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Social Reproduction and Depletion

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic yet again underlined the importance of care and caring as well as the intersectional inequities attached to it - women and racialised minorities remained more vulnerable to the crisis. This was in part because of the gendered regimes of paid labour which see women and racialised minorities as disproportionate numbers of care workers: '70.4 percent of the total workforce in the health and social work sectors' are women (Dugarova 2020, p.3; see also Lingham *et al.*, forthcoming). Despite the clapping for carers and other performative appreciation of those who were on the frontline of the crisis, care work continues to be under/un-valued; valorisation can only work so far. Building on the arguments of feminist international political economists, I examine the importance of taking this work of care seriously.

I use the concept of social reproduction rather than care to examine the gendered regimes of labour that underpin the maintenance of life. I understand social reproduction as the work of biological reproduction (including reproducing labour). This carries with it the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain family and intimate relationships. It also includes the unpaid

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production in the home of both goods and services. This includes different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in and of the community and finally, it encompasses the reproduction of culture and ideology which stabilises (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations (Hoskyns and Rai 2007, p. 300; see also Laslett and Brenner 1989, p. 382-3). Social reproductive work is both rewarding and alienating, done autonomously and yet framed by social inequalities. Social reproduction is both outside and inside the production boundary, which determines what is counted as 'productive' work in the measurement of national economies through GDP. Social reproduction thus includes 'the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' and 'also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension' (Katz 2001, p. 710).

Depletion through Social Reproduction

Social reproduction is not costless. When unrecognised, valorised but not valued, social reproduction leads to depletion of those who care. As Diane Elson has argued in the context of another crisis – the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s:

> "If too much pressure is put upon the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilities …To maintain and enhance human capabilities, the domestic sector needs adequate inputs from all other sectors. It cannot be treated as a bottomless well, able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from the other sectors" (Elson 2000, p.28).

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What is depletion through social reproduction (DSR)? Simply put, depletion occurs when resources for social reproduction fall below a threshold of sustainability over time. Rai *et al*. described depletion through social reproduction in the following way: everyone has a set of resources (stock), dependent upon their socio-economic position. These resources are used up in doing social reproductive work as well as paid work. Some of this outflow of resources is replenished through everyday processes such as eating, sleeping and resting, all of which are affected by social hierarchies and power relations. Resource outflows are also affected by 'natural wear and tear' such as aging, which in itself is a social process. Depletion also connects our social and natural worlds – the impact of depletion of the environment on human beings and their social lives. After all, the lack of water lengthens the working day of women – 'a study of 24 sub-Saharan countries revealed that when the collection time is more than 30 minutes, an estimated 3.36 million children and 13.54 million adult females were responsible for water collection. [And] one roundtrip to collect water is 33 minutes on average in rural areas and 25 minutes in urban areas' (UNICEF, 2016). Depletion can then be seen as a tipping point – when the difference between outflows and inflows is not bridged then the individual, household, or a community tip into depletion (Rai *et al*. 2014, p89). Depletion thus takes many forms and operates at the levels of individuals, households and communities, which are embedded in capitalist regimes of racial and patriarchal hierarchies that affect their location and their life/worlds.

Depletion is harmful. Rai *et al*. find that this harm takes different forms: first, as *'discursive harm'*, that is negating work that takes place in the domestic sector, while through this negation affirming gendered social hierarchies and distinctions of class and race. Second, as *'emotional harm'*, for example in the guilt associated with being

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a 'working mother' which condemns millions to believing they are harming their children's present and future (Borrelli *et al*., 2017). Third, *physical harm* as the (non)recognition of the working body within the home. Here we think of tiredness, lack of sleep and of being unable to maintain friendships and community networks of support. Finally, there is the harm to *citizenship entitlements* (Rai *et al*. 2014, p. 91). Harm occurs when groups are constituted as 'non-contributors' to the economy and therefore as recipients of its welfare rather than citizens with entitlements (Morris, 2010). This also connects with the idea in feminist legal theory that harm is relational (Nedelsky 2011, pp. 22–34) and can lead to subsistence harms which then form communities of harm framed by social violence (Sankey, 2015; Ni Aoláin, 2009).

Measuring depletion is a form of recognition. To know the intensity and extensity of depletion allows us to reveal not only the distress – physical, emotional/mental and social - but also to strategise towards reversing depletion: "Valuation becomes a communication tool by translating unpaid work into a language governments understand: money" (Hoskyns and Rai 2007, p. 302). Depletion can be measured by calculating the difference between the resource outflows used up in the provision of social reproductive work and resource inflows that go into maintaining the current stock of resources available to those engaged in this work (Rai *et al*. 2014, p. 93). Depletion, where unrecognised and uncompensated for, forms a component of the subsidy provided by social reproduction to capital.

