



The Production and Reproduction of
SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Project Description

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

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

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Principal Investigators:

Prof. Dr. M. Pelican (University of Cologne, Global South Studies Center Cologne – hereafter GSSC)

Prof. Dr. M. Eresso (Addis Ababa University)

Prof. Dr. T. Huynh (Jinan University, Guangzhou)

Prof. Dr. U. Lindner (University of Cologne, GSSC)

Abstract

The starting point for this research unit is a very specific conundrum: Why have attempts at increasing equality often contributed to generating more durable inequalities? To shed some light on this question, this research focuses on concepts and actors and their roles in producing and reproducing social inequalities in the context of colonial and postcolonial labor systems and regimes of mobility in the Global South. In this study, inequalities are understood as relational and historically embedded and as comprising several dimensions, including social, economic, and epistemic inequality.¹ More specifically, the research unit focuses on selected concepts that are locally grounded and describe forms of social inequalities linked to different types of labor exploitation, namely “native labor,” “new slavery,” “human trafficking,” and “cheap/abundant labor.” The unit members investigate – both from a historical and contemporary perspective – how these concepts circulated on a global scale and were negotiated, translated, and adapted by institutional and individual actors with the aim of challenging social inequalities, while eventually contributing to the (re-)production of those same, or new, inequalities.

The research unit intends to reconcile debates on conceptual history, labor history, and inequality and combines perspectives from the Global South and North. Ultimately, it aims to interpret global labor regimes and to draw lessons from experiences for societies in both the Global South and North.

¹ Our interpretation of the terms Global South/Global North takes inspiration from the understanding developed at the Global South Studies Center of the University of Cologne, where our research unit is hosted, and where vibrant discussions on the term have endorsed a relational understanding (<https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/en/the-center/global-south>).

1. Aim of the research unit and research questions

At the heart of our research unit is a conundrum: that attempts at increasing equality often contribute to generating durable inequality. We focus on concepts and actors, both institutional and individual, and their roles in producing and reproducing social inequalities in the context of colonial and postcolonial labor systems and regimes of mobility in the Global South. The inequalities under study take various forms and are characterized by labor exploitation, unequal power relations, graded rights, and gendered and racial exclusions. We specifically focus on exploitative labor arrangements because labor exploitation is a vital factor in engendering durable inequalities. Exploitation is here understood in Wertheimer's (1996) broad definition: the exploited give more than they get in return. Drawing on Tilly (1999, 2001) and Quijano (2000), we understand inequality as relational and historically embedded and as comprising several dimensions, including social, economic, and epistemic inequality. While there is a significant body of literature on inequality with regard to income and wealth that has recently been much debated in academic and policy circles (Piketty 2014), our research unit foregrounds the role of concepts and actors in producing durable inequalities through labor exploitation, thus addressing a lacuna in research.

Our research unit discusses selected concepts that are locally grounded and used to frame forms of labor exploitation, namely "native labor," "new slavery," "human trafficking," and "cheap/abundant labor." While these concepts are circulating on a global scale, local actors engage in processes of negotiation, translation, and adaptation, thus challenging and transforming their content. Language here plays a crucial role, as the concepts' unidirectional and multidirectional translation and vernacularization can radically complicate their meanings. The actors under study are institutions and individuals involved in regulating labor systems and those with experience of labor exploitation. They include policymakers, legislators, international organizations, and civil society representatives.

The research unit investigates how concepts of labor exploitation have been used with the aim of challenging social inequalities, while eventually contributing to the production and reproduction of those same, or new, inequalities. We approach our topic in two complementary ways: On the one hand, we study the concepts' global circulation in order to trace possible linkages across time and space. On the other hand, we examine the production and reproduction of social inequalities through the lens of grounded situations – that is, by analyzing localized cases in their regional, national, and global contexts.

The local contexts under study – Cameroon, China, Ethiopia, India, and South and East Africa – have all been shaped by the effects of global capitalism, spread through colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal development policies that have reinforced economic disparities and inequalities of power between the Global South and North. Besides studying social inequalities, our research unit addresses epistemic inequalities. We see anthropology and

history as disciplines that are particularly apt to critically question the assumed universality of the Social Sciences. We understand the *South* as an ontological critique of a hegemonic North-Atlantic paradigm, as an imaginary space from which social categories grounded in historical and cultural experiences can emerge as theoretical categories. Moreover, the effort of thinking from, about, and through the *South* is important in order to consider the latitudes of this concept, and how it resonates within distinct disciplinary fields (Alatas 2006; Costa Pinheiro 2013; Rosa 2014).

