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"Knowing How to Arrange Things": Reproductive Surplus and Social Reproduction in Contemporary Capitalism

Abstract

This article develops the concept of reproductive surplus to explore how the labour involved in social reproduction generates capacities that both support and exceed capitalist accumulation. Drawing on ethnographic research in the post-industrial Portuguese city of Setúbal, it examines how households organise survival through networks of care, reciprocity, and institutional negotiation amid deindustrialisation, precarious employment, and austerity. While these practices are often understood as mechanisms for reproducing labour power, the article argues that they also generate relational, moral, and practical capacities—forms of social knowledge, communicative competence, and moral judgement—that are crucial for navigating labour markets and welfare institutions. Bringing Marx's analysis of surplus value into dialogue with Maria Mies's feminist critique of reproductive labour and Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity, the article shows how contemporary capitalism increasingly relies on capacities produced through social reproduction, even though these capacities remain embedded in social relations that cannot be wholly subordinated to accumulation.

Keywords: social reproduction; reproductive surplus; austerity; moral economies; anthropology of capitalism

Introduction

On a late afternoon in the *Bairro das Fontainhas*, one of Setúbal's older working-class neighbourhoods,[1] a small group of women stood outside a café, discussing how they would get through the coming weeks. "You have to know how to arrange things," one remarked, prompting knowing nods from the others. The conversation flowed easily from work and family obligations to the rising costs of everyday necessities. One woman had recently lost a temporary cleaning job at a logistics warehouse on the outskirts of Lisbon. Another was caring for her elderly mother while occasionally preparing trays of homemade food to sell informally to neighbours. As they spoke,

[1] Setúbal is a Portuguese post-industrial port city located approximately 50 kilometres south of Lisbon, historically shaped by fishing, canning industries, and later heavy industry.

they compared strategies for stretching limited resources: delaying utility payments, borrowing small amounts from relatives, asking the shopkeeper to extend credit at the local grocery store, or taking turns looking after each other's children when short-term work appeared. These competencies are not evenly distributed across social life. In Setúbal, as in many other contexts, women frequently play central roles in organising care, maintaining kinship and neighbourhood networks, and mediating relations between households and institutions. The capacities cultivated through these activities are therefore deeply shaped by gendered divisions of reproductive labour. One woman explained that survival required knowing whom to approach for help, how to ask without damaging one's reputation, and when assistance might circulate through networks of kinship and familiarity. What she referred to was not simply budgeting or making ends meet, but a broader social competence cultivated through everyday life in the neighbourhood. As many residents explained during fieldwork, survival depended not only on access to material resources but also on the ability to navigate relationships of obligation, reciprocity, and care.

For many residents of Setúbal, this practical competence—often described as *knowing how to arrange things*—was essential to sustaining life amid unstable employment and shrinking welfare provision. It involved maintaining relationships with relatives and neighbours, managing reputations within local networks, and navigating welfare offices, charities, and employers. Although rarely recognised as economic work, these activities shaped how people obtained resources, organised cooperation, and managed uncertainty. They also raise a broader analytical question: what kinds of capacities are produced through the labour of sustaining everyday life? Social reproduction theory has long shown how domestic labour, care work, and other life-sustaining activities reproduce labour power and maintain the conditions necessary for capitalist accumulation. The Setúbal material invites us to consider what else is produced in the course of that labour.

In this article, I develop the concept of reproductive surplus to describe the relational, moral, and practical capacities generated through social reproduction that extend beyond the immediate reproduction of labour power. These include forms of social knowledge, communicative competence, and moral judgement cultivated through practices of care, cooperation, and survival, and subsequently mobilised in labour markets, welfare systems, and informal economies. They are not individual assets analogous to social capital but socially produced capacities grounded in relations of reciprocity, responsibility, and interdependence. The

surplus at issue is not a measurable remainder or an additional form of surplus value. Reproductive surplus does not replace Marx's account of surplus extraction within production. Rather, it draws attention to capacities produced through the work of sustaining life that make contemporary economic and institutional arrangements operable. Employers benefit from reputational networks through which workers are found; welfare institutions depend on claimants' abilities to assemble documents, communicate need, and present morally intelligible accounts; and households rely on practical knowledge of how resources can be obtained and redistributed. Institutions may appropriate these capacities as though they were individual attributes, but they do not produce the social relations from which they emerge.

This institutional availability is ambivalent rather than intrinsically emancipatory. Reproductive capacities can stabilise precarious labour markets and compensate for fragmented welfare systems, absorbing costs displaced onto households, especially women. Yet because they remain embedded in relations not organised solely by accumulation, they may also sustain cooperation, claims-making, and collective projects that institutions cannot fully contain. Simone de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity helps to hold these effects together: action develops within conditions that constrain freedom without determining all its possible uses (de Beauvoir 1948;1949; Kruks 2012). The labour of sustaining life can therefore facilitate accumulation while generating capacities through which existing arrangements are negotiated, contested, or exceeded.

