



The Production and Reproduction of
SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Conference Report

OPENING CONFERENCE OF THE RESEARCH UNIT “THE
PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES:
GLOBAL CONTEXTS AND CONCEPTS OF LABOR EXPLOITATION”

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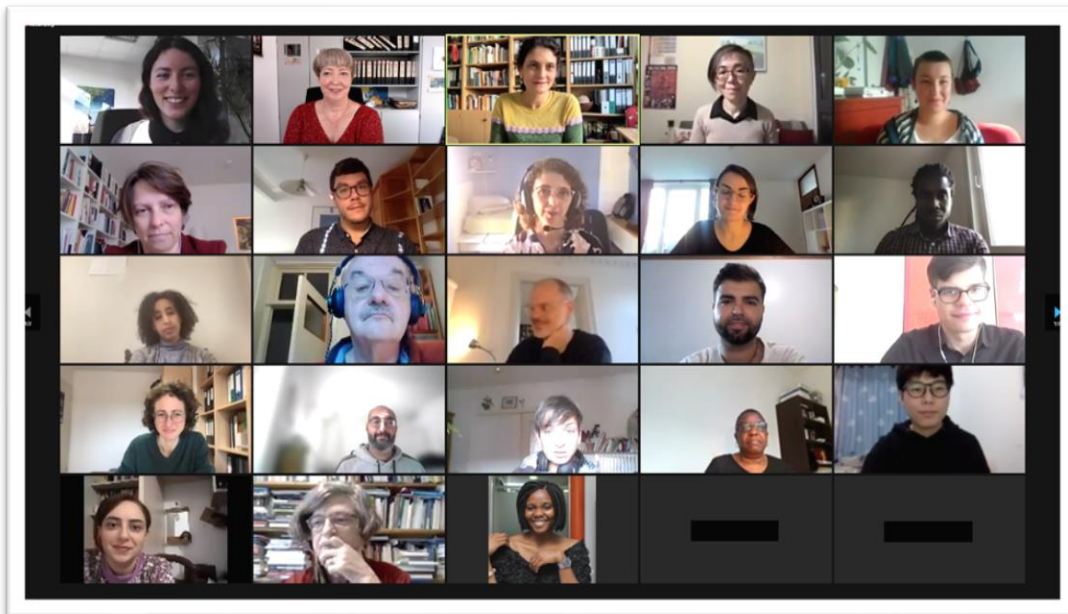
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“The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Contexts and Concepts of Labor Exploitation”

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Participants of the conference „The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities“, 11.11.2021

The opening conference of the same title as the international research unit hosting it took place on November 11 and 12, 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the conference was held online via Zoom. This enabled international participation from both speakers and audience to engage in an initial exchange. As it was the first conference held, the panels mainly focused on presenting the preliminary approaches of the different projects of the unit, whose main objective is to analyze how attempts aimed at increasing equality often have contributed to generating more durable inequalities both from a historical and contemporary perspective.

For the 1st panel of the conference, chaired by Michaela Pelican (University of Cologne - UoC), Cynthia Pizarro (External Advisor;

University of Buenos Aires) held a keynote lecture on “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Labor Migrants: Accentuation of Inequalities”. In her speech she emphasized how the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the different intersecting regimes of mobility in which some peoples’ movements are normalized while others’ are criminalized. Thereby an exacerbation of existing social inequalities and the rise of new ones was produced by this pandemic, which especially affected the Latin American migrant population. She elaborated on how the precarious conditions experienced by many migrants in Latin America were intensified by mitigation measures like closure and militarization of borders, lockdowns and quarantine. This also led to the increasing racialization of the virus, when Covid-19

struck racialized minorities the hardest. Cynthia Pizarro's collaborative research during the Covid-19 pandemic showed that migrant mobility has thus continued but with accentuated inequalities and risks for migrant communities which are related to the migration cycle of origin, transit, destiny and return. It remains now to be seen whether migrants will continue unsafe practices established during the Covid-19 pandemic that lead to smuggling, trafficking, and exploitation and if governments seize the opportunity to institutionalize policies such as militarization and border closure.

