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Maternal Workers to the Front!

A Review of Maud Perrier's *Childcare Struggles, Maternal Workers and Social Reproduction* 2022

By Claire English

University of the West of Scotland

Maud Perrier is an important contributor to the sociology of families and childcare and builds on over a decade of research in the areas of motherhood, social class and feminist theory to produce this much anticipated manuscript, *'Childcare Struggles, Maternal Workers and Social Reproduction'* (Bristol University Press, 2022). Perrier begins this immersive and exciting text by telling us that childcare poses one of the greatest 'ethical, practical and political challenges to 21st Century feminism'. This is undoubtedly the case. The unstable situation for childcare workers, parents and carers and young children in the Covid-19 era has been one of rapid changes and 'making do' childcare options alongside seemingly unending and unpredictable policy shifts for care providers, parents and grandparents alike. It has been an incredibly difficult time for those with caring responsibilities at a point in history when parents, mothers, and those who work in care, were already overburdened (English, 2022; Hardy et al, 2022). What Perrier brings us in this thought-provoking work is an analysis of what Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) can do to improve this situation across the incredible range of people- paid and unpaid- who undertake the care of young people.

Perrier follows the work of social reproduction theorists like Silvia Federici, who argue persuasively that 'devaluing the reproduction of human life is a central pillar of capitalism, one of the main engines of the accumulation process (Federici, 2018). Social Reproduction Theory is a structural analysis of 'life work', and relates to activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally (Farris, 2022). Perrier mobilises this framework to 'ask how childcare workers create social relations across households, workplaces and communities that contest the stratified devaluation of care' (Perrier, p25)- and this book presents case studies showing how these gendered and racialised workers actively contest this devaluation. For the sake of concision, this review will focus on three main areas of novelty and feminist innovation; the practical application of SRT in Perrier's case studies, the analytical possibilities offered by the 'maternal worker' and the psychosocial legacies of neoliberal depletion that Perrier investigates so thoroughly.

Firstly, I want to note the practical application of SRT as an important continuation of and contribution to the current literature in this area. When feminist scholars mobilise social reproduction theory to make sense of the inequality inherent in the home, the workplace and society more generally, we tend to be met with: Yes, but what can this kind of theory actually do?¹. In the case of the issues covered in Perrier's book specifically, they might ask, how can we use SRT to change the material conditions of paid and unpaid care workers in a neoliberal economy? Perrier's empirical work in this book makes a valiant attempt at doing just that- showing activists, workers, volunteers in the third sector, trade union organisers and mothers just what an analysis of social reproduction can bring to establishing feminist power (or counterpower) in real life situations.

This book is a combination of three case studies interwoven with theory and critique of the impact of neoliberalism on the family and what a collective response to these conditions might look like. Perrier deftly connects the scholarships of black feminist thinkers like Patricia Hill-Collins, Tracey

¹ see Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019 wrote their book *'Feminism for the 99%* in part as an attempt to answer this question.

Reynolds and Sara Ahmed with a body of work- social reproduction theory- that has sometimes been accused of ignorance towards the differing experiences of motherhood and care for women of colour (Davis, 1983; Ferguson, 2020). Perrier's work builds on the critiques leveraged by Susan Ferguson (2020), Premilla Nadasen (2021) and others that by locking social reproduction theory into an analysis of unpaid sets of relations, within individualised (often heterosexual) partnerships and homes, much of the utility of the theory is missed. What this book does is to remind feminist theorists of social reproduction of the crucial insight that women's oppression lies in the contradictory, dialectical relationship between paid and unpaid work that has historically played out very differently across racialised and classed subjectivities. This is important when noting, as Perrier does, that the childcare that reproduces the next generation relies not only on households, but workplaces, state funded welfare provision, commercial entities acting as childcare providers, unpaid family members, friends and many others.

Her three main case studies are the striking childcare workers in Australia who are told by politicians that withdrawing their labour will feel to families like they are 'withdrawing their love and trust'; the charity, non-profit and local government workers in the 'women's sector' watching their projects ravaged by austerity; and the nannies who organised collectively during the covid pandemic struggling to be recognised by larger scale childcare and trade union movements.

