

WS 08
The (contested) primacy of neoliberal thinking

30.09.2019, Teil 1: 14:00-15:30 Uhr / Teil 2: 16:00-17:30 Uhr, Raum D434

Organisiert von / organized by:

Janina Kehr (Universität Bern)

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Since the neoliberal turn in the 1970s, concepts of efficiency, productivity, competition, and individual merit have gained importance within and far beyond the realm of economic thought. This trend has been further accelerated by the financial crisis and national as well as supra-national interventions directed toward the implementation of austerity measures, the deregulation of labor markets, and the overall cutting of social welfare. Neoliberal economic thinking and its consequences have thus become an intrinsic part of the organization of everyday lives and the ways societies are conceived of. As a specific body of knowledge, neoliberal thinking has almost become a “natural” and thus non-negotiable way of seeing and understanding the world.

In this workshop, we wish to discuss papers that deal with empirical examples in which the imperative of neoliberal economic thought is shaping the ways our interlocutors think, speak, work, organize themselves and interpret the world around them. Contributions from the realm of the study of markets, healthcare, migration, welfare, the household or any other field are welcome. Conceptually, the workshop aims to draw upon inputs from feminist economic anthropology as well as from the history of knowledge and science. Combining these fields, we hope to develop an understanding of the contested primacy of neoliberal economic thought as a mode of governance that influences most spheres of social life, independent from whether they are perceived as “economic” or “non-economic” in the first place. We thereby wish to gain new empirical insights of how the primacy of neoliberal economic thought seeps into diverse life projects, social relations, and institutional settings. Also, we wish to interrogate how neoliberal knowledge and its consequences distinctly affect individuals and groups as well as their possibilities of negotiation taking into account inequalities along racial, gender, nationality and class lines.

Vortragende Teil 1 / Speakers part 1:

Julia Pauli (Universität Hamburg)

Never enough. Neoliberal intimacies in Namibian middle class marriages

Constant reasoning about marriage and love has become a major preoccupation of Namibian middle class couples. Often with anxiety, couples try to understand what makes a bond work. Much of this thinking borrows from neoliberal constructions of the self. Ideas on how to improve oneself have become common since Namibia’s Independence in 1990 when Namibia’s former socialist liberation movement SWAPO turned into a capitalism embracing, all-time government. Advice on different techniques of self-formation is now readily available in stores, churches or fitness gyms. Supermarkets provide self-help literature on how to be attractive. Fitness centers like Virgin Active shape the body and religious marriage counselors the soul. Yet, the downside of all this effort is a prevalent fear of not going ahead and even failing. Although divorce rates are low, most couples interviewed in 2015/6 in Windhoek were anxious about their investments into their bodies, minds and loves, fearing that it is ‘never enough’. The paper explores how in the everyday discourses and practices of urban middle class couples neoliberal promises of endless happiness are fused with intimate anxieties of love’s ending.

Veronika Siegl (Universität Bern)

Free to choose? The fragile truths of commercial surrogacy

The notion of free choice has become a cornerstone of neoliberal thought as well as a central concern in debates around commercial surrogacy. This concern largely evolves around the question whether becoming a surrogate is a matter of choice or desperation. In my presentation, I engage with these debates and show how feminist endeavours of countering the image of women as passive victims have been co-opted by a neoliberal and libertarian discourse; a discourse that constructs individuals as “free to choose” and hence as individually responsible for their fate. Ethnographically following the story of a German couple and a Ukrainian surrogate, I examine how, when and by whom freedom of choice and responsibility are accepted, rejected, redirected, or negotiated. I furthermore scrutinize the ways in which surrogacy agencies in Ukraine take up these notions in their intermediary position, from which they significantly shape the relationship between intended parents and surrogates. My presentation shows that the precarious conditions of commercial surrogacy in Ukraine are based on and result in certain imaginaries that I conceptualise as “fragile truths”.

Andri Tschudi (The Graduate Institute Geneva)

For-profit with a heart?

Neoliberal reforms, charity and ethical business in private hospital care in South India

In the last three decades, the neoliberal restructuring of the Indian healthcare sector has allowed for the rapid expansion of large for-profit hospital groups (so-called corporate hospitals). Critical social science research shows how the growth of corporate hospital chains has led to rising costs, deepening health inequities and the erosion of professional ethics through the exacerbation of for-profit motifs in doctor-patient relationships. While highlighting the relentless profit maximisation pursued by private hospital providers, these accounts pay less attention to the actual norms and values guiding hospital care in the corporate mode. Using twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in a large for-profit hospital in Bengaluru, this paper explores how different actors negotiate the fissures between the for-profit and charitable inclinations of the hospital as older traditions of community service and charity intersect with neoliberal notions of accountability, efficiency and entrepreneurship. In this way, the paper contributes to the understanding of the moralisation of corporate activities and the turn towards ethical business-making in neoliberal market regimes.

