

Theorising the revolution: formulas, lexical gaps, and feminism

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Dear friends,

I have been thinking about labour and the nature of exploitation. Not the political party, though they could easily fit under a similar topic sentence. I'm also quite sure you're thinking "you, thinking about labour? ha!" as though you don't know precisely what you're in for reading these dispatches. But I have a configuration of theoretical terrain which I think might be useful to sketch out, and I'm yet to find time to do this in an academic text, so we're doing it here!

You may have heard of essentialising, and the sin of oversimplification. Well let's do our absolute best to oversimplify the basic equation of the basis of the "economy". This is a fun one, because who you ask will depend on what part, here, is considered the economy, but enough disclaimers...

Productive labour

Labour Power + Means of Production = Total Value Created

Wages < Total Value Created

Where the difference (Total Value Created - Wages) = Surplus Value extracted by the capitalist

Great, so in one fell swoop I've alienated economists, sociologists, Marxists, and more. But we're not through the looking glass just yet, folks. I want to add a level to this that helps us understand epistemology. Regardless, I think we can agree that we are missing a big chunk of the labour that powers our contemporary "economy". This work is almost exclusively done by women-identifying folk, and therefore has been oft excluded from academic texts...

Reproductive labour

Unpaid Domestic Labour + Community Care Work + Intergenerational Reproduction + Emotional Labour + Education/Skills Transfer = Regeneration of Labour Power

You might see, here, that *we can't get anywhere* without this labour. Therefore, it is at least equally essential to the functioning of society, because without it, we literally die out as a species. So when we piece this together, the new "productive labour" model might look like:

(Re)productive labour

(Reproductive labour) → Labour Power + Means of Production = Total Value Created

These are, with derivations for socio-cultural understandings and configurations of labour, the basic building blocks of any human society, in a sense. For the western world, of course, we might hope for a system without the capitalists tacking on the surplus value extraction and despotically controlling society to face a global heat death. But these systems do not maintain themselves, they require a social cohesion which the capitalists like to claim can only be maintained by them for evil ends. However, the actual tools and systems of social and cultural connection are deeply universal. Let's add another layer atop our (re)productive labour base (yeah, the base - Marxists, looking at you - is deeply dependent on women's

labour). What we're missing, now, is the superstructure, which comes in parts (because it has, in the capitalist world, supplanted culture)...

Environmental extraction

Resource Depletion + Ecological Degradation + Climate Disruption = Material Base for Production

Why is this superstructural, even though it relates to the material base? Because we do not need to destroy our planet in order to live. No, I won't elaborate.

Imperialism

Territorial Dispossession + Resource Appropriation + Labour Arbitrage + Debt Bondage = Global Accumulation

Again, superstructural, because no one needs to steal others land in order to live. But we're not quite done...

Intersectionality

Gender Hierarchy + Racial Subordination + Ability-based Exclusion + Sexual/Gender Conformity = Differential Exploitation

Here we are verging into more traditionally superstructural considerations. Anything depicted as "social" can be rendered, at least by insensitive Marxists, into superstructure. But the overlook that occurs here is that intersectional violence is fundamentally required for the division of labour, the maintenance of capitalist hegemony, and the continued justification of imperialism. So these all interlock. Next, we have a layer of enforcement, to ensure that people follow these conditions.

State violence

Police Power + Carceral Systems + Border Regimes + Surveillance Apparatus = Coercive Enforcement

Let's take these parts together and weave in some of Gramsci's thinking on how this fits together to capture the modus operandi of a society. Importantly, for Gramsci, this was a changeable thing—we are not locked into one way of operating. We can change how we work, think and create, we just have to want to.

Hegemony

Superstructural Totality =
(Hegemonic Apparatus[Cultural Institutions • Media Control • Educational Systems])
×
Environmental Extraction[Resource Depletion • Ecological Crisis • Climate Disruption]
×
Colonial Power[Territorial Theft • Resource Appropriation • Global Labour Arbitrage]
×
Intersectional Oppression[Gender Hierarchy • Racial Subordination • Ability-Based Exclusion]
×
State Violence[Police Power • Carceral Systems • Border Regimes])
→ Manufactured Consent + Systemic Reproduction + Material Exploitation

Our $\times$ is multiplicative, so if you happen to fall into a space where these things pertain to you more than others, you are more likely exploited from, and feel the weight of hegemonic enforcement much more viscerally, and often violently.

