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Market Authoritarianism and Care Extractivism

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Cross-Cutting the Four Conference Themes**

“Reincarnation or Death of Neoliberalism? The Rise of Market Authoritarianism and its Challenges for Labour”

Expansion and accumulation through imposition of the market principles of efficiency, competition and growth on economic sectors, which have been to a large extent outside of the market and of transnational value chains, is a feature of market authoritarianism. In the past decades, the care economy, care work and social reproduction have increasingly been subjugated to the imperatives of the capitalist market and included into the fast growing service economy. Social reproduction or – in terms of feminist economics – the care economy is a precondition for the functioning of society and markets, and globalised capitalist accumulation is not only based on resource extractivism and exploitation of labour but on care extractivism as well.

It is a fundamental contradiction of the capitalist economy that its permanent drive for profit maximisation results in the depletion of natural, human and social resources so that neoliberal capitalism has to invent new ways to cope with one crisis of social reproduction after the other. One commodified response to the reproductive crises is the reconfiguration of social reproduction in transnational care chains and the reconfiguration of biological reproduction in transnational markets.

The dominant feature of this marketised reconfiguration of social reproduction is a growing inclusion of the care work of domestics, nurses and other care providers as waged services into the labour market along gender, class/caste and racial lines, and along North-South/East inequalities, increasingly transnationally organised by commercial agents. At the same time due to neoliberal austerity policies and social cuts, policies and markets try to externalise the costs for social reproduction and transfer it back to the responsibility of private households and communities. Voluntary work in the care sector, including the famous welcome culture for migrants in 2015 in Germany upholds the lack or withdrawal of much needed public provisions.

The commodification and professionalization of care work and its transnationalisation however did not change the global pattern of low valuation and underpayment of this kind of labour, manifesting itself in informal and precarious labour relations. Everywhere care takers have to struggle to be recognised as “normal” workers and value creating beyond a productivist perspective in order to secure labour rights, social security provisions and a right to organise. This has been phrased and ensured after a long struggle by domestic workers in the ILO-Convention 189 that is however ratified by 23 countries only.

Apart from the global level, there is a twofold response to the economisation of care at the micro-economic local level. Firstly, in a number of European countries, a feminisation of labour struggles occurred because of a new site of strikes and protests in care sectors where strike has been unthought of like in hospitals. The focus of resistance

was not only on better payment but on more recognition and good quality of care work. “More staff” was the key demand during the strike at the Charité, Berlin’s largest hospital, in kindergardens and schools, a demand jointly articulated by patients, parents, kids and staff opening space for new alliances.

Secondly, the rationale of care work with its principles of moral economy, need orientation and cooperation has potential to function as a counterlogic to the care- and reckless market authoritarianism of neoliberal capitalism and as a driver for alternative practices like urban agriculture and clinics of solidarity in Greece. This requires a political perspective on care that is critical of power relations at an intersection between production and reproduction, public and private, local and global.

This paper analyses in an intersectional, time and space diagnostic way the ambivalences of care in the context of authoritarian market and political regimes in neoliberal capitalism. It is cross-cutting the different themes of the conference.

CV

Christa Wichterich holds a PhD. in sociology, was a guest professor for gender politics at Kassel and Basel University and works now as a free-lance author and scholar-activist. As researcher and journalist her main topics are globalization and gender from a perspective of feminist international political economy and ecology, women’s movements and international women’s policies. Earlier she worked as university lecturer in India and Iran, and as foreign correspondent in Kenia. She published widely on the above mentioned issues. She is on the board of the ICDD, Kassel.