on government to intervene to forestall wider effects on the economy caused by a drop in the production, extraction and circulation of surplus-value.

While the road blockade affects various different spheres of the production process, its base tends to be drawn from workers in the reproductive sphere who recognise that their position as producers of value for capital in communities enables them to have significant economic effects on all capitalistic spheres, not just that of the formal workplace. In other words, a factory strike can shut down the extraction of surplus-value at one specific point; a road blockade can have much wider effects beyond that specific node. This pressure by movements drawn from the sphere of reproduction can reverberate powerfully throughout society, forcing even the strongest economies and their governments to cede to protester demands.

While the road blockade may be especially disruptive, other strategies abound: from the general reduction in birthrates since the 70s (Chamie 2015), to the politicised refusal of women to provide sexual pleasure – which they considered a form of labour – to their husbands (Braw 2012), to the 1975 general women's strike in Iceland (Vishmidt 2013) which interrupted forms of unpaid and paid labour throughout the country. Such pressure primarily from the reproductive sphere can, at times, be strong enough to force significant concessions from capitalists and governments alike. Understanding the relevance of these struggles outside the factory is therefore essential towards rationalising their political force.

At the same time, such an approach has its limitations, especially over an extended period. As Federici points out, “reproductive labour is important for the continuation of working class struggle...if we refuse it completely we risk destroying ourselves and the people we care for.” (Vishmidt 2013). Therefore, such disruptive strategies can only be a partial strategy of resistance. Refusing to produce surplus-value needs to be accompanied by the activation of “unproductive” labour in the sphere of reproduction that is explicitly de-linked from capitalist commodity chains (Federici, 2012, 144).



Strategy #2: Disruption of surplus-value production: This can be effective in terms of disrupting value production and circulation at specific companies but also for society as a whole. This cannot be a long-term strategy as the sphere of reproduction is deprived of the necessary resources for consumption and further reproduction

### **(C) Reproduction and “the commons”**

Disruptive struggles that demand concessions and reforms from the capitalist system can only take resistance so far. Since, as Peter Linebaugh has explained, “reproduction precedes social production” (2009, 244), the extraction of surplus-value cannot happen without its production by women’s labour in the reproductive sphere. Theorising reproduction as ‘point zero’ of surplus-value production and at a temporal distance from where it can be extracted, forces us to think of long-term strategies that refuse to work for capitalism. Given the lackluster history of state-centric attempts at revolution (Holloway 2002), alternatives have emerged in the concept of “the commons”, physical or intangible property held in common by groups of people. As Linebaugh has shown, the commons have existed throughout history – in particular, as part of struggles resisting capital accumulation through enclosure (2009). Practically, and with varying effectiveness, the reproduction of the commons can take the form of a communal urban farm in New York, a cooperative kitchen such as “ola communes” in Peru, or a reorganisation of the neighborhood for collective housekeeping and childcare (Federici 2012).

The ultimate goal – even if not explicitly – is the reproduction of life for itself rather than in the interests of capital. The Zapatistas, for instance, have harnessed indigenous communal traditions and the collective power of their members (who would otherwise be increasingly exploited on capitalist farms or in maquiladora factories) to occupy land<sup>38</sup> and grow food for their own internal consumption, to provide free education and healthcare in its villages, and to

<sup>38</sup> They have “recuperated” hundreds of thousands of hectares of land from latifundistas (Grubačić and O’Hearn, 2016, p. 129)

create cooperatively-run organisations producing coffee, as well as artisan and other products to non-Zapatista consumers (Ramírez, 2008; Grubačić and O’Hearn, 2016). This has, simultaneously kept members from starvation under the precarious post-1994 NAFTA economic conditions, while also kept them insulated from oppressive and exploitative working conditions outside their collectively organised communities. Instead of creating surplus-value through reproducing the capitalist farm or factory, they have defended existing indigenous communal practices while also building entire communities de-linked from this process.

