



Social reproduction

HADAS WEISS, Humboldt University of Berlin

Social reproduction is a lens through which to analyse the persistence of society over time, even as its human and material components keep changing. Its main value is in identifying and explaining tensions that emerge between the logic that reproduces society, and the continued survival (biological reproduction) and wellbeing of the population. Its origins are in Karl Marx's critique of capitalist society, as governed by a drive towards accumulation. Initially, anthropologists have sought inspiration from Marx in examining the reproduction of non-capitalist societies, but they have since largely joined adjacent disciplines in focusing on capitalism. Modern social reproduction theory has proceeded from blind spots in Marx's analysis, primarily regarding the role of women and domestic work in maintaining current workers and non-workers. From there, it has expanded to examine other fault lines in the reproduction of capitalist society. Contemporary strands of social reproduction theory attend to crises that emerge with respect to care work and livelihoods as finance becomes the main motor of accumulation. They also underline ways in which the reproduction of society reproduces inequalities within it. For ethnographers, attention to social reproduction illuminates the entanglements of any chosen fieldsite and plights therein with broader dynamics of accumulation.

Introduction

Social reproduction is a concept used in anthropology and adjacent disciplines to make sense of society's continuity over time as recognisably the same entity. Its primary focus is therefore the logic (a composite of forces and institutions) that organises finite, ever-changing things and people into categories, positions, and patterns of behaviour that exceed their individual existence. Inevitably, social reproduction also attends to the persistence of society's members: their biological reproduction (including the sexual relations and fertility that generate it) and the sources of their survival, longevity, and wellbeing. Biological reproduction, no less than the reproduction of a specific culture, institution, or phenomenon, is nevertheless understood to be subordinate to the reproduction of society writ large, which is the unit to which 'social reproduction' refers. The analytic value of social reproduction theory is precisely where the two key aspects of society—its logic and its human components—are in tension with each other. Focusing on social reproduction tends to work best when it allows us to recognise this tension, explain it, and identify ways in which it could be reduced or overcome.

The tension between society's logic and the survival and wellbeing of its members is particularly jarring in capitalist society. This is so because the logic that holds capitalist society together cannot be reduced to the decrees (supporting the continued survival and wellbeing) of any one person or group of people. Social reproduction theory has emerged out of the writings of capitalism's main critic, Karl Marx (1992 [1867];

1992 [1885] and other writings). While anthropologists have also used it to analyse pre-capitalist and non-capitalist societies, social reproduction as an analytic has proven most fruitful at illuminating the fault lines of capitalist society, including those that Marx himself had overlooked. Its main uses today, then, both within and outside of anthropology, are in mounting a critique of capitalism as it manifests itself in particular fieldsites and empirical case studies.

Anthropology's baseline for working out the logic of society has been interdependence: that is, the [dependence](#) of society's members on each other, as the glue that keeps a very large group of people together (Martin 2021). Insofar as interdependence is taken to be established through reciprocal exchange (Mauss 2018 [1925]), however, it cannot explain the long-term and inter-generational interactions that social reproduction entails (Weiner 1980). Nor does it capture the multiplicity of transactions that do not proceed symmetrically or reciprocally. The ubiquity of hierarchies and inequalities suggests, rather, something more fundamental against which everything else in society is synchronised. Inspired by Marx's thought, social reproduction theory traces this something to the way in which a society's resources are produced and distributed; and it goes on to ask how this production process reproduces itself (Godelier 1977).

What follows is a brief account of the journey that anthropology and adjacent disciplines have travelled in studying social reproduction. It begins with the theory's origins in Marx's analysis of capitalist society as governed by a logic of accumulation. It continues with feminist scholars' insistence on the constitutive role of unwaged domestic [labour](#). It then arrives at the various articulations of social reproduction theory against the backdrop of contemporary crises and [finance](#)-led capitalism. The entry ends with a reference to the role of culture and ideology in the reproduction of social inequalities.

