

INTRODUCTION

Jaime Acosta Gonzalez, Jess Issacharoff, & Jacob Soule

Critical theory has long attempted to name the mechanisms through which societies reproduce themselves. Louis Althusser's ideological state apparatuses and his attendant notion of "reproducing the relations of production," Michel Foucault's evolving theorizations of discipline and biopower, Silvia Federici's analysis of unwaged and invisible labor—all of these various contributions to the critique of capitalist societies posited social reproduction as key to developing an understanding of how these societies sustained themselves, moving critique beyond the factory floor and into the "hidden abodes" of other social and spatial sites.

This movement of critical thought away from the terrain occupied by its more orthodox Marxist roots occurred alongside the emergence of what we now call "neoliberalism," that social formation that began as a relatively fringe intellectual school, and subsequently developed into a fully-fledged project of state power with the election of Thatcher in 1979 and Reagan in 1980, as well as the earlier US backed removal from power of Chile's president Salvador Allende in 1973. This period ushered in the historical weakening of organized labor as a political force, the destabilization of global financial regulatory frameworks, and the inauguration of new modes of primitive accumulation in the Global South in the wake of decolonization. What, then, did these aforementioned new theoretical frameworks have to say about this historical shift? Directly, not much at all. In many ways, the Althusserian and Foucauldian schools, and the new Marxist feminist movements, were directing their energies towards the critical dissection of a stage in capitalism's history that was in the process of disappearing—the Keynesian, Fordist, welfare statism of the post-war period, in which it was still primarily through the state that society reproduced itself materially and ideologically.

As such, the established frame of reference inherited by what has become known as social reproduction theory has been challenged by the developments associated with neoliberalism. This is primarily because

neoliberalism has been understood as marking the displacement of the burden of reproduction from the state to the population itself, a transition that is evidenced by the retreat of the welfare state, and the increase in precarious, informal, and unwaged labor. Beyond this, at the ideological level, we might ask on what kind of subject does the neoliberal paradigm rely? Eva Cherniavsky has argued that this subject has been radically hollowed out by the “passing of disciplinary society,” which in turn, for Cherniavsky, means the “the erosion of *normative culture as such*, that is, culture oriented to the *production of reproducible interiorities*.”¹ Under these circumstances, clearly, theories developed to understand the reproduction of an older kind of subject will struggle to satisfyingly explain how neoliberalism sustains itself as a regime of social control.

This is not to say, of course, that social reproduction and its critical infrastructure is rendered irrelevant in the current conjuncture—far from it. Recent theorists of neoliberalism, among them Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Michaela Crichtlow, have stressed the ways in which highly gendered and racialized processes of subjection allow for the fantasy of an unfettered *homo oeconomicus* to proliferate in the first place. The difference now might be that, where these processes were once thought to occur outside of the remit of capital per se, that is, beyond the scope of the productive economy, social reproduction has itself been fully incorporated into capital accumulation. Indeed, we might say that these thinkers test Marx’s hypothesis that

[t]he highest development of capital exists when [...] the *socially posited* needs of the individual, i.e. those which he consumes and feels not as a single individual in society, but communally with others—whose mode of consumption is social by the nature of the thing—are [...] not only consumed but also produced through exchange, individual exchange.²

Implied here is that social reproduction demarcates the limit point of capital accumulation, that which it cannot go beyond, and therefore, by definition, that which it cannot fully incorporate without hitting an ultimate impasse. Insofar as neoliberalism names the set of principles which seek to transform social relations *themselves* into commodified life forms, then it is not just the case that social reproduction provides an interesting

lens through which to study neoliberalism, or vice versa, but that they are mutually constituted theoretical entities.

Our theme generated responses from our contributors that necessitated a reconceptualization of the relationship of neoliberalism to social reproduction along three distinct lines. We have organized the essays in this issue of *Polygraph* accordingly. First, these essays ask how the household and the family unit persists as the locus of reproduction, standing as the much forgotten addendum to Thatcher's famous slogan that "there is no such thing as society, only individuals *and their families*." Second, in the context of neoliberalism's deep imbrication with new forms of imperial control, responses to our prompt inevitably turned to migration and mobility as central thematics for understanding the spatial and temporal coordinates of social reproduction across global space. And finally, there necessarily arose the question of neoliberalism's relationship to the state, and the related suspicion of its continued relevance for understanding the new forms of authoritarianism and populism arising as a political response in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Can neoliberalism, and its particular modes of social reproduction, sustain itself in this bewildering new conjuncture? Or has it ascended to a new stage in its development, marking neoliberalism as a historical period, rather than a contemporary framework?