Secondly, I want to examine Perrier's development of the category of, the 'maternal worker', to analyse and develop solidarity between those engaged in paid and unpaid care work whilst foregrounding the unequal power relations that inevitably occur when you include those paying for a service and those in a waged relation to it. One limitation of the concept was that I found it difficult to understand how we might practically or convincingly invite men, nonbinary people, and those who undertake the labour of care but do not identify with the 'maternal' to see themselves part of a seemingly gendered category like 'maternal worker.' I was intellectually challenged by the ambitious undertaking of trying to find a unifying concept that could do what Perrier sets out to do, but I was not always sure this concept of the maternal worker did what it needed to. If the project is to convince everyone that does care labour that they are maternal, whatever their subjectivity, then perhaps we need to know more about what it is conditions, enables or motivates specifically maternal care, sociologically speaking. That said, I hope Perrier continues to do this insightful thinking work so that feminist academics might apply this, or a similar concept, in ways that make sense not only to those engaged in childcare, but also other forms of care such as elder care, disability care, and perhaps even shining a light on the need to centre the voice of the children and others 'receiving' that care. As Perrier notes, those of different subjectivities have 'differential access' to anticapitalist struggle, but it feels that some incredibly fruitful imaginings could happen in this intellectual arena. We know that caring for others brings feelings of joy and collectivity (English and Campbell, 2020), and I look forward to understanding how maternal workers could benefit from harnessing the power inherent in the 'messiness' of these overlapping, symbiotic relationships.

For those of us who write about motherhood and social reproduction, it is easy to recognise the challenges of mobilising a term like 'maternal worker'. These challenges are born of wanting to emphatically restate the material reality that it is women who do this so much of this work (Perrier notes in chapter two that 96% of paid childcare workers are women), whilst also ardently maintaining that it should not be work that is dominated by women or considered more appropriate for women. This balancing act is real. Perrier notes the unscientific understandings of 'natural care instincts' that proliferate not only about women and motherhood and but also about migrant nannies' 'innate' suitability to look after the children of wealthier women. This is part of what she

calls the differential devaluing of childcare labour across classed, racialised and citizenship lines that scaffolds the hegemonic idea that childcare isn't skilled labour (p.9).

Connected to this devaluing of childcare labour are the stealthy ways in which the nation state and local governments chip away at the economic and social resources necessary for a functioning childcare system, especially for those families or children deemed to be 'at risk' (ibid. p.72). In this last section I want to look at the work Perrier brings to the concept of depletion in neoliberal times.

In chapter two, Perrier interviews women working in children's centres on projects largely funded by local authorities. She uses the work of Rai et al (2014) to identify depletion as the gendered and racialised harms produced by institutions and society through a lack of recognition for carework. This defunding and its subsequent reliance on individual women to exceed their own personal capacities and resources to cover for the inadequacies of state provision lead to immeasurable emotional drain and burnout (p.70). I see this use of depletion as lens with which we can tie individual feelings of exhaustion to structural inadequacies. This is helpful in demonstrating how organising around defending women's rights to reproduce themselves, and those they care for, with dignity and support, as a key principle of feminist organising and a key way of locating the role of the state in overburdening those who are already structurally disadvantaged under capitalism.

This leads then to the final question, that of how we might form organisations of maternal workers or of feminist solidarity that are up to the challenge of defending women and building a new future. For Perrier, an important act is to challenge the normalcy of familial structures that prevent community approaches to care. She suggests that beyond 'redistributing the affective and material resources it demands, countering the psychoanalytic consequences of raising children in nuclear families, including its tendency to reproduce adults predisposed to liberal individualism rather than collective solidarity' is where the work needs to begin. But it is not only looking to ways of re-learning or un-learning capitalist modes of reproduction, but also looking to experimentation with forms of collective childcare. Perrier's account of migrant nannies and their self-organising practices during the pandemic was especially heartening, with the National Domestic Worker's Alliance raising US\$4 million for safety equipment, sick pay, welfare support and so on, and the Nanny Solidarity Network in London crowdfunding to deliver English language training, immigration and employment legal advice to Nannies, who had been largely forgotten in mainstream discourses about care during the pandemic. Perrier scrutinises the trade unions who organise regularised childcare workers and looks at how they might learn from the organisations that provide solidarity beyond the limits of citizenship.

This book is an incredibly important intervention into the way that academics, trade unionists and activists might think about the gendered and racialised processes and experiences that structure childcare as a practice and an industry today. It is required reading for any of us that write about social reproduction, motherhood, and the sociology of work in the UK and beyond. This book's release comes following a similar book about childcare, 'Commoning Care and Collective Power' by Manuela Zechner which traces the twin genealogies of childcare commons and the micropolitics of municipalism in Barcelona. Zechner creates a relatedly insightful case study of mothers' networks and commons nurseries, telling of powerful webs and infrastructures of care in the neighbourhood of Poble Sec (2021, Transversal Texts). The way that both Perrier and Zechner draw on social reproduction theory to make the argument that the care of young people needs to be radically transformed, shows parallels between different locations that speak to the inadequacies of neoliberal economies in managing care.

Perrier's ever-present reflexivity about her own role as a researcher in spaces dominated by those over whom she had 'economic and cultural advantages' (p.15) make this book a sincere and honest approach to the problems faced by feminist researchers seeking to pursue shared interests despite differential access to structural power. I am already looking forward to seeing where interpretations and reconfigurations of the maternal worker will take this area of study, and indeed feminist community organising more generally.

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