

Social Reproduction and Unfree Labour in Global Political Economy

SGIR 7th Pan-European International Relations Conference, Stockholm, September 9-11, 2010

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Draft paper – please do not cite without author's permission

Abstract

Social reproduction debates are beginning to gain attention from the more 'critical' wing of global political economy. However, many of feminism's fundamental claims about the gendered nature of capitalist production and development remain un- and under-acknowledged within the discipline. This paper explores how a social reproduction approach to looking at labour questions allows us to arrive at richer, more progressive conclusions. Rather than closing off the possibilities of what we consider the social and economic world, an explicit engagement with social reproduction encourages a more open way of studying political economy. Taking the contemporary debate over 'unfree labour' in global political economy, I show how current analyses of the phenomenon are limited by their narrow categories of labour. Even studies of unfree labour which purport to engage with 'gender' have tended to do so in a somewhat limited way, using gender as a synonym for women and failing to acknowledge the gendered foundations of unfree labour. I develop an analytical framework for looking at issues surrounding unfree labour by integrating a social reproduction perspective. As such, I aim to demonstrate how debates surrounding labour rights – particularly in the context of unfree and migrant labour - in the contemporary economy can be made more progressive and emancipatory by drawing on feminist analyses.

Introduction

Debates around social reproduction have been considerably revived over the last few years thanks to the energies of feminist political economists. Both empirical and theoretical work has been carried out in order to broaden our understandings of production and the global economy. In addition, ongoing policy and advocacy work is developing these concepts into concrete recommendations and calls for action. Feminists identify this work to be of vital importance for analyses of political economy, social reproduction – both conceptually and empirically. Some of the insights of the social reproduction literature have been incorporated into political economy, albeit in a partial and in many ways reluctant manner. Obscuring relations of social reproduction in the analysis of political economy is an example of enduring gender biases and assumptions in the study of the global economy. Research carried out from a social reproduction perspective has analysed a broad range of policies and processes in global political economy (see Bakker and Silvey 2008; forthcoming special issue of *Review of International Political Economy*). While feminist political economy research in broad terms has focussed extensively on production, there has been little work within the social reproduction literature to date which specifically focuses on labour rights and working conditions. Where this has been the case, this has usually been in the area of domestic and care work - that is, social reproductive work - particularly in relation to female migrant workers (for example, Herrera 2008). To clarify, I want to make a distinction here between research that explores gender relations and gender inequality in global production, and that which begins from a starting point of social reproduction, which is the concern of this paper. In order to develop the study of social reproduction, it is important to extend our analyses to other areas of work. Without breaking in to mainstream and gender-blind 'critical' debates about labour it will always be difficult to consolidate the analysis of social reproduction within political economy. This involves convincingly making the case for its inclusion in all aspects of debates around labour, production and capital.

In order to illustrate how we might go about this, I take an example of a particular area of study in political economy which is currently experiencing something of a revival – unfree labour – and demonstrate how the assumptions embedded within these debates do not take account of social reproduction. Unfree labour in contemporary research refers to forced or bonded labour, 'where a person is deprived of control over the conditions in which she [or he] sells her [or his] labour in the marketplace and consequently subject to the most extreme forms of exploitation' (Phillips 2010: 15). By relying on individualised notions of 'the worker' – and, by extension, work and the economic - they are limited in their ability to conceptualise the full complexity of human labour. The primary argument

constructed here is that any discussion of labour rights that does not incorporate social reproductive labour is a conceptually and empirically incomplete analysis. Overly narrow conceptualisations of labour/work limit the explanatory and transformative parameters of the debate, and prevent us from seeking progressive and transformative solutions.

This paper therefore draws together two current strands of political economy – social reproduction and unfree labour - and explores the ways in which engagement between these two fields might generate some fruitful areas for further debate. This is a preliminary attempt to tackle these issues and as such, I am very open to comments and suggestions on how to move forward with this agenda. The paper proceeds in three substantive sections. The first establishes a conceptual framework for looking at the relationship between social reproduction and unfree labour, setting out an agenda for broadening what is considered economy and political economy. In the second part of the paper I sketch the analytical contours for incorporating social reproduction into the analysis of ‘freedom’ and ‘unfreedom’. The final section offers a broad overview of contemporary debates in unfree labour and explores to what extent this work takes social reproduction into account. In order to do this I set out a typology of research in unfree labour, from that which deals with *explicitly* gendered labour to that looking at *implicitly* gendered labour. I argue that global regimes of social reproduction condition and shape all forms of labour relations, albeit in different ways in different contexts. The paper concludes by offering some remaining questions and suggestions for how future research into unfree labour might take social reproduction into account more systematically.

