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Depletion: Towards a
Feminist Ecology of Care

Book Review

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Depletion: Towards a Feminist Ecology of Care

Book Review

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Abstract

The book review of Shirin Rai's seminal work on *Depletion: The Human Cost of Caring* explores the harm caused by the depletion of beings who care when their labour is left unrecognised and unaccounted for within the productive domains of the economy. The article showcases how Rai explores everyday practices of care largely performed by women (also accounting for children who care), while providing an empirical account to recognise care labour. Rai goes on to show how location matters when such care can be delegated; it depletes differentially based on class, caste, and gender, and that commodification of care may valorise it but not necessarily value it. The review argues that *Depletion* also provides an important empirical account to measure care through time-use surveys and the Feminist Everyday Observational Tool (FEOT), which contributes to both theoretical and policy-oriented accounts in recognising and visibilising care labour. The book also provides rich ethnographic accounts of women who care, while prescribing different strategies to reverse the structural harm caused by depletion, namely, mitigation, transformation, and replenishment.

Keywords

Social Reproduction; Care Labour; Harm; Feminist Methodology; Feminist Political Economy

Zusammenfassung

Die Buchbesprechung zu Shirin Rais bahnbrechendem Werk *Depletion: The Human Cost of Caring* (dt.: Erschöpfung: Die menschlichen Kosten von Fürsorge) untersucht den Schaden, der durch die „Erschöpfung“ von Menschen entsteht, die sich um andere kümmern, wenn ihre Arbeit innerhalb der produktiven Bereiche der Wirtschaft nicht anerkannt und nicht berücksichtigt wird. Der Artikel zeigt, wie Rai alltägliche Pflegepraktiken untersucht, die größtenteils von Frauen (einschließlich pflegender Kinder) ausgeübt werden, und liefert gleichzeitig eine empirische Darstellung zur Anerkennung von Pflegearbeit. Rai zeigt weiter, wie wichtig der Ort ist, an dem solche Pflege delegiert werden kann; sie erschöpft sich je nach Klasse, Kaste und Geschlecht unterschiedlich, und die Kommodifizierung von Pflege kann sie zwar aufwerten, aber nicht unbedingt wertschätzen. Die Rezension argumentiert, dass *Depletion* auch eine wichtige empirische Darstellung liefert, um Pflegearbeit durch Zeitnutzungserhebungen und das *Feminist Everyday Observational Tool* (FEOT) zu messen, was sowohl zu theoretischen als auch zu politikorientierten Darstellungen bei der Anerkennung und Sichtbarmachung von Pflegearbeit beiträgt. Das Buch enthält auch reichhaltige ethnografische Berichte über Frauen, die sich um

andere kümmern, und schlägt verschiedene Strategien vor, um die durch Erschöpfung verursachten strukturellen Schäden rückgängig zu machen, nämlich Minderung, Transformation und Wiederauffüllung.

Schlagworte

Soziale Reproduktion; Pflegearbeit; Schaden; feministische Methodologie; feministische politische Ökonomie

Rai, S. M. (2024). Depletion: The Human Costs of Caring. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Depletion: The Human Cost of Caring by Shirin M. Rai is a timely intervention which showcases that practices and acts of care, and those who perform them, are not elastic and endless. She argues that reproduction of life does not just happen. It is laboured over and left uncared within the 'productive' domains of the economy. Unequal distribution of social reproduction leads to harm in measurable ways. As she writes:

"Depletion argues that strategies for recognising, measuring, pluralising, and reversing the harms of depletion are urgently needed in the context of growing costs of care and caring for our social and ecological worlds" (Rai 2024: 18).

In all countries, in all classes, races, religions, and cultures, women perform these labours more than men. Because these women are classed, raced, and located in deeply unequal ways, they therefore experience depletion differently and intersectionally. In addition to showcasing how such labour is feminised, she also takes into account how children who care also remain depleted—an issue most deeply explored in Chapter five of the book.

Rai defines depletion as "*the human cost of social reproductive labour*" (Rai 2025: 2) that results when the outflow of social reproductive labour exceeds the inflow of resources, tipping those affected over the threshold of sustainability. The book frames depletion as harm that is historic, present, and anticipatory. When this harm is left unrecognised, it ignores how costs are

borne by individuals in different locations and how it depletes differentially based on caste, class, gender, and age. Depletion, as a concept, draws parallels between ecological harm and harm inflicted on individuals, households, and communities through unrecognised and undervalued resources that are extracted, accumulated, and mobilised to serve national capitalist development. But Rai's arguments are not limited to "national" capitalist development, as she posits that depletion needs to be

"locationally decentred [as] multi-earner households of the Global North often mitigate their depletion by buying in migrant labour, generating global care chains and global households" (Rai 2025: 13).

Depletion is a form of structural violence because of how deeply social reproduction is embedded in capitalism; however, she argues, it can be reversed through different strategies like mitigation, transformation, and replenishment.

The book makes roughly four arguments. First, the unequal organisation of social reproduction produces depletion, systematically harming those who provide care. Second, reversing this harm requires its public recognition and measurement. Without commensurable evidence, the structural nature of depletion remains obscured, and state interventions, though necessary, remain insufficient for genuine replenishment. Third, a vision of the "good life" for all must integrate both human and planetary care, recognising their interdependence. Finally, any account of depletion must be historically and politically situated, acknowledging how race, gender, and class inequalities continue to shape the global care regime.

Drawing from Angela Davis (1983) and Maria Mies et al. (2014), Rai posits that

“the concept of social reproduction needs further stretching when faced with different regimes of public and private life, of blurred distinctions between family labour and work and marketized labour and racial gendered distortions” (Rai 2024: 13).