The political and economic consequence of this is that neither the sites of production or reproduction among the Zapatists produce much surplus-value for capitalists; in other words, the primary function of their communities is not as a reserve army of labour for capital. Rather, they reproduce unproductive labour, as well as services and goods which have a collective social value for their collective commons.<sup>39</sup> Thinking of surplus-value in this way does not make it possible to track rates of exploitation, but it does allow us to see what kinds of values are being produced through various social relations. It forces us to look directly for anti-capitalist communal forms of organisation that refuse capitalistic social relations.

However this does not mean that all or even most commons are sites of resistance. For instance, urban farms, especially when there is a breakdown in the food distribution market, can exist quite comfortably as a reproductive bulwark for other capitalist social relations. For this reason, Dalla Costa and James warn that:

The question is not to have communal canteens. We must remember that capital makes Fiat for the workers first, then their canteen. For this reason to demand a communal canteen in the neighborhood without integrating this demand into a practice of struggle against the organization of labor, against labor time, risks giving the impetus for a new leap that, on the community level, would regiment none other than women in some alluring work so that we will then have the possibility at lunchtime of eating shit collectively in the canteen (1975, 23–24).

In other words, collective and *seemingly* anti-capitalist “modes of production” can paradoxically be of service to capital by creating more efficient and unseen ways of reproducing the worker for capital. This is the upshot of Wolpe’s famous

---

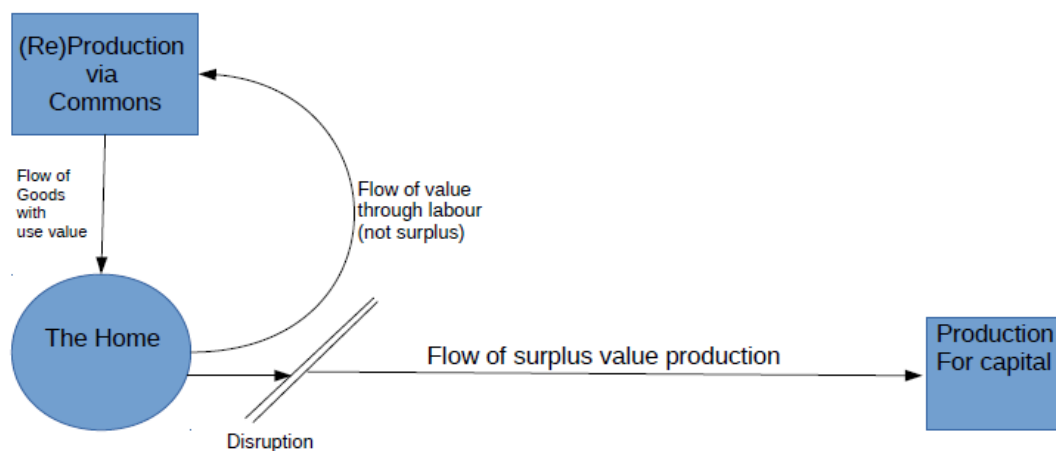
<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that despite the objective success of struggles such as that of the Zapatistas, no current project to reproduce the commons is fully divorced from capitalist social relations. The Zapatistas are no exception; their ability to resist is limited by a number of factors and capitalist social relations tend to eat away at the long-term efficacy of communal ones. For instance, a significant number of Zapatistas have migrated to work elsewhere in Mexico or to the United States (Fuller, Werman and Estey, 2011). This has a number of implications which cannot be dealt with here. Still, what is important to note, is that their commons remain resilient in the face of these threats.

thesis on “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa” (1972): Subsistence and even radically egalitarian ways of organising groups of people can have the effect of reproducing the worker so that capital can extract more value by paying wages below normal costs of reproduction. Indeed, certain sectors of capital know this and therefore specifically seek in many instances to maintain unpaid communal forms of reproduction outside the state – thereby obscuring its worth as surplus-value producing work.

This way of looking at social organisation is also the rationale behind mainstream economics’ recent focus on social capital and gift economies. These economists have attempted to show how the commons can “be made to produce for the market” (Federici, 2012, 140). Our praxis, then, must conceptually link the struggle for the commons to the issue of disrupting surplus-value production. “Commoning” can only be anti-systemic when reproduction happens for its own sake rather than for the sake of capital. Put another way, the struggle for the commons must simultaneously also be a struggle to make labour ‘unproductive’ through disrupting the flows of surplus-value. Federici extols us therefore to “disentangle those aspects of domestic work that reproduced us from those that reproduced capital” (Vishmidt 2013).