The research unit comprises four projects, all addressing contexts of labor exploitation in different parts of the Global South from a historical (Huynh, Lindner) and contemporary perspective (Eresso, Pelican). The Principal Investigators are experienced scholars of history and social anthropology, settled in three different countries and continents (China, Ethiopia, Germany), who build on their previous collaborations and expertise. They engage with the following overarching questions:

- How do institutional and individual actors negotiate, translate, adapt, and strategically use concepts of labor exploitation?
- How do the concepts under study circulate and relate to one another? How do they conceal and stabilize forms of social inequality?
- Why have old concepts of labor exploitation and their contemporary derivatives (e.g., “contemporary slavery”) regained importance in the context of increasing global inequalities?

While the four projects, each in its own way, respond to these questions, they also pay attention to the role of global structures (e.g., colonialism, racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism) and social categories (e.g., race, gender, and class) in shaping labor exploitation and the production of social inequalities. Our shared goal is to jointly develop theories grounded in historical and cultural experiences in the South to explain the roles of concepts and actors in producing and reproducing social inequalities through labor exploitation.

2. Projects²

From global standards to unequal treatment: The ILO and the concept of “native labor”

Lindner looks at the International Labor Organization (ILO) and its handling of the issue of “native labor” from the 1920s to 1950s. The ILO, created in 1919 at the peace conference in Versailles, had a tripartite structure comprised of workers, employers, and governments. It

² The research unit has been complemented by a special project on COVID-19, also funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The project is entitled “Communication during and after COVID-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China”. For more details see: <https://socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/covid-19-project>.

developed a strong expertise in the field of labor policy, pushed for better conditions for workers in its member states, and aimed to establish universal labor standards. Its initial focus was on industrial labor in Western countries. However, when delegates of the ILO such as A. Thomas tried to extend its standards to colonial societies during the 1920s, they were rebuked by most colonial governments (Maul 2012). Following debates on forced and compulsory labor as well as on slavery and indentured labor (framed as “new slavery”) that attracted public attention in Europe and North America, the League of Nations issued the Slavery Convention in 1926. The ILO was mandated by the League to develop regulations on forced labor, still facing the opposition of the colonial governments, who drew on racial stereotypes and the argument of trusteeship and civilizing mission to avoid stricter regulations. To address the problem of differential treatment of workers in Southern colonies and Northern metropolises, the ILO adopted the term “native labor” in its own publications and statements (Rodríguez-Piñero 2005), thereby introducing a form of double standard. The term was commonly used for the indigenous workforce in British colonies. The Forced Labor Convention was finally issued in 1930, but ratified by many governments only in the 1950s. While it obliged the signatories to abolish forced labor, many exceptions were made, e.g., forced labor was still allowed for infrastructure projects in colonies. Focusing on the concept of “native labor,” the project asks: In what ways has the concept contributed to reifying social inequalities across the global color line and to affirming colonial structures? How has the concept’s underlying assumption affected negotiations between the ILO, colonial powers, and emerging unions in the colonies? The project concentrates on the colonial government of India, the only colony with delegates in the ILO, and British Southern Rhodesia. It draws on materials from the ILO Archive, Geneva; The National Archive, London; the National Archives of India, New Delhi; and the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Chinese indentured labor as “new slavery”: Perspectives from South Africa and China

Huynh engages with debates concerning “new slavery,” particularly as they relate to the deployment of Chinese indentured labor in early 1900s South Africa. The concept of “new slavery” was initially metaphorically used by British abolitionists to describe the conditions of Indian indentured laborers, whose demand rose in the colonies that had emancipated their slave populations. This term was soon extended to the Chinese laborers, who were indentured to work in the gold mining industry when the Transvaal Colony was annexed by Britain after the South African Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The war created opportunities for African laborers to seek other livelihood options, and many chose to stay away from the gold mines. The industry’s subsequent urgent demand for cheap, unskilled labor was framed as both a South African and imperial problem. As an imperial problem, the choice of Chinese indentured laborers as a stopgap to the labor shortage was widely contested, involving the British

