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Understanding the Implications of Socially Reproductive  
Labor as Labor

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Research for this paper was conducted on the traditional lands of the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan Nations. Resources were also obtained from a library located on the traditional lands of the Muskogee (Creek) Nation.

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Commented [MM2]: Just FYI, some of this information can go in the Abstract that precedes the column, but it's great to have it here now.

### Social Reproduction Theory in the academic library

#### Understanding the implications of socially reproductive labor as labor

The library worker occupies a peculiar place in contemporary society. A seemingly ancient profession with quite modern origins, a service position dedicated to the free dissemination of information in a world increasingly driven by demands of profit and efficiency, an advocate of information literacy in the era of the hot take the library worker, on the surface, appears to be an anomaly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Countless think pieces have declared the end of the library with the dawning of the internet while countless movies and television shows depict the library worker across time as an invaluable resource when one has reached the limit of their knowledge. The question that confronts all those who would examine the library and the library workers who staff it is deceptively simple: why does the library exist? What purpose does the library worker serve?

Traditional Marxist explanations for the existence of the library might argue that the library serves an ideological function. It helps to provide the illusion that a capitalist society is both democratic and meritocratic, it provides every individual with the chance at social advancement the argument would go. However, such an analysis would turn the academic and public library into two entirely different beasts; the public library might be geared towards democratic service but the academic library, with its more limited access, is geared solely towards the advancement of academia. The postmodern approach may examine the library as a tool of ideological hegemony and societal oppression. The argument would point to the myriad of ways in which the institution holds up whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and imperialism through its physical and institutional structures. While neither of these analyses miss the mark entirely, they are rather unsatisfactory from an explanatory perspective. Both positions presuppose the existence of the library without the theoretical tools to explain why the library came into existence when it did in the form that it did.

In understanding the “why” of libraries, it is useful to turn to Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), specifically that section of SRT sometimes referred to as Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF). Social Reproduction Theory, as opposed to various theories of social reproduction, is a vitally important framework that examines both the daily and generational renewal of human life—and by extension human labor—as a means of situating the whole of human life within a system of capitalism that extends beyond the traditional conception of capitalism as a *merely* economic relationship. Social Reproduction Theory is seen most clearly in the academic library where the point is very clearly to teach research and information literacy skills to a new generation of professionals, information sector workers, and business leaders, though it can be seen again and again throughout school and public libraries—though special libraries may fill a more productive rather than reproductive function, they do so in much the same way as the reproductive functions at other libraries.

#### **What is Social Reproduction Theory?**

It is important to define terms when referring to SRT because social reproduction has long been a focus of various fields of social studies: economics, sociology, political science, etc. However, there is a particular strain of Social Reproduction Theory that was born out of a mixture of Marxism and Feminism that carries with it strong explanatory power that can address the apparent contradictions of libraries’ existence as a free public good in an otherwise privatized world. While Ferguson (n.d.) points out that the ideas at the core of SRT can be traced back to pre-Marxian socialists, it was the 1969 publication of Benston’s “The political economy of women’s liberation” that finally created a “sustained, robust discussion and debate capable of carving out discrete and coherent theoretical territory.” It is important to note that this debate was also a sharp break from theorists of social reproduction like Bourdieu and Althusser who primarily focused on the ways the state and society recreate themselves through ideological apparatuses or cultural capital. This new school of thought “identified and developed the political economic insight that the social labours involved in producing this and the next

generation of workers sit in a *necessary but contradictory relation* to the capitalist drive to produce and accumulate surplus value” (Ferguson, n.d., emphasis in original). While SRT may still be a loosely defined school of thought, it maintains a theoretical coherence that is useful for understanding libraries and library workers within a broader society.