Conceptual foundations of a social reproduction approach

Before attempting to engage with the literature on unfree labour, I would just like to briefly set out the analytical foundations of social reproduction, in particular in terms of insights about global production and the global economy more broadly. Mainstream and critical scholars in political economy have been accused of privileging the social relations of production – in both epistemological and ontological terms – over other forms of economic relations, and therefore failing to take into account the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between social reproduction and production (see Bakker and Gill 2003; Hosykns and Rai 2007). A recent resurgence of interest in social reproduction from a feminist political economy perspective has generated a good deal of theoretical and conceptual work in this area (Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Bakker and Silvey 2008). The conceptual foundations of this work lie in feminist economics, which highlights the importance of reproductive activity for the working of any economy, and argues that this should be central to any analysis of economics (Power 2004).

Feminist economics reveals the deep masculinist bias in neoclassical economics – namely, the separation of ‘productive’ paid labour carried out in the market and ‘reproductive’ unpaid labour carried out in the home or community, usually by women (Waylen 2000). By failing to acknowledge the sphere of unpaid work, mainstream economics can only provide a partial picture of the work done in the economy, and any economic analysis which does not take this work into account for this will be incomplete (England and Folbre 2003). Economic activity in this conceptualisation is understood as the activity needed to sustain fully functioning systems of exchange and distribution (Power 2004). Processes of social reproduction within this conceptualisation of political economy become a constitutive and determining element of economic life and, by extension, relations of production.

A social reproduction approach shows how different sectors or dimensions of socioeconomics are intimately linked within - and to - the global economy, and cannot be understood separately. Diane Elson’s (2000) work is a useful starting point for thinking about this kind of approach to political economy. Along with the traditional macroeconomic categories of public and private sectors, Elson argues that we need to include the domestic sector – i.e. the place where ‘unpaid non-market oriented labour’ is carried out – in order to appreciate the workings of political economy (Elson 2000: 79). As she states, ‘this labour produces vital inputs for the public and private sectors: a labour force available for work and a variety of intangible social assets’ (Elson 2000: 80). By exposing how the rules and norms of both public and private sectors and circuits are based on assumptions about the domestic sphere and the role of women in that sphere, Elson highlights the gender bias of macroeconomics. As she argues:

Moreover, the rules and norms of both public and private sectors are predicated on the assumption that the care and nurture of the labour force on a daily and intergenerational basis is primarily a female task, and should be treated as fundamentally external to the operations of the unit, even though none of these units can be sustained in the long run unless such domestic labour is undertaken.’ (Elson 2000: 85)

Elson’s ability to point out how changes in the ‘domestic’ sphere have an impact on public and private dimensions of the economy is a vital tool for theorising the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between social reproduction and production. In order to avoid the pitfalls of much mainstream and critical political economy, unfree labour debates need to acknowledge this relationship more explicitly in order to avoid narrow conceptualisations of the economy and political economy.

Rather than 'adding on gender' to analyses of production, a social reproduction approach requires a rethinking of vital questions and assumptions about global production and labour. This paper develops an argument that a systematic inclusion of social reproduction would enhance both the theoretical and transformative contribution of research on unfree labour. Decades of feminist research on the gender dimensions of production have demonstrated the ways in which gender inequality shapes and sustains global production processes. This research has explored women's work in a variety of sectors, including garment factories (Elias 2004), home-based work (Prügl 1999; Kantor 2003) and the service sector in general (Guy and Newman 2004; McDowell et al. 2005). Collectively, this work demonstrates the ways in which gendered inequalities are 'central to the functioning of the global political economy' (Elias 2004: 27). However, in order to move debates on social reproduction forwards we need to engage with a broader range of aspects of global production. The following section makes a first attempt at engaging with the analytical debates surrounding 'unfree' forms of labour.