Commonwealth countries (e.g., Australia and New Zealand) as well as different constituencies in Britain and South Africa. “New slavery” and, also, “Chinese slavery” were concepts that were used by those who, for different reasons, opposed deploying Chinese indentured laborers in the Transvaal. These debates and the afterlife of the concept of new slavery since the indentured labor system was officially abolished by the British government in 1917 are well documented in English sources. But, Chinese sources and views of the Chinese people have not yet been adequately examined. This project draws inspiration from Rebecca Karl’s 2002 study, pointing out how a small but influential group of Chinese intellectuals, in collaboration with those in the diaspora, looked out at the world in the early 20th century to learn lessons that could be used to mobilize everyday people to oppose the Qing imperial government. South Africa was one site of observation/learning, and slavery as well as race relations were among the knowledges that informed their anti-imperialist vision. This project, then, extends Karl’s study, asking whether the group of Chinese intellectuals encountered new slavery and/or Chinese slavery, particularly in their observation of South Africa? If so, what were the views of both or either concepts? Was new slavery used as a metaphor similar to slavery, adapted to deepen the sense of Chineseness and inequality experienced by the Han people under Manchu rule? What new meaning did new slavery gain in their transmission to a Chinese context, where the people were already engaged in revolution? Answers to these questions are sought through archival research in Taiwan, the UK, and South Africa and through ethnographic fieldwork in Shandong Province (China), where the majority of the Chinese indentured laborers were recruited from.

Debates on “trafficking in persons and slavery” in Cameroon

Pelican studies public and legal debates about “trafficking in persons and slavery” in Cameroon and how they relate to forms of exploitation and social inequality. Cameroon is both a source and a destination of children and adults, particularly women, being exposed to exploitative labor on a national and transnational scale. These arrangements are rooted in long-standing cultural practices (Lawrence & Roberts 2012). “Trafficking in persons” is a legal concept framed by national and international policymakers and has been applied in different parts of the world, including Africa (Adepoju 2005). It refers to the recruitment and transfer of persons by means of coercion or deception for the purpose of exploitation. The legislative process in Cameroon has entailed diverse conceptual and linguistic convolutions due to the country’s bilingual (French and English) and bijural system. As preliminary research suggests, the translation process (from “trafficking” to “*traite*” to “slavery”) has resulted in the use of the term slavery in the English version of the country’s current anti-trafficking law. The notion of trafficking in persons and slavery was first introduced in 2005 with a focus on the possible exploitation and abuse of children sent from rural areas to stay with relatives in the city. In

2011, the legislation was adjusted to include adults, as women and youths are also exposed to the dangers of abusive work arrangements, particularly in a transnational context. Recently, the case of Cameroonian women exploited as domestic workers in the Gulf States, who publicized their experiences of physical and sexual abuse, has refueled debates. Policymakers and legislators are very aware of close links between poverty, social inequality, and high-risk migration, and have been working on an integrated policy framework. Yet the current legislation does not provide the necessary instruments to assist the victims of human trafficking, but rather contributes to their further exploitation, driving them into new abusive arrangements. This project asks: How is the concept of trafficking in persons and slavery understood and used by different parties in Cameroon, including policymakers, legislators, civil society organizations, journalists, and individuals with trafficking experience? How does the current policy framework contribute to questioning or reinforcing existing structures of exploitation along the lines of gender and generation? These questions are addressed via ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and qualitative interviews with governmental/non-governmental actors and with women migrants in Cameroon and Kuwait. The research also draws on the analyses of legal and policy texts so as to reconstruct the legislative process.

“Development” fostering social inequality? A study on labor arrangements in Ethiopia’s manufacturing sector

Eresso looks at debates on “development” and practices of employment in the manufacturing sector in Ethiopia. Her focus is on understanding the role of the Ethiopian state and national development policies in producing and reproducing social inequality. Ethiopia follows a developmental state model with the objective of ensuring equitable economic development and social justice. It has set an ambitious national vision of becoming a lower-middle-income country by 2025, backed by different policies and strategies. One such policy is the national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II), covering the period from 2015 – 2020, which focuses on ensuring rapid, sustainable, and broad-based growth through enhancing manufacturing sector productivity (Oqubai 2015). The state has sponsored the construction of mega-industrial parks attracting well-known global brands from Europe, the US and Asia. A major selling point to attract Foreign Direct Investment is the “cheap/abundant labor” in the country. The much-touted employment opportunities created by these manufacturing industries are not matched by decent working conditions, thus contributing to growing economic inequality. Most of the workers in the industrial parks and the manufacturing sector earn less than 30 USD a month, which is way below the government’s own minimum wage for its civil servants. Moreover, they are exposed to working conditions below the standard set by the Ethiopian labor law (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly 2019). This contribution seeks to

examine the paradox of a government committed to economic development and social equality while at the same time reinforcing inequality, and poses the following question: How does the government's concept of development contribute to reducing or increasing social inequality in Ethiopia? What are the working conditions of factory workers, and what informal and legal strategies do they use to advance their interests in the workplace? To answer these questions, Eresso does ethnographic fieldwork and conducts qualitative interviews with policymakers and workers employed at Industrial Parks located at two different sites in the country.

