

Diets that are high in free sugars, salt, and saturated fat, and low in fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and proteins, are one of the leading causes of non-communicable disease in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article draws on social reproduction theory to conceptualise the work involved in eating a healthy diet as part of the reproduction of labour power within the capitalist mode of production. It explores ways that ultra-processed foods have enabled workers to reduce the amount of time required for the reproduction of labour power. In some cases, this reduction has allowed workers to enjoy greater leisure time, but more importantly, it has also enabled capital to incorporate that time into paid work, generating surplus value for capital. The article demonstrates that further uncovering the relationship between unhealthy diets and capitalism is crucial for addressing both population health challenges and the organisation of social reproduction.

The Ailing Body of Capital: Social Reproduction, Unhealthy Diets, and Non-Communicable Diseases

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Non-communicable diseases – heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancers, among others – are the number one cause of premature death and disability in Aotearoa New Zealand, and one of the main causes of non-communicable diseases is determined by how and what we eat.¹ Consuming an unhealthy diet is a major risk factor for many non-communicable diseases, particularly those diets that are high in free sugars, salt, and saturated fat and low in fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and proteins.² Unhealthy dietary patterns are widespread in Aotearoa New Zealand as just 30 per cent of adults get adequate fruit and vegetables in their diet, and over 90 per cent of preschool-aged children consume foods with excess added sugars, salt, and fat.³

To date, the New Zealand Government has done little to address the widespread consumption of unhealthy diets, which has led to devastating health outcomes for the

1 World Health Organization, 'New Zealand: Health Data Overview for New Zealand', accessed 1 January, 2024.

2 Boyd Swinburn, et al., 'The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change: *The Lancet* Commission Report', *Lancet* 393 (2019), 791.

3 Ministry of Health, 'New Zealand Health Survey: Annual Data Explorer', accessed 8 December, 2021; Teresa Gontijo de Castro, et al., 'Child Feeding Indexes Measuring Adherence to New Zealand Nutrition Guidelines: Development and Assessment', *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 18, no. 4 (2022), 2.

Aotearoa New Zealand population. Since 1990, the number of people both living with and dying from non-communicable diseases has increased dramatically.⁴ Although people in Aotearoa New Zealand are living longer, we are also spending more years in poor health and many people are managing several non-communicable diseases at once.⁵ The burden of non-communicable disease is not distributed equally across the population, as people living in socioeconomic deprivation, and Māori and Pacific peoples, are more likely to be diagnosed with non-communicable diseases and to die younger as a result.⁶

Given these health outcomes and social indicators, we can ask: why do so many people consume unhealthy foods, especially if they know that they put us at higher risk of an early death? Right-wing politicians in New Zealand are often quick to blame individuals for making poor food choices and failing to take responsibility for their own health. For example, during her campaign as National Party leader in the run up to the 2020 General Election, Judith Collins evoked the language of personal responsibility in a discussion of obesity in Aotearoa New Zealand. When pushed by a radio interviewer on the structural causes of obesity, such as socio-economic deprivation, Collins responded: ‘Do you know what is heartless? Thinking someone else can cure these issues. We can all take personal responsibility and we all have to own up to our little weaknesses on these matters. Do not blame systems for personal choices’.⁷ Such individualistic framing, however, is widely rejected by population health experts.⁸ Instead, experts generally emphasise that people make dietary choices within unhealthy

4 Ministry of Health, *Longer, Healthier Lives*, 7.

5 Ministry of Health, *Longer, Healthier Lives*, 14.

6 Santiago Lago-Peñas, et al., ‘The Impact of Socioeconomic Position on Non-Communicable Diseases: What Do We Know About It?’, *Perspectives in Public Health* 141, no. 3 (2021), 158–176; Cameron C. Grant, et al., ‘Nutrition and Indigenous Health in New Zealand’, *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 46 (2010), 480; Ministry of Health, ‘New Zealand Health Survey’.

7 Quoted in *RNZ*, ‘Judith Collins: Obese People Must Take Responsibilities For “Personal Choices”’, *RNZ*, 13 October, 2020.