These questions relate to a broader body of research in the anthropology of capitalism and feminist political economy. Anthropologists have long emphasised that economic life cannot be understood solely through markets or production but must also account for the social relations through which life is reproduced (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Bear et al. 2015; Tsing 2015; Kasmir and Gill 2022). Feminist scholars have similarly challenged the tendency of economic theory to prioritise productive labour while treating domestic work, care, and subsistence activities as secondary (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016, 2022; Katz 2001). These debates have been further developed within contemporary social reproduction theory, which highlights how capitalist economies rely on the labour required to sustain everyday life (Vogel 2013; Weeks 2011; Bhattacharya 2017).

Ethnographic research demonstrates how these processes connect households to broader transformations within capitalist economies. Studies of women's labour in global production systems show how household survival strategies intersect with transnational circuits of capital and

labour (Fernández-Kelly 1984; Ong 1987; Wright 2006). Other ethnographies highlight how wage labour, domestic responsibilities, and informal economic activities frequently overlap in everyday life (Constable 2007; Freeman 2000; Mills 1999). More recent studies of debt, austerity, and precarious livelihoods further illustrate how practices of care, obligation, and moral judgement shape economic life in times of uncertainty (Han 2012; James 2014).

Together, this literature establishes social reproduction as a constitutive dimension of capitalist economies. However, less attention has been paid to the competencies produced while people undertake the work of sustaining life: how they learn to interpret obligations, communicate need, coordinate assistance, and judge what can be asked of whom. Narotzky's account of labour as activity directed towards sustaining life is important here because it rejects an a priori division between productive and reproductive domains (Narotzky 2018; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). The question is therefore not simply where value is produced, but how capacities formed across households, neighbourhoods, and institutions become consequential within processes of accumulation.

Addressing these questions requires revisiting classical debates on labour and reproduction. Marx demonstrated that capitalist accumulation depends on extracting surplus value from labour power within the wage relation (Marx 1976), while also recognising that labour power must be reproduced outside the workplace through everyday activities that sustain workers and their families. Feminist scholars later extended this insight by analysing how capitalism relies on extensive domains of reproductive labour beyond the wage relation. Among these contributions, Maria Mies's work remains particularly influential. Through a series of studies—including her ethnography of rural women's labour in India (Mies 1982), her analysis of the international division of labour (Mies 1986), and her collaborative work on subsistence economies and ecofeminism (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and von Werlhof 1988; Mies and Shiva 1993; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999)—Mies showed how capitalist accumulation depends on forms of labour systematically rendered invisible within dominant economic frameworks. Her concept of *housewifisation* described the historical process by which women's labour is naturalised as domestic or supplementary, enabling capitalism to appropriate reproductive work while excluding it from recognised economic value.

Drawing on ethnographic research in Setúbal, this article develops the concept of reproductive surplus from the everyday practices through which people organised for survival

during and after Portugal's austerity programme. The analysis is based on sixteen months of fieldwork conducted principally between 2015 and 2016, followed by further research visits in 2017 and 2019. It combines participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews, and repeated everyday conversations in working-class neighbourhoods, households, charitable organisations, parish initiatives, and informal economic spaces. I accompanied residents as they budgeted, exchanged food and childcare, sought work, assembled documents, and negotiated assistance. I also observed encounters involving volunteers, welfare intermediaries, and people seeking support. This multi-sited approach enabled me to follow resources, advice, and moral evaluations as they moved between domestic, neighbourhood, and institutional settings.[2] The following section situates these practices within Setúbal's history of industrialisation, deindustrialisation, and austerity. The two subsequent ethnographic sections examine, first, the mobilisation and institutional capture of reproductive capacities in welfare encounters, and, second, their generation and circulation through networks of care and reciprocity. The conclusion returns to their ambiguity and asks under what conditions they might support collective claims rather than merely compensate for institutional withdrawal.

Setúbal: Deindustrialisation and the Reorganisation of Social Reproduction

The everyday practices discussed earlier unfold in a city whose social and economic environment has been heavily shaped by repeated cycles of industrial growth and decline. Setúbal, located on the northern bank of the Sado River estuary, about fifty kilometres south of Lisbon, evolved during the twentieth century into one of Portugal's leading industrial centres. Its economic history has been closely tied to the exploitation of maritime resources, the growth of manufacturing industries, and, later, the development of heavy industries linked to both national and international markets. These changes have significantly reshaped the organisation of labour, urban space, and household life in the area.

The initial major phase of industrialisation began in the late nineteenth century with the rapid expansion of the canning industry. Attracted by the abundance of sardines in the Sado estuary and the availability of cheap labour, foreign investors established numerous fish-processing factories across the city. Production was labour-intensive and relied heavily on female workers recruited from nearby rural areas. By the early twentieth century, the canning industry had become

[2] All interlocutors' names have been anonymised.

the region's primary economic activity, employing thousands and shaping the city's urban development. Despite this growth, Setúbal's industrial economy was marked by notable instability. Employment in the canning sector fluctuated with fish supply and international market conditions. Working conditions were often arduous, wages were low, and labour relations were frequently tense. Women constituted the majority of the workforce, working long hours on repetitive manual tasks while also managing household responsibilities. Similar patterns are documented in Maria Mies's ethnography of lace makers in Narsapur, where women's domestic labour became part of global commodity chains yet remained classified as household activity rather than wage labour (Mies 1982).