3. State of the art/relation to existing research

Social inequality has only been recognized as a significant problem since the Enlightenment. Seminal thinkers such as Marx, Weber, Lenski, Wallerstein, and Harvey developed economic and sociological theories about the creation and stabilization of inequality which are still relevant today. Many current theories of inequality have also been inspired by thinkers from Latin America, where economic inequality has been more prevalent (e.g., Costa 2011). Recent research has concentrated on unequal capital and income distribution in Europe and the US; more relevant for our research unit are works on social and economic inequalities on a global scale (Milanovic 2017).

There has been significant research on our main thematic focus, labor exploitation, in the fields of history and anthropology. In recent years, labor history and studies on labor migration have opened up to a global dimension beyond their original focus on Europe and the Global North (van der Linden 2008). Also, the transition from forms of bonded labor (slavery, indentured labor, native labor, human trafficking) to wage labor is no longer addressed as an evolutionarily even trajectory, but as a dispersed process that constantly creates and recreates new inequalities (Brass & van der Linden 1997; Tappe & Lindner 2016) with differing experiences for women and men (Jain & Reddock 1998).

As we deal explicitly with concepts of inequality in the Global South, we also work with the postcolonial critique of the Northern hegemony of knowledge production (Chakrabarty 2000). African scholars, such as Nyamnjoh (2012), have questioned existing epistemological hierarchies and have called for more attention to be paid to alternative systems of knowledge. Importantly for us, Mbembe (2017) has argued that particularly experiences of slavery, colonialism, and racism and the concomitant historical narrative have shaped the contemporary world order and forms of inequality.

4. Theoretical framework and methodological approaches

We draw inspiration from theoretical contributions in history, anthropology, and sociology. In our analysis of social inequalities, we firstly rely on structural theory, such as Tilly's (1999,

2001) work on durable inequalities. Tilly uses a relational approach to inequality linked to social categories, such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, education, and occupation. He argues against common explanations of inequality as the result of individual differences, and foregrounds the role of organizations in producing and maintaining categorical inequality. Importantly for our research unit, Tilly stresses the significance of exploitation (extraction of surplus value from subordinate workers) and adaptation (elaboration of social routines perpetuate exploitative arrangements) for the production of durable inequalities. Drawing on Tilly's approach, we argue that social inequalities are not simply pre-given, but are also sites of contention, negotiation, and reification. By focusing on the role of institutional and individual actors as well as on the circulation of concepts of labor exploitation, we pay attention to processes and organizational logics that produce durable inequalities across both the Global South and North. Going beyond structuralist theory, we take up criticism of Tilly (Wright 2000) and integrate postcolonial voices that theorize epistemic inequalities. We draw inspiration from Quijano's *Coloniality of Power* (2000), which addresses Eurocentrism, racism, modernity, and colonialism as concepts that promote historical and present-day conditions of dependency, and more generally, inequality (Costa Pinheiro 2019).

Our understanding of concepts and their global circulation is informed by Bal (2002) and Das (2018). Agreeing with Bal (2002), concepts are never simply descriptive, but also programmatic and normative; they travel between scholars, disciplines, historical periods, and geographically dispersed communities. Going beyond Bal's focus on the academic realm, we include governments, international institutions, companies, and representatives of civil society as vital actors who promote the circulation of concepts across the South-North divide, and whom we see as part and parcel of an "epistemic community" (Haas 1992).

With regard to research methodology, the research unit combines well-structured ethnographic and archival research with the aim of developing innovative approaches for dealing with multi-sited cases, seemingly unconnected, yet conceptually linked. Ethnographic fieldwork, such as participant observation at field sites and semi-structured interviews with state and non-state actors, enables us to excavate policy and legislative processes, often not apparent or not well documented. Archival research, consisting of collecting and organizing meeting minutes, correspondences, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers, allows us to reconstruct public debates and the circulation of concepts. Textual and audio-visual materials that are part of archives and ethnographic studies are examined for their impact on public perception of the social inequalities under study.

The research unit comprises seemingly disparate case studies, separated by region, language, and history. But the mechanisms (e.g., colonialism, racism, capitalism, development, and neoliberalism) that operate within the cases, yielding quite different spatial configurations on the ground, also operate through them and connect the cases. We advocate

for methodological connections (instead of comparisons) between the cases, inspired by Subrahmanyam's (1997) approach to connected histories. This facilitates the observation of cases that are not empirically associated, but can be methodologically connected as an exercise in observation of similar outcomes of different historical processes influenced by colonialism and development.