Bhattacharya (2017) describes SRT in the following manner: Marx “leaves undeveloped or undertheorized the production and reproduction of labor power. It is this part of the total reproduction of the system that is of concern to social reproduction theorists” (p. 13-14). This means that, far from simply explaining the ideological prowess of ruling classes to ensure the status quo is maintained, SRT is focused on the production of Marx’s most curious commodity: labor. Labor, of course, is central to Marx’s, and many other early political economists, theories of capitalism as it is the ability to extract more value from labor than what is paid for it that makes capital profitable to begin with. Scholars seeking to expand and deepen SRT are functionally expanding Marx’s theories beyond the immediate production of commodities to the production of labor itself. Or, as Bhattacharya (2017) puts it “recasting of the labor theory of value from the point of view of wage labor (as opposed to from the side of capital)” (p. 14).

Fraser (2017) situates the history of reproductive labor under capitalism in three historical epochs. In the first epoch, we see the emergence of a distinction between productive and reproductive labor as industrial commodity production for wages moves the latter out of the home and isolates the former to the private, or domestic, sphere. Prior to this period, pre-capitalist and early capitalist labor of all varieties was based in the home. Men and women carried out similar routines, even though the tasks may have fallen along strictly gendered lines; both brought raw materials into the home, turned those raw materials into useful goods, and used those goods for production within the home. This early epoch, as described by Fraser, saw this change dramatically as raw materials ceased coming to the home and commodity production became centered outside the home. What was left within the home was the

**Commented [MM3]:** I don't fully understand this concept. How is reproductive labor moved out of the home? What do you mean by productive labor isolated to private/domestic spheres?

I'm thinking that maybe somewhere early on here it would be helpful to have a pretty straightforward explanation of how you are using "production" and "reproduction". For the very literal among us, it would be helpful to get a sense of the scope of usage of those two concepts.

labor that would reproduce the daily and generational labor to fuel commodity production outside the home (Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017, p. 42-43). As many of the tasks that women had been carrying out prior to this epoch were relegated to this latter category—clothing, feeding, healing, and teaching—the domestic, reproductive realm became coded as female while the realm of commodity production was coded as male. While, as Fraser points out, such stark gender lines were never a reality for working class women (Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017, p. 44), this early division is important in understanding the continued centrality of socially reproductive labor in the larger structures of capitalism. That is, reproductive labor may not produce an immediately tangible commodity for sale, but it does produce and reproduce the crucial commodity of labor on a more or less daily basis. Further, it is the lack of an immediately visible, tangible commodity combined with the feminization of this work that often results in the devaluing of labor carried out in more formalized reproductive careers and jobs like teaching, domestic labor, librarianship, and nursing in our current epoch.

The second epoch saw the expansion of social welfare at the centers of global capitalism as public investment in a wide swath of the economy was perceived as necessary for the long-term stability of capital. The third epoch, our current time, often referred to popularly as the neoliberal era saw the creation of a two tiered system of reproduction as social reproduction was privatized twice; as some families could afford to pay others to take care of their reproductive needs and others were forced to find ways to both work and meet their needs.

Of course, though all of this, social reproduction was not a neutral challenge of capitalism. The duty of social reproduction took on distinct gendered, racialized, classed, and geographic characteristics. Reflecting pre-capitalist divisions of labor and gender norms, the majority of socially reproductive labor, such as cleaning, feeding, clothing, and educating the former, current, and next generation of labor has always fallen on the shoulders of women. However, because capitalism prioritizes commodity production, much of this labor, though central to the ability to capital to function, remains unpaid.

Further, the vast majority of women do not live under conditions in which they can completely sit out of the work force to focus on socially reproductive activities. This results in the infamous “double shift” that women are frequently expected to carry out as they work all day and tend to the reproductive needs of their family ~~such as cooking, cleaning and child rearing~~. The fact that more men are now taking on a larger share of the reproductive burden does nothing to change the fact that this work disproportionately continues to fall to women and that this is uncompensated labor, without which capitalism would cease functioning.