Depletion causes differential harm that is class, race, and gender sensitive. This means that we need to underscore the importance of intersectional inequalities and exclusions within which depletion is embedded. This can generate ripples of harm across space and time (Conaghan, 2002), which affect individuals, households, and

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communities. As Geronimus *et al.* (2006) have argued, long-term racial discrimination against African-American communities, compounded by gendered inequalities has led to the 'weathering' of the health of African-American women resulting in much higher maternal mortality in this group than any other. Depletion then is an issue that needs urgent attention.

Mitigation, Replenishment and Transformation

Depletion is not irreversible. The strategies of reversing depletion take different forms – mitigation, replenishment, and transformation (Rai *et al.* 2014, pp. 98-100); struggles for replenishment and transformation are ongoing and urgent. *Mitigation* occurs when individuals attempt to lessen the consequences of depletion by deploying strategies such as buying in labour or by sharing tasks across genders and generations or by communal and collective arrangements among networks of friends and neighbors. *Replenishment* includes interventions by both state and voluntary associations and other non-state actors which assist households to cope with depletion but without remedying its structural causes. *Transformation* involves structural changes in two dimensions. Restructuring of gendered social relations means equitable redistribution of domestic labour with men and women being fully involved in the sharing of social reproduction. Further, the recognition and valuation of social reproduction and therefore of DSR.

All these three strategies depend in some part on the support/actions of the state and the law. State facilitation and blockage of migration allows for access to labour, as well as its disposability and precarity. Support for social reproductive labour through public provision of child and elder care can alleviate the care burdens of millions;

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austerity policies of the state have the opposite effect. Legal interventions at both national and international levels can be mobilised to reverse harm, but as I have argued elsewhere, with Beth Goldblatt (2017), physical harm that results in economic loss is the easiest area for tort law to address, which excludes much of unpaid labour in the home. However, the inclusion of unpaid labour in the sustainable development goals (5.4) has been the result of sustained feminist campaigns and a first step towards an international recognition of social reproductive labour and its depleting costs. However, this sits poorly with the continued focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic development that the UN System of National Accounts insists on (Rai *et al.*, 2019). Further, state and international actors must recognise and remedy the harms of corporate malpractices affecting social reproduction (Goldblatt and Rai, 2020), without which reversing depletion becomes impossible.

As I have argued in my forthcoming book, *Depletion: the costs of care and struggles to reverse it* (2024), by accepting the unequal system of social reproduction, we are also willing to accept the harming of those who care. As seen above, this harm that accrues through social reproduction is multifaceted and affects everyone, but unequally. The recognition of depletion as harm must recognise the location and histories of inequalities that cast long shadows on the current care regime – race, gender and class are vectors of this inequality. Further, the strategies of reversing harm cannot be successful if society as a whole – states, markets, and individual and collective actors – does not recognise and determine to reverse this harm; mitigation can only be limited, unequal and indeed can intensify harm for some. State intervention in addressing the effects of unequal distribution of social reproductive work is essential, if not sufficient, for replenishment as a strategy of reversal of harm.

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Investment in social infrastructure, regulation of corporate malpractice and of labour standards for example, can help replenish those engaged in social reproduction. A vision of a 'good life' for all, rather than for some, also must include human as well as planetary care; harm to our environment is harm to ourselves as communities. Strategies of net-zero, minimising extraction of resources from fragile environments, degrowth to reshape consumption as well as production patterns all form part of the strategies needed to reverse depletion.

Conclusion

Reversing depletion needs building alliances across difference; solidarity needs to be reflexive to be effective over time. Feminist experience shows that solidarity can be both empowering and excluding. To address this complexity, we need to work towards building more symmetrical relations among those mobilising to reverse depletion. As Balibar (1997) argues, solidarity needs to be a mode of thinking where politics is assumed to happen with others, but one which does not lapse into reifying its own particularity as universality. Working across lines of difference then takes labour, time, and effort, which in itself can be depleting. As Bernice Johnson Reagon has pointed out: 'I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing coalescing' (1981, p. 358). Building solidarity to mobilise against depletion needs not only giving voice (recognition) to labours of social reproduction, but also deep listening to voices of difference across spaces and locations. This is important because solidarities need to be developed in time and sustained over time; processes of communication are important for not just building

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solidarities but also maintaining them. Depletion can be reversed through such solidaristic politics.

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