Exploring the analytical connections between social reproduction and unfree labour

In order to contextualise this discussion, I want to make clear exactly what I mean by unfree labour. I am not referring predominantly to work from a Marxist tradition (Brass 2009). Although this work is valuable, this paper is not attempting to engage with Marxist debates in this area. More specifically, I want to explore recent work coming out of a University of Manchester Political Economy Institute Seminar Series which explores issues such as bonded labour and forced labour.¹ This work engages with Marxist debates but overall presents a heterodox approach, and as such is distinct from the debates around unfree labour within exclusively Marxist analyses. This contemporary debate over unfree labour also has an activist counterpart through the campaigns of organisations such as Anti Slavery International.² In policy terms, these debates feed into the ILO's Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour.³ In the popular imagination, issues of unfree labour have gained high level publicity, particularly in relation to trafficking, forced prostitution and subsequent 'freeing' of women in EU countries.⁴ The aims of this Seminar Series are to grapple with some of the conceptual questions behind unfree labour and generate empirical studies which contribute contextualised case studies of contemporary conditions of unfree labour from a political economy perspective. Recent research has explored issues such as seasonal agricultural workers in the UK, sex workers on the US-Mexican border and forced labour in sugar plantations in Brazil. Later in the paper I explore these empirical areas in more depth.

The conceptual component of this Seminar Series has attempted to grapple with the issues of 'freedom' and 'unfreedom' in political economy, focussing in particular on global production. In order to proceed with this analytical discussion, I set out two key processes through which social reproduction shapes 'unfreedom' in the labour market. First, by influencing the conditions and 'choices' of workers and influencing their interaction with unfree forms of labour. That is, workers' responsibilities for social reproduction condition their options and may push them towards unfree and forced forms of labour. Second, through the global dynamics of regimes of social reproduction and their interaction with global production and labour. Both of these framings of social reproduction and unfree labour require an acknowledgement of the 'embeddedness' of social reproduction and its constitutive relationship with production and labour. We will now look at these two processes in turn.

Workers' responsibility for social reproduction

Debates around freedom and unfreedom have not focussed on social reproduction in any substantive way. They have tended to focus on 'contracts' – in a variety of forms. However, these are predominantly understood as labour contracts to a large extent, in the sense that they exist between worker and employer. This literature has looked extensively at degrees of exploitation through concepts such as coercion and force. However, to date this work has not been grounded in an understanding of the individual worker as socially embedded in relations of social reproduction. As set out above, analyses of production that excluded the relationship with social reproduction depict a 'narrow' picture of social relations. For example, the degrees of coercion involved in unfree labour need to be placed in the context of other forms of coercion in workers' lives – for example, expectations to marry and perform unpaid social reproductive labour. It is worth questioning to what extent social reproductive labour is 'free' – in the sense of labour freely given based on a fair and non-exploitative contract. What is the role of kinship ties and obligations in shaping workers' freedom in the labour market? How can we understand the systems of coercion that are involved in social reproductive labour, and to what extent to these offer parallels with bonded and forced labour?

To be clear, I am not trying to claim here that social reproductive work should be seen as forced or unfree labour in a simplistic manner. This would open up a whole new line of debate about wages for housework and the valuation of care work in the global economy. Although these debates still have resonance in the contemporary economy, they are not necessarily helpful for this discussion. Rather, what I want to do here is to open up the unfree labour debates to incorporate the *dynamics* of the political economy of social reproduction in their analyses, and offer some preliminary thoughts on how

we might theorise this. How do we tackle the embedded assumptions within unfree labour debates about the ‘freeness’ of other workers – that is, those not working under conditions of unfreedom. This requires a much more developed conceptualisation of the relations of social reproduction in which workers in global production are embedded.

In this sense, we need to conceptualise workers not as individuals but rather as fundamentally tied in to social reproduction of themselves and others. Due to global processes of gender inequality, this means that women are in many ways less free to choose what forms of labour with which to engage. As such, we need to understand the labour of all workers – and in particular women workers – as already unfree to some extent, or at the least shaped by conditions of unfreedom embedded in inequalities of social reproduction. How can we understand the ways in which obligations (primarily to women) to provide unpaid social reproductive labour interact with degrees of freedom and unfreedom in the labour market? We will return to these questions in a more concrete manner in the discussion of empirical debates below.