A second phase of industrial expansion began in the mid-twentieth century, driven by the growth of heavy industry linked to the port of Setúbal and broader state-led strategies for economic modernisation. Shipyards, cement factories, and other large industrial facilities attracted thousands of workers from across the country. During this period, the city became an important centre of industrial employment and labour mobilisation. Trade unions, workers' committees, and neighbourhood associations played a significant role in shaping local political life, especially during the revolutionary period following the Carnation Revolution of 1974. However, the industrial economy that once supported the city began to decline in the late twentieth century. Economic restructuring, technological advances, and intensifying global competition contributed to the gradual decline of many industries that had previously sustained local livelihoods. Shipyards reduced their workforce, manufacturing plants closed or relocated, and job opportunities became increasingly scarce. As a result, the labour market in Setúbal became characterised by unstable employment, temporary contracts, and persistent unemployment.

These transformations were further intensified by the austerity measures implemented in Portugal after the global financial crisis and the Eurozone debt crisis. In 2011, Portugal accepted a €78 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission, initiating a programme of fiscal consolidation that included cuts to public-sector wages, pension freezes, reductions in social spending, and stricter eligibility criteria for welfare benefits. Municipal social services faced severe resource constraints, while demand for assistance rose sharply. Local welfare offices and charitable organisations in cities such as Setúbal reported a growing number of applicants who had previously been in relatively stable employment but now sought emergency support. Austerity, therefore, did not simply reduce welfare provision;

it also transformed the institutional and moral conditions under which assistance was requested, evaluated, and granted. Similar dynamics have been documented across Southern Europe, where households increasingly rely on informal economies and kinship networks to navigate the consequences of austerity-era restructuring (Narotzky 2020).

Residents often interpret these changes through stories that link current economic insecurity to the city's industrial past. Conversations with local historians, trade union representatives, and long-term residents frequently highlight Setúbal's legacy of labour struggles and political mobilisation. Locally, the city is sometimes called a 'red city', a reference to earlier periods of strong working-class organisation and resistance. These historical memories provide an important moral framework for understanding present economic challenges, linking current uncertainty to longer histories of labour conflicts and economic shifts. The decline in industrial jobs has significantly altered how households manage their livelihoods. While previous generations could often rely on stable factory jobs, many residents today piece together income from various sources. These may include temporary work, pensions from retired relatives, unemployment benefits, casual or informal jobs, and various forms of official support. Survival increasingly depends on households' ability to combine these diverse resources and share them across generations.

Clara's account linked the city's industrial past to the calculations of the present. She cleaned private homes while her husband had left Portugal after the 2008 crisis to package frozen fish in northern Britain. Their adult son was completing a master's degree in history. Maintaining his studies had become the organising purpose of the household's dispersed labour: wages earned abroad, Clara's cleaning income, and small contributions from relatives were repeatedly pooled to cover rent, transport, books, and food. When money ran short, Clara's mother helped with the rent and friends brought groceries. Clara contrasted this arrangement with a childhood memory from the mid-1980s, when her father's factory delayed wages during a labour conflict. He would tell the children he had already eaten so the limited food could be divided among them. For Clara, her husband's migration did not signify withdrawal from family life. It was another way of continuing the struggle to secure a future for their son, even though that struggle separated the couple for long periods and depended on work neither regarded as desirable nor secure.

This family history was not merely a narrative of resilience across generations. It formed part of Clara's practical assessment of what could be endured, which obligations came first, and

when accepting help remained compatible with dignity. Memories of withheld wages and paternal sacrifice provided a moral language for interpreting contemporary unemployment and migration, while present-day relations with relatives and friends turned that language into material support. The household's capacity to sustain an educational project was therefore distributed across places and people: a fish-processing plant abroad, cleaning jobs in Setúbal, a grandmother's income, and friends able to provide food. Education appeared as an individual investment in the son, but its conditions of possibility were collectively and reproductively organised.

Ethnographic research across various neighbourhoods revealed that these strategies often extend beyond the nuclear household. Extended families, neighbours, and local acquaintances play key roles in sharing resources and information. Small loans among relatives, informal childcare arrangements, and the sharing of household goods are common ways residents manage periods of economic hardship. These exchanges are rarely formalised with explicit contracts; instead, they rely on unspoken understandings of reciprocity, trust, and reputation that shape daily social ties. Reputation is crucial to maintaining these support networks. Residents often emphasised that being seen as responsible and trustworthy was essential to receiving help when needed. Being recognised as someone who contributes to family duties, repays debts, and helps others whenever possible enhances one's standing within local reciprocity networks. Conversely, those seen as unreliable or unwilling to reciprocate may gradually be excluded from such support. In this way, access to resources is affected not only by economic circumstances but also by moral judgements embedded in everyday social interactions.

