

Special Session:

Beyond Development and Resource Extractivism: Feminist Perspectives

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Abstract (long version)

Principles and ethics of a caring and sustainable economy

In the special session “Beyond Development and Resource Extractivism: Feminist Perspectives” I will present some of the results of an international workshop and an ongoing debate between feminist researcher from the global south and the global north (see www.genanet.de/care-eco.html?&L=1).

Our feminist concept of a sustainable and caring economy is based on a change of perspective. This new perspective puts the until today externalized and invisible (and therefore often destroyed) so called “reproductive” – the paid and unpaid care work as well as the productivity of nature – in the center of social and economic thinking and acting. This makes it possible to discover hierarchical gender relations which need to be transformed, as well as principles from the field of reproductive work aiming at transforming the prevalent principles of the market economy. In such an economic system growth is not an end in itself but a means for a “good life” for all human beings and for the maintenance of nature’s capabilities to regenerate. Economic actions are not targeted towards maximizing profit but are oriented to conserve and regenerate their living basis today and for the future (Biesecker/Hofmeister 2010).

A caring society – from a global to a local level – should be one in which care penetrates all major societal institutions because care/caring is not just an activity or a form of work, but in a deeper sense, it is a system of social relations that recognizes not only the interdependence between human beings but also their vulnerability, and urges people to be aware of asymmetrical relations and dependencies that shape both individuals’ lives and society (Schnabl 2005; Gottschlich 2012). „Marginalizing care furthers the myth that our successes are achieved as autonomous individuals, and as such, we have no responsibility to share the fruits of our success with others or to dedicate public resources to the work of care” (Lawson 2009: 210). Caring is also an ethical position that involves a commitment to others, to the community, to society at large and to nature (Ventura-Dias 2013). Based on the experience of the life world and the care economy, feminist approaches describe the special quality of caring. This quality is expressed in shouldering responsibility for others and making a conscious commitment to other people and nature (Gottschlich 2014). In this sense caring implies “reaching out to something other than the self - implying a deep empathy with other human and non-human persons” (Tronto 1993: 102).

Feminist scientists have recognized the multidimensional, complex and contradictory nature of care for women's identity and gender equity. They have introduced care as a category relevant to the individual and the global society and as indispensable to human coexistence but that there is hardly an area as important as care (work) being subject to so much aversion, degradation and marginalisation (unfortunately in the discourse on sustainability as well). Furthermore, the current distribution of care responsibility itself is a problem of equity. Consequently, feminist scientists call for an equitable cross-gender distribution of work rather than delegating care (almost exclusively) to women. They also advocate a new balance when it comes to assuming responsibility for private and public care rather than promoting privatisation (Gottschlich 2014). Re-thinking and re-shaping of the responsibility for caring is urgently needed due to the fact that on the most general level, caring can be perceived as a group of activities that include “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto 1993: 103, original emphasis).

Based on this understanding of interdependence the following principles of an ethics of care make an indispensable contribution to sustain livelihoods and lead to a reorganization of economy (Gottschlich 2014). Such a caring economy

- focuses on the needs of people and
- aims at facilitating life processes and ensuring a good life for everyone,
- is embedded in social-ecological context, focusses on live-giving processes,
- needs to be error tolerant and reversible
- is anticipating long-term consequences
- and is acting thoughtfully, slowly and transparent in terms of time and space (Biesecker et al. 2000).

However, care is not only a social virtue and a behavioral norm to a sustainable economy. It must be established as an attitude and a behavioral norm within and between societies and their economies which takes into account asymmetries of power (Gottschlich 2014).

References

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