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# The Compulsion to Repeat as long as the Fundamentals Remain Unchanged – An Introduction

*Antonia Kupfer/Constanze Stutz*

## 1 Introduction

Although it is potentially possible, humankind has still not succeeded in securing the basis of life for all people. A major reason is the dominant global capitalist economy, based on the use and exploitation of nature. This disturbed metabolism between economy and nature has caused many deaths already and poses an immediately life-threatening dimension for even privileged ones now. Devastating weather and climate catastrophes and an increase in infertile and inhospitable parts of the Earth are forcing ever more people to migrate. Since the economic crisis of 2008/2009, the growth and potentials of expansion of the post-Fordist production phase have come to an end. In turn, the “economic-ecological pincer crisis” (Dörre, 2019: 28, translated by C.S.), with its corresponding rampant social inequality, is becoming increasingly apparent, and is exacerbating the already widely diagnosed crisis of social reproduction (Aulenbacher, 2010; Winker, 2015). Large parts of the working population are being confronted with strong reductions in wage and reproductive work and are suffering from exhaustion. After three years of the Covid-19 pandemic, existential problems have intensified for many, with millions of people far from living a good life.

This state of affairs is not accepted by everyone. It is precisely these prevailing conditions of social reproduction (Bhattacharya & Vogel, 2017) that are being increasingly challenged by a resurgence of social movements across the globe (Arruzza, 2018). In recent years, an intensification of struggles around work and demands for the reorganization of care relations can be observed, along with international labour strikes and unrest in feminized employment sectors (Artus et al., 2020). In Germany, for example, a consolidation of labour struggles in this sector can be seen, beginning with the strike of nurses and physicians and other care workers of the Berlin Charité hospital in 2015 (Dücker, 2022). At the same time, transnational networks have been collectively organizing a powerful international feminist strike movement (Gago, 2021). These feminist strikes are united by an expanded concept of work and labour<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> With work, we refer to paid activities, accomplished by employees, the self-employed, civil servants or

which includes domestic and care work, as well as voluntary free labour (Federici, 1975).

At the same time, the social devaluation of feminized sectors of paid work and the more difficult conditions of reproduction for an ever-larger proportion of wage workers are not the only fields of struggle over social reproduction. Social struggles are taking place over energy, climate and transportation policies, with the goal of achieving affordable energy and transport (as in Kazakhstan in January 2022) while slowing climate change and preserving the planet (Backhouse & Tittor, 2019). With bitter disputes at borders, the question of how to deal with refugees and migrants is one of the most pressing issues that many countries are facing (Casseo & Goppel, 2012; Hess et al., 2017; Maffei, 2019; Buckel et al., 2021). Calls by the tenants' rights movement for the expropriation and socialization of private housing corporations have also grown in recent years (Vollmer, 2019).

As different as these social movements and struggles may be, they are united on one fundamental level: they are all about securing livelihoods and better foundations for social and ecological reproduction.

## 2 Concepts: Change, Crisis and Livelihoods

The contradiction between the possibility of a more egalitarian society and continuing social inequality appears to be growing (see also Kupfer & Stutz, 2022). If the necessary knowledge seems to be there, the question remains of why nothing – or not enough – is happening to secure the livelihoods of all people. In the presence of dynamics of multiple crises, armed conflicts and wars and the catastrophe of climate change, precise conceptual work is necessary. The increased need for scientific debates about social dynamics comes at a time when the conditions (especially time and money) for learning and teaching in educational institutions and science are being systematically dismantled.

Constance Stutz thinks that the notion of “authoritarian liberalism” (*libéralisme autoritaire*) coined by Grégorie Chamayou (2020 [2018]) grasps well the current phenomenon of defending the status quo through arguments of constraint. Following Chamayou, the struggle to secure livelihoods is taking

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illegalized people, that generally have a positive (since creative and constructive) meaning for the working subject. With labour, we refer to unpaid activities in production and/or services, as well as to work that emphasizes the exploitative dimension of the work relation, especially the exploitation of the worker or employee, self-employed person or civil servant by the employer and/or the person or organization paying the workforce. Emphasizing the exploitative dimension does not neglect or exclude the fact that labour can also be perceived as fulfilling, rewarding, creative or otherwise positive – by both the working subject as well as the client or employer or other benefiting person or group. We have tried to use these two notions as precisely as possible, and if we refer to both dimensions, we use a slash between them (work/labour). For a deeper explanation of the distinction between work and labour, see Kupfer 2024.

place within a framework of social restructuring. Neoliberal modes of power are based on “a fundamental functional and strategic link between reducing the scope of state intervention and strengthening state authority within a limited area” (ibid.: 347, translated by C.S.) in which “subaltern pressures on policymaking are curtailed” (ibid.: 346, translated by C.S.).

