

blog interdisziplinäre geschlechterforschung ●●●●●

A feminist economics view on racialized, gendered, and classed effects of the COVID-19 crisis

17.11.2020 Karin Schönplflug

From a European middle class perspective, autumn 2020 is looking more and more apocalyptic. New lockdowns are once again bringing a creaking halt to our 'life-as-we-know-it': Curfews, no leisure shopping, no fitness studio, no holiday flights, no bars and restaurants, no parties, no cultural events. Instead there is again home office and private seclusion, more big disappointments and psychological hardship. Still, it is remarkable how not everyone is affected in the same way, and it is worthwhile to try out an intersectional standpoint (as is practiced in feminist theory and gender studies) to see the cracks that have become visible as the COVID-19 crisis “weakens the foundations of [...] interlocking systems of inequality and provides an opportunity for us to imagine feminist alternatives to the prevailing order” ([Tobias Neely 2020](#)).

Hypervisibility of inequality-based foundations of the economic system

During the COVID-19 crisis inequalities are on the rise: the [ILO](#) estimates a 10 percent loss of global labor incomes in September 2020 compared to 2019 and the [World Bank](#) expects an additional 88 to 115 million people to be pushed into extreme poverty this year – [while the richest stockholders and the most powerful global companies manage to hugely increase their wealth](#) during the crisis. With these increasing gaps, the foundations of the economic system are more and more exposed as strictly inequality-based, racialized, classed and gendered: 1. The division of labor in the production as well as the service sector is based on remunerations and working conditions strictly disproportionate to the essential nature of that work and 2. Essential workers and their lives are visibly expendable as they are sacrificed by withholding appropriate protection and lack of respect or acknowledgement. Women's (and children's) wellbeing in their homes is also not on the agenda as an explosion in domestic violence causes little public interference. 3. The skewed options based on class for performing reproductive labor and the disregard for child care is becoming obvious. 4. Finally, a halt to planetary exploitation and destruction of (indigenous) lands is omitted in the window of opportunity that a global shut-down proposed; all policies strive for a return to the “normal” environmental expropriation, extractivism and GDP growth that harms vulnerable populations most.

These four principles of the global economic system are generally soft-soaped and concealed for the populations of the global North, but have become starkly apparent in 2020.

Essential work as gendered, classed and racialized division of labor

For example, the working conditions in the health sector show a structure strictly organized along intersectionally interlinking hierarchies: While women make up about 40 % of the estimated global paid working population ([ILO 2016](#)), [70 % of the workers in the global health and social sectors are women](#). An average gender pay gap of around 28 % exists in the global health workforce; accounting occupation and working hours that gap is 11 % ([Boniol et. al 2019](#)). While getting paid less than their

male colleagues, women have been infected more often in their work. In the case of Spain, [76 % of all infections of health-care workers are women; in Italy it is 69 %; in the US 73 %](#). Also, the health systems have become visible as highly racialized: For example, in the British NHS, around 40 % of doctors and 20 % of nurses and just in London, 67 % of the adult social care workforce are of Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds who make up a large population of those dying from working with COVID-19 patients ([Khan 2020](#)).

Racialization means vulnerability to the virus

Generally the consequences of such systemic gendered and classed racism on labor markets (i. e. lack of access to jobs that can be done remotely, jobs with great exposure to other people and chronic stress that leads to health disparities) makes BIPOC people especially vulnerable to the virus: In the hardest hit country, the USA, the relative likelihoods of infection and negative outcomes are severely skewed by race: [Black or African Americans are affected 3 times more compared to white persons and their death rates are twice as high](#). Similar data exist for the UK: Asian excess deaths are 1.5 times higher for the Indian population, 3 times higher for the Pakistani and the Bangladeshi population. Excess deaths for BIPOC persons are 4 times higher for the Black African population, 2.5 times for the Black Caribbean population, 7 times higher for the Black population of other backgrounds ([Razaq et al. 2020](#)). There is currently little trustworthy data on other volatile populations, such as Indigenous peoples or traveler communities.

Gendered separation of spheres means vulnerability at home

Women's death caused by Corona are globally lower than men's ([Reeves/Ford 2020](#)); but since the first lockdown the violence against women in private households has increased by roughly 30 % worldwide, which [UN Women](#) has termed the "Shadow Pandemic". Little has been done to protect women from male violence in their homes, while at the same time unpaid labor in the household is absolutely essential for keeping the economic system afloat. It amounts to 10,8 Trillion US Dollars in 2019 ([OXFAM 2019](#)), at a very timid estimation that is about 10 % of World GDP, just in the West it is likely worth close to 40 % of GDP. Before Corona, women already performed at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men ([UN ECOSOC 2016](#)), international studies of COVID-19 effects found mostly adverse results for women concerning increases in unpaid hours and job security in the labor market.

Classed (re-)production means vulnerability to overburdening

Survey evidence from the UK, US and Germany shows that "the labor market impacts differ considerably across countries [...] within countries, the impacts are highly unequal and exacerbate existing inequalities. [...] Less educated workers and women are more affected" ([Adams-Prassl 2020](#)). Put more bluntly, a pandemic "caste system" is observable where "the wealthy retreat to secluded vacation homes [with appropriate staff], the middle class work remotely while homeschooling, and the working class are forced to keep the economy running and care for children at the same time" ([Tobias Neely 2020](#)).

Connections to (neo-)colonial perspectives

The faults and fallouts of (neo)liberal economics become visible not as coincidental, but on the contrary essential for the functioning of the economic system that is based on unpaid-for, stolen, and extracted inputs. Google Trends reveals that from a Western middle-class perspective life does suddenly seem "apocalyptic," but apocalypse has long matched the experience of generations of colonized, enslaved and exploited people. From a Native American point of view a year like 2020 is not especially apocalyptic but rather part of a "post-apocalyptic Anthropocene [...]" we already inhabit what our

ancestors would have understood as a dystopian future” (Whyte 2018). While Kyle Whyte in 2018 is referring to species loss and the climate crisis, the pandemic is feared to have [absolutely devastating effects on tribal nations](#), Native populations and their epistemologies while skewed leaders are enhancing environmental destruction especially [in indigenous lands in the US](#) and [in the Amazon region](#) – which in the end will severely affect us all.

The crisis as "portal" for imagining feminist alternatives

Now that we see the cracks, there is the above mentioned opportunity to imagine alternatives and it is “high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action” (Haraway 2015: 161) in solidarity and with a strategic essentialism that is not blind for colonialism, classism, institutionalized racism or anthropocentrism, but is fit to engage with global problems with local and trans-local networks. The way forward is what Donna Haraway calls a “multispecies ecojustice” (Haraway 2015: 161), with ecological solutions far exceeding mere sustainability and that allow a complex long-term view that completely changes the sole paradigm of current global economics’ “growth”. Such changes need improved frameworks for life oriented, reproductive and care work and also structures discouraging “death-making” (Ferguson/Bhattacharya) profit oriented work. To do that, a strict recreation of institutions is necessary: Systemic individualism, racialization, gender-roles, families/households, nations, money, time and competitive markets must be completely reconsidered to allow a systematic decentering of humans in global affairs (Schönpflug/Klapeer 2017). In this sense the crisis is a "portal" (Roy 2020) for imagining feminist alternatives to the prevailing order.

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