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Introduction: Corona and Work around the Globe

Corona and Work around the Globe is about the simultaneity of events that have affected people and their daily lives, their work routine, and their understanding of what it means to be a citizen in different parts of the world during this global pandemic. In many cases, experiences of lockdown, standstill, empty streets, closed shops, and no-go public areas are similar.

These similarities between government measures to contain the crisis – social distancing, disinfection and, in many places, mask requirements – are impressive, but sometimes worrying. There are also vast differences. Where do welfare concepts work, where do they not? Where are parliamentary rights suspended and where are they not? Where are human rights trampled on and where are they not? How much has work changed under coronavirus conditions? And what does that mean for a possible ‘Post Corona’ scenario? We tried to find out.

The Lockdown

On March 11, 2020, the federal state of Berlin directed coronavirus measures at the institutions of higher education in Berlin. As of the end of the working day on March 20, 2020, operations at all Berlin scientific institutions and thus also at the Humboldt-Universität were limited to emergency levels, and they closed their doors. re:work closed its doors, too. Our center remained empty until June 2020. Since then, the strict measures have been gradually relaxed, but even today the university has not returned to normal operations. Currently, due to rapidly rising infection rates, the university is even re-introducing a number of restrictions.

Overnight, all communication switched to online or via telephone. During this ghostly time, we received a lot of messages from our alumni group of fellows. All thoughts revolved around this new, decisive, and hitherto unknown experience, from which everyone was now equally affected: COVID-19. In the aim of sharing this with everyone we know, scattered around the globe, the idea for the book at hand arose. We invited colleagues living and working in various parts of the world to bring this idea to life with us. The Berlin Center for Global Engagement (BCGE), an initiative of the Berlin University Alliance, provided financial support.

Corona and Work around the Globe

There is little doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally disrupted the world of work, causing massive human suffering and laying bare the extreme vulnerability of many millions of workers and self-employed individuals. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the large-scale workplace closures in response to COVID-19 have led to a worldwide reduction in hours worked of 10.7 percent in the second quarter of this year, which translates into a loss of more than three hundred million jobs. In the world of work, coronavirus has been particularly damaging for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, thus dramatically exposing the devastating consequences of the massive inequalities underpinning societies across the globe. Worldwide, over six out of ten working people make their living in the informal economy. Referring

again to ILO data, out of more than two billion workers, 1.6 billion face an imminent threat to their livelihoods as average income in the informal economy shrunk by approximately sixty percent in the first month of the pandemic alone. This breathtaking decline has intensified global poverty. Moreover, the pandemic has impacted women and men in the world of work in specific ways. For instance, women are over-represented in the more affected sectors such as services or in occupations dealing with the pandemic on the frontline, for example health care and care work. Finally, young people all over the world, many of them already squeezed in labor markets before the pandemic broke out, have seen their prospects deteriorate sharply. Those leaving or soon to leave education now face a bleak future in labor markets reeling under the impact of COVID-19. Some commentators are already describing them as the “lockdown generation.”

Views from Different Corners of the World

Against this backdrop, this volume aims to provide a global perspective on the transformations in the world of work brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.¹ It enables us to reflect on the effects of coronavirus by bringing together case studies from various corners of the globe. These case studies explore the ways in which coronavirus has shaped labor relations and work practices in different parts of the world, locating these insights within a broader historical perspective and conversation. We aim to break down the general statistics and trends into glimpses of concrete experiences of workers during the pandemic, of workplaces transformed or destroyed, of workers protesting against political measures, of professions particularly exposed to coronavirus, and also of the changing nature of some professions.

The coronavirus crisis has also strengthened populist and anti-democratic forces in the United States, Western and Eastern Europe, Brazil, and India. This has led, among other things, to a blatant denial of scientific expertise and fierce attacks on international organizations such as the World Health Organization. These tendencies have coincided with a transformation of universities and scholarly work in many parts of the world, with scholars facing increasing constraints on their academic freedom, as some participants in our project, for example those based in Brazil, India, or even Japan, are currently experiencing for themselves.