The Household

As an economic unit in itself, the household has long been a central focus of theories of social reproduction. The Wages for Housework campaign of the 1970s underscored the ways in which reproductive labor undertaken by women in the home was naturalized and unwaged despite being absolutely crucial for capital. Silvia Federici explains the intended effect of the campaign as follows: "To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking."³ This elaboration of the forms of unwaged reproductive labor demonstrates its multiple valences as both material reproduction of children and the reproduction of social relations. It is fitting to begin with the wages for housework campaign as it signals the rise of a certain form of social reproduction theory within feminism

emerging in the midst of the 1970's restructuring, privatization, and deregulation that characterize the global rise of neoliberalism.

The relationship of neoliberalism and the family is often portrayed as one of co-optation and destruction—the application of the cold calculus of the market to social relations, obliterating traditional structures of kinship and care. The exemplar of this cold calculus is Gary Becker's concept of human capital and his framing of the family as an investment. Becker poses marriage and childrearing in terms of potential earnings and the division of labor within the household as an allocation of resources.⁴ However, Melinda Cooper has pointed out the curious alliance between free market neoliberals and the conservative defenders of traditional “family values,” arguing that concepts of personal responsibility have always relied on forms of familial responsibility. Rather than reading the neoliberal turn as an atomization of kinship networks and family formations into individual actors, Cooper demonstrates that neoliberalism is in fact premised on the continued survival of the household as an engine and carrier of debt, in which the family carries the burden previously placed on the state in a welfare system. This is in essence a mechanism for managing the crisis itself provoked by neoliberalism's economic restructuring. In fact, Cooper argues, constant calamity is a feature not a bug, as “the history of the family is one of perpetual crisis.”⁵

Nancy Fraser, too, has read the history of capitalism's relationship to care as a series of crises. In her 2016 piece “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” Fraser argues that neoliberal restructuring is only the most recent of three “regimes of social reproduction-cum-economic production in capitalism's history.”⁶ Each of the three regimes have emerged as a reaction to a perceived crisis of care, beginning with nineteenth-century industrial capitalism which produced the separate spheres ideology of the private domestic home as the site of reproduction. The second stage, state-managed capitalism in the twentieth century, modified the Victorian ideal, and “promoted the seemingly more modern ideal of ‘the family wage,’ even though, once again, relatively few families were permitted to achieve it.”⁷ The most recent regime is the one which we seek to understand in this issue. According to Fraser, this third regime is our contemporary system of global financial capitalism, which is marked by the movement of manufacturing to low wage nations, the evisceration of welfare, and the

“dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot—all glossed by the even more modern ideal of the ‘two-earner family.’”⁸

This issue picks up where the theorists discussed above left off. Lisa Adkins’ article in this issue, “Social Reproduction in the Neoliberal Era: Payments, Leverage, and the Minskian Household,” departs from the often assumed view that social reproduction is marginalized or rendered an afterthought in the post-Keynesian age. For Adkins, social reproduction in fact has taken on a new centrality: “rather than in crisis the maintenance of life has shifted its axis.”⁹ Where social reproduction was once theorized by Marxists and socialist feminists alike as “a set of practices which work to support capital via the daily maintenance and reproduction of labour power and on which the survival of households also depends”, social reproduction must now instead be thought about in terms of its co-dependent relationship with finance capital.¹⁰ Finance relies on the leveraging of payments from households for the reproduction of life, and these households in turn rely (in the increased absence of state-provision) on finance’s facilitation of the debt-fuelled means of survival. By centering the household (*all* households, crucially) in her analysis, Adkins provocatively shifts the terrain of analysis of social reproduction from its focus on those populations formerly provided for by the welfare state and now rendered surplus, to thinking of the financialization of social reproduction in terms of “whole populations [...] the at risk *and* the risk bearing.”¹¹

Ivis Garcia’s “The Two-Income Debt Trap: Personal Responsibility and the Financialization of Everyday Life” synthesizes the insights of Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi’s *The Two-Income Trap* and Greta Krippner’s *Capitalizing on Crisis* in order to assess the emergence of personal responsibility narratives as a mystifying force, concealing the stagnation of wages and accumulation of personal debt over the last forty years. Tracing the development of the family wage, Garcia unravels how the false promise of the dual-income household in the 1970s evolves into what she terms the “two-income debt trap” in our contemporary moment. Garcia offers an account of how our conceptualization of the domestic sphere indexes the macro-economic shifts we understand as neoliberalism, and how the form of the family comes under increasing pressure as a consequence of the financialization of everyday life.