Marx and Engels provided the foundational analysis of labour under capitalism, demonstrating how the commodification of human work power serves as the basis for capital accumulation. Their examination revealed how capitalism transforms concrete human activity into abstract labour time, enabling exploitation through the extraction of surplus value. This analysis showed that workers become alienated not only from the products of their labour, but from their very creative and productive capacities as human beings. They expose how capitalism reorganises the entirety of social relations around this fundamental exploitation, creating a system where human creative potential becomes subordinated to the endless drive for profit accumulation. It's a gross person's world out there, we're just (forced to be) living in it.

The industrial revolution's transformation of work processes made this abstraction of labour increasingly concrete in workers' daily experiences. And we've only seen intensification and abstraction away from any awareness of our own exploitation since. Marx and Engels' analysis provided the theoretical tools to understand how technological changes served not to liberate workers, but to increase capital's control over the labour process itself —ever cementing the hegemony of capitalism (systemically). This set the stage for later theorists to examine how scientific management and automation would further fragment and degrade workers' autonomous creative capacities.

Building on this foundation, Braverman's labour process theory explored how scientific management techniques systematically deskilled and degraded work under monopoly capitalism. His analysis showed how management's drive to control the labour process led to the separation of conception from execution, transforming skilled craftspeople into interchangeable machine operators. This scientific management served to increase surplus value extraction while simultaneously undermining workers' ability to resist through the destruction of their craft knowledge and autonomy. Braverman revealed how automation and computerisation accelerated these tendencies, creating increasingly alienated forms of work. Even if some of his claims were dubious and romanticised the kind of work that might be of value in a society (the theory helps, but is far from perfect, as with any theory).

These processes of deskilling and control continue to evolve with new technologies, though often in less obvious forms. Specifically, new thought technologies in management and corporate settings which “creep” rather than being advertised broadly as revolutionary changes to workforce management. Braverman's insights help us understand how contemporary management techniques —from algorithmic control to agile methodologies —represent new iterations of capital's eternal drive to subordinate living labour to dead labour, worker to machine. The degradation of work remains central to capital accumulation, especially as it takes on new digital forms (call it “enshittification” all you like, it's just capitalism). And let me take a moment of digression here to explain living and dead labour (can't just drop you in the deep end like that, you know).

The fundamental tension between living and dead labour lies at the heart of capitalism's necessity to transform human creative capacity into mechanised, controllable processes. Thought technologies, like Fordism (factory, production line), advanced this in particular ways. Living labour represents the vibrant, autonomous potential of human creative and productive powers —our ability to imagine, adapt, and shape the world around us. Dead labour, embodied in machines and algorithms, represents the crystallisation of past human knowledge and effort into forms that can be owned and controlled by capital (anyone else noticed the AI bubble bursting and fading into the background, while AI continues to replace human jobs?). The eternal necessity to subordinate the former to the latter reveals capitalism's inherently anti-human character. Capitalism is a literal cancer —and it has

already claimed many of us. Okay, back to the main show.

Gramsci's crucial contribution was to examine how capitalism maintains its dominance not just through *economic exploitation*, but through *cultural hegemony* achieved through, in part, the manufacturing of consent. His analysis showed how civil society institutions work to naturalise capitalist social relations and prevent the development of revolutionary consciousness. These are the tools that give us "common sense" a social construct that makes us say stupid shit like: "what do you want to do when you grow up?" . Gramsci demonstrated that successful resistance requires not only economic struggle, but the development of counter-hegemonic movements capable of challenging capital's cultural power. Quite literally, capitalism, the cancer we've just talked about, has subsumed culture —its elites, the ruling class, have only accumulation, nothing else that resembles culture in any form we might recognise.

