

Book Review

Childcare Struggles, Maternal Workers and Social Reproduction

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Perrier, M. (2018). *Childcare Struggles, Maternal Workers and Social Reproduction*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Through an examination of specific exploitations and mobilizations in the field of childcare, and supported by testimonies from workers and community organizers, *Childcare struggles, maternal workers and social reproduction* presents a compelling argument for a system of universal childcare that balances the needs of mothers with fair well-paid labor for the working-class and migrant workers who most often work in this sector. By examining various struggles and movements in the childcare sector, in the UK, United States and Australia, Perrier argues that connections between parents, childcare workers and unions are necessary in constructing mutually supported and well-funded systems of childcare. The text draws on and builds upon existing literature (e.g. Fraser, 2016; The Care Collective, 2020) that advocates for collective models of caring. It is timely in its release, given that more than a decade of government underfunding and pay freezes have been met with increased activism across employment sectors, and with care now being foregrounded in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the importance of 'care work' in a capitalist society. In this social context the book is a particularly empowering and instructive read concerning the ways in which communities can organize to address their needs, taking into account the need for cross-class collaboration, in the face of what has been routine exclusion of working class and migrant workers 'from the table' of decision-making.

The book opens with a theoretical discussion of contemporary childcare which, viewed through the lens of social reproduction, exposes the ways in which 'lower class and racialized majority mothers have been devalued' (Perrier, 2022: 28) through capitalist processes, particularly focusing on informal community organizing such as 'othermothering' (Perrier, 2022: 30). Connecting this to the women's movement Perrier discusses how lack of government support for their childcare schemes meant that 'the groups' political principles and economic realities often collided', for example, in 'the impossibility of paying a playgroup supervisor above minimum wage' (Perrier, 2022: 33). The chapter concludes with Perrier arguing a key theme of the book: the necessity of connecting waged and unwaged mothering, which she considers fundamental for a thorough evaluation of childcare struggles, foregrounding the long-neglected issue of maternal politics that 'continues to be sidelined from discussion of labor-based childcare' (Perrier, 2022: 39).

Chapter two continues the theme of connections in childcare activism by discussing how the childcare strikes organized by the Australian Union, United Voice, were 'disconnected from earlier feminist attempts—especially black and socialist feminist mobilizing - to revalue and redistribute childcare' (Perrier, 2022: 42). Giving a very balanced evaluation of the strike, whilst she argues that parents were supportive of the strike action, she also directs the reader to testimonies stating some parents' unwillingness to collect their children early. She discusses how connections between parents and childcare workers and childcare workers and unions was integral to successful

strike action. Specifically, with regards the childcare strikes, testimony from childcare workers revealed a desire to commit to full day strike action which was curtailed by the union. Perrier points out that this continues a long tradition of the exclusion of the working classes from decision making in labor disputes.

Building cross-class connections is the focus of the third chapter which considers contemporary notions such as self-care and work/life balance from a classed perspective of exactly who provides services to exhausted middle-class mothers, or as Perrier endearingly terms it, ‘mothering the mothers’ (Perrier, 2022: 62). Here Perrier introduces ‘depletion theory’ in order to explain the classed and racialized nature of activism. Not only are working-class and migrant workers often depleted by performing services to alleviate the depletion of middle class mothers, but that depletion itself also excludes people from participating in activism, thus situating them as ‘consumers, patients or recipients of services rather than as political subjects’ (Perrier, 2022: 65). Here, focusing on Bristol, through her own empirical research of Bristolian ‘community mothers’ (Perrier, 2022: 67) from different class positions, she discusses depletion on a systemic level by examining how ‘cuts left participants in community organizations and medium sized charities vulnerable to the physical and emotional depletion following failed funding applications, organizational restructurings and job threats’ (Perrier, 2022: 70). Whilst her interviews with ‘mumpreneurs’ providing wellness services to affluent mothers demonstrated that this group was less vulnerable to austerity, these mothers similarly suffered low wages and exhaustion, which for Perrier highlights the possibility of cross-class connection in respect of shared vulnerability. ‘A broader maternal workers movement that can shape policies from below’, requires, Perrier concludes ‘the abandonment of a philanthropic model of maternal support’ (Perrier, 2022: 78).

Chapter four looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic both increased the demand for ‘live-in’ childcare providers, as well as making these roles more exploitative as employers routinely flouted lockdown rules, whilst restricting the movements of their nannies for their own safety. Interviews with organizers reveal the lack of power felt by migrant workers in challenging their employers’ demands, and that relationships with ‘parent-employers’ (Perrier, 2022: 92) worsened during the pandemic. Organizations in Massachusetts and London, set up to build worker solidarity in the childcare sector, were misconstrued as charities providing financial support, an assumption both adapted to in the face of government inaction amidst worker poverty and homelessness during the pandemic. The emphasis in this chapter is on engagement between workers and grassroots organizations looking at the invisibility and fear experienced by migrant workers, a position that makes them reluctant to engage with organizations that they view as being ‘part of the system’ (Perrier, 2022: 95).

In the concluding chapter, ‘Maternal Worker Power’, Perrier shows how sociology can help to argue against the persistent devaluation of care work. By bringing together ‘the sociologies of mothering and waged childcare work’ (Perrier, 2022: 100) through the lens of social reproduction, she argues that an approach can be built which ‘centers work-based, home and community-based movements’ (Perrier, 2022: 100) Ultimately, she asserts that, without a turn towards social reproduction, ‘sociologists will continue to produce work that reproduces, rather than challenges these harmful separations and hierarchies’; and that this perspective may serve to protect ‘future studies of the childcare workforce to avoid silo-ing migration policies, employment laws and grassroots community and work-based movements’ (Perrier, 2022: 101).

This book provides an important and meticulous evaluation of classed and racialized stratification of childcare in neoliberal economies, using social reproduction as a tool for discerning the differences between waged and unwaged childcare labor. It is a must read for anyone interested in the politics of working motherhood, childcare crises and social reproduction. Tales of both fight backs and depletion in the childcare sector, told through empirical research of members of organizations, and the workers themselves, help to construct a gripping narrative and inspirational argument concerning maternal worker power: one that views working-class and migrant childcare workers as self-determined political agents, rather than passive recipients of charity.

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