Taken to its logical conclusion, the understanding that surplus-value is first produced at the site of reproduction forces us to rethink our whole approach to revolutionary struggle. Instead of systematic change being understood as the capture of state power by a party that represents the working class, revolution is reconceptualised as the prefiguring of a more just society through a reorganisation of reproduction outside of capitalist exploitation while at the same time disrupting social relations that extract value from people’s labour. It is precisely through this debate about the (re)production of capitalism, that resistance can be re-articulated in the service of the struggle for an alternative society.





Strategy 3: The Commons. This is a form of reproduction for its own sake. Strategies can include communal forms of reproduction and cooperative forms of production. As such reproductive/productive spheres tend to collapse into one another.

## Conclusion

History demonstrates that the struggle against alienation and exploitation do not only take place within the productive factory – however important it may be. Resistance also materialises in the home (hooks 1990), in the social factory (Clever 1992), and throughout society in general. When bell hooks sees the homeplace as a site of resistance, she is not disregarding the home as a space of exploitation and oppression. She recounts growing up in a household in which her mother, more than her father, imposed patriarchal discipline and gender norms in the process of reproducing the working family (hooks 1987). In thinking reflexively about her past, she is able to understand this process without the lens of Marxist political economy. As with her own experiential understanding, past struggles at the site of reproduction have not necessarily needed Marxist theory to legitimate its validity.

Rethinking Marx's theory of value becomes a useful tool for these struggles precisely because it helps link oppressive experiences foregrounded by hooks and other feminists with how this is simultaneously a form of economic exploitation for capital. In doing so, one is not just critiquing how many Marxists have – like their pro-capitalist counterparts – obscured the value of unpaid housework; one is also opening up new ways of seeing the surplus-value flows within the capitalist system and how this can be resisted through collective action.

The urban poor (often without a permanent homeplace) have also become a key radical actor as the majority of humanity has migrated into cities. While much of this underclass works long hours in factories, many live and work much more

precariously. As a result of urbanisation under capitalist dispossession, land occupations and eviction resistance are reasserting the home as a primary site of resistance, latching on to new strategies for disrupting value production for capital. Such forms of struggle, therefore, can be considered acts of “insurgent commoning”. They not only affirm bell hooks’ focus on homeplace but also substantiate an autonomist feminist recentring of labour value theory at the sphere of reproduction. As such, the urban poor, of whose struggles women usually predominate, are reinvigorating such theory – as the renewed interest in Marx’s value theory and the work of people like Silvia Federici shows.

Many current social movement struggles are being informed by a diverse new range of leftist theory. Breaking the hold that orthodox Marxism once had on political action and concentrating theoretically on the sphere of reproduction in the building of resistance to capitalism has been essential to the increasing diversity of reflexive thinking within many of these struggles. This has taken many forms – from social movement unionism, to disruptive struggles that seek concessions from the state and capital, to the broadly territorial movements building a new commons. The goal of this article has been to rethink the way we understand Marx’s theory of value so that it can be brought back into conversation with social movement theories that are not necessarily “Marxist”. New concepts that see value in reproductive space, particularly through differentiating between where it is produced and extracted, have the capacity to influence these struggles – but only if the relationship is reciprocal in the way that autonomist feminist praxis has always demanded. Let this be, then, part of a call towards such a potential convergence.

### **Acknowledgements**

Because of the extensive support I’ve received from friends and colleagues, this article has gone through so many revisions that it barely resembles the original draft. I would like to thank George Caffentzis, Silvia Federici, Frido Wenten, Basani Baloyi, Deniz Duruiz and Timothy Mitchell for taking the time to read various drafts, for their support, and for their extensive comments that have pushed me to keep improving it. I would also like to thank the reviewers of a previous version of this article and especially Laurence Cox for their challenging yet extensive feedback.

## Bibliography

Aufheben 2005. The arcane of reproductive production. *Aufheben*, 13. Available at: <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-arcane-of-reproductive-production>.