Carole Ammann (Universität Bern) und

Susan Thieme (Universität Bern)

“I am a physician, not a scribe” – Impacts of neoliberalism on nurses and physicians

“Why must we always note down so much? I am a physician, not a trained scribe.” Similar complaints about the increase of administrative duties and the lack of time physicians and nurses can spend in their primary field of responsibility are omnipresent. For some years, the development of the health care system in Switzerland, as in many other countries, has been driven by neoliberal processes such as privatisation, commercialisation, new forms of payment, and management principles of economic efficiency and quality assurance. In this paper, we interrogate how the primacy of neoliberal thinking affects nurses and physicians in their daily working life. We analyse their bargain possibilities to influence such developments by taking into consideration other factors such as age, gender, position, and nationality. We hereby draw on qualitative data we collected outside the hospital, namely media articles, governmental documents, and reports by different actors within the healthcare sector. Furthermore, we did expert interviews with stakeholders and

a variety of healthcare professionals. Inside the hospital, we did an institutional ethnography that involved doing observations by shadowing nurses and physicians in their daily work in three different wards, collecting documents, and conducting interviews with members of the middle and senior management.

Vortragende Teil 2 / Speakers part 2:

Johannes Lenhard (Max Planck – Cambridge Centre for Ethics, Economy and Social Change)
Champions that disrupt and scale – How VCs are trying to make the new economic world order (and are not always succeeding)

Venture capital funds – equity investors into start ups – filter how our future economy looks like. VCs have already produced some of the most highly-valued companies today including Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook and Microsoft (Picardo 2018). How do these small, but so influential investment firms spread a highly competitive ('we fund only the top 0.01% of founder-champions'), innovation-obsessed ('we fund companies that disrupt industries') and growth-possessed ('we fund models that scale globally') culture in new companies? Based on almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 100+ venture capital partners in Munich, Berlin, London, San Francisco and New York, I will present preliminary answers to the question above analyzing three terms at the core of the VC investment process: VCs fund champions developing a disruptive business model that can be scaled globally. What do these terms mean and how do they influence VCs – and hence the startups they fund? I will in a second step hint at one barrier to the spreading of this VC DNA: founders that don't want to take VC money because they resist to be disruptive and scalable champions.

Agathe Mora (University of Sussex)

Rule of law on the dark side of neoliberal accountability in post-War Kosovo

This paper analyses the discourse and practice of reconstruction as and through 'rule of law' in post-war Kosovo. It situates this discourse within a broader rhetoric of neoliberal governance to focus on the impact of such rhetoric on the ways in which rule of law operates and is rendered accountable in the day-to-day. Based on ethnographic fieldwork within the European Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), the paper focuses on the everyday work of a small team of legal professionals at the Supreme Court of Kosovo mandated to rule over post-conflict property restitution appeal cases. It discusses EULEX's internal audit culture to illustrate how, through a series of managerial techniques of reporting, rule of law has become a neoliberal, box-ticking exercise in bureaucratic accountability. Such audit overkill directly impacts the way EULEX's transitional justice programme has come to understand the 'justice' it works towards. This paper asks what happens on the dark side of accountability, in the interstices between the utopian promises of rule of law and the neoliberal form its implementation takes, and the moral fault lines this disconnect generates.

Jon Schubert (Brunel University London)

The fantasy of neoliberal efficiency and frictionless imports in an oil-dependent economy

Cargo shipping has over the past decades become one of the most emblematic stand-ins for globalisation, peddling a seductive imagery of frictionless transnational trade, just-in-time logistics, and increasingly cost-effective global reallocation of high volumes of goods. Backed by the norma-

tive might of transnational institutions, instruments such as UNCTAD's Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) are being rolled out across Africa, promising the 'dematerialisation' of customs processing. This presentation charts the intensive work required to produce this fantasy of frictionless trade in and around the Atlantic port of Lobito, Angola. In a context where a drop in world oil prices has diminished imports by 50-60% since 2014, and where the new, shiny, oil-backed transport infrastructures have ground to an almost complete standstill, the paper looks at the practices and discourses of the social actors involved in making this import-dependent economy work, and how they deal with the seeming failure of the promises of transnationally connected economic growth. How do they negotiate the tensions between neoliberal, crony capitalist, and state dirigist logics that are played out around Lobito's transport hub, and how do they reconcile these ideas that chafe against their everyday experiences of living in a state of economic crisis?

Discussant: Stefan Leins (Universität Konstanz)

Stefan Leins ist seit 2019 Juniorprofessor für Ethnologie an der Universität Konstanz. Zuvor war er Dozent am Institut für Sozialanthropologie und Empirische Kulturwissenschaft der Universität Zürich. Er interessiert sich für die Kultur des Ökonomischen sowie Theorien des Kapitalismus und forscht zu den Themen Wirtschaftswissen, Finanzmarktpraktiken und Wertschöpfungsketten. Sein Buch *Stories of Capitalism: Inside the Role of Financial Analysts* erschien 2018 bei der University of Chicago Press.