Antonia Kupfer prefers the notion of “fascist tendencies” to describe current dynamics in policy, politics and society, with an emphasis on continuity and an aggravation of conventional power relations. The term fascism is highly contested and contains many potential dangers, of which failing to grasp empirical complexities and banalization are two. In using the term (and others), Kupfer is intentionally taking a position, with the aim of finding as precise a description and analysis of current social developments as possible. To this aim, Kupfer views it as productive to follow Klaus Fritzsche (1977), in terms of detecting fascist potential in current societies and insisting on a macro-sociological perspective of society as a whole. Fritzsche, who conceptualizes fascism concisely as both an “expression of crisis and [an] approach to a problem” (ibid.: 455, translated by A.K.) comprehends six theses, from which Kupfer emphasizes the following as being crucial today: namely, the emergence of fascism as a petit bourgeois protest movement with emotionally diffuse attitudes against institutions of the system in power, which rises under the protection of growing groups of capital (ibid.: 456).

Guido Speckmann and Gerd Wiegel (2021 [2012]) list five minimum conditions for a meaningful use of the term fascism, summarizing that “All previous fascisms arose in situations of political and social crisis in the respective countries and offered themselves as a special form of bourgeois rule to secure the existence of the capitalist mode of production with the direct exercise of violence” (ibid.: 60, translated by deepl.com). For Kupfer, the notion of fascist tendencies captures more precisely the violence of current domination strategies, in which life is suppressed, exploited, violated and ended for the benefit of a small privileged group; something that Chamayou’s term “authoritarian” fails to adequately depict.

Regarding the specificity of the present moment, Stutz argues that the concept of fascism covers more than it can illuminate. Even if the current worldwide situation shows similarities, fascism, from a historical perspective, is something very different, as unlike fascist constellations, the present mode of rule is borne by the postulate of a sovereign, independent will detached from the demos.

There are probably several reasons for this fruitful difference of opinion, such as our different ages, experiences and professional positions, as well as our different political perspectives and normative values. Both of us nevertheless agree on the importance of applying a classical Marxist analysis of society to the analysis of currently contested issues such as care and ecology. By this we argue that an understanding of social phenomena requires a feminist-historical-materialistic analysis of their social contexts in order to reveal

unequal distributions of power and thus violence, exploitation and suppression. Thus, we believe that an analysis of the coming-into-being of structures needs to be part of the analysis of what is currently being contested and claimed by various contemporary social movements aimed at securing livelihoods and better foundations for social and ecological reproduction. In terms of research methods, the analysis of coming-into-being includes a reconstruction of subjective perspectives, following Gabriele Rosenthal (2008), such as those collected through interviews. Such a reconstruction includes a description of the development of the perspective by referring to the social context in which it developed.

While we differ in our emphasis, we agree on a question that we consider key: How do we conceptualize crisis in the current situation in which everything seems to be in crisis? In order to integrate both the forces that persist, as well as those that are compelled to change by the crisis, a focus on how social movements politicize crisis and the subjective perceptions of crisis are of great importance. Since we consider the interrelation of structures and agencies as constitutive for societies and social phenomena, we also ask: How do subjects interpret their experiences and perceptions of crisis? How do seemingly objective crises, like the crisis of reproduction, influence the habits of individuals? Do these individuals also enter into crisis, or do they rather adapt to and pacify the experiences of crisis? What role do social struggles and movements play in this?

In order not to objectify social crisis processes, it is necessary to take a differentiated look at one of the main crisis-driving modes of capitalist production: the structural indifference of the capitalist mode of production towards its socio-ecological preconditions (for the feminist social theoretical perspective in German, see: von Werlhof, 1978; Mies, 1980; Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1994; Beer, 1990; later picked up by Wissen, 2020; Kupfer, 2023). This mode has intensified in recent decades. Since the global economic crisis of 2008/2009, it has become increasingly clear that the modes of production, life and being (Gramsci, 1996) of neoliberally-governed financial market capitalism can no longer be permanently stabilized. Rather, they are visibly condensing into an “economic-ecological pincer crisis” (Dörre, 2019: 28) that heralds the end of the phase of globalized post-Fordist capitalism, without a new regime of accumulation – with its corresponding gendered ways of life, regulating institutions and property relations – having already taken hold. What emerges clearly is that “historical capitalism [is] characterized not only by a cyclical process of creative destruction, but also by a long-term tendency to destroy existing livelihoods more rapidly than to create new ones” (Silver, 2018: 203, translated by C.S.).