Joana made the temporal labour of provisioning especially visible. With little money available after wages and debts had been accounted for, she planned meals by comparing supermarket promotions, visiting different shops, and adjusting the week's menu to what could be purchased cheaply in small quantities. Promotional prices often rewarded customers able to buy several items at once, but Joana could not immobilise money in household stocks. A discount was useful only if it coincided with the day income became available and with what the household immediately needed. Neighbours sometimes brought vegetables from family plots, while acquaintances connected to fishing shared fish that had not been sold. Joana did not treat these transfers as free goods: they belonged to relationships maintained through conversation, previous assistance, and the expectation of future attentiveness. Provisioning therefore required more than distributing insufficient income. It involved synchronising wages, debts, prices, meals, and other

people's availability, while judging when help could be accepted and how it should eventually be acknowledged or returned.

Women frequently play central roles in these cooperation networks. In many households, women bear primary responsibility for organising care, managing household budgets, and maintaining relationships with relatives and neighbours. They often act as intermediaries between households and institutions, gathering information on welfare programmes, charitable aid, or potential employment opportunities. These tasks require sustained attention to others' needs and circumstances, as well as the ability to anticipate crises before they escalate. This involvement also extends into the institutional sector. Residents regularly interact with organisations that provide assistance or services, such as municipal welfare offices, parish charities, food banks, and local associations. Navigating these institutions demands a specific set of practical skills: recognising which organisations can support them, understanding bureaucratic procedures, and presenting personal circumstances in ways that institutional gatekeepers recognise as legitimate. Access to support therefore depends not only on formal eligibility criteria but also on the ability to mobilise social knowledge and moral credibility during these interactions (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Bear 2015).

Anthropological studies of economic life during crises have increasingly emphasised the importance of everyday practices. Rather than simply reacting to scarcity, households organise for survival through networks of care, reciprocity, and moral evaluation that shape how resources circulate (Han 2012; James 2014). In insecure labour markets and contracting welfare systems, such practices function as relational infrastructures. Elyachar's concept of phatic labour highlights the communicative work through which channels of sociality are created and maintained (Elyachar 2010), while Simone's account of 'people as infrastructure' shows how conjunctions among persons, objects, spaces, and practices enable urban life under conditions of limited formal provision (Simone 2004). In Setúbal, these infrastructures were neither frictionless nor equally available: they depended on gendered labour, accumulated knowledge, histories of reciprocity, and morally assessed reputations.

The reorganisation of social reproduction in Setúbal therefore offers an entry point for examining capacities in use rather than asserting them in the abstract. The following sections show residents interpreting institutional expectations, advising one another, coordinating resources, and maintaining the relationships through which work and assistance became accessible. These

practices sustained capitalist institutions while generating knowledge and obligations that continued to circulate beyond the particular encounters in which institutions drew on them.

Welfare Encounters and the Institutional Capture of Reproductive Capacities

Austerity heightened the practical importance of interpreting bureaucratic procedures, gathering evidence, narrating need, and sustaining relationships through which advice and assistance could flow. These were not secondary embellishments to material survival. They were forms of labour that made scarce resources accessible and assembled formally separate welfare services into routes that people could actually navigate.

In February 2016, Helena arrived at a parish welfare office seeking help with an overdue electricity bill. She carried a folder containing identification documents, her granddaughter's school enrolment papers, bank statements, and recent household receipts. The volunteer processing applications reviewed the papers and asked why Helena's adult son, registered at the same address, did not contribute to the bills. Helena first said he was unemployed, then explained that both her son and granddaughter depended on her pension. What appeared on the form as another adult household member therefore represented an additional obligation rather than an additional source of income. Helena was given a supermarket voucher and the telephone number of another organisation, but the electricity bill remained unpaid. Outside, she stopped beside a neighbour waiting for an appointment and explained which papers had been requested. 'You have to explain it properly,' she said, 'otherwise they don't see what you need.' Her remark did not mean that deprivation was unreal until narrated. It identified the labour required to translate a household's shifting dependencies into categories that an institution could recognise.

Such encounters reveal how welfare systems rely on skills they do not cultivate. Applicants learn which documents matter, which household details may count against them, and how responsibility can be made visible. This knowledge circulates through families, waiting rooms, parish offices, and neighbourhood conversations. Helena's folder was the material outcome of repeated acts of remembering, collecting, ordering, and anticipating questions. Her account linked unemployment, co-residence, grandparental care, and pension income into a morally intelligible claim. The institution treated this competence as part of the applicant, yet it had been developed over years of managing other people's needs and through advice exchanged among women who had made similar applications.