Marxian origins

The concept of 'reproduction' presupposes the existence of something that is being reproduced, and expresses a preoccupation with its continuity, persistence, and repetition (Burawoy 1976). This something cannot be a material entity, as such entities perish and transform. Rather, it is likely a [relation](#); one so foundational as to form the condition for every instance that occurs next, generating the consistency of each subsequent occurrence (Balibar 1970).

Karl Marx (1992 [1867]) identified this core relation, in capitalist society, as that which pertains between 'capital', i.e. [money](#) and material resources for investment in the production of goods and services to be sold on the market, and 'labour power', i.e. the capacity of largely propertyless but legally free people to [work](#). Although this relation is an abstraction, it can and often is embodied in people, namely in capitalists, who own and invest the means to produce, and in workers, who sell their capacity to work for a wage. The relation is foundational because it structures everyone's behaviour to a considerable extent. Capitalists are

forced by competition with other capitalists to pursue market-mediated profit lest they be pushed out of business and cease being capitalists. And workers are forced by lack of independent means of livelihood to sell their labour power for a wage with which to buy the things they need and want.

What drives capitalist society's reproduction, according to Marx, is therefore compulsion: the actions of all members of society being carried out under the domination of something external to them. The domination is 'structural'; that is, enforced not by people but by structures and institutions, chief among them being the market. Marx showed how everything that is produced under capitalism is produced to be sold on the market. It is where capitalists obtain the material and human resources for undertaking production, and where workers obtain their living necessities. As both capital and labour power depend on it for the most basic conditions of their existence, the market exacts pressures and incentives that regulate and synchronise the reproduction of society at large (Wood 2002).

According to Marx, for capital to always be available for production, the value that workers produce in their work must exceed the value represented in their wages. Capitalists pocket the so-called 'surplus value' as profit, and they reinvest it. The capitalist market operates through them towards the goal of accumulation: the creation of surplus value that, when reinvested, launches the next cycle of production. And so, each new cycle of production resets the conditions for subsequent production and accumulation. This dynamic requires not only that there be enough capital for reinvestment, but also that there be enough workers to keep production going, and to buy the product and thereby 'realise' its profit. Marx identified this as a contradictory dynamic because capital stands in opposition to labour. On the one hand, the lower workers' wages are, the greater the surplus value available for accumulation. On the other, wages must be high enough for workers to continue working, consuming, and raising the next generation of workers so that production won't come to a standstill.

This renders the reproduction of capitalist society a bumpy, crisis-ridden affair. Capitalists overproduce to undersell their competitors, partly through ever-greater automation, whose surpluses end up being destroyed or devalued. The tighter the competition among capitalists, the harder to achieve the profits of yesteryear. Hence, escalating competition and automation, which in turn reduce the demand for and value of people's labour power (Marx 1992 [1867]: 762-794). Unemployed, underemployed, and poorly paid workers struggle to purchase the stuff they need and desire. Resources must be distributed to smooth the process of reproduction. Marx therefore discussed 'schemes of reproduction' in the second volume of *Capital* (1992 [1885]) as the allocation of resources to people and of people to resources in a way that supports the continuity of production and, perforce, of accumulation (Narotzky 1997).

Throughout his writings on capitalism, Marx insisted on the interdependence of the production, consumption, and circulation of both people and things. Yet, anthropologists drawing inspiration from Marx in their studies of non-capitalist societies have found it useful to confine 'production' to the technical

process of creating things. Arguing that it is not the predominant logic of non-capitalist economies, they could thereby focus on the logic that governs the biological reproduction and circulation of people (Gregory 1982).