Badger, Emily 2016. Why highways have become the center of civil rights protest. *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/07/13/why-highways-have-become-the-center-of-civil-rights-protest/>.

Bhattacharya, T., 2017. How Not to Skip Class. In T. Bhattacharya, ed. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*. London: Pluto Press.

Braw, Elizabeth 2012. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Leymah Gbowee: “Sex Strikes Help Good Men.” *Huffington Post*. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-braw/leymah-gbowee-nobel-peace-prize\\_b\\_1561922.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-braw/leymah-gbowee-nobel-peace-prize_b_1561922.html).

Brown, Heather 2014. Marx on Gender and the Family. *Monthly Review*, 66(2), pp.48–57.

Castells, Manuel 1983. *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chamie, Joseph 2015. Opinion: Women on Reproductive Strike. *Inter Press Service*. Available at: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/10/opinion-women-on-reproductive-strike/>.

Cleaver, Harry 1992. The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: from Valorization to Self-Valorization. In W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn, & K. Psychopedis, eds. *Essays on Open Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 106–144.

Cleaver, Harry 2011. Domestic labor and value in Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s “Women and the Subversion of the Community” (1971). *University of Texas*. Available at: <https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/357k/HMCDallaCostaDomesticLaborAndValue.htm> [Accessed August 2, 2018].

Dalla Costa, Mariarosa & James, Selma 1975. *Women and the Subversion of the Community* 3rd Revise., Falling Wall Press Ltd.

Davis, Rebecca 2013. De Doorns: Strike continues, in spite of Cosatu. *Daily Maverick*. Available at: <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-01-17-de-doorns-strike-continues-in-spite-of-cosatu/#.V4ueOu3RbQo>.

Engels, Friedrich 1970a. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Moscow: Progress Publishers. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch02.htm>.

Engels, Friedrich 1970b. The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. In *Marx/Engels Selected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Fanon, Frantz 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press.

Federici, Silvia 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland: PM Press.

Federici, Silvia & Caffentzis, George 2007. Notes on the Edu-Factory and Cognitive Capitalism. *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, p.5. Available at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0809/caffentzisierungfederici/en/print> [Accessed March 19, 2016].

Fortunati, Leopoldina 2013. Learning to Struggle: My Story Between Workerism and Feminism. *Viewpoint Magazine*. Available at: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/15/learning-to-struggle-my-story-between-workerism-and-feminism/> [Accessed March 19, 2016].

Fortunati, Leopoldina 1996. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, New York: Autonomedia.

Friedan, Betty 2001. *The Feminine Mystique* Fifth Edit., New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Friedman, Milton 1966. The Methodology of Positive Economics. In *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 3–16, 30–43.

Fuller, G., Werman, M., & Estey, M. 2011. Zapatista youths reconsider capitalism. *PRI's The World*. Retrieved from <http://www.pri.org/stories/2011-04-01/zapatista-youths-reconsider-capitalism>.

Gonzalez, Maya 2013. The Gendered Circuit: Reading The Arcane of Reproduction. *Viewpoint Magazine*. Available at: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction/#rf1-2837>.

Gough, Ian 1976. Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour. *New Left Review*, I(76), pp.47–72. Available at: <https://newleftreview.org/I/76/ian-gough-marx-s-theory-of-productive-and-unproductive-labour>.

Gutierrez Aguilar, Raquel 2014. *Rhythms of the Pachakuti: Indigenous uprising and state power in Bolivia*, Duke University Press.

Harley, Anne 2014. The pedagogy of road blockades. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 6(1), pp.1–36.

Harvie, David 2005. All Labour Produces Value For Capital And We All Struggle Against Value. *The Commoner*, 10, pp.132–171.

Holloway, John 2002. *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, London: Pluto Press.

hooks, bell 1987. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* First Edit., London: Pluto Press.

hooks, bell 1990. Homeplace (A site of resistance). In *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. South End Press, p. 383.

Hopkins, C.T., 2017. Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal. In T. Bhattacharya, ed. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*. London: Pluto Press.

