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Social Reproduction, social security and crisis-related developments: Feminist Perspectives regarding Europe's neoliberal restructuring

I Fiscal crisis – impacts on European Social Security

The **crisis** of the US-American financial market in 2007/08 caused severe damages to global economy with regionally different effects and outcomes. It hit – not only - European countries in diverse ways. My input will follow traces of these events with regard to consequences for social policies and especially the situation of women in two different countries and geographical zones of the European Union: Germany as a relatively strong economy and welfare state of North-Western Europe - and Southern Europe in case of Greece as another example, where welfare structures have not ever been as deeply implemented in the state to such degrees as in Germany.

The *fiscal crisis* caused a breakdown of financial markets on a global scale which was by many people compared with events around the world economic crisis of 1929. The development of a derivative market in financialised ways of accumulation of free floating capital by institutions like Wall Street, Goldman & Sachs bank and many others caused especially in the field of subprime housing credits and their weak coverage of back up financing a direct link to European countries. Especially in Spain, also part of Southern Europe's region, where a big market bubble of housing industry broke down very many people lost their condominium and where expelled from their home. This is all the more a sensitive situation in countries where property of an apartment or a house is an important part of retirement provision and as such an arrangement as central part of social security coverage. Additionally, British and other countries pension funds also of Europe's relatively well-of countries suffered from the fiscal shock effects of this crisis, and, seen from today, many people cannot be sure to receive later a decent pension in their old age.

Massive unemployment was also especially in the Southern countries of Europe (foremost in Greece and Spain, given differences in economic performance between them) the consequence of the fiscal crisis. The vulnerability of lower industrialized national economies in Europe's South is high; the fiscal constraints forced by the crisis management of the European Commission as a strong actor after the crisis forced especially Greece to pay back public/state loans to the credit donors, which form the financially better coping states of the European Union. The crisis-related measurements of the European Commission's policy encompassed the safeguard of banks, which - as an effect of the crisis - were at risk to drown. The massive re-funding of banks and credit arrangements put not only pressure on the credit borrowers (like Greece and other nation states), but also on countries like Germany with a strong export-led economy. In fact, it were not the banks which had to stand in for their risky financial business dealings on cost of vulnerable credit borrowers/states, but the taxpayers – in the sense that extensive credit saving provisions had to be guaranteed by countries towards the European Commission as collective actor of credit donor countries. The consequences were, as in the case of Greece, life-threatening effects of cutbacks in social funding (like pensions, unem-

ployment subsidies, health infrastructures and the like). The unemployment rate in Greece raised to the high level of on average 25 % (2016), but youth unemployment even to the tremendous rate of on average 43,2 %! (European Statistics <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/74795/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosigkeit-in-europa/>)

In consequence many public infrastructures like hospitals, institutions for the care of the elderly and the like were shut down. The need of care services in the sector of health infrastructures has dramatically changed since then.

One answer of civil society and solidarity movements in Greece was and still is to found so called “solidarity clinics”, which are run on basis of voluntary work by doctors, nurses, physicians and people from the neighborhood as well as from patient’s families who provide necessary support and help of all kind. Mentally ill people can be seen walking about homeless and without provision of medicine in the streets of Greek towns like Thessaloniki. Caused by cuts in pension subsidies now many families live on the subsidies of one pensioner in the family. in combination with unemployment there are no other available social subsidies. On the other hand there are numerous demonstrations from pensioners to protest against further continued cuts in pension, which do not provide them with a reasonable amount of money to live on. And many people who are younger in the meantime left the country to try to find a living in Germany, other European countries or abroad. Additionally, Greece faces great challenges in managing the great number of migrant refugees from Northern Africa and Near Eastern Countries.

In terms of politics, the socialist left party “Syriza”, which tried with a public referendum to postpone and fight European austerity measures, was pushed back by European commission’s decision to stay to a strict depths reduction course for Greece. this strategy obliged the Greek government to follow strict fiscal rules, bound them to the need to save money and to cut public spending and costs – on the back of its citizens and of social provisions. Also huge industrial infrastructures like harbors, airports and traffic facilities were sold to foreign investors in favor of paying back national debt.

