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978-0-521-41872-0 - Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market

Antonella Picchio

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This book focusses on the relationship between the process of commodity production and the process of social reproduction of labour. It seeks to restore that relationship to the central place it had in the classical surplus approach, where profit was defined primarily in terms of the difference between production and the costs of social reproduction of labour.

The argument is directly opposed to that of the wages fund theorists, who rejected the Ricardian view that wages were exogenously determined by material, historical and institutional factors. By substituting a strict supply-and-demand mechanism, they and their modern followers actually removed the whole question of the exogeneity of the process of social reproduction from the analysis of the labour market. This rendered marginal and analytically invisible certain fundamental aspects of the economic system – in particular, the function of the state and that of women's work, in the process of social reproduction. Examination of the 1909 Poor Law Report and of the women's labour market shows that what disappeared from theory remained crucial for economic policy.

The production–reproduction perspective, on which this book is based, makes it possible to recover some essential aspects of the social reproduction of labour and its fundamental role in the structure of the waged labour market, opening new directions for economic analysis.

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To my sisters: Joan, Laura, Pina

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For cognition is neither passive
contemplation nor acquisition of the
only possible insight into something
given. It is an active, live
interrelationship, a reshaping and
being reshaped, in short, an act of
creation.

Ludwik Fleck
'On the Crisis of Reality'

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