A forerunner of social reproduction theory in anthropology has been Claude Meillassoux (1972, 1981), who had applied Marxian insights to pre-capitalist societies. He characterised the mode of production of Neolithic peasant communities as the agricultural cycle. Its slow pace forged lifelong and intergenerational dependencies. At all times, the workers of one agricultural cycle were indebted for seed and food to the workers of the previous one, and they supplied seed and food to their dependents and successors. Since these communities sustained themselves on agricultural work, their elders—the creditors of seed—managed the work and product of juniors. Each household needed a workforce large enough to make optimal use of its land, so elders also managed the ‘distribution’ of the women who birthed and raised children. Their socially reproductive task was thus matching the number of working hands to productive capacities. Meillassoux (1981) claimed that a similar logic of social reproduction persisted in capitalism’s peripheries. There, miners and factory workers live and subsist on farms, exiting them when their work is in demand. This allows employers to pay them only the wages necessary to cover their actual work time and throw them back on their families for the rest.

While acknowledging Meillassoux’s contribution to our understanding of social reproduction, anthropologists have nevertheless faulted him for positing a biological rather than a social basis for women’s oppression (Donham 1999; Katz 1983; O’Laughlin 1977) and for overemphasising women’s biological reproduction at the expense of their domestic work (Collier & Yanagisako 1987; Harris & Young 1981), issues that will resurface among feminist theorists of social reproduction. They have also faulted him for analytically separating production from reproduction, thereby defying the Marxian principle that ‘as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction’ (Marx 1992 [1867]: 711) (O’Laughlin 1977; c.f. Weiss 2018).

Separating production from reproduction makes even less sense for capitalist societies, whose reproduction can be simply considered the net result of its specific production process (Cammack 2020). Yet, the insistence of an earlier generation of anthropologists to examine the reproduction of people in contradistinction to that of things bespeaks a refusal to sideline the human components of a social logic that operates ‘as a connected whole’. This refusal lingers on in contemporary social reproduction theory, which emphasises the reproduction of labour power, livelihoods, and care.

Feminist interventions

One of the conditions for capitalist society to reproduce itself is that the workers producing surplus value receive wages to sustain them and their dependents. This should allow them to continue working and to

raise the next generation of workers. Marx often wrote as if the wages of workers, and the goods and services they could buy, would lead to labour power's daily maintenance and generational renewal without further ado. Yet, women not only give birth to workers; [historically](#), they have also been disproportionately those raising and educating them, on top of caring for other dependents, making the [house](#) liveable, preparing meals, and so forth. Such domestic labour, because it is unwaged and not directly performed for market exchange, has been taken for granted and fell out of the traditional Marxian purview.

Feminists have long objected to the devaluation of domestic labour. In the 1970s, a Wages for Housework Campaign initiated public discussion about revalorising it. Anthropologists of the period, inspired by Friedrich Engels' 1884 book *The origin of the family, private property and the state*, have pursued gender issues in the reproductive process, as a feminised sphere of 'domestic production', distinct but no less important than waged, market-mediated production (Edholm *et al.* 1977; Harris & Young 1981; Sacks 1979). Anthropologists Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako (1981) conceded that the distinction between men's production and women's reproduction reflects empirical observation. Yet, they warned against using it as a basis for theory, since strictly separating production from reproduction risks making a universal law out of a historically specific phenomenon. The same criticism could apply to assumptions about transhistorical sexism or patriarchy which, while noting how women's undervalued domestic work intersects with capitalism, fail to consider what in capitalism itself produces it.

A touchstone of modern social reproduction theory has been Lise Vogel's (2013 [1979]) anchoring of women's oppression in the reproduction of capitalism itself. Capitalist production necessitates biological processes specific to women (pregnancy, childbirth, lactation) to produce the next generation of workers. But this alone does not condemn women to subordination. Vogel explains that, while childbearing is necessary for capitalism, it is also problematic for it: reducing the childbearing woman's capacity to work for a wage, it further requires that she be maintained during this period. One cost-cutting solution is that men be made responsible for their wives. The capitalist state, acting as an agent of accumulation, has controlled and regulated female reproduction by reinforcing a male-dominant order made up of breadwinning husbands and (temporarily) unwaged, childrearing wives. This arrangement not only devolves more power on husbands-as-providers; it also creates potential conflicts between men and women, to be addressed through gendered notions of 'love' and 'sacrifice' (Picchio 1992).