8 Garry Egger and Boyd Swinburn, ‘An “Ecological” Approach to the Obesity Pandemic’, *BMJ* 315, no. 7106 (1997), 477–480.

food environments.⁹ In particular, unhealthy diets are attributed to key driving factors in the food system – a food supply dominated by ultra-processed foods; the high cost of healthy food relative to cheap junk food; the high density of unhealthy food outlets; and widespread marketing of junk food, especially to children.¹⁰ Indeed, when population health experts advocate for interventions to target unhealthy diets, they tend to focus on these above determinants, including reformulation targets for packaged foods, levies on sugar-sweetened beverages, the removal of GST on fruit and vegetables, and stronger regulation of both unhealthy food outlet density and junk food marketing.¹¹

The structural causes of unhealthy diets are not just limited to those within the food system, and many of us are aware that the way we eat is determined by a whole host of broader socio-economic factors. In this article, I focus on one particular barrier to consuming a healthy diet in Aotearoa New Zealand, a barrier that has received comparatively scant attention as an area for policy intervention – that is, the time and effort that cooking demands. Cooking at home is often recommended as part of a healthier dietary pattern. Fast food typically contains high levels of saturated fat, sugar and sodium, and is sold at a relatively low price, while healthier

9 Egger and Swinburn, 'An "Ecological" Approach', 477; Dorothy H. Broom and Jane Dixon, 'Introduction: Seven Modern Environmental Sins of Obesity', in *The 7 Deadly Sins of Obesity: How the Modern World is Making Us Fat* (UNSW Press, 2007), 1–19.

10 Claire M. Luiten, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods Have The Worst Nutrient Profile, Yet They Are The Most Available Packaged Products in a Sample of New Zealand Supermarkets', *Public Health Nutrition* 19, no. 3 (2016), 530; Zaynel Sushil, et al., 'Food Swamps by Area Socioeconomic Deprivation in New Zealand: A National Study', *International Journal of Public Health* 62 (2017), 869; Fiona Sing, et al., 'Food Advertising to Children in New Zealand: A Critical Review of the Performance of a Self-Regulatory Complaints System Using a Public Health Law Framework', *Nutrients* 12, no. 1278 (2020), 10; Sally Mackay, et al., *How Healthy are Aotearoa New Zealand's Food Environments?*, INFORMAS Report, University of Auckland, 2021, 42.

11 NZ Herald, 'Why Do Fast-Food Outlets Dominate Our Poorest Suburbs? Chewing the Facts – Episode Three', *NZ Herald*, 19 August, 2023; Guyon Espiner, 'Off The Shelf: The Quiet Struggle to Stop Us Eating Ourselves Sick', *RNZ*, 20 September, 2023.

takeout and restaurant options tend to be expensive and largely inaccessible to most of the population.¹² In fact, the Ministry of Health recommends cooking at home as part of its dietary guidelines.¹³ Moreover, cooking at home is often implied within other policies that promote healthy diets. For example, when the high density of unhealthy food outlets is identified as a determinant of unhealthy diets, the implication is that these foods displace healthier home-cooked meals.

On the surface, cooking at home appears to be a simple recommendation to address some major health issues. But as many of us know, this practice is easier said than done. Cooking healthier meals at home takes a vast amount of time and effort – planning meals, shopping for groceries, cooking, cleaning up afterwards. Empirical research confirms that people in the Global North often experience a lack of time as a major barrier to cooking at home, and sociological literature has explored ‘time poverty’ as a factor shaping one’s ability to prepare food.¹⁴ These barriers to cooking healthier meals at home are crucial for two reasons. First, if we ban junk food advertising, make takeout food less accessible, and reformulate foods to have less sugar and salt, none of these policies and legislative changes help time-poor households with the burden of cooking at home. But perhaps more importantly, these barriers are closely related to a vast range of other factors in our lives, most of them appearing entirely unrelated to the food system – such as the time and effort we spend in paid work, on commuting, or in our caring responsibilities. Here, we can identify a broader issue with the conceptualisation of the causes of unhealthy diets in the field of population health. Unhealthy diets are often only considered within the context of the food system, siloed from other systemic factors at

12 Peng Jia, et al., ‘Fast-Food Restaurant, Unhealthy Eating, and Childhood Obesity: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis’, *Obesity Reviews* 22 (2021), 2.