Global dynamics of social reproduction

This goes beyond discussions of degrees of freedom for workers to look more broadly at social reproduction as an embedded regime in global production. If we understand the relationship between production and social reproduction to be co-constitutive as set out above, how does this regime of unpaid and under-paid social reproductive work structure and the social relations of global production? Moreover, how do regimes of social reproduction shape freedom and unfreedom in the labour market and, more generally, in global production? This can be seen in factors such as the systematic undervaluing of ‘women’s work’ in the global economy, assumptions about secondary earners, and the structural ‘disposability’ of women workers.

If we acknowledge that global production is already subsidised by a large amount of non-contracted, unpaid work, where does that leave debates around unfree labour? Are there aspects of unfreedom already built in to global production through its coercive and exploitative (and naturalised) assumptions about social reproductive work? Analyses of freedom and unfreedom need to take pay more careful attention to the ways in which the global gendered care regime already structures and disciplines the workforce – in particular the female workforce. This is taken up in the next section on empirical research on unfree labour.

Engaging with contemporary research in unfree labour

The concern of the paper now is to take these analytical contentions and apply them to preliminary research on unfree labour in global political economy. In order to do this I identify two key strands of this research – that which deals with *explicitly* gendered labour such as sex work and domestic work and that which deals with *implicitly* gendered labour such as global production networks and global value chains. It should be noted that much of this research is in its early stages. The research discussed here is based on presentations to the *Unfree Labour Seminar Series* at the University of Manchester's Political Economy Institute. The criticisms of the papers offered here are developed in a spirit of engagement with work in progress, and should be treated as such. I deal with research on explicitly and implicitly gendered labour in turn, aiming to demonstrate how a social reproduction approach could enhance this work.

Explicitly gendered labour

This analysis emerges from a number of papers presented to the seminar on 'Gender and Unfree Labour'. While these papers do a good job of presenting fine-grain empirical detail on women's unfree labour in global production, they generally fail to engage with gender as a regime of inequality sustained through social reproduction. Susanne Hofman's research on sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico explores degrees of freedom and unfreedom involved in this kind of work. This analysis is both sophisticated and sensitive, and leaves space for women's own interpretations of their level of 'choice' in engaging in sex work. Hofman acknowledges the structural dynamics of poverty and marginalisation and how they influence labour relations. She also reports that sex workers in Tijuana are usually single heads of household with care responsibilities for children and other dependents (Hofman 2009). However, it would be interesting to carry out a more systematic gender analysis of the motivations of women to enter into such work. For example, if we focus on sex workers as embedded in relations of unfreedom through their social reproduction responsibilities, how does this shape our analysis of their freedom to engage in this kind of work? The majority of ethnographic research with sex workers highlights their family responsibilities, and cites care for children or wanting a 'better life' for them as one of the main motivations for entering sex work (Brennan 2004). A more substantive engagement with sex workers as embedded in social reproduction would contribute to a more nuanced analysis of freedom and unfreedom within this kind of work.

A large amount of research has been carried out on domestic work or care work - that is, paid social reproductive labour. However, much of this neglects the issue of gendered structures of social reproduction and misses out the degrees of unfreedom involved in domestic work. Elizabeth Frantz's research on the 'Kafala' system shows how migrant domestic workers in the Middle East are open to a range of abuses and points out that domestic labour is not considered work under this system (Frantz 2009). However, she does not engage with social reproduction as a constitutive component of global production, and the paper could be developed much further along these lines. Extensive research on 'global care chains' has developed ways to conceptualise the global dimensions of social reproduction (Hochschild et al 2000, Yeates 2004). However, the focus is almost exclusively on female labour, reinforcing assumptions that women are the predominant providers and/or purchasers of social reproductive labour. What is needed in order to take this work forwards is a more explicit engagement of the ways in which regimes of social reproduction conditions *all* workers, not just domestic workers migrating in precarious or trafficked situations. This literature – particularly in relation to unfree labour through trafficking and bonded labour - offers little criticism of the degrees of unfreedom in which both provider and purchaser are embedded. Exploring these issues further could be fruitful for taking these debates forward.