Control over women's childbirth and domestic labour emerges, then, from capitalism's need to produce, in an efficient way, the next generation of workers. This need is most overt where there is a shortage of labour power. A well-known account thereof is by Silvia Federici (2004), focusing on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Population declines and the necessity for working hands had then induced the budding capitalist powers to criminalise celibacy and birth control. Women accused of such 'reproductive crimes' were persecuted as witches. Men were co-opted into this subjugation of women, finding in it a means of regaining some of the power they lost on being turned into propertyless workers. Women became,

for them, substitutes for the lands that had been taken away from them: a basic means of livelihood, and a resource to appropriate and exploit. New cultural canons followed suit, establishing that women had to be placed under male control because they were allegedly excessively emotional and lusty or, once defeated, asexual beings that could edify the household.

Vogel (2013 [1979]) also emphasised that the socially reproductive labour of caring for household members and raising the next generation of workers was neither always nor necessarily performed by housewives. On the contrary: women's domestic labour competes with capital's drive to accumulation because women could be spending the same time working for a wage, directly fuelling the production of surplus. It serves accumulation well, then, to reduce the amount and cost of domestic labour and so, to free up more labour power and capital for investment in for-profit production.

Vogel specified several ways in which this is done. One is commodification: laundromats, ready-made clothing, and fast-food chains allow aspects of domestic labour to be purchased on the market. Childcare, housekeeping, and eldercare can also be made available at a price, in what Arlie Hochschild (2003) identified as the 'commercialization of intimate life'. Devolving these tasks onto the for-profit sector also provides opportunities for capitalist entrepreneurs, fuelling profitability and accumulation. And mass production of domestic goods and services reduces their costs, enabling the lowering of wages and, perforce, of the costs of social reproduction (Picchio 1992).

Another means Vogel identified for minimising the amount and costs of domestic labour is by socialising it: public education, healthcare, and retirement make aspects of domestic labour the responsibility of the state. The corporate sector also plays a role in socialisation through institutions like occupational insurances and pensions. [Taxes](#) and corporate contributions distribute the costs of social reproduction more widely across the population. This multiplies the sites in which socially reproductive labour takes place, from the household to workplace training, parks and playgrounds, social housing, schools, social welfare programs, childcare and healthcare facilities, and so on (Katz 2001).

Finally, Vogel stipulated that the cost of domestic labour can be reduced by importing migrant labour to perform it. The socially reproductive labour of maintaining the workforce and of renewing it is thereby separated geographically: migrants are recruited from one country to serve as the workforce of another, where they are also maintained (Burawoy 1976). Migrant women from the Global South and from former-Soviet countries often do double duty for social reproduction: the breadwinners and providers of their own families through the remittances they send back, and those performing housekeeping and [caretaking](#) tasks for the families that employ them (Barber & Lem 2018).

Crisis and financialisation

Despite the multiple sites and means through which social reproduction is accomplished, social

reproduction theory of the 1970s focused primarily on the [household](#). This reflected the end of an era where public support for the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model was at its highest. Following the Great Depression and Second World War, states in the core of global capitalism assumed some public responsibility over welfare, investing in healthcare, schooling, childcare, and pensions. Sparking economic demand among (primarily white and unionised) workers, and supplying them with the means to consume, was deemed necessary for maintaining the profitability of mass production. Households were supported by more jobs, higher wages, and public-sector spending, becoming private spaces for the consumption of mass-produced objects of daily use: the domain of the housewife (Fraser 2017).