One dimension of the current accumulation and aggravation of the crisis is that it is widely perceived as new. Yet it is important to remember that authors writing from the 1970s to the 1990s (see above for the German authors articulating a feminist social theoretical critique of capitalist modes of production) were

themselves part of a long tradition of critiquing capitalism as an economic system and way of life that destroys livelihoods. This perception of novelty ties back to the socio-political developments of the last 30 years. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, and with the loss of an alternative, capitalism presented itself as the only possible political-economic system. Mark Fisher (2009) refers to this as “capitalist realism”. Contemporary feminist theorists have taken up the thread of the structural indifference of the capitalist mode of production towards its socio-ecological preconditions once again and are following the tradition of eco-feminist and materialist theory on their own terms. They conceptualize the contradictory organization of the sphere of devalued care work in the present-day crisis as a comprehensive crisis of social reproduction (Aulenbacher, 2010; Bhattacharya & Vogel, 2017). While politically we may easily agree with them, we need to take a closer look on a conceptual level. How are crisis tendencies handled in different social spheres and sectors? Is it possible to include an analysis of the dynamics of devaluation and investment and include at the same time subjective interpretations (Dück, 2022)?

If we conceptualized “social crisis” as a principally open situation without a predicable (preliminary) outcome – because by social crisis we refer to phenomena that are characterized as being contested – we can add depth to the (contested) analysis of transformations. In concrete terms, a focus on the contested enables us to integrate persisting forces and find practices of solidarity. As is true for all social analysis, the investigation of social changes requires us to take into account social contexts, which in turn are always composed of (contested) social structures and practices. For the current analysis of social and ecological reproduction, we consider Dück’s (2022) emphasis on subjective interpretations especially insightful for the understanding of the current social crisis. Nevertheless, while we do include subjective interpretations in our analysis, we do not echo them without having first analysed them (Kupfer, 2015; Kupfer 2024) – indeed, we recognize this as an important emancipatory research strategy in itself. Thus, we follow Gabriele Rosenthal (2008) in dealing with interviewees’ narratives in a reconstructive way.

Finally, we observe a significant shift towards criminalizing and repressing activists in social movements in recent years; this took an especially pointed turn in Germany in spring 2023. This criminalization could be interpreted as a way of securing the capitalist mode of production by the direct exercise of violence, as Speckmann and Wiegel have ascribed to attempts to solve crises that they describe as fascist. In fact, while the impending problems of climate change become ever more evident, dominant policies and politics steadfastly adhere to a paradigm of wealth through growth, instead of considering degrowth as a way to secure livelihoods.

In Germany, for instance, the nature of contestation seems to have reached another level in terms of the intensity and violence with which the federal states are reforming police legislation to enhance the repressive possibilities regarding

activists engaged (often using tactics of civil disobedience) against capitalism, sexism, racism, fascism and neo-Nazism, as well as for increased protection of the environment and ecology. In May 2023, activists of the environmental protest group Letzte Generation (Last Generation), whose most widespread form of protest has involved gluing themselves onto streets in order to block car traffic and demand enhancements to public transportation instead, were accused of being a criminal organization (Bayrisches Landeskriminalamt, 2023). The United Nations and Amnesty International have criticized this criminalization and have accused the police of allowing a severe encroachment of fundamental rights (United Nations, 2023; Gschoßmann, 2023). Even though the attorney general's office in Munich has admitted to some mistakes (Engert, 2023), this repression is part of a shift in discourse towards an intensification of authoritarian security policy by mostly right-wing politicians. Repression against environmental activists is not limited to Germany. In France, the large environmental movement Les Soulèvements de la Terre was banned in June 2023 (République Française, 2023; Les Soulèvements de la Terre, 2023), while in other countries, such as Indonesia, activists are being arrested (Amnesty International, 2023).

Till now we have talked about livelihoods being contested. But what do we mean by livelihood? The notion of livelihood – the basis of existence or source of life – comprises three important assumptions. First, we refer to entities – material, physical, biological – outside of human beings, with their own systems and processes. Photosynthesis is thus one example of a livelihood. Second, humans are social, cultural and natural beings, and as such are dependent on livelihoods. Third, livelihoods are finite if ecological systems are destroyed. So far, livelihoods are something that exists apart and independent from human beings. Thus, by livelihoods we refer to the material conditions of human existence. The notion of livelihood is related to the notion of nature, which is a material reality that is not the result of human will. However, over the course of human civilization, humans have increasingly influenced nature, which makes it impossible to see nature as “the other” to society. At the same time, societies were always shaped by natural conditions such as seasons. The notion of nature also changes historically and in relation to societies' ability to influence and control it.