Implicitly gendered labour

A key focus of contemporary work on unfree labour has been on degrees of unfreedom in global value chains. Although Stephanie Barrientos's (2001) research acknowledges the gender dimensions of global production, it focuses on women's and men's work rather than regimes of social reproduction. How can incorporating social reproduction into the analysis of global production chains enhance our understanding of freedom and unfreedom? This would require taking social reproduction seriously as a co-constitutive component in global production. It would expand the analysis to explore how global production chains are subsidised by unpaid and under-paid social reproductive labour, and how this conditions the degrees of freedom in which workers interact with global production. For example, this might entail an empirical study of a global production chain which took into account the social reproductive labour contributed at each node of production. This would allow for a more nuanced analysis of how social reproduction and production interact at different places and at different times and how this shapes conditions of freedom and unfreedom for workers in that chain/network.

As argued throughout the paper, the majority of research on the gender dimensions of global production focuses on female workers. As such, we are limited in our ability to conceptualise how male

workers are also shaped by regimes of social reproduction. In terms of unfree labour, how do we expand our analysis to male-dominated areas of work? How could we develop our analyses to explore the ways in which the global care regime shapes and discipline men's as well as women's labour? This is a more challenging task, but is equally important as analysing women's labour. For example, Siobhán McGrath's research on sugar cane workers recounts the political economy of 'slavery-like conditions' in Brazil (McGrath 2010). How might we engage with her findings in order to unpack the embedded nature of social reproduction in men's labour, and in turn how this shapes conditions of freedom and unfreedom. This would require moving beyond social reproduction as an empirical category of labour and the assumptions embedded within this – that this is work that is 'naturally' performed for free by women. Future research should take into consideration how regimes of social reproduction are complicit in shaping freedom and unfreedom, not just on the female labouring body but on all workers in all aspects of global production.

Conclusions

This paper offers a preliminary attempt to draw together contemporary literature on social reproduction and unfree labour. I began by outlining a social reproduction approach to political economy, arguing for a broadening of our understanding of 'the economic' and a recognition of the co-constitutive nature of production and social reproduction. Next, the paper presented a framework for analysing the ways in which social reproduction shapes degrees of freedom and unfreedom. This focussed in turn on individual workers' responsibilities for social reproduction, and how regimes of social reproduction condition unfree labour in global production. The final section of the paper engaged with a broad range of empirical research in unfree labour and offers some suggestions on how such work might be enhanced by a social reproduction perspective. This research covers both explicitly gendered labour – sex work and domestic work – and implicitly gendered labour – such as global production chains and industries such as sugar cane production. I argue that future empirical studies on unfree labour should incorporate the embedded nature of social reproduction in labour relations and global production, not just in terms of traditionally female labour such as care work and sex work but also in areas such as agriculture and services.

Three key conceptual questions for further debate emerge from this preliminary analysis. One, how can we understand the nature of freedom and unfreedom in the provision of unpaid social reproductive labour through responsibility and gendered coercion? Two, how do workers' obligations and responsibilities to social reproduction condition their relation to unfree labour such as sex work,

precarious migration and bonded labour? Three, how can we conceptualise of social reproduction as a global regime which shapes the nature and degree of unfreedom in global production and labour relations?

This paper is a first step towards generating debate on social reproduction and unfree labour. At the same time, it is hoped that as this debate develops, it will be able to contribute to the social reproduction literature by offering new analytical insights and original empirical material. A higher level of engagement between feminist and non-feminist political economy can lead to greater conceptual clarity and more rigorous empirical research. Moreover, it can help to generate high quality research which can contribute to the potential for progressive social change. How can taking social reproduction seriously contribute to advocacy campaigns regarding unfree labour? At the same time, what can this analysis contribute to advocacy work that works towards greater recognition of social reproduction in global economy policy? In any case, a more systematic interaction between these fields of political economy is likely to yield a further set of questions and case studies that challenge the terms of debate and provoke a re-thinking of some basic assumptions.

Notes

¹ <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/PEI/research/unfree/esrc/index.html>, accessed 9th August 2010

² <http://www.antislavery.org/english/>, accessed 9th August 2010

³ <http://www.ilo.org/sapfl/lang--en/index.htm>, accessed 9th August 2010

⁴ See, for example, 'Prostitution and trafficking – the anatomy of a moral panic, The Guardian, 20th October 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/20/trafficking-numbers-women-exaggerated>, accessed 11th August 2010

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