By examining the role of intellectuals and cultural institutions in maintaining capitalist hegemony, Gramsci provided tools for understanding how exploitation is normalised and resistance contained. His insights into how ruling class ideas become "common sense" (literally vs "good sense" or perhaps "better sense" which requires training and comradeship to perform deep analysis) remain essential for analysing contemporary ideological control, particularly as digital platforms create new mechanisms for manufacturing consent. This laid groundwork for understanding how gender, race and other forms of oppression intersect with class exploitation. But it also shows us how the superstructural elements are reciprocally connected to the base in a way that cannot be subordinated *to* the base. i.e., the biggest bone of contention between Gramscian theory and Marxist theory is which part needs to change first, and how it comes to be changed. Marxism has a kind of stasis —not on all fronts of course, where Gramscianism is a deliberately activist and mobile configuration of theory that gives us 'outcome' rather than process. But this isn't the final piece necessary for our full conception.

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) builds on these foundations while centring the often invisible labour required to reproduce the working class itself. SRT scholars like Silvia Federici showed how unwaged domestic labour —performed primarily by women—is *essential* to capitalism's functioning while being systematically devalued. This analysis reveals how gender oppression is not incidental but fundamental to capitalist accumulation, as the system relies on the unpaid work of social reproduction while refusing to acknowledge its value.

This connects to Gramsci's insights about hegemony, as the devaluation of reproductive labour requires extensive ideological work to appear natural rather than constructed. SRT shows how capitalism's apparent separation of productive and reproductive spheres serves to obscure their essential connection, while creating additional axes of exploitation and oppression. This theoretical development helps explain how various forms of oppression intersect with and reinforce class exploitation while pointing toward the need for truly intersectional resistance movements. Let me make this slightly more explicit, though, as we aren't going to get far without strong theoretical connection between SRT and Gramsci (which, as far as I know, has not been done widely elsewhere).

The naturalisation of reproductive labour as "women's work" represents a deeply successful hegemonic achievement. Operating at the intersection of base and superstructure to ensure the continued reproduction of labour power, but mystifying its essential role in capitalist accumulation —i.e., not valuing it, rewarding it, or incentivising it like other work (government initiatives to stimulate population growth do not count here). Gramscian theorists (at least this one you're reading) would identify this as a deployment of *common sense*, the biological *fact* of childbearing has been ideologically expanded to justify the gendered assignment of all manner of social reproductive labour - from childcare to emotional support to community maintenance. All unpaid. All significantly undervalued. This common sense

operates through multiple cultural institutions (superstructure) to make the exploitation of reproductive labour appear as natural law rather than a *constructed* social relation essential to capital's functioning (base). This hegemonic operation transforms historical contingency into apparent necessity. The fact that women can bear children becomes twisted into an ideological justification for their performing all manner of unpaid labour necessary for capitalism's reproduction ... and men's comfort. This naturalisation serves capital in multiple ways: it ensures the reproduction of labour power while keeping these costs *external* to wage calculations, it creates gendered hierarchies that fragment working class solidarity, and it obscures how reproductive labour forms an essential part of capitalist production rather than existing in a separate "private" sphere. The hegemonic success, here, is so complete that even radical political movements often struggle to recognise reproductive labour as labour, demonstrating how thoroughly this particular configuration of common sense has been embedded in our collective consciousness. It also shows the genius of feminists in recognising and fighting this "common sense" .

Across these theoretical terrains we see an arc of increasingly sophisticated understanding of how capitalism operates through multiple, interconnected, systems of exploitation and control. We are also able, in a relatively unique way, to connect these theories and understandings to grapple with capitalist ontology (or capitalist realism). Each builds on previous insights while expanding the analysis to new domains, helping us understand both the totality of capitalist domination and potential paths for resistance. The contemporary challenge is to synthesise these perspectives into forms of praxis capable of addressing capitalism's evolving mechanisms of control while building genuine alternatives. The work of identifying these alternatives is the most difficult, but also achievable if we can share a framework for understanding our exploitation.

I have rambled for long enough, but I hope to better connect these theoretical territories as I continue working in this space.

In solidarity,

Aidan