13 Ministry of Health, *Eating and Activity Guidelines for New Zealand Adults*, Ministry of Health, 2020, 58.

14 Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: From Farm to Fork, the Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (Portobello Books, 2007), 272; Sarah Gerritsen, et al., ‘Improving Low Fruit and Vegetable Intake in Children: Findings From a System Dynamics, Community Group Model Building Study’, *PloS One* 14, no. 8 (2019), 7; Anne Murcott, *Introducing the Sociology of Food and Eating* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 85.

play. Suggested policy interventions tend to focus narrowly within the food system and neglect to address broader social and economic factors. While there is a growing body of population health research that links unhealthy diets to the capitalist economy, this conclusion usually emphasises the consequences of for-profit food production or considers the influence of the food industry over policymaking.¹⁵

But food has a more fundamental role to play in the functioning of the capitalist economy, which Marxian critiques of the capitalist mode of production can help us better understand. Food is central to the reproduction of labour-power – workers must eat every day, multiple times a day, in order to continue working and creating surplus value for capital. In Marxian terms, food is a critical part of the means of subsistence, embodied in the basket of commodities that we buy with our wages in order to replenish our labour-power.¹⁶ Food is thus a foundational commodity for capital accumulation because of its integral role in the reproduction of labour-power. Marxian scholars have pointed out that the cheapening of the food supply, usually at the expense of its quality, enables capital to lower wages while ensuring that workers can still eat, thereby maintaining the workforce while maximising profits.¹⁷ This dynamic obviously benefits food corporations, as population health research has highlighted. But as scholarship in food regime theory and critical food studies has illustrated, this relationship between capital accumulation, cheapening of 'wage-foods', and the structuring of food systems benefits capital in all industries,

15 See, for example, Melissa Mialon, 'An Overview of the Commercial Determinants of Health', *Globalization and Health* 19, no. 85 (2023), 4–5; Benjamin Wood, et al., 'What is the Purpose of Ultra-Processed Food? An Exploratory Analysis of the Financialisation of Ultra-Processed Food Corporations and Implications for Public Health', *Globalization and Health* 19, no. 85 (2023), 4.

16 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), 276.

17 Raj Patel and Jason Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Black Inc, 2018), 92.

even those that appear unrelated to food.¹⁸

It is clear, therefore, that the food that people eat and their dietary patterns are not merely determined by food systems and the actions of food corporations, but also by the position of workers within the capital-relation and their dependence on the wage to purchase food. But this dependence is not the extent of the relationship between the capitalist economy, waged work, and unhealthy diets. We must also theorise how the time, effort, and work required to feed a healthy diet, not to mention care for dependents, relates to the capitalist mode of production.

Social Reproduction and Unhealthy Diets

Many feminist scholars have drawn attention to the type of work involved in cooking healthy meals, often pointing out the way that such care work is often taken for granted.¹⁹ As Anna-Maria Murtola and Neil Vallelly highlight, the term ‘invisible work’ emerged to describe the various forms of unpaid work usually undertaken by women in private realms.²⁰ This work – cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and older people – often goes unpaid and is rarely considered to be work. This care work is sometimes naturalised as an inherent part of femininity, while at other times it is considered as leisure, absorbed into the free time that workers are granted outside of the paid working day.²¹ As a result, such care work appears to occur outside of, and is thus unaffected by, the material conditions that

18 Phillip McMichael, ‘Value Theory and Food Regime Temporalities’, *Review* 38, no. 4 (2015), 308; Farshad Araghi, ‘Accumulation by Displacement: Global Enclosures, Food Crisis, and the Ecological Contradictions of Capitalism’ *Review* 32, no. 1 (2009), 113–146; Raj Patel, ‘The Long Green Revolution’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 1 (2013), 1.

19 Anna-Maria Murtola and Neil Vallelly, ‘Visible and Invisible Work in the Pandemic: Social Reproduction and the Ambivalent Category of the Essential Worker’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 32, no. 8 (2023), 889.

20 Murtola and Vallelly, ‘Visible and Invisible Work’, 889.

21 Sylvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012), 93; Tithi Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory’, in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017), 16.

make up other social determinants of health – such as income, housing, and access to healthcare. Consequently, considerations of the work that goes into feeding ourselves are often treated by politicians and policymakers as issues of willpower or laziness, individualised commitment to eating a certain way, and personal enjoyment of cooking, as opposed to material or even economic determinants of non-communicable disease occurrence.