Leonor's trajectory showed how such knowledge could depend on intermediaries. Unemployed after periods of work as a waitress and domestic cleaner, she was pregnant and caring for two adolescent daughters when I met her. The previous year, she had attended a household-budgeting course organised jointly by social-security technicians and a parish charity. She resented the repeated insistence that additional schooling would resolve her unemployment; as she put it, certificates could not create jobs that did not exist. Yet when she applied for the *Rendimento Social de Inserção*,[3] she relied on two experienced charity volunteers who explained which forms to complete, which documents to collect, and which office to approach. The same volunteers had earlier delivered a second-hand refrigerator and pieces of furniture to her home. Material goods, bureaucratic knowledge, and personal mediation travelled together. Their help enabled Leonor to make a claim, but it also positioned the volunteers as gatekeepers capable of judging her decisions and reporting on her conduct.

The contrast between Helena and Leonor is analytically significant. Helena had accumulated administrative competence over years of managing a multigenerational household and could pass on parts of that knowledge to another claimant. Leonor's access remained more dependent on people who translated the system for her. Neither case can be reduced to individual resourcefulness. What each woman could do depended on the organisation of relationships around her, on unequal access to institutional familiarity, and on the moral classifications through which helpers distinguished responsible need from suspected dependency. Consequently, welfare navigation was a reproductive achievement distributed across claimants, relatives, neighbours, volunteers, documents, and institutional contacts.

Access to welfare consequently entailed administrative and moral labour alongside formal eligibility. Auyero (2012) shows how waiting disciplines claimants and makes time itself a medium of state power; Dickinson (2016) demonstrates that obtaining food assistance can become work demanded in the name of economic citizenship; and Lazar (2023) situates such efforts within the patchwork labour through which people struggle to sustain and improve their lives. In Setúbal, these demands were also gendered. Women commonly assembled household papers, remembered appointments, rehearsed accounts of need, and demonstrated that assistance would support

[3] Rendimento Social de Inserção, or Social Insertion Income, was introduced in 1996 as a guaranteed minimum income scheme. It consists of a universally recognised monetary component (a cash benefit), though it is means-tested and time-limited. This program aims to help individuals and families facing severe economic deprivation, while also supporting claimants as they reintegrate into the labour market.

dependants rather than an allegedly irresponsible self. As Skeggs (1997) argues, respectability operates as a classed and gendered moral resource. Appearing restrained, caring, and reliable helped make deprivation institutionally recognisable while exposing claimants to judgement about family life, consumption, and employability.

Anthropological studies of labour under global capitalism have revealed similar patterns across other regions. Aihwa Ong's ethnography of factory workers in Malaysia shows how gendered labour systems rely on moral and disciplinary capacities cultivated through everyday social interactions (Ong 1987). Carla Freeman's research on service-sector jobs in the Caribbean likewise shows how workers draw on gendered social competence developed within households and communities to meet the relational demands of modern labour markets (Freeman 2000). María Patricia Fernández-Kelly's study of women workers in Mexican export industries similarly indicates that industrial labour systems depend on social organisation and household work that support workers beyond the factory (Fernández-Kelly 1984).

Welfare offices and charities did not merely assess a pre-existing condition called need. They elicited and evaluated socially produced capacities for narration, interpretation, and moral self-presentation. Labour markets drew on related capacities. Information about temporary jobs in warehouses, cleaning services, catering, and construction circulated through acquaintances, and recommendations depended on being known as reliable. The communicative and reputational work that kept these channels open developed across domestic and neighbourhood life, then became usable by institutions as if it were an individual attribute. Feminist analyses of invisible labour help make this appropriation legible. Mies argued that accumulation depends on labour beyond formal wage relations, particularly domestic and subsistence activities that maintain labour power across generations (Mies 1986). Social reproduction theorists have similarly demonstrated how labour power is reproduced outside formal employment (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016; Narotzky 1997). The Setúbal material shows that the relational competencies produced in that process also become part of how labour and welfare institutions function.

Reproductive surplus names this institutional availability without implying complete capture. Helena's ability to connect documents to a credible account and Leonor's access to intermediaries who understood the social-security system made fragmented welfare provision operable. Yet those capacities were produced through relations of care, advice, and accumulated experience. Institutions benefited from them while disavowing the collective labour on which they

depended. The same knowledge could subsequently circulate laterally: a claimant advised a neighbour; a volunteer transformed familiarity with offices into a route through them; reputations moved information about work. Reproductive capacities were therefore appropriable but not exhausted by institutional use.

Welfare encounters reveal one mechanism by which reproductive surplus is incorporated into contemporary capitalism. Institutions individualise collectively produced capacities as employability, communicative skill, responsibility, or bureaucratic competence. At the same time, the relations through which these capacities are cultivated continue to organise exchanges beyond institutional purposes. The ability to narrate need can become advice offered to another claimant; familiarity with an official can help a neighbour; knowledge acquired while caring for a relative can later be used in paid care work. The following section examines this further circulation within neighbourhood networks of care and reciprocity.