Rai’s account thus goes beyond Nancy Fraser’s (2016) conceptualisation of “*boundary struggles*” over the economy, polity, and households, to include planetary harm and material extraction that hampers the achievement of good life for all and this of one of the most compelling moves posited by Rai. In Chapter six, which broadens the usual contours of care debates, Rai argues that extractive industries-mining, deforestation, and resource grabs can produce forms of communal and ecological depletion intimately tied to the burdens of care. This extension is important because it insists that care politics cannot be decoupled from environmental politics: when land, water, and life-support systems are degraded, the burden of repair and survival falls disproportionately on those already doing the hardest reproductive labour. This chapter stands out as a daring and necessary bridge between feminist political economy and environmental justice.

Depletion makes an important analytical distinction between “*care*” and “*social reproduction*” to better understand depletion in different contexts. Rai argues that care is a “*capacious concept*” that is political, normative, largely used as a relational, and is a more structural approach to understand how life is produced and maintained within the capitalist system. When such practices of care are commodified through capitalist social relations, in terms of wages or in contemporary times, platformed, it transforms care into a “*goal-oriented task*” (Rai 2025: 9) rather than a relational one, which “*may valorise care but not necessarily value it*” (Rai 2024: 10). On the other hand, “*social reproduction*” is an esoteric, “*awkward*” and “*jargonistic*” (Rai 2024: 8) term. It is a “*more structural approach to understanding how life is reproduced and maintained within the capitalist system*” (Rai 2024: 8). As a concept, it is embedded within historical debates on labour within Marxism that expand on dichotomies such as production/reproduction, public/private, use-

value/exchange-value, among others. Rai argues that if social reproduction is not valued, risks of intensifying depletion increase. These theories bring out the entanglements of reproduction and production as well as exploitation, oppression, and accumulation wherein women are treated as a reserve army within capitalist structures that are embedded in long histories of gendered and racist expropriation (Bhattacharya 2017; Bhattacharya 2018; Farris 2019; Ferguson 2020). For Rai, social reproduction includes several things: firstly, biological reproduction that entails various life-making and life-producing activities; secondly, the production of goods and services at home, including paid and unpaid, formal and informal labour and thirdly, the reproduction of culture and ideology required to maintain social relations beyond the household.

She reflects on accounts of women and their journey in exercising their agency and managing their households and lives, even when their work remained unrecognised. Thinking through eight lives of women from different social locations reveals that the micro-practices of care itself are deeply embedded in structures of capitalist work regimes as well as in everyday demands framed by cultural and social norms. Each of these lives brings out the differences because they have different resources to draw upon to mitigate and mobilise these norms. *Depletion* thus provides a rich ethnographic account by showcasing these women’s strategies of survival and even thriving in the absence of state support. While narrating these stories, Rai argues,

“that our lives of future generations are dependent on the work we call social reproduction, the reproduction of life itself, which can be and is being eroded by depletion” (Rai 2024: 3).

The gap this book seeks to address is that previous scholarship has discussed the role of social reproduction in sustaining capitalism, but the costs of social reproduction have only been partially understood and analysed.

The book aims to reveal the full ‘costs’ of social reproduction by focusing on depletion to understand the circuits of power that circulate

through different regimes of care to challenge them and eventually lead to their reversal. Marx and Engels in the German Ideology saw “*production of life*” as both “*natural*” and a “*social relation*”. Care work performed by women has often been taken for granted and marked as ‘natural’ and consensual, as a labour of love. This has been critiqued by many feminist scholars, such as Elisabeth Prügl (2020), Tithi Bhattacharya (2017; 2018), and Silvia Federici (2021), among others. Rai makes a telling argument when she states, “*consent does not mitigate depletion, just as love does not make social reproduction less depleting*” (Rai 2024: 4).

Methodologically, the book utilises time-use surveys, using FEOT (Feminist Everyday Observation Tool) in Chapter Three, shadowing the women whose lives are presented as case studies, as well as policy-oriented prescriptions. Chapter Two addresses the measuring of depletion in multiple registers, and this approach could be more robust when read in conjunction with Nancy Folbre (2006), which Rai also discusses. The book also utilises other methods, such as time-use surveys, to research, reveal, and potentially reverse the depletion effects of social reproduction. Some readers will appreciate this interdisciplinarity; others may want more systematic empirical evidence. The vignettes are vivid but limited in scale. They powerfully illustrate mechanisms but do not, on their own, settle questions about prevalence or causal weight. Rai is aware of this tension as she frequently calls for improved metrics and re-

search agendas that can render depletion visible to policymakers without flattening its qualitative depth.

In conclusion, Depletion is as much an agenda-setting manifesto as it is an empirical monograph, but its central concern remains that of recognition. Rai contends that social reproduction is relentless, and that depletion should be understood not as a calculus of labour but as a measure of the pain and harm produced by its persistent non-recognition without overlooking the moments of joy and meaning that care work can also bring. This itself is a mammoth undertaking, let alone the difficulties in measuring the harm caused by depletion. The nuance of her argument becomes particularly evident in her discussion of one reversal strategy, replenishment, which involves state actors. Here, Rai highlights how citizenship is tied to taxation, and because care practices rarely fall within the ‘productive’ domain, women and children are often framed as recipients of state ‘welfare’. The ‘social contract’ is weakened in this case as women and children are treated as second-class citizens. For a reader, this multifaceted conception of depletion linking bodily and mental exhaustion, political exclusion, and the erosion of civic belonging emerges as one of the book’s most original and thought-provoking contributions.

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