We are mindful of real risks and ethical issues that each project differently confronts as well as of ethical standards that apply to all four projects (e.g., confidentiality, data management). We develop methodological and ethical guidelines for our research collaboration that not only benefit the unit members, but are also useful for researchers and students genuinely interested in interdisciplinary and transcontinental collaboration.

5. Relation to the aims of the call (with respect to the development of a global perspective)

Our research unit responds to the thematic pillar "Institutions and Networks" outlined in the call. We study institutional and individual actors embedded in global networks (e.g., abolitionists, human, and labor rights organizations) and involved in standardization processes (e.g., anti-slavery or anti-trafficking legislation) from a contemporary and historical perspective. Each project investigates examples of labor exploitation, paying attention to local, regional, and international dimensions.

Our research unit is both academically and politically relevant. By integrating MA students, PhD candidates, and postdoc researchers, we consciously promote junior scholars (see 7. and 8.). We address contemporary sociopolitical issues of the highest relevance in the Global South and the Global North, as the rise of political instability and populism in several of our research sites accentuates and reinforces inequalities. Finally, we create a network of scholars who continue working together after the conclusion of the research unit. Our long-term goal is to interpret global labor regimes and draw lessons from experiences for societies in the Global South and North.

6. Scientific added value to be expected

In contrast to existing studies that focus on the concomitant production of inequalities through capitalism and their consequences for societies, we center on processes aimed at addressing social inequalities that lead to their stabilization. As we show in the projects of the research unit, the concepts under study highlight and delineate contexts of labor exploitation, while at the same time concealing other areas of exploitation.

The unit's scientific value also lies in its transdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to understanding social inequality. Unlike mainstream academic debates that are often rooted in particular disciplines, we are working at the interface of historical, anthropological, and

sociological discussions on the subjects of inequality, labor history, labor migration, labor exploitation, and conceptual history. With our focus on grounded situations and the circulation of concepts, we bring into conversation different voices, perspectives, and knowledge economies. Our goal is to develop a more just and representative understanding of social inequality by connecting South–North and South–South knowledge production, thereby contributing to decentering and overcoming epistemic inequalities.

7. Principal Investigators (PIs), their expertise and tasks within the research unit

The research unit is based on long-standing collaboration between the unit participants, Eresso, and Huynh (2 PIs in GS countries), and Lindner and Pelican (2 PIs in GN countries). It comprises four projects with different temporal and regional foci, each headed by one of the research unit members. The unit members are experienced scholars located in three continents who build on ongoing academic exchange via the Global South Studies Center (GSSC) and in projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Volkswagen Foundation (VW): Eresso/Pelican have a mentoring relationship as part of Eresso's current postdoctoral VW fellowship; Huynh/Pelican have collaborated in the context of labor migration from Africa to China (Jinan University, DFG).

The research unit stands to benefit from previous research by Eresso on female labor migration from Ethiopia to Djibouti (Eresso 2017, 2019) and Huynh's expertise on indentured labor from China to South Africa (Huynh 2013). It expands on the works by Lindner on bonded/indentured labor in European colonies in Africa (Lindner 2016) and by Pelican on labor migration from Africa to the Gulf States (Pelican 2015, Damir-Geilsdorf & Pelican 2019).

The research unit will run for a duration of four years. The PIs each realize their projects and participate in joint research and knowledge production as well as in the teaching and co-supervision of Master and PhD students. Besides the PIs, the unit members include four Master students (with Eresso, Huynh), the PhD researcher Fabiana Kutsche (with Lindner), and the postdoc researcher Jonathan Ngeh (with Pelican). Their work is supported by student and research assistants and the unit's administrative coordinator Ulrike Wesch. In addition, we will benefit from regular exchange with our external advisers Anne Kubai (Uppsala University), Cynthia Pizarro (Universidad de Buenos Aires) and Marcel van der Linden (University of Amsterdam) to sharpen our ideas and ensure the quality of our work. It is our aim to integrate students and junior researchers from all levels and regional backgrounds as well as to promote academic exchange and mutual learning processes among all members of the research unit.

8. Organization of group and work plan

While members conduct research at different sites, our joint research unit meetings are divided between China, Ethiopia, and Germany, where we are each individually based. Our communication strategy includes monthly exchanges between the group members, for which we create a virtual workspace, drawing on secure internet applications and following current standards of data protection. At the same time, we launch a website of the research unit to communicate research findings to the general public, which is hosted by the GSSC (<https://socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/>). In addition to our regular informal exchanges, we organize yearly unit meetings, which consecutively take place in the location of each partner and are combined with a public workshop, a panel, or a summer school. This enables us to discuss our joint overall research questions and provide opportunities to disseminate knowledge.

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