This book is based on a truly global academic cooperation. We asked each of the authors to write an essay on how coronavirus has changed work and labor in particular neighborhoods, cities, regions, or even states. This main theme was refined by questions such as to what extent disruptions and intensifications had instituted changes for the better or worse, or if changing features of labor had also changed (or were related to changes in) the cityscape, welfare politics, an awareness of the strength or failure of government, the democratic order. We did not specify the format. The authors were free to write in any way they chose. Accordingly, the spectrum ranges from reports and heavily source-based analyses to more literary forms. In this kaleidoscope, some authors used photographs, drawings, or interviews, some used statistics and graphics, others did without all of that. In terms of the main content, some essays focus on people and their professions and activities. Others are interested in labor law and labor rights, or draw historical comparisons. The protagonists of the essays range from informal workers and industrial workers, to artists, employees

¹ There are currently a number of efforts to analyze the effects of Corona on work. See e.g. Aaron Ben-Ner, “Service Work in the Pandemic Economy,” In *International Labor and Working-Class History* 2020 (online, October 12, 2020).

in public offices and universities, and unemployed people. All essays are based on the personal experiences of the authors and their concerns in these difficult times. What was most important for us was the regional spectrum, that our authors focused on the region they are living in, where they witnessed the coronavirus pandemic.

Amid the diversity, two main themes emerge: Inequality and contestations of democratic principles and parliamentarism. The authors approach these overarching focal points using different examples. Accordingly, we have bundled the essays into six subject areas.

They are preceded by a prologue. MAHUA SARKAR, one of the editors of this book series, writes about the university as a work site in times of Corona – which is appropriate, since, after all, all authors come from the university environment.

The essays in the first section, *Despair and Indifference at the Margins*, describe the force with which the poorest, the people at the margins of various societies, have been hit by coronavirus and the measures to contain the pandemic. SUPURNA BANERJEE conducted numerous interviews with migrant and local workers in the informal sector of Kolkata. She spoke to people who have acquired skills in niche areas of the informal sector so as to earn a modest but reliable income. With the lockdown, many activities were lost and those affected had to be inventive in order to find a job – often in areas in which they had no skills at all – and earn at least enough to feed themselves and their families. For the protagonists of ALINA SANDRA CUCU's essay, the professional flexibility that the workers in Banerjee's essay find challenging seems to be a familiar normal. Cucu analyzes the lives of those in Romania who have always had to switch from job to job and take whatever they can get, regardless of their skills and talents. NICOLE MAYER-AHUJA moves this topic to Germany. Coronavirus and associated measures to stop it from spreading bring the issue of inequality onto the agenda. Mayer-Ahuja reconstructs the supposed solidarity that emerged in certain German cities across class, gender, and race boundaries in the first period after the lockdown, as well as the sharp decline in this trend and its subsequent reversal over the course of the pandemic – even though solidarity is one of the few ways we can tackle the new social challenges. CHITRA JOSHI compares the severity with which Indian labor migrants were and are affected by catastrophic pandemics and the measures taken against them today and in the past.

The section *Being 'Relevant to the System' Is Female* contains three essays that address so-called systemic relevance in very different ways. LARISSA ROSA CORRÊA and PAULO FONTES study the situation of domestic workers forced to risk their lives in the pandemic mainly for three reasons: they have to stay at home in their favelas in Rio de Janeiro shaped by high infection rates; they have to endure financial shortages rendering them unable to support their families; or they have to expose themselves to the virus on public transport or through their employers while being exploited for extra work that goes unpaid. BRIDGET KENNY examines the constraints on low-paid service workers under the various government security levels to contain the pandemic in Johannesburg, especially the female cleaning personnel who maintain streets and buildings in the center of the city. Her findings are strikingly similar to those of her Brazilian colleagues. The suffering related to COVID-19 is female in many places. BAHRU ZEWEDE tells a refreshing counter-story about a female fashion designer in Addis Ababa, who makes a virtue out of necessity and takes to producing masks in a system-relevant manner.