Migration and Mobility

In his reimagining of David Hockney's *Man Taking Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964), Ramiro Gomez substitutes a single dark-skinned figure into the domestic scene, highlighting the presence of reproductive labor that is often rendered invisible. Titling his piece *Woman Cleaning Shower in Beverly Hills* (2014), Gomez's pastiche captures not only a demographic shift—migration from Mexico and Central America to the US—that has deeply marked contemporary Los Angeles, but the centrality of this displaced population to the reproduction of society. While the frank sexuality of Hockney's Los Angeles paintings were aligned with the social antagonisms of the 1960s, Gomez's intervention refocuses our attention on the relationship between classes, capturing northward migratory flows and their absorption into circuits of reproductive labor that once stood outside of formal economic exchange.

In a similar way, we argue, the insights of social reproduction theory make salient the centrality of migration, expanding our understanding of the concept beyond the normative “generational replacement through childbirth” model that has been under increasing pressure for some time now.¹² While on the one hand, migration is seemingly the product of a series of interrelated crises, among them climate change, ruthless regimes of accumulation by dispossession, and political instability brought on by decades of neoliberal policy prescriptions on a global scale, it also operates as the solution to another: the reproduction of labor power in a bounded society. Both in the form of low-wage, precarious labor and the remittances sent back home, this disposable labor force supplements the withdrawal of the social guarantees that once defined the post-war welfare state. Globally, migrants sent an estimated \$574 billion to their home countries in 2016, and in Central America, remittances constitute nearly 20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹³

The twenty-first century has been called the century of the migrant, and with good reason. Diagnosing the emergent global order at the turn of the century, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri warned that “A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration.”¹⁴ Thomas Nail, a contributor to our issue, has noted that in the early 2000s, there were more people on the move than at any other point in human history, with this trend projected to increase dramatically over time.¹⁵ What do we make of this massive displacement in the age of neoliberalism? Our issue

attempts to grapple with the question of how the phenomenon of mass migration forces us to reconsider theories of social reproduction. Shifting the conversation from exclusion to exploitation, the migrant emerges not as a marginal subject, but as a paradigmatic figure under neoliberalism, caught between the perpetual crisis of the family and the repressive machinations of the militarized state that attempts to halt their movement.

In this issue, Thomas Nail's "Three Theses on Neoliberal Migration and Social Reproduction" reconsiders contemporary theories of social reproduction through the vantage point of mobility, arguing in a set of interrelated theses that the movement and circulation of migrants must factor into any discussion of the reproduction of society. Taking migration as constitutive, rather than epiphenomenal, Nail foregrounds the historical role of migration in the formation of nation-states and modes of governance, framing the neoliberal moment as an intensification of dynamics of primitive accumulation that amount to what he terms "a migration regime of social reproduction."¹⁶ Neoliberalism, Nail argues, "completes the cycle by providing a new 'surplus reproductive labor army' in the form of displaced migrants from the global south."¹⁷ Offering a novel account of migration as a form of social reproduction, Nail augments our understanding of the concept beyond its traditional boundaries, insisting on the centrality of migrants, not their marginal status.

Also in this issue, Nancy Armstrong's "The migrant novel: on becoming what we are not" traces how traditional narrative forms such as the bildungsroman are taken up and transformed by contemporary writers who seek to represent the figure of the migrant. According to Armstrong, J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* strive towards the dissolution of normative narratological structures that centered on the progress of individuals over time in favor of a more radical representation of dislocated and invisible labor that "maintains, tears down, remakes, cleans and replenishes the depersonalized spaces that today's salaried professionals consider home."¹⁸ These novels, Armstrong claims, sever our relationship to the ossified form of the citizen-subject and reimagine the relationship of populations to the state. Instead, these novels assert the mobility and flow of displaced migrants as the new social logic, displacing inherited models of subjectivity that have historically guided literary representation of individuals.

States and Markets

As far as neoliberalism and social reproduction relate to one another, convention would have it that their entwined story is one of the retreat of the state from the responsibility of care assigned to it under New Deal liberalism, and the dispersal of these responsibilities into the vagaries of market logic. In other words, there no longer exists a permanent contract between the state and its citizens, in the Hobbesian sense of security in exchange for sovereignty. There is only the constantly mutating ground of the market from which individual economic actors (formerly known as citizen-subjects) are to draw the provisions of life on a case by case basis. If this story is becoming a suspiciously familiar one, it seems right to offer it up anew for critical inspection. For if the meaning of neoliberalism as a periodizing concept is wedded to the retreat of state sovereignty, and in particular the waning of the nation-state in the midst of economic globalization, then how are we to respond to the sudden strengthening of nationalist rhetoric and economic populism in the midst of the 2008 crisis? Has the pendulum swung away from the volatility of the market and back to the security of the state? We might think in particular of the atrophying everywhere of so-called “centrist” discourse—ever the unrelenting ally of neoliberalism in the political sphere—in the midst of challenges from the social-democratic left and the authoritarian right. Or perhaps this shift is only the completion of a tendency always present in neoliberalism’s political formation, the ideological fusing of free market economic liberalism with nationalist and authoritarian rhetoric that Stuart Hall presciently identified early on as a constitutive feature of Thatcherism.¹⁹