Care, Reciprocity, and the Ambiguity of Social Reproduction

In Setúbal, assistance often flowed through exchanges that were neither straightforward market transactions nor bureaucratic redistribution: small loans, shared childcare, food, clothing, household goods, transport, and responses to sudden illness or unemployment. Residents usually described such transfers as *ajuda*—help. The term did not erase calculation. People remembered who had assisted whom, distinguished temporary difficulty from perceived unreliability, and judged when a request might threaten a relationship. These evaluations were part of the infrastructure through which resources circulated. Help was not the opposite of economic action; it was a way of organising material provision through relationships whose value could not be reduced to the item transferred.

The circulation of resources within these networks therefore depends not only on material need but also on cultivating relationships and reputations. Individuals known to contribute to collective life—by helping neighbours, caring for relatives, or participating in community activities—are more likely to receive support when they face difficulties. Conversely, those perceived as unwilling to reciprocate may gradually be excluded from these networks of assistance. Moral evaluations of social conduct thus play a crucial role in shaping how resources circulate within the neighbourhood. These dynamics echo classic anthropological observations of kin-based survival strategies. Carol Stack's (1974) study of African American communities in the

United States showed that welfare payments, wages, and gifts circulated through extended family networks according to moral expectations of reciprocity rather than individual entitlement. Similar patterns can be observed in Setúbal, where assistance moves through dense webs of obligation linking households, neighbours, and relatives. Women often play key roles within these reciprocity networks. In many households, women are primarily responsible for coordinating care, managing household resources, and maintaining relationships with relatives and neighbours. These practices reflect enduring gendered expectations regarding responsibility for social reproduction, through which women often become key organisers of the relational infrastructures that sustain everyday life.

Teresa's household condensed several of these movements. In her early sixties, she lived with her husband in a house inherited from her mother, whom she had cared for for fourteen years after a stroke left her severely disabled. Teresa also owned another house, paid off over three decades, which she had lent to her younger, unemployed son so he would not have to pay rent. Her elder son was also without stable work, while his partner worked evening shifts cleaning at a hospital. During school holidays, Teresa cared for their two boys and provided lunch, an afternoon snack, and dinner. On one visit, a pile of children's clothing filled the kitchen table. A neighbour who had migrated to Switzerland had brought it back during the summer, knowing the boys were growing quickly and that new clothes were expensive. Housing, food, clothing, childcare, and pension income circulated here through transfers with different temporalities. Some drew on inheritance, others on grandparental obligation, migration, neighbourhood familiarity, or the anticipation that help would eventually move in another direction.

Teresa did not describe these arrangements as an alternative economy. She spoke instead about keeping her sons and grandsons from going without. Her practical knowledge lay in coordinating resources that were never available at the same time: when her pension arrived, which meals could feed extra people, who might have clothes to pass on, and how long one son could stay in her house without paying rent. This coordination widened the room for action for other household members. It enabled a daughter-in-law to retain paid work and allowed sons and grandchildren to remain housed and fed. At the same time, it shifted the costs of unemployment and inadequate welfare provision onto Teresa's property, pension, time, and body. The relational capacity generated through her care was productive, but its productivity was inseparable from an unequal gendered burden.

Marta's working day connected these domestic competencies more directly to paid labour. A single mother of two daughters, she began before sunrise in the kitchen of a charitable organisation, preparing vegetables, cooking, washing dishes, and cleaning until mid-afternoon. Later, she travelled to private homes, where she cleaned and cared for older people informally. Friends and acquaintances had helped her obtain both forms of work after a prolonged period of unemployment. When she fell behind on three mortgage payments, she negotiated new terms with the bank while deciding which household expenses could be postponed. She described the choice between servicing the loan and putting food on the table not as a one-off calculation but as a recurring effort to prevent one shortage from producing several others. The communication, attentiveness, and judgement demanded in her paid care work were continuous with the capacities through which she managed her daughters' needs, debts, transport, and meals. Employers could purchase her hours, but not the social history through which those capacities had been formed.

Women's everyday activities included mediating conflicts, anticipating shortages, organising collective responses to crises, and ensuring support flowed between households. Through these practices, they developed relational knowledge and moral authority crucial to community life. Ethnographic studies in other settings reveal comparable crossings between production and reproduction. Constable's research on migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong shows how workers sustain transnational networks of care and obligation (Constable 2007); Fernández-Kelly demonstrates how women's wage labour in Mexican export industries depends on extensive household organisation (Fernández-Kelly 1984). These comparisons matter not because women everywhere perform the same tasks, but because capitalist institutions repeatedly draw on capacities cultivated through historically specific arrangements of feminised responsibility.

A further case illustrates how pensions and informal care linked different households. Lídia, a retired worker on a pension of roughly five hundred euros, regularly transferred between one hundred and fifty and three hundred euros to an adult son who had emigrated. He was earning money abroad but still servicing the mortgage on a flat in Portugal, and the amount he could send home fluctuated with employment and housing costs. Lídia treated her transfers as a way of preventing the loss of an asset accumulated through years of family work. To create some room in her own budget, she informally assisted an older woman with limited mobility: buying groceries, collecting medicines, cleaning, and keeping her company. The small payment she received

travelled almost immediately into another circuit of dependency. A pension formally assigned to one person, income from unwaged-looking care, and a migrant worker's mortgage were folded into a single intergenerational project.