The commodified version of socially reproductive labor has also taken on a racialized and geographic quality as Black and Latino women in the United States take on a disproportionate amount of domestic work, child care, and healthcare roles; essentially taking care of everyone else’s families before they are able to go home and take care of their own. On the peripheries of global capitalism, women are frequently tasked with labors in agriculture and textiles, clothing and feeding the world, if not emigrating to wealthier nations to provide the care taking roles listed above in order to send money home to their family. Time and again, socially reproductive labor is being passed off to poorer and poorer workers down the global supply chain of reproductive labor, entrenching inequalities while ensuring productive labors continue uninterrupted.

### **SRT and Academic Libraries**

What can ~~those workers staffing~~ academic library workersies take from this theory, however? How does it impact our interpretation of the library and its place within society? Where is the explanatory power of SRT that was missing from already existing analyses of libraries within society? The answer seems to come from Fraser’s three stages.

Fraser (2017) points out that the second stage of socially reproductive labor under modern capitalism is represented in the welfare states that followed the Great Depression and World War II. This era distinguishes itself by the introduction of the state into social reproduction on a mass scale.

While this is certainly the case, it is also clear that such developments had already become a requirement of capitalism on a much smaller scale in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the demands of industrial society in the United States simultaneously removed working class women from the home and created a need for literate middle management that identified with the employer over the workers, public schools, public libraries, and larger and more plentiful colleges and universities began to appear across the country. The educational demands of society could no longer be met within the confines of the household.

This transformation was especially pronounced in academic libraries. Where before, the library had been a place for the storage and preservation of books, the growth of higher education and the creation of land grant universities also saw the development of libraries as systematic institutions of scientific inquiry (Weiner, 2005, p. 4-5). This change in the academic library's ~~nature-purpose~~ running parallel to the development of public libraries and the profession of librarianship was no coincidence but a direct result of increasing sophistication of capital in the United States and its need for a more expansive and educated work force. Without the increasing inquiry and research needed at the modern scientific academy, which would have been impossible without the increasing demands of industrial capital, the academic library would ~~not have had not needneeded~~ to move beyond the warehouse methods that had preceded this change. So we see in the academic library a direct correlation with capital's need to produce and reproduce labor specific to its level of development which in turns situates the academic library directly within, rather than adjacent to, a totality of systemic capitalism.

Of equally significant importance to library workers is SRT's conception of socially reproductive labor *as labor*. The labor that library workers carry out creates, or contributes toward, a final product made for consumption; from the position of labor it is only a coincidence that this product is the unusual commodity of human labor. Library workers, just like teachers, nurses, a domestic workers, produce human beings that will go on to serve specific functions within the system of capitalist production; we

can see this in the increasing emphasis of economic value on degrees and higher education. This should not be a misconstrued statement implying that library workers make or shape people in some higher sense but needs to be understood in its practical and material terms. The distinction is important because, as laborers in a capitalist system, library workers are alienated from their labor; they do not own the means of creating the commodity, nor do they own the product. Library workers through the nature of their work must sell their own labor to create a market commodity that will be sold and bought outside of the control of the workers who produced it (Marx, 1990, p. 716).

While there is no practical way for library workers, or any other laborers in the field of social reproduction, to have meaningful control over the products of their labor, this does not eliminate the fact that this process alienates the librarian from their labor during that time for which they have sold it. The librarian cannot accept or refuse to provide their labor during the working day because it is not theirs to give or withhold regardless to the ends it might be applied. Failure to provide the services for which they have been hired places the library worker in the same precarious position as any other laborer who would withhold their work under capitalism; the position of unemployment. Such conditions challenge both traditionalists who continue to hold up librarianship as a vocation as well as those who seek to implement critical practices into library labor as neither can escape the fact that

there is no possibility under capitalism for work to be any more than ~~just that: work~~ alienated labor. To imagine work as more is to imagine labor existing outside of a global capitalist system of production. For library labor to carry the transformative power that critical practitioners imagine, it would first be necessary to labor within a system that can provide for the flourishing of each individual absent their ability to produce for the sake of consumption. In other words, if labor is alienated because it is divorced from the laborer through the process of its sale, then the abolition of the transactional process is the only way to reunite the laborer with the fruits of their labor; a feat which would require a fundamental transforming of society and with it a likely transformation of the library itself. Such a transformation