If we look to Germany, the situation is different for several reasons, but not acceptable still in terms of social security standards and social provision. There were cutbacks in public investments in social infrastructure frequently since the last 10-15 years (seen from today). the partial privatization of public funding in many areas of social provision led to a marketization of these formerly public infrastructures. A logic of financialisation was implemented in formerly state-led organisations, bureaucracy and agencies. Effects of these rearrangements are cost-reduction policies, which put pressure on prices of e.g. health services, hospitals and care services for the elderly and other needy people and clients - as well as in the education sector.

Germany seems to be on first view in a relatively comfortable situation of actually still having an affluent economy; export-oriented and successful in the sense, that unemployment rates are relatively low at the moment (2005: 11,2 %; 2016: 4,2 %). Still, this is only a superfluous picture of structural and tectonic destruction.

After a longer period of recession during the late 1990s and 2000 years, the German economy seems actually to develop well; the amount of incoming taxes thus rising at the moment. But

to complete the broad picture and the numbers, one would need to add several features of economic and financial relevance.

20 percent of German citizens especially of the following next generations of pensioners in the next decades are in risk of poverty actually (in Europe on average: 25 percent). with regard to their presumptive sold-age provision after around 2030 their income today is relatively low in relation to everyday living costs. Part-time work and extended temporary employment in the low-wage sector cause income vulnerability and social insecurity of many people, especially women and, related to them, children. The number of single parent households, most of them female-headed, has grown. Many of them are likely to be exposed to income poverty, and 20% of children under 18 are presumed to be poor. The number of women working in special arrangements, where the wage income is not more than 400/450 € per month, make them depending on a family income in a dual earner family or, as working poor, force them to take up several low paid jobs, or, third option, to ask for public additional social subsistence. This clientele is not able to save money for the old age. In contrast, the assets of people who earn high salaries or benefit from financial investments and from property of real estate, are rising. In Germany, as in many relatively better-off countries in Europe the separation of people with very different economic status in terms of income, property and financial and by that social stability leads to a social decomposition respectively polarization of society and its cohesion, which now is at a worrying level already. Given the demographic challenges in near future, when more elderly than employed people will be the ratio, Germany faces a severe lack in pension funding. Poorness of particularly women in old age is to be considered.

II Feminist aspects of crisis-related effects: The change of welfare state arrangements under constraints of neoliberal restructuring of social policies with regard to social security

The consequences of neoliberal austerity politics which were implemented in Germany since the end of the late 1990ies/beginning 2000 years, have their implications for social security, standards of provision and costs in health, education, care, public infrastructures like highways, public sport grounds, public libraries et cetera. The intended policy of cost reduction of public spending was implemented as a measurement against unemployment, economic downturn of a so called “too costly social welfare state. This marked in the beginning of the 2000 years debates which led to partly privatized social welfare provisions and to cuts of some of the former social benefits.

A noteworthy example in this context is the reform of unemployment insurance as part of the so called “Agenda 2010”, implemented in 2003 and the following years, which made a certain social provision of the second year of unemployment insurance a welfare provision instead of an insurance benefit earned by employment. It does not any more relate to the level of the former wage of a person but is now a reduced and down-leveled benefit. The effects of this “reform” are manifold: people are forced to take up jobs of any kind; they have to accept inferior job offers to get out of the social provisioning; the status of education and job skills is underrated in favor of a quick return to the labor market. Until today, to gain this social provision means to be exposed to a greater economic and social vulnerability and to live through

hardship of livelihood. A more authoritarian way of handling these measures forces people to oblige to administrative rules.

This reform is to be seen as part of a more encompassing strategy to change the welfare code in the context of the German welfare system by means of neoliberal politics. The implemented neoliberal agenda forces processes of economisation and financialisation of social, cultural and extended parts of societal fields of public enterprise. Impacts of this strategy change are exhausting and excessive working conditions especially in care work contexts, in education and in the still growing sector of the service industries.

Mostly women work in this field of the labor market - often informally - in this sector of neoliberal European economic development strategies in fostering low-waged labor markets to provide cheap labor. Tightened by the depletion of public social, care and health services especially women faced crisis-related a growing pressure to take over care obligations in the family; to try to run a family management along with their own occupation in stressful jobs and to fill in gaps of care provisioning. Many women have to pay personally the costs of this politics and suffer from the claims shifted towards private social contexts, families and social networks like neighborhoods. They were by the fiscal crisis and in combination with an austerity-led policy of crisis management imposed on them.