The 2nd panel "What makes a politician an expert on colonial labor? The ILO and the concept of 'Native Labor'" was chaired by Ulrike Lindner (UoC) and consisted of a presentation by doctoral researcher Fabiana Kutsche (UoC), enriched by comments made by Daniel Maul (Guest Speaker; University of Oslo) and Marcel van der Linden (External Advisor; University of Amsterdam). In the center of this presentation stood the so-called Committee of Experts on Native Labor, which was initiated in 1926 as a specialized working group of the International Labor Organization (ILO). The concept of 'native labor' was a racist term used for workers of color in the former colonies, therefore creating a double-standard and disguising their exploitation that had already been prohibited under the international labor standards. By drawing on examples of Great Britain and Germany, Fabiana Kutsche examined the choice of personnel in the committee, finding out that, in the eyes of the ILO, an 'expert on native labor' would not be a worker him- or herself or a person living in the dependent territories, but instead mostly white males over the age of 55, who looked back at successful careers in their countries' colonial pasts and had no working class background themselves. They were selected in the

interests of their respective national governments and represented the colonial past's spirit on an international platform. Therefore, this study serves as an example for racist knowledge production and will help to gain an understanding of the intersections between internationalism, colonialism and labor politics in the first half of the 20th century, which also has a great impact on how labor is organized today.

In panel 3, chaired by Tu Huynh (Jinan University), Jonathan Ngeh (UoC) and Anne Kubai (External Advisor; Södertörn University) elaborated on "Debates on 'Trafficking in Persons and Slavery' in Cameroon". Jonathan Ngeh talked about the recent backlash to human trafficking in Cameroon that was fueled by the shared experiences of returned migrant (domestic) workers from the gulf states which included labor exploitation and structural difficulties to return to Cameroon. He identified the importance of exploitation for the grassroots understanding of human trafficking that differs from the focus on coercion in legal terms of human trafficking. This problematic distinction based on agency, which seeks to differentiate (coercive) trafficking from (voluntary) smuggling, produces questionable data about trafficking and adds to the reproduction of social inequalities. Agency seems especially important to the question posed by Anne Kubai whether the history of human trade is repeating itself in the era of global neoliberalism. What really is the difference between slavery then and human trafficking now? Or when and how does trafficking become slavery? The history of trade in humans needs to be understood through peoples' stories to answer these questions. Anne Kubai elaborates how understanding migrants' life situations and decision-making processes can help to critically examine the link between

vulnerabilities, inequalities and human trafficking. Both Jonathan Ngeh and Anne Kubai call for more reliable data and documentation of the complexities of lived experiences of affected persons.

Panel 4 was a roundtable of the research project “Communication during and after Covid-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China” moderated by Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican (both UoC). Its collaborators shared their experiences as African migrants in the United Arab Emirates to pursue the question to which degree and in which ways the pandemic reinforced and still is reinforcing existing inequalities. The inputs pointed out how the pandemic worsened the availability of information of the migrants’ home countries. On the other hand, some participants reported about their positive experience of connecting with friends via media like Zoom and Whatsapp. However, the negative experiences of isolation bringing insecurity and frustration outweighed. To be part of the project enabled the collaborators to exchange experiences and contribute to knowledge production. Furthermore, it allowed the members to get information from different regions that can also be passed on to their local communities, as misinformation is seen as a major problem during the pandemic. The group stressed the privilege of speaking openly about their experiences without being censored or overheard.

In panel 5, chaired by Nicholas Miller (Flagler College/ UoC), Lovise Aalen (Guest Speaker; Chr. Michelsen Institute) and Meron Zeleke Eresso (Addis Ababa University), discussed the contentions surrounding foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia, drawing on their respective research experiences. Lovise Aalen reported that Ethiopia is attractive to

Chinese investment because of political similarities, the externalization of environmental damage away from China, as well as for its geopolitical position at the horn of Africa. Ethiopia is likewise attracted since China serves as a “role model” of economic development. The main reason, however, is Ethiopia’s dividend demography, as Meron Zeleke Eresso pointed out, that serves as a pool for abundant cheap labor. She found that the nature of the jobs of the Ethiopian women she interviewed discouraged political participation. Political activities are likewise not encouraged and existing labor laws not implemented by the government to stay attractive for foreign direct investment to finance its infrastructure projects. The current political instabilities and the lifting of the AGOA agreements with the USA because of the war, further worsened the situation for workers in Ethiopia. How these events influence FDIs from China and other countries remains to be seen.

After the 5th and last panel, Michaela Pelican closed the workshop by reminding the audience of the underlying conundrum that all of the presented examples have in common, that is how attempts to reduce inequality contribute towards producing new or perpetuate existing inequalities. The research unit will continue to analyze the mechanisms that lead to inequality and what role capitalism and neoliberalism as driving forces play in creating different forms of exclusion and exploitation. She further stressed the importance of focusing also on epistemic inequalities through analysis and a methodology that seeks to overcome the coloniality of power.

Thanks are due to all participants, external advisors, guest speakers and the members of the research unit for the presentations and fruitful discussions that invite further exchange.