Eco-feminism, a scientific trend that started in the 1970s and which is focused on revealing the connection between the exploitation of nature and of women, continues to be important to this day. Indeed, “ecofeminism opened the door to the recognition of women's knowledge and wisdom. It invites us to think about the elements that lie behind identity constructions and how this relationship is differentiated around elements such as environment, ethnic affiliation, age, religion and class” (Larrea et al., 2006: 27, translated by deeppl.com) According to Sissy Larrea and her five co-authors from Ecuador, social eco-feminism is characterized by an integrative approach and knowledge, which is different to the cultural eco-feminism of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies and the ecological political economy of Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayer

and Esther Wangari (1996). Mark Münzel (1987) fundamentally questions, from an epistemological perspective, ethno-ecological research findings by non-indigenous or non-aboriginal people. We consider his critique useful, as it guides researchers to systematically reflect on their methods and interpretations. Nevertheless, we do not consider this shortcoming to be a reason to abolish this approach altogether, in light of the assumingly few publications by indigenous and aboriginal people during the late 1980s. Due to lack of time, we admit to this shortcoming in our own work here by not taking work by indigenous and aboriginal people into account, but have rather followed publications we could access more easily.

In sum, it seems adequate to assume interdependencies between nature and society, and thus to state that the two are in a dialectical relationship (see Görg, 1999: 11). Through a dialectical perspective, nature and society are two different areas characterized by their mutual relatedness (Brand & Reusswig, 2007: 656). According to Clark and York (2005), Marx conceptualized human history as part of – though not subsumed by – natural history:

that is, society is embedded in nature and dependent on it, although there are distinct social and natural processes (...). A dialectical relationship exists between society and nature, as they continually transform each other in their coevolutionary development (...). The direction of this relationship is not predetermined, the future remains open (ibid.: 327).

They add that “[t]he dialectical materialist perspective recognizes that the world is one of constant change but not one where anything goes. Constraints and possibilities remain in the structural conditions of the world” (ibid.: 332).

The dialectical perspective is also crucial for the emancipation of people. Following Görg (1999), Horkheimer and Adorno claim in their book “Dialectic of Enlightenment” (1972 [1947])

that man, in spite of all construction of an object world ‘for himself’, recognizes nature as an alien (external as well as internal) condition of his existence, that he recognizes that in spite of, or rather because of, all projections of his impulses and purposes onto nature, he nevertheless also remains attached to it in a certain respect. As long as he does not recognize these conditions also as an element that is nevertheless also an *independent reality* in spite of all meaning it has for man in the first place, his own development, his emancipation from social domination as well as his relation to his own as well as to the external nature remains deformed. The nature-dominating thinking and acting can thus not exhaust the specifically human possibilities for reflection and self-realization and at the same time undermines the conditions of its own existence (Görg, 1999: 126–127, italics in original).



Consequently, livelihood struggles are directed towards the preservation of external and internal nature, comprising, for example, the conservation of woods and animals, as well as the promotion of breaks and other improvements to working conditions in paid work in order to maintain the workforce. With this, livelihood struggles are struggles over social relations to nature.

Livelihood struggles are directed against an exploitative and extractive relation to nature. They stretch from abstract visions of the good life (such as *Buen Vivir*) to the concrete struggles of blocking coal diggers. For a couple of years now, societies of the Global North are also being confronted with the destruction of nature and climate change in a way that poses an existential threat. For example, draught is increasingly leading to water shortages, which as a consequence has also excluded rivers as a means of transportation (this happened to the river Rhine in the summer of 2022). However, most destruction still takes place in the Global South, which means that the main perpetrators are not suffering the consequences of their actions. Despite this realization, powerful Western states like the US and member states of the EU are predominantly pursuing a policy and politics of greenwashing and technofixes as part of the “Inflation Reduction Act” and Green New Deal (Kupfer, 2023).

From the abundance of livelihood struggles to choose from, we have chosen to focus on those carried out by the social movement for climate justice. We have selected the climate justice movement because it is pushing a fundamental claim for system change to address an inherently multidimensional crisis. With this, it goes beyond local initiatives relating to specific issues, such as imposing a speed limit for a single residential road. This does not mean that the climate justice movement does not engage in protest against the local destruction of nature – it does – but its agenda is much broader and local issues are incorporated into wider narratives about the current systems of capitalism, sexism, racism and ableism. Thus, the movement is fighting against various attacks on livelihoods simultaneously. Additionally, the climate justice movement is a transnational movement, which is well suited to our volume that aims to achieve a global perspective.

In addition to looking at the social movement for climate justice, we will also focus on states’ reactions to the current multidimensional crisis, where we observe broadly two ways of dealing with it. The first, already mentioned, is being carried out by the EU and the US, and could be subsumed under the notion of Green New Deal (though since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this project has been partially postponed). The second is being carried out by individual states (such as Poland and Hungary) that are intentionally dismantling democratic institutions. However, in terms of states’ policies and politics, and the already existing and increasing repression of activists, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between authoritarian and democratic states, which is itself a dimension of the current crisis we have pointed to above.