However, recent developments in capitalism have raised attention to reproductive activity that cuts through the household. The capitalism of the present, often called 'financialised' because [finance](#) is its main motor of accumulation, has seen the relocation of manufacturing to low-wage regions and the mass recruitment of women into the paid workforce. Firms struggling to maintain profitability squeeze [labour](#) power such that wages decline, raising the number of hours of waged labour per household needed to support a family. Jobs become [precarious](#), with workers (now including most mothers) having to increase workloads while dealing with less predictable work schedules, shift work, and longer work hours. This dovetails with higher divorce rates and single-parent households, and with a rollback in public support for healthcare, childcare, and eldercare. A so-called 'crisis of care' ensues, as [care](#) work is foisted upon families just as their capacity to perform it diminishes (Bakker 2007; Bakker & Gill 2003; Fraser 2017). Care work intensifies to such an extent that it becomes the most visible manifestation of social reproduction and is sometimes erroneously conflated with it.

A new strand of social reproduction theory foregrounds lives and livelihoods under such strains. It zeroes in on the work that maintains and renews labour power, while also identifying the people who perform it as an oppressed class, capable of transformative political action. In making visible their socially reproductive labour, it links it to other categories of oppression such as gender, [race](#), and [disability](#), asking how they are reproduced along with the reproduction of accumulation (Bhattacharya 2017). It further insists that capital's drive to instrumentalise labour power runs up against sentient beings that cannot be fully subsumed as workers. It holds that, in the face of pressure to speed up and short-change socially reproductive labour, the people who perform this labour—maids, eldercare workers, social workers, etc.—confront the real needs of vulnerable populations. In helping them, they may even counter the alienating tendencies of capitalism (Ferguson 2020).

These ways of blending the reproduction of capitalist society with the reproduction of its members, as well as diagnosing the burdens on care work as a crisis of social reproduction, do much to foreground society's human components. Yet, this intuition has its limits. Since the societies analysed are capitalist societies, the reproduction of lives and livelihoods within them can hardly be distinguished from that of their economies (Smith 2018). Labour power (which includes domestic labour, care work, and those performing

it) is itself subsumed by the logic of accumulation rather than standing in opposition to it (Munro 2019). And capitalist reproduction does not 'care' for people in any meaningful sense of the term, as it does not necessitate the reproduction of the entire population or their wellbeing. It requires only enough workers to set the next cycle of production in motion (Cammack 2020; O'Laughlin 1977; Vogel 2013 [1979]). In an era of more jobseekers than jobs, maintaining every single person as a present or future worker, let alone the sick, disabled, and elderly, cannot be a priority when following the premises of capitalist accumulation. If capitalism can only be reproduced through the reproduction of both capital *and* labour power, the more urgent challenge is rather maintaining capital's profitability (Weiss 2020).

Labour power took centre stage in an earlier era of industrial capitalism. But capital now bypasses its mass deployment, pursuing profit through financial channels. The household remains a nexus of social reproduction, but not only for being where labour power is maintained and renewed. Rather, it becomes a privileged site for making payments. For an increasing number of households, wages no longer cover all costs, and private [debt](#) finances things like housing, healthcare, and education. Households manage a range of regular payments, from utility bills through subscriptions to mortgage and credit card payments. Bundled together, these steady, risk-managed payment streams become assets for transactions by larger financial entities such as banks, pension funds, and institutional investors. Payments as means of sustaining family life are thus new profit opportunities for capital, replacing industry as key engines of accumulation (Adkins 2019; c.f. Federici 2014).

By no means does this ease the burden on women. They are a more vulnerable part of the workforce than men, and therefore the first to suffer from pressures upon it. And the shortage of jobs leads many more people to rely on their families for subsistence. If women are assigned most of the domestic work, they bear the brunt of this burden. Women also suffer directly through finance. Financing schemes usually target women, deemed easier than men to shame and pressure into repayment on account of their greater family and social entanglements. Women's indebtedness thereupon strains these very relationships (Schuster 2015). The speedy and inexorable rhythm of women's debt repayment may also attenuate the bond between mothers, preoccupied with debt servicing, and their [children](#), whose educational trajectories orient them to long-term horizons (Newberry & Rosen 2020).