Lídia's arrangement unsettles any neat distinction between dependence and contribution. She depended on pension income; the older woman depended on her practical and emotional attention; and her son depended on transfers that helped preserve his possibility of return. At the same time, Lídia's own security was weakened by the regular outflow of money and the physical demands of care. What held the arrangement together was her ability to anticipate bills, coordinate errands, monitor another person's condition, and decide how much could be sent without making her own household unviable. These capacities had exchangeable effects, but they were not produced for exchange. They emerged from a history of caring responsibilities and were mobilised across welfare, migration, property, and informal employment.

Beatriz, a part-time cleaner, described a related but differently organised chain of care. Several generations of her family lived within walking distance in the same social-housing neighbourhood. The tenancy of Beatriz's flat remained in her mother's name, preserving a rent the household could afford, even though the practical organisation of the home had shifted over time. Beatriz accompanied her mother to public offices and medical appointments, translating letters and keeping track of dates. She also cared for grandchildren when her daughter's shifts changed at short notice. Her adult son, struggling with debt, ate frequently at her home while directing whatever money he had towards repayments. No single transfer resolved any household's difficulty. The low rent, a prepared meal, an afternoon of childcare, and help interpreting an official letter instead prevented separate problems from becoming simultaneous crises.

Following this chain makes the distributed quality of reproductive capacity concrete. Beatriz's knowledge and time enabled her mother to retain access to services, her daughter to remain available for paid employment, and her son to continue servicing debt. In turn, the mother's tenancy secured affordable housing from which these activities could be coordinated. What an employer perceived as the daughter's flexibility, or a creditor recorded as the son's regular payment, was partly produced by relations absent from those institutional accounts. The arrangement widened possibilities for action while concentrating responsibility in Beatriz's daily schedule. It was enabling and depleting at once—the ambiguity that reproductive surplus is intended to capture.

Other ethnographies highlight how these relational infrastructures become particularly visible in contexts marked by debt and economic insecurity. Clara Han's work in Chile shows how everyday practices of care and responsibility shape the experience of living with debt in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods (Han 2012). Deborah James's ethnography of indebtedness in South Africa similarly shows how financial obligations are embedded within broader social relations through which aspirations, responsibilities, and moral evaluations are negotiated (James 2014). More recent research has examined how household economies increasingly rely on complex combinations of debt, care, and obligation (Zaloom 2019; Guérin, Kumar, and Venkatasubramanian 2023). Together, these studies reveal how economic life is deeply intertwined with the relational infrastructures that sustain everyday life.

Reciprocity also extended beyond households connected by kinship. On visits to a fishing village near Setúbal, I accompanied Rita as she collected shellfish from Rosa, a fisherwoman who had worked on the estuary for decades. Rosa refused payment, explaining that what she gave would return to her in another form. Rita knew gloves wore out quickly when gathering shellfish and offered to bring some from a workplace contact. The exchange did not establish a direct equivalence between a quantity of shellfish and a pair of gloves. It relied on knowledge of Rosa's work, repeated visits, and confidence that neither party would treat the other's generosity as an opportunity for extraction. Similar delayed exchanges linked vegetables grown on small plots, fish left unsold at the market, transport, furniture, and occasional access to machinery. What circulated was not only a useful object but also information about another household's circumstances and a disposition to remain attentive to future need.

Such exchanges could fail. A neighbour who had promised to buy pastries from a woman earning supplementary income later postponed the purchase to visit the hairdresser, saying she might buy them afterwards if money remained. The seller interpreted this not merely as a cancelled transaction but as a refusal to recognise the unequal conditions of their two households. Her anger stemmed from the broken expectation that familiarity should produce attentiveness: the neighbour knew how little money entered her home and had nevertheless treated the promised purchase as optional. Reciprocity required judgement, memory, and the management of disappointment. These frictions matter because they show that relational infrastructures are neither automatically solidaristic nor outside power. Their maintenance involves the continuous evaluation of what others know, what they owe, and whether they have acted with sufficient regard.

The practices observed in Setúbal are therefore more than local responses to hardship, but they should not be romanticised as an autonomous communal sphere. Gibson-Graham's diverse-economies approach is useful because it renders household flows, gifts, informal work, and reciprocal labour visible as economic practices rather than residual supports to a singular capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 2008). Yet visibility alone does not settle their politics. Assistance may be guided by moral considerations that diverge from formal eligibility criteria, and resources received as individual entitlements may be redistributed through kin obligations. At the same time, such redistribution can shift the costs of unemployment and inadequate provision onto pensions, housing, and unpaid time. As Sabaté (2016) shows in relation to the Spanish mortgage crisis, periods of restructuring reactivate moral arguments about obligation, fairness, and responsibility rather than replacing them with purely economic calculation.