Social reproduction analyses offer a particular way of understanding care work in connection with the capitalist economy more broadly. Building on a Marxian critique of capital, scholars of social reproduction conceptualise the work involved in the renewal of labour-power as part of the capitalist economy as a totality. As Tithi Bhattacharya writes, ‘if workers’ labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker? Put another way: What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society?’²² The daily reproduction of labour power is a facet of capitalism that is somewhat neglected in Marx’s conception of the reproduction of labour-power and his critique of capital more broadly.²³ In thinking through the wage, Marx posits that the value of labour-power is determined by the value of the commodities required to reproduce that labour-power, which he terms the ‘means of subsistence’.²⁴ But as scholars theorising social reproduction rightly point out, this phrasing constitutes an incomplete reading of what goes into ensuring that workers can turn up to work day after day with the energy to work.²⁵ It is one thing to buy groceries with the wage you receive from your employer, but it is another thing to turn those groceries into a meal. It is precisely this latter form of work that social reproduction theorists emphasise in their critique of the capitalist mode of production. Crucially, in making such work visible, social reproduction scholars point out that this work does not exist external

22 Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’, 1.

23 Nancy Fraser, ‘Contradictions of Capital and Care’, *New Left Review* 100 (2016), 99–117.

24 Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 276.

25 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 93; Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’, 10–11.

to the economy, but rather it is integral to the functioning of the capitalist mode of production itself.

Social reproduction also takes on a unique status in the capitalist mode of production, because unlike the production of commodities, capital does not exert direct control over the reproduction process. As Leopoldina Fortunati points out, one feature that differentiates the capitalist mode of production from other modes of production is that the labour-power of workers is the thing that is bought and sold, not the workers themselves.²⁶ Under capitalism, workers are ‘doubly-free’, as Marx puts it, but they must sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage in order to acquire their means of subsistence.²⁷ As Bhattacharya explains, ‘[a]t the end of the workday, because the worker is “free” under capitalism, capital must relinquish control over the process of regeneration of the worker and hence the reproduction of the workforce.’²⁸ This distinction is crucial because it demonstrates that the reproduction of a worker’s labour-power is not the explicit economic aim of capital.²⁹ Rather, the reproduction of labour-power is a worker’s responsibility alone.

A rift thus appears to exist between the production of commodities and the reproduction of labour-power, where capital takes charge of the first and relinquishes responsibility for the second. The exploitation of workers in the sphere of production tends to be obvious, as Marx points out in his critique of capital. The reproduction of labour-power, however, often appears as free from the exploitation present in the workplace. In some cases, reproductive work appears as leisure – cooking dinner at night might look like relaxation, even if it is essential for a worker to turn up to work the next morning. In other cases, reproductive work seems like a natural attribute of femininity or a remnant of a pre-capitalist past.³⁰

But this rift between production and reproduction is in many ways

26 Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. H. Creek (Automomedia, 1995), 7.

27 Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 272–273.

28 Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’, 9.

29 Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 10.

30 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 16.

only an apparition. While capital relinquishes responsibility for the reproduction of labour-power to workers, it is nevertheless dependent on this reproduction for its continued existence. Without workers continuing to turn up to work each day with replenished energy, surplus value would not be created and capital accumulation would not continue. Instead, capital maintains indirect control over the reproduction of labour-power via its ownership of the means of production. Exerting control through the links between production and reproduction – for example, the wage, the length of the working day, and the commodities that make up the means of subsistence – capital indirectly commands the form and nature of social reproduction. As Bhattacharya argues, even ‘the time of reproduction must necessarily respond to the structuring impulses of the time of production’.³¹ This indirect command is important because social reproduction serves a different purpose for capital than it does for workers. For capital, social reproduction is important to the extent that workers can continue to work, as labour-power must be constantly renewed for the sake of capital accumulation. But for workers, social reproduction occurs for the purpose of living itself. We reproduce ourselves through this work not just because capital requires it, but for our own survival. This element of reproduction is evident when we consider food, since eating is not limited to its function in replenishing a worker’s energy. Further, food has a significant social and cultural role, and many people enjoy both cooking and eating as a joyful activity in and of itself.

These two differing purposes for social reproduction – one for capital, one for workers – can come into tension when they fail to align. In its most extreme cases, for people living on very low wages and working long hours, for example, social reproduction is almost entirely dictated by the needs of capital. In these cases, capital relinquishes responsibility for reproduction only to the extent that labour-power is adequately renewed so that it can be reused in the sphere of production. As a result, workers have very little freedom over how they reproduce themselves, and ultimately, social reproduction is oriented towards the needs of capital. This dynamic is most

31 Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’, 10.

evident for workers living in socioeconomic deprivation in Aotearoa New Zealand, where low wages and minimal free time outside of work means that possibilities for different forms of social reproduction are much constrained.