All over the world, attempts are being made, again and again, to relate the number of deaths in the coronavirus crisis to the quality of the respective health care systems. The better a system works, the fewer deaths there are. In the section *The Health System in Which We Live*, four essays discuss the possibilities and limitations of welfare systems in the countries in which the authors live. MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN focuses on nurses, who often work under poor conditions and who are chronically underpaid. At the height of the pandemic, they were hailed as heroines. When they

tried to use this praise to fight for better wages, the hype fell silent. DEBORAH JAMES, a member of London School of Economics Department of Anthropology's Covid and Care Research Group, presents a jointly-authored analysis of the changing care networks in the United Kingdom during the coronavirus crisis and the importance of the third sector in the face of state withdrawal and state-driven austerity. PREBEN KAARSHOLM writes about the sudden changes in the care system in Denmark that accompanied the coronavirus crisis, drawing comparisons with Norway and Sweden, which have followed different paths in many respects. He reflects on the potential return of Keynesianism and economic policies of debt financing, public investments, and multiplier effects after a long drought of neoliberalism. YOKO TANAKA writes about the comparatively harmless course of the coronavirus crisis in Japan, which may be due to fortunate circumstances but has been claimed by the Japanese government as a product of their success, while their measures have remained inadequate and dysfunctional.

The fourth section, *Thwarted Youth*, comprises three essays dealing with problems and opportunities, especially concerning young people and their career prospects – as well as those who provide their start in life, namely the teachers. MARY JO MAYNES and ANN WALTNER describe the situation faced by young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four in Minneapolis in the United States who are disconnected from work and school under the current pandemic conditions. The interruption of their plans for first jobs, internships, volunteer work, etc. has an effect far beyond simple life planning. Insecurity and depression contrast with new forms of empowerment, such as engagement in the Black Lives Matter protests as observable generational markers of the new COVID-19 generation. The essay by JAMES WILLIAMS considers the mandatory school closures in Great Britain during lockdown. How does this affect learning and teaching? Williams examines how the various actors – the children and their parents, the teachers and school administrators and the teachers' union – have reacted to this. BABACAR FALL reports from one of the world's poorest regions, the Sahel, covering countries such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. He writes about the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD), an initiative that was set up to give young girls from this region a professional perspective. A large-scale project has enabled girls to produce masks for the entire Sahel zone and make a useful contribution to prevention during the pandemic.

In the section *Fighting for Justice in the Pandemic*, LEON FINK compares low-wage immigrant poultry workers and the United States police, two groups whose very polarity at opposite ends of the spectrum of control and collective influence raises increasingly pressing challenges for community health, welfare, and democratic self-rule. CRISTIANA SCHETTINI shows how sex workers in Argentina fought long struggles for their work to be recognized and how state policy has taken back hard-won rights as a side effect of measures to limit the pandemic. Airlines around the world were among the first and particularly hardest hit by the spread of coronavirus. ON BARAK traces the connection between military and civil aviation and explains the resulting protections for Israeli pilots with a military background in the global aviation crisis compared with their colleagues around the world.

The last section, *When Private and Public Spaces Become Blurred*, brings together essays on changes in working conditions and working methods that have emerged in the wake of local pandemic lockdowns. In the history of work, the division between the private sphere and the workplace has been fiercely contested. Against this background and with a look at historical pandemic experiences, JÜRGEN KOCKA and SANDRINE KOTT look at the phenomenon of the 'home office.' DANIEL EISENBERG also addresses remote working, but approaches it in a methodologically different way. In a kind of self-observation, he describes the simultaneity of the experience of being at home, of being in intensive exchange with colleagues via the internet, the neighborhood's empty

streets, and the news of the coronavirus crisis and the demonstrations against racism in many American cities.

Current Issues in the World, Told Visually

This book also includes visual contributions that do not require words. The documentary photographer and artist MAURICE WEISS accompanied a medical team in an emergency ward for coronavirus patients at the Ernst-von-Bergmann hospital in Potsdam for three weeks in March/April 2020. His photo series “Black Ward” depicts their pressures, stress, and helplessness in the face of coronavirus, about which little was still known at the time. ELLEN ROTHENBERG is a concept artist and feminist political activist. In her collage “‘This is Ridiculous,’ Voting as Labor During COVID-19: A Report from the United States,” she considers inequality in the United States, which emerged more strongly than ever during the coronavirus crisis. She observed the primary elections in Wisconsin and Georgia, which took place on April 7 and June 9, 2020, and demonstrates the effort and cost of exercising the right to vote under coronavirus conditions. Interviews with Rothenberg and Weiss contextualize their work as artists as well as their art around the subject of work.

The chapters for this book were written over the European summer months of 2020. By the time it goes to print in December 2020, the world may once again look completely different. It is and can only be a snapshot of a completely unexpected, unusual time for everyone – from the Americas and Africa to Europe to Asia.