In terms of social security, there is another noteworthy challenge for people now to take care of savings for the old age. The crisis-related strategy of the European Bank is to keep interest loans at a historically very low level to invite corporations and capital to invest. But pension insurances are, along with stock-related strategies of saving, especially for people with lower incomes still the most used strategy to care for the old age. Low compounded interest rates lead to retarded saving stocks in future. This is an indirect, but crucial effect which lowers social security and leads to higher risks of poverty in the old age. Also, it is a strategy which leads to dispossession.

But let us be aware of the underlying social structures which impose the risk of being in a vulnerable situation of social security in a *gendered way*. The welfare state model which was implemented in the new formation of the state of West Germany after 1945 was strongly bound to and structured by a family-wage-earner model. One adult, mostly men in the 1960-1980, was/were the main earner, whereas women were responsible for unpaid care work at home and indirectly and insufficiently covered by social insurances and entitlements via the income of their husband. Possibly they (later in this period) worked in a part-time job. The system of taxation mirrored this family-oriented balance of work, income and social security measures. Effect of this model were accumulated disadvantages in wage payment (Gender pay gap, Gender wage gap, Gender pension gap) as well as a gender pension gap as a result of such “careers” in the labor market.

Today we see manifold forms of arrangements of combining family and wage labor. More women are participating in the labor market; now a dual-earner-model is prevailing, where both adults are gaining income, but often still with different results because of gendered discrimination of women in the labor market in relation to men. In a politically mainstream-related strand of discussion and feminist-scientific discourse about _shared responsibilities of

_couples a narrative reigns which focuses on a family-related income – thus fading out a lot of aspects of classist, sexist and racist faultings.

A dual-earner-dual-carer-model would be more adequate to the actual situation of gendered work-division in a labor-oriented form of social and society organization, if we look to normalized family-related models of care and provision. Not to mention the utopia of overcoming this kind of forced shared family work division...

The challenge still lies in the question of how to productively combine family life, care work with gainful employment. A model of a so called “short family fulltime” employment is discussed now, which is promoted by the actual German secretary of family affairs - a Social Democrat minister actually. This model suggests, that in – diverse – forms of family both partners are working on average between 28 and 32 hours per week. It would follow from this suggestion, that – mostly - men reduce their investment in paid employment to give them the chance to take part in care activities in the private sphere, and that women are encouraged to work more hours per week than they do on average now with regard to care duties. Social security provisions seem to have – with regard to that model – leveling effects of work-live-balance and a fairer share of care work obligations between men and women as a couple; economic independence of women might be strengthened, maybe the risk of poverty in old age might be leveled, too.

From a left-feminist point of view, many structural conditions underlying the described model must change: there has to be a cultural change in seeing part-time work as a non-sufficient model of work scheme, as long as there are no . There has to be sufficient supply of daycare structures. And of course, such a model does not function on the basis of low-wage-politics. And of course, these changes would not overcome the neoliberal agenda of down-turned and thus reformed offer of social provisioning so far. This model has a blind spot to the need of redistribution of social security measures, which are not family-bound.

III Social reproduction - Challenges and the need to think new forms of organizing it

In the book “Power, Production and Social Reproduction” (2003), Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill (both from York University, Toronto/Canada) explore critically the concept of social reproduction in depth in a post-fordist globalized world. Starting from a critique of “disciplinary neoliberalism”, which comprises of more authoritative state handling of social reproduction in different countries and globally, they state that “new constitutional mechanisms associated with unrestricted free capital mobility coupled to the offshore world of tax avoidance” (p 28), which led to constrained social policies and the easing of private investors to be free from the need to contribute substantially to the collective costs of social reproduction

With regard to concerns related to social security and social reproduction, also UN 2002 (UNDP 2002; UNRISD 1995) agencies had at that time formulated papers which accordingly raised the issue of social reproduction.