Consequently, capital does not merely take command over the way we eat through capitalist food production or via the wage, which dictates the amount of money we can spend on food commodities. Rather, population diets are affected by the reproductive labour required in food preparation: meal planning, grocery shopping, food storage, cooking, eating and cleaning. The time and effort that capital makes available to workers for social reproductive work often constrains the possibilities for healthier diets. We can therefore think through the work involved in consuming a healthy diet as part of the reproduction of labour-power. This work is an integral part of the capitalist economy as a totality and it is indirectly structured by capital to serve its needs for continual, faster, and more intensive accumulation.

Ultra-processed Convenience Foods and Neoliberal Capitalism

Over the past few decades, there have been major changes in the nature of the food supply in Aotearoa New Zealand. These changes have, in turn, affected the role that cooking and preparing food plays as part of the reproduction of labour-power. Since the 1980s, in particular, developments in food processing have led to a greater proportion of ultra-processed foods in the food supply.³² Ultra-processed foods are formulations of ingredients created through industrial techniques and processes.³³ Food substances are extracted from whole foods, which are usually a few high-yield plant foods such as corn, wheat, soya, cane, or beet. These substances are subjected to some form of chemical modification and are then assembled along with

32 Phillip Baker, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods and the Nutrition Transition: Global, Regional and National Trends, Food Systems Transformations and Political Economy Drivers', *Public Health Nutrition* 21 (2020), 2.

33 Carlos Augusto Monteiro, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods, Diet Quality, and Health Using the NOVA Classification System', Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019, 8.

other food substances, colours, flavours, emulsifiers, and other additives. The result is a product that is convenient, ready-to-eat, and packaged, and with a longer shelf life. We are familiar with these foods as they surround us in supermarkets, dairies, and vending machines – for example, snacks such as chips, confectionary, and cookies, mass-produced packaged breads and buns, packaged cakes and cake mixes, and ready-to-eat meals such as frozen pizza and instant noodles. Fast food meals are also frequently composed of ultra-processed products.

The widespread availability of these ultra-processed convenience foods has changed the way that we approach eating as part of the reproduction of labour-power. Convenience foods can dramatically reduce the reproductive work required for food preparation. Instead of the time required to plan a meal, shop for ingredients, and spend an hour in the kitchen cooking, with added time for cleaning dishes, a family can make a drive-through fast-food order in a matter of minutes. Snacks are designed to be eaten on the go, complementing low-quality meals or replacing them entirely. International research also suggests that households are increasingly reliant on takeaway food, particularly in the Global North, where the density of takeaway outlets is highest in the most socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods.³⁴

The growing presence of ultra-processed foods in our diets has occurred alongside changes to the ways that social reproduction is structured for workers since the neoliberalisation of the global economy in the 1980s. In the last four decades, as Nancy Fraser observes, there has been a global attempt to accelerate capital accumulation through a reorganisation of reproductive work.³⁵ In Aotearoa New Zealand, the neoliberalisation of the economy involved practices such as the privatisation of state housing, tertiary education, and aspects of healthcare, alongside benefits cuts and the

34 Hayley G. Janssen, et al., 'Determinants of Takeaway and Fast Food Consumption: A Narrative Review, *Nutrition Research Reviews* 31 (2017), 17.

35 Fraser, 'Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism', in *Social Reproduction Theory*, 21–36.

increased financialisation of the economy.³⁶ As a result, two simultaneous changes have occurred that impact social reproduction specifically. First, there has been an increase in the number of women participating in the workforce, with real wages declining so that households in the Global North are now largely dependent on all adults participating in paid work.³⁷ This transformation marks a shift away from the Fordist regime of social reproduction, wherein many families depended upon members of the household (often women as housewives) taking care of the work necessary for the reproduction of labour-power.³⁸ This neoliberal reorganisation of social reproduction has in part been facilitated by the increasing presence of ultra-processed foods in people's diets in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ultra-processed convenience foods effectively reduce the amount of time involved in eating, enabling capital to incorporate that time into paid work that produces value for capital. Indeed, as researchers have shown, an increase in women participating in paid work and a shift towards dual worker households has increased global ultra-processed food consumption.³⁹ Second, alongside these changes to the gender composition of the workforce, the state has retreated from social welfare and institutional supports that aided social reproduction, instead shifting this burden onto individuals, families, and communities. This retreat of the state enabled capital to step in, turning the services that once supported social reproduction into an opportunity for profit generation. As a result, workers have experienced compounding constraints on their capacity for reproduction.