Inequality

Writing in 1979, Lise Vogel concluded that domestic [labour](#) cannot be completely removed from households: the costs of childcare and household maintenance are prohibitive while profitable day-care centres were yet to be established, making such services beyond most working-class households' reach. But, at least in rich countries, things have since changed. With migrant labour and low wages in the [care](#) and service sectors, their costs are declining.

Recall that the [relation](#) in capitalism that, according to Marx, coordinates all others, is that between capital and labour power. It matters a great deal where a household and its members are positioned on the spectrum between them. Workers may be permanently or [precariously](#) employed. They may be high- or low-earning. And they may be propertyless or possess a [home](#), savings, and credentials. As workers, they are all dominated by the pressures and incentives of accumulation and obliged to contribute to the production of more value than they receive. But they are also pitted against each other in a competition that allows some to benefit at the expense of others. This being the case, the focus on 'households' and 'women' for critically analysing social reproduction risks glossing over too much.

It still holds true that women's unwaged domestic labour is among the factors that cheapens social reproduction, which in turn allows for the cheapening of waged labour. Every woman is exploited and dominated in this way. But these days, even households in capitalism's core countries depend almost entirely on the wages of two adults to survive. Under pressure, women can and often do work harder at home, but wage declines more often lead to increases in female employment. However united women may be in their domestic labour, wages are what determines many of their possibilities. This is one major aspect of life where women's interests are divided. The low wages and poor working conditions of housekeeping and childcare harms women who perform these services for a wage. But it allows other women to outsource this labour to others. Moreover, insufficient and inadequate employment makes education and cultivation more important for landing good jobs, and education is purchased at different qualities. This, while higher-income women who purchase housekeeping and childcare services can spend more development-enhancing time with their [children](#). Wage levels make a huge difference, then, in the reproduction of each household's social position (Gimenez 2018) and they serve as a wedge that divides women's collective struggle for a better life.

This turns the provision of food and clothing, the managing of a budget, marriage and childrearing, homeownership, education, and public interventions, into 'reproductive struggles' (Weiss 2008) in which some have advantages over others. Social reproduction does not reproduce just any society; it reproduces a class society in which certain groups are empowered to and within their reproductive labour while others are disempowered (Ginsburg & Rapp 1995). Elite women, for instance, also devote unrecognised, unwaged labour to their families. But the goal of this labour is to ensure that their children get into the best schools and preserve their privileges (Glucksberg 2018; Kromidas 2021). Factory working men, in turn, must negotiate shift work to assume some of the unwaged reproductive labour that their working wives cannot undertake (Sabaté 2016). And [racialised](#) migrant women allow native European women to work outside their home for a wage, providing the housekeeping and childcare that rollbacks in public services have commodified (Farris 2017).

Not only households are divided according to their reproductive resources: communities and countries are, too. Geographers analyse social reproduction as reinforcing inequalities in space. Migrants are imported

from low-income countries to perform domestic labour in high-income countries, while government disinvestments from welfare, healthcare, education, public space, and the environment generate spatially uneven erosion (Katz 2001). Anthropologists also foreground the role of culture and ideology in maintaining inequalities. The social relations involved in the reproduction of material life are bound up with their cultural expressions, just as culture itself is materially produced and embodied (Narotzky 1997).

Susana Narotzky (2021) demonstrates this in her [ethnography](#) of Ferrol, Spain. Its young adults express ambivalence regarding their parents: grateful for their material support, yet resentful of their privileges. Narotzky traces this ambivalence to different scales of social reproduction. The Spanish state, acting as an agent in the reproduction of [finance](#)-led accumulation, cuts back on pensions and restructures industry, squeezing the livelihoods of the old as well as the young. This intensifies the [dependence](#) of family members on each other, forcing them to pool resources. Still, pension cutbacks are promoted through a discourse of intergenerational fairness, as if different generations were vying for scarce resources. More generally, state policies are represented ideologically as aiming for sustainability, as if designed to ensure social reproduction in the very sense (the survival and wellbeing of the population) that they ultimately undermine.