Inman, Mary 2015. The Role of the Housewife in Social Production (1940). *Viewpoint Magazine*. Available at:  
<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-role-of-the-housewife-in-social-production-1940/>.

James, CLR 2001. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, London: Penguin Books.

James, Selma 2012. *Sex, Race and Class: The Perspective of Winning, A Selection of Writings 1952-2011*, Oakland: PM Press.

Kelley, R.D.G., 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Linebaugh, Peter 2009. *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marx, Karl 1871. The Civil War in France, English Edition of 1871, Zodiac and B. Bagins, ed. Marxists Internet Archive. Available at:  
[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/civil\\_war\\_france.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/civil_war_france.pdf)

Marx, Karl 1969. *Theories of Surplus-Value: Volume IV of Capital*, Moscow: Progress Publishers. Available at:  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/index.htm>

Marx, Karl 1999. *Capital : A critique of political economy Volume I* Online Edition, F. Engels, ed., Moscow: Progress Publishers. Available at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>

Marx, Karl 1999. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume III* Online Edi., F. Engels, ed., New York: International Publishers. Available at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf>.

Marx, Karl 2008. Results of the Process of Production. In D. McLellan, ed. *Capital: a new abridgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich 2010. *Collected Works Volume 40: 1856-1859*, Lawrence & Wishart.

Mohandesi, S. & Teitelman, E., 2017. Without Reserves. In T. Bhattacharya, ed. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*. London: Pluto Press.

- Mohun, Simon 1996. Productive and unproductive labor in the labor theory of value. *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 24(4), pp.30–54.
- Naicker, Camalita 2014. *Marikana: Taking a Subaltern Sphere of Politics Seriously*. Rhodes University.
- Naicker, Camalita 2015. Worker Struggles as Community Struggles: The Politics of Protest in Nkaneng, Marikana. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Available at: <http://jas.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0021909615605533>.
- Ricardo, David 1817. *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, London: John Murray. Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Ricardo/ricP1.html#Ch.1>, On Value.
- Robinson, Cedric 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Robinson, Harriet 1898. Loom and Spindle or OOM AND SPINDLE Life Among the Early Mill Girls : 100 PURCHASE STREET Copyright 1898. Available at: <http://library.uml.edu/clh/all/han.pdf>.
- Ross, Kristin 2008. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, New York: Verso Books.
- Sacks, Jared 2012. Cape winelands: Why the farmworkers defied Cosatu. *Daily Maverick*. Available at: <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-11-16-why-the-farmworkers-defied-cosatu/#.Vu6vyiaM1Qs>.
- Smith, Cyril 1997. Friedrich Engels and Marx's Critique of Political Economy. *Capital & Class*, Summer(62), pp.123–142. Available at: <https://libcom.org/library/engels-and-marx-critique-political-economy-cyril-smith>.
- Toscano, Alberto 2008. The Open Secret of Real Abstraction. *Rethinking Marxism*, 20(2), pp.273–287. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08935690801917304>.
- Vishmidt, Marina 2013. Permanent Reproductive Crisis: An Interview with Silvia Federici. *Mute*. Available at: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>.
- Wolpe, Harold 1972. Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid. *Economy and Society*, 1(4), pp.425–456. Available at: [http://www.wolpetrust.org.za/main.php?include=texts/theory.html&menu=\\_menu/dialogue.html](http://www.wolpetrust.org.za/main.php?include=texts/theory.html&menu=_menu/dialogue.html).
- Wright, Steve 2008. Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism: A Preliminary Survey. *Historical Materialism*, 16(4), pp.111–140.
- Zibechi, Raul 2010. *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-state Forces*, Oakland: AK Press.
- Zibechi, Raul 2012. *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements*, Oakland: AK Press.

**About the author:**

Jared Sacks is a PhD candidate of Middle East, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) at Columbia University. He holds a MSc in Labour, Social Movements and Development from SOAS, University of London. He was formerly the founder of a non-profit children's organisation and a freelance investigative journalist and commentator in South Africa. He has spent years engaging with various South African community groups and social movements including the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo. He can be reached at jaredsacks AT gmail.com