The increasing convenience of food commodities may appear

36 Vanessa Cole, "WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED": Community; Displacement and Dissensus in Glen Innes, Tāmaki Makaurau', MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 2015, 42–43; Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment* (BWB, 1997), 3–5.

37 World Bank, 'New Zealand', accessed 26 June, 2025; see, for example, the increase in usage of early childhood education services since 1988 in Omar Aziz, et al., 'The Effect on Household Income of Government Taxation and Expenditure in 1988, 1998, 2007 and 2010', *Policy Quarterly* 8, no.1 (2012), 30; Bill Rosenberg, 'Wages and Inequality', *Policy Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2015), 64.

38 Fraser, 'Crisis of Care?', 29.

39 Baker, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods', 10.

advantageous to workers, especially for women. Less time spent on the work of often unpaid and invisible social reproduction frees up hours of the day for participation in the workforce. But this assumption ignores capital's command over both the productive and reproductive spheres of labour. Capital is ultimately concerned with paying a wage that enables labour-power to be reproduced, and no more. As Fortunati argues, '[a]nything that goes beyond this "sufficiency" becomes waste, a luxury that the proletariat must not permit itself'.⁴⁰ With more adults in the paid workforce and less time required for the reproduction of labour-power, capital can depress wages. Indeed, since the 1980s, we have witnessed a decline in real wages across the Global North, so that every household is dependent on all adult members to be in paid work to earn enough to survive.⁴¹ Households not only have less time outside of work for their reproduction, but also lower wages to spend on the means of subsistence.

Evidently, the choice to replenish one's labour-power via convenience foods is not made in a vacuum, nor is it a simple matter of laziness. Rather, convenience foods form an integral part of the current neoliberal regime of capital accumulation, enabling the quickest possible renewal of labour-power and an increasing amount of time in value-producing work. For some workers, relying on ultra-processed foods is a way of claiming back some of the free time that capital constantly seeks to absorb. In this sense, it is not necessarily that workers are absolutely reliant on ultra-processed foods. Rather, they make a choice between eating a healthy diet and enjoying a small amount of leisure time. Here, the issue is an economic system that forces this grim choice upon workers, masquerading under the illusion of workers' freedom to pretend that they have control over their lives. Against such a worldview, we must aspire to an economic system where everyone has the freedom to both consume healthy food and enjoy leisure time.

40 Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 19.

41 Rosenberg, 'Wages and Inequality', 64; Fraser, 'Crisis of Care?', 34.

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Of course, the convenience of these ultra-processed foods has largely come at the expense of their nutritional value. Diets with a higher proportion of ultra-processed foods are associated with higher risks of all-cause mortality, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancers, coronary artery disease, cerebrovascular disease, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, frailty, and depression.⁴² The more that workers are forced to rely on cheap, ultra-processed convenience foods to feed themselves, the greater their risk of development these non-communicable diseases later in life. Due to the constraints that the capital-relation places on our capacity for social reproduction, analyses through the lens of social reproduction theory demonstrate that it is a *reliance* on, and not simply occasional consumption of, these unhealthy foods that leads to non-communicable disease.

We can also observe here a fundamental contradiction within the capitalist mode of production. Many critiques of capitalism focus on pointing out the system's inherent contradictions that lead to its own self-destabilisation. But as Fraser points out, theorising social reproduction as part of the totality of capitalism also illuminates the contradictions between social reproduction and capital accumulation itself. 'On the one hand', writes Fraser, 'social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilise the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies'.⁴³ Nowhere is this contradiction more visible than in the non-communicable diseases experienced by workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. While ultra-processed foods make workers better suited to participating in surplus-value-generating work for capital, they ultimately cut workers' lives short, or force them to manage serious ailments and illnesses throughout their post-working life. It is in this

42 Baker, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods', 2; Leonie Elizabeth, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Foods and Health Outcomes: A Narrative Review', *Nutrients* 12, no. 7 (2020), 1975; Melissa M. Lane, et al., 'Ultra-Processed Food Exposure and Adverse Health Outcomes: Umbrella Review of Epidemiological Meta-Analyses', *BMJ* 324 (2024), 1.