In definition of Bakker/Gill, a progressive concept of *social reproduction* has to integrate several aspects: biological reproduction, reproduction of labor power and social practices connected to caring, socialization and the fulfillment of human needs (p 4). Drawing from

concepts of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Marx, they enlarge the agenda of today's challenges for social reproduction to a global focus with regard to shifting gender orders, the erosion of the family wage and the feminization of survival (p 18).

With regard to "care extractivism" Christa Wichterich (2016) also states challenges in post-fordist new arrangements of social reproduction. she sees social reproduction as concept which critically points out parallels between the extractivism of nature by forced accumulation of capital-driven industries with the "extractivism" of care work and its commodification by global care chains (Arlie Hochschild 2001). A major care workforce of migrant women from the global South is taking care of children, elderly and demented persons across borders and regions; between global South and global North. The global North is extracting care labor from the Global South, were it then causes needs and losses of care provision back home. Personal body-related services in case of surrogate motherhood are as well organised in form of extractivist relations, leaving surrogate mothers often without rights and sufficient medical treatment after giving birth.

Always across lines of social inequality, different levels of provision with social reproduction-related resources, this care extractivism is deeply inserted in social reproduction itself. Wichterich points out, that from a political-economy-related point of view social reproduction is not the "other" side of production, but an integral part of processes of capital accumulation. Therefore, a concept of social reproduction enlarges our understanding of capitalist social practices, forces and structures –as well as gender models. Care economy as a concept thus tries to develop this approach in more depth with regard to differences of social structuring, of familial, individual and cultural living arrangements. She points out, that we have to develop a context-sensitive understanding of forms of social reproduction, including post-colonial informed scrutiny to not wrongly generalize Western/Northern countries' concepts and gender orders. The respective background of existing or non-existent public and welfare structures in different regions of the global North and global South is necessary to be taken into account, on the basis of a self-critical understanding of the political performance of the Global North. Yet, the mentioned care chains remain us to also to understand interdependencies of care economies and social reproduction in an ever more globalized world.

Hence, a comprehensive model of *progressive* ways of organizing social reproduction and social security, if we want to invest in a (today somewhat utopian seeming) perspective of social change, would not give reasons for more inequality and extractivism of natural and human resources (not only) of women. On the contrary, it would allow for decent structures of social reproduction in transformed societies which do not rely on growth-related extractivist modes of production (undocumented work; forced migration by ecological incidents and extractivist effects of resource exploitation) as well as capital-driven structures of social reproduction. Seen from a point of view of an **ecology of care** (Hochschild 2001), we would have to change many structures of institutionalized and familial care provision as well as to reform social rights and entitlements to and around care, their availability and validation, which cross borders of national arrangements. We would also enlarge our understanding of economic structures not only with regard to capital, but also with regard to emotions as a resource in global care chains.

From a gender-analytic point of view we face actually persistent social care arrangements, influenced by globalization, a growing female workforce, but yet persisting gendered divisions of labor. This “dialectics” of care work forces us to think of changed arrangements – culturally, mentally, politically, economically – to foster concepts of social security and reproduction, care work and care provision which allow for a good life for everyone. A changed politics of time as well as of employment schemes and production forms as well as of realities and of shared care responsibilities and practices are not only a feminist dream, but an integral part of socio-ecologically transformed sustainable societies and their mutual exchange relations.

In further thinking and remodeling politics and structures of social reproduction, global social rights may be a concept of further investigation, in addition of human rights which are implemented, but yet often neglected. global social rights would be a possible focus of a transformed understanding of legally extended claims to well-being. If we would practically and factually have implemented such rights with regard to care and decent living conditions and negative effects of climate change - if these rights would be a common point of reference, politics would look like differently than today. It would cover needs and necessities of care issues for everyone, therewith a ground for further development of progressive care structures emerging. As for now, they lack of broad political pressure to be implemented factually. And still the struggles of local and global feminist and worker’s networks, groups and activists are necessary to indicate and formulate demands of a “care revolution”, as one of the actual German networks as a social movement calls itself. This care revolution networks debates center around a transformative conception of change of recent structures of production and social reproduction with regard to care needs of all humans; of care givers as well as care receivers, under non-constraining conditions of publicly funded, accessible and sufficient care infrastructures.

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