**Commented [MM4]:** It sounds like you believe there are other possibilities for what work \*could\* be beyond just work. What are those? Is there a way to add that to make your point clearer?

would also transform the relation between the librarian and the patron in ways not currently imagined. However, the educative process in such a situation, when careers, salaries, and education are not inextricably linked could be imagined as truly contributing to human flourishing

Examining library work through the lens of SRT might strike a painful blow to the practitioner's ego, but this does not negate the usefulness of the theory. Instead, SRT challenges us to consider our labor, our advocacy, and our relationship to our patrons in a new light. Rather than a lauded profession that exists outside of the demands of capitalism, library work becomes a part of capital's unrelenting hunger for production and this opens the door for solidarity with our patrons rather. SRT strips the labor of library work of any potential to upset capital's order, but also positions the library worker to reach out to those outside the library to struggle together for improvements to library work, library services, and the larger community.

#### **Implications**

Library work has long been a field focused on advocacy and individual work, SRT allows librarians to look beyond the boundaries of their own voice or their own labors to improve the library's positioning within the academy and within society at large. It creates for the library and its users a new relationship; one where the labor of the library worker and the labor produced by the library worker has a common goal, more control over the fruits of [their](#) collective labor. In understanding that library labor is part of a chain of labor within a universal system of capitalist production the links between library work, teaching faculty research, and the post-collegiate labor of students all becomes interlinked. It also clarifies the grounds upon which advocacy work takes place and can illustrate what types of advocacy are effective given the issue at stake.

The interconnection of student, library, and teaching needs has been on display in recent years as teacher strikes have taken on not only issues of pay, but also teaching and learning conditions within schools. Beginning with the 2012 strike of the Chicago Teachers' Unions, for example, the lack of Library

and Media Specialists within Chicago Public Schools became a central focus of striking teachers (Chicago Teachers' Union, 2012, p. iv). In 2014, graduate student workers in the University of California system won gender neutral bathrooms and lactation stations as rights in their contract with the UC system; a right that guaranteed access to these amenities to all workers, students, and visitors to campus (Flaherty, 2014). And in 2019, Rutgers faculty won guaranteed equal pay for equal work on all campuses, enforced arbitration on cases of harassment or stalking, and an end to the school's "no green card policy" after the faculty prepared to strike before the close of the semester (Carrera, 2019). What all of these instances illustrate is a moment in which workers, specifically workers in socially reproductive fields, had rights baked into their contracts that extended beyond traditional issues of pay to ensure that the laborers and the people that they serve are being taken care of by the employer as much as the employee; often referred to in labor circles as social justice unionism. These demands and contracts illustrate how conceiving of socially reproductive labor as labor benefits both the worker and the population they serve.

Too often, library workers ~~over-burden themselves or~~ take it upon themselves to provide services that go above and beyond what library users have come to expect. While these efforts should be lauded, they also set a dangerous precedent that this should be the norm; that library workers can take on more work, and more complicated work, without assistance or compensation from the university, because it is right or just or liberative. ~~Herculean efforts such as these, however, expose librarians to burn-out and frustration because they cannot escape alienation from their labor nor the fact that they are ultimately producing the raw materials of capitalist production and little more.~~ Moving beyond individual practice and into collective efforts at reform and solidarity with other workers and future workers opens the door for new ways of advocating for our libraries, our patrons, and ourselves without exposing individuals to blowback or burnout. Social Reproduction Theory allows for the re-

grounding of library labor and points a new way forward as libraries face continuing pressure to do more with less.

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