43 Fraser, 'Crisis of Care?', 22.

contradiction of social reproduction and capital accumulation that we can see the manifestation of Sébastien Rioux's observation that 'crises of social reproduction are also crises of the body'.⁴⁴ Rioux posits that social reproduction analyses remind us of the materiality of the consequences of capitalism. After all, what could be more material than the ways that the crises of capitalism appear in our bodies? In the case of unhealthy diets, capitalism's contradiction between surplus-value extraction and the renewal of labour-power manifests in disease and premature death among the working class.

Rioux's observation also overlaps with Friedrich Engels' concept of 'social murder', which is also pertinent in demonstrating the devastation caused by non-communicable disease in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁴⁵ Engels coined this term, based on his observations of the working class in England during the nineteenth century, to describe the way that the capitalist society inflicts premature death upon the working class by way of an economic system that produces unhealthy and dangerous working and living conditions. In particular, Engels' use of the term 'murder' denotes that society is aware of the causes of these premature and unnatural deaths yet does nothing to address them.⁴⁶ The use of the term 'social murder' with respect to population health has had a resurgence over the past few years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. But the concept of social murder is also useful for understanding the ongoing crisis of non-communicable disease in Aotearoa New Zealand, demonstrating that these deaths are premature, avoidable, and therefore constitute a form of murder.

44 Sébastien Rioux, 'Embodied Contradictions: Capitalism, Social Reproduction and Body Formation', *Women's Studies International Forum* 48 (2015), 199.

45 Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (Penguin, 1987), 128.

46 Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, 128.

Beyond Unhealthy Diets

As I have outlined in this article, social reproduction analyses make visible the links between our increasing dependence on ultra-processed foods to feed ourselves and capital accumulation more broadly. What does this conclusion mean for how we address the healthiness of diets in Aotearoa New Zealand? The arguments that I have laid out demonstrate that widespread unhealthy diets are not a problem of individual responsibility or personal choice, but an inevitable manifestation of the tension between capital accumulation and the reproduction of labour-power in the capitalist mode of production. Solutions that emphasise individual behaviour change or education are thus futile in addressing the high rates of non-communicable disease in Aotearoa New Zealand. Moreover, it is crucial that any policy interventions on population health go beyond the food system to address the important role of food in the reproduction of labour-power. Such interventions would require us to recognise the work that goes into consuming a healthy diet as work and that capital is dependent on this work for generating surplus value.

There are several possibilities for ways that we can reorganise the reproductive work involved in consuming a healthy diet, so as to make it accessible to the whole of the population in Aotearoa New Zealand. This reorganisation could be done through providing direct material support for social reproductive work, or through the state assuming responsibility for some aspects of reproductive work through the provision of universal services. One example of such state support is the New Zealand Government's Ka Ora, Ka Ako programme, which provides free lunches to students at low-decile schools, a programme that the current National-led government have refused to commit funding towards from 2026.⁴⁷ In providing healthy school lunches, one aspect of reproductive work is shifted away from parents and families and on to the state. School lunches are one less thing that parents and caregivers have to plan and prepare in

47 Ministry of Education, 'Ka Ora, Ka Ako: Healthy School Lunches Programme', accessed 21 July, 2020.

the meagre time they have outside of work. There is potential for similar state-funded food provision in universities, workplaces, and communities, for example through free or subsidised canteens.

Social reproduction analyses also highlight the reciprocal relationship between the work involved in consuming a healthy diet and other aspects of social reproduction. Food plays a central role in the means of subsistence and the reproduction of labour-power, meaning that alleviating other pressures on workers can contribute to creating the conditions for healthier dietary patterns. Providing support for other aspects of reproductive work – for example, greater state provision of childcare and housing or shortening work hours – can increase workers' capacity for consuming a healthy diet.

Finally, uncovering the relationship between unhealthy diets and capitalism as a totality demonstrates that moving away from capitalism and towards different economic systems is crucial for addressing population health challenges. Population health experts must offer their explicit support for resistance to the capitalist mode of production in Aotearoa New Zealand, even when this resistance occurs outside of food systems. Fighting for the right to a healthy diet is not just the domain of population health experts, but something that the Left must work towards more broadly, as healthy diets are intertwined with debates around work, housing, and education. Doing so constitutes our best chance at addressing the harm caused by non-communicable disease in Aotearoa New Zealand.