Do these political challenges to neoliberalism, though, actually indicate its waning as a form of governmentality? Are we yet in a position to imagine a subject that might replace that of economic liberalism’s *homo oeconomicus*? This is a question that Alex Moskowitz’s contribution to this issue, “The Production of the Subject: Foucault, Marx, and the Ontology of the Market,” addresses. Moskowitz provides a comparative analysis of two thinkers who ground so many of the theorizations of the relationship between social reproduction and neoliberalism in the contemporary moment. While there have been many examples of the productive combination of Foucault and Marx (as well as many examples, for better or worse, of mutual hostility between the intellectual followers of both) Moskowitz’s analysis attempts to make manifest a new point

of intersection. Through close readings of the early writings of Marx alongside Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France—specifically those now published as *The Birth of Biopolitics* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*—Moskowitz claims that there is a shared conception of subjectivity as something that must be actively produced, whether in Foucault's notion of the “technology of the self,” or Marx's of “species being.” Contrary to neoliberalism's privileging of the market as that which ideally maps onto a preconceived notion of subjectivity, Moskowitz finds in Foucault and Marx the materials for a critical challenge to the very idea of a reproducible subject. In short, “the production of the perfect neoliberal subject can help us relearn that all subjectivities must be produced.”²⁰

If the market has been theorized as the legitimating framework for the ideological entrenchment of neoliberalism, Yahya M. Madra and Ceren Özselçuk, in their contribution to this issue, suggest that the structuring force of markets might be limited to what they term “historical neoliberalism”—referring both to the delimited intellectual movements of neoliberalism's early proponents, as well as to its instantiation as a fully-fledged period or stage in capitalism's history from the 1970s until its unravelling in 2008. Their essay, “Capital's Sovereign Exception: The Liberal Matrix and its Discontents,” examines the apparent decline of neoliberalism and the rise of what has been termed neo-mercantilism, characterized by power and profit seeking nation-states. They analyze this new form as an emergent reaction to structural crises of capitalism amidst the environmental limits to growth and the debt crisis precipitated by financialization. In theorizing the rise of neo-mercantilism, Madra and Özselçuk render visible the forms of sovereignty (firms and bureaucracies) that underwrite and make possible, but are paradoxically occluded by, the logic of bourgeois economics. They approach this theorization of the present through a novel reappropriation of A.J. Greimas' semiotic square, a conceptual tool which makes uniquely visible the “unarticulated others” that perturb any seemingly settled binary—in this case liberalism's “primal binary” of state/market.²¹ For Madra and Özselçuk, corporate sovereignty, which was once the form through which neoliberal *marketization* justified itself, has in our contemporary moment become the model through which the *state* reasserts itself as a “corporate actor with sovereign powers.”²² In their reading of the shifting demands of the neo-mercantilist state and its distortions of the crisis of social reproduction, Madra and Özselçuk offer a reconsideration of

Marx's analysis of "needs" and "abilities" as axiomatic in any communist intervention into contemporary discourses of social reproduction.²³ In setting forth an axiomatic schema of needs and ability, Madra and Özselçuk seek to unsettle neoliberal and neo-mercantilist frameworks of choice, consumption, and permanent growth, allowing for radical experiments in the realms of production and reproduction both.

We are pleased to be able to present a forum for such sustained and productive engagement with the social, political, and theoretical concerns raised by the subject of this issue of *Polygraph*. Taken together, we hope the essays that follow will provide a road map for future inquiry into the relationship between neoliberalism and social reproduction. We are indebted to John Paul Stadler for his help and advice. We are grateful also to the editorial collective, reviewers, and the faculty and staff at Duke University whose efforts have made this issue possible.

NOTES

- 1 Eva Cherniavsky, "Neocitizenship and Critique," *Social Text* 99 (Summer 2009): 9.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993), 532.
- 3 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 19.
- 4 Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 5 Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 7.
- 6 Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," *New Left Review* 100 (July/August 2016): 104.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 9 Adkins, 19.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 12 Tithi Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 73.
- 13 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/23/migrants-from-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-sent-a-record-amount-of-money-to-their-home-countries-in-2016/>
- 14 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 213.
- 15 Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.
- 16 Nail, 55.
- 17 Nail, 56.

- 18 Armstrong, 73.
- 19 See Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today* 23.1 (1979): 14-20.
- 20 Moskowitz, 106.
- 21 Madra and Özselçuk, 114, 115.
- 22 Ibid., 125.
- 23 Ibid., 128.