Institutions like the church, the army, and above all schools, play important roles in social reproduction. These include instilling in their members the proper cultural knowhow and attitudes to preserve the social inequalities that accumulation generates (Althusser 2001 [1970]). Schools turn the favourable circumstances into which children are born into catalysts of success. Sent to a better school, these children's upbringing prepares them to do well and gain confidence in their studies, making it easier for them to overcome obstacles that the less-prepared trip up on. Better school performance paves the path towards more valuable credentials and higher paying jobs. And higher wages allow for living in better school districts, where such advantages are bestowed upon the next generation (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977).

In contrast, disadvantaged children might gain favour among their circles by rebelling against school authorities and rejecting the paths marked out for them. But in so doing, they end up replicating in the workplace and on the streets the very disadvantages into which they were born (Bourgois 1995; Willis 1981a). In reflecting on his ethnography of how this happens in an industrial town in England, Paul Willis (1981b) explained that the reproduction of capitalist society occurs at a very high level of abstraction. While exacting material and social pressures, this process still allows each member of society to inhabit the role they inherit differently. In the terrain of culture and experience, space opens up for ethnographic research to illuminate struggles for and within social reproduction, particularly as they occur in sites that a narrow focus on market transactions neglects.

Conclusion

Social reproduction is a concept that exposes tensions between society's logic of accumulation on the one hand, and the survival and wellbeing of the people subject to it on the other. An invaluable tool for anthropology, it points to capitalist society and the process of accumulation to which it is beholden as the main driving force in the dynamics of any chosen fieldsite and the struggles of those who occupy it. It defies, therefore, any bounding in space and time of [ethnographic](#) observations, making capitalism a key reference point. At the same time, capitalism cannot be accessed through interviews and observation alone, since 'a mode of production does not tend to reveal itself directly in any spontaneous and intimate experience of those agents who reproduce it by their activity' (Godelier 1977: 24).

This presents a special challenge for anthropology. While ethnographic study, with its on-the-ground focus, has the unique capacity to bring to light obscured aspects of social reproduction, anthropologists also bear a responsibility to conduct their fieldwork informed by an understanding of capitalist accumulation. Only then can they look beyond reported speech and observed occurrences to the structures that animate them. This introduces new research foci and widens the ethnographic imagination. Understanding practices and institutions in terms of social reproduction means seeing them less as isolated things and more as forces, agencies, and bridgeheads of power: facilitating some occurrences and preventing others (Smith 1999: 11).

Once trained to see social reproduction, it becomes impossible to unsee it. Plights and fortunes in any fieldsite invoke analogous instances elsewhere, making sense with respect to a broader logic. This has, in the first instance, a sobering effect. As Tania Li (2008) describes of her experiences studying poverty-reduction programs of development agencies in Indonesia, it bars one from being taken in by technical solutions to immediate problems which, in their blindness to social reproduction, are helpless against the persistence of misery. But one must also keep in mind—as Susana Narotzky (1997) reminds us—that it is not the objective of society to reproduce itself, and to theorise as if this were a foregone conclusion is to preclude the viability of ruptures and radical change. Social reproduction is therefore not the endpoint of inquiry. It is rather the beginning of an engaged anthropology; one that asks not only about the forces that reproduce inequality and domination, but also about how they are changing, and about how they can change still (Li 2008).

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Note on contributor

Hadas Weiss is a researcher at Humboldt University of Berlin. Her research deals with social and ideological aspects of contemporary capitalism as manifested in Israel, Germany, and Spain. She has published in anthropology and interdisciplinary journals and is the author of *We have never been middle class: how social mobility misleads us* (2019, Verso).

Dr. Hadas Weiss, Humboldt University, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany.
hadaspweiss@gmail.com