This tension is illuminated by de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity: capacities arise within constraints, yet their uses are not fixed by them. The concept of distributed agency helps specify one relational effect. Agency is distributed when one person's care, knowledge, resources, or connections make another's action possible across space and time (AUTHOR 2024). Reproductive surplus identifies the generative side of that relation—the capacities produced while life is maintained—and asks how those capacities subsequently circulate and become appropriable. The concepts overlap but address different questions: distributed agency concerns how possibilities for action are relationally enabled; reproductive surplus concerns what social reproduction produces beyond the immediate renewal of labour power.

Neither concept makes mutual support inherently liberatory. Reproductive capacities can sustain claims-making when shared knowledge turns an isolated welfare encounter into collective understanding, when neighbourhood ties mobilise resources for a threatened household, or when care enables participation in associations, unions, and other political projects. Lazar's account of labour struggle is useful because it includes dispersed efforts to accommodate, escape, and improve life alongside organised collective action (Lazar 2023). But relations of help may also be exclusionary, paternalistic, or exhausting, and their capacity to absorb crisis can reduce pressure on the institutions that produce it. Their political potential lies not in care or reciprocity as such, but in whether reproductive competencies can be collectivised, linked to claims on institutions, and organised without leaving their costs privatised and feminised.

Conclusion

This article has developed the concept of reproductive surplus to describe the relational, moral, and practical capacities generated through the labour of sustaining life. In Setúbal, "knowing how to arrange things" involved assembling documents, narrating need, maintaining job contacts, redistributing housing and food, coordinating care, and judging obligations. These practices made fragmented welfare provision and precarious labour markets workable, even though neither welfare institutions nor employers produced the competencies on which they relied. Reproductive surplus therefore extends social reproduction analysis beyond the renewal of labour power to encompass the capacities generated during that renewal.

The concept brings Marx's analysis of surplus value into dialogue with feminist accounts of reproductive labour. Marx located the source of capitalist profit in the extraction of surplus value within production, while recognising that labour power must be reproduced beyond the workplace (Marx 1976). Feminist political economists have shown that this reproduction depends on extensive unpaid or undervalued labour, predominantly performed by women, and that contemporary labour regimes continually reorganise the relationship between production and reproduction (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016; Mezzadri 2019). Mies's concept of *housewifisation* is especially important because it identifies how women's labour is naturalised as domestic or supplementary, even as capitalist accumulation depends upon it (Mies 1986). Reproductive surplus builds on this insight by directing attention to the social knowledge, communicative competence, and moral judgement produced through reproductive labour and made available to economic and institutional processes.

The ethnographic cases show that these capacities are neither individual attributes nor an undifferentiated communal resource. Helena's ability to narrate household dependency helped an institution assess her claim and was later offered as advice to another applicant. Leonor's route through social security combined paperwork, furniture, charitable assistance, and personal mediation. Teresa moved housing, food, clothing, pension income, and time across generations, while Marta's contacts and caring competencies linked household survival to formal and informal work. Lídia's pension and care work sustained a migrant son's mortgage, and Beatriz's coordination of housing, appointments, meals, debt, and childcare widened the possibilities available to several generations. These arrangements exemplify a broader reorganisation of care, welfare, debt, and obligation under economic insecurity (Muehlebach 2012; Narotzky 2020;

Cooper 2014; Zaloom 2019; Guérin, Kumar, and Venkatasubramanian 2023). They are situated accomplishments built on histories of interdependence and unequal responsibility.

Reproductive surplus does not replace Marx's concept of surplus value or propose a second measurable form of value. It identifies capacities produced through social reproduction that enable capitalist valorisation and welfare governance. Institutions individualise these collectively generated capacities as employability, flexibility, responsibility, or bureaucratic competence, obscuring the relationships and gendered labour through which they are formed. Yet institutional appropriation does not exhaust them. Relations of reciprocity may sustain diverse economic practices not reducible to wage labour or market exchange (Gibson-Graham 2008), while distributed agency describes how one person's care, knowledge, or resources can expand another's capacity to act (AUTHOR 2024).

The political implications of these relations remain ambiguous. Reproductive capacities may become politically consequential when practical knowledge is shared, individualised difficulties are recognised as common conditions, and networks of support are linked to collective claims. Yet the same capacities can compensate for welfare retrenchment, stabilise precarious labour markets, police respectability, and keep the costs of crisis within households. Survival does not automatically become resistance. De Beauvoir's account of ambiguity helps resist both functionalism and romanticisation: people act from conditions they did not choose and through dependencies that may be enabling and constraining at once. An anthropology of reproductive surplus therefore follows capacities across households, neighbourhoods, welfare offices, and workplaces, asking how they are generated, appropriated, and potentially collectivised. The concept names a contested social product that can facilitate accumulation and unpaid crisis management, but may also enable mutual provision, political participation, and claims on institutions. Which possibility prevails depends on whether the labour and costs of sustaining life remain privatised and feminised or become collectively recognised and politically organised.

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