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The Commons We Want

A Review of Selected Social Anthropology Literature for the XIX Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons in Nairobi, June 19-24, 2023

Subtheme 7: Global Health Commons Between Pandemic and Glocal Health

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Introduction

In the debate of social anthropology, *Global Health* is a relevant topic in different ways. Disciplines such as biological anthropology or medical anthropology are increasingly concerned with the role of global health in commons. During the literature research, certain themes repeatedly came up and emerged as important debates in social anthropology. Firstly, we will talk about care work, an important topic in general and a significant debate in anthropology. The literature examines how care work is organized: if it is privatised, organised by the state, or organised by commons. Secondly, we will show how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced communities, the importance of commons and what inequalities emerged. The differences between how nations handled the situation is also an important topic. Thirdly, we will examine how anthropology deals with inequalities in access to medicine and contraceptives. Other themes which are important but not discussed in this literary review are the role of medicinal plants, how they are used, the role they play in commons and their accessibility. Another theme is mental health and the role it plays in societies and commons. We will sum up this text with a brief summary and an outlook on how anthropology about global health in commons might develop.

Care work

One area where we found literature is the organisation of care work. One point that is discussed repeatedly in this field of anthropology is the meaning of the term *care*. A common issue in the literature is who does the care work and how it is organized. Is it privatized? Is it regulated by the state? Are there communities that perform care work and who pays for it? Another important sub-theme is transnational care work and the associated global care chains. A term that seemed important to me is "commoning care".

Definition of care

The term *care* is difficult to define, with different understandings of the term. Two anthropologists who tried to define the word are Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher. They have established five points that define *care*.

- “1. *Caring about*. At this first phase of care, someone, or some group notices unmet caring needs.
2. *Caring for*. Once needs are identified, someone or some group has to take responsibility to make certain that these needs are met.
3. *Caregiving*. The third phase of caring requires that the actual caregiving work be done.
4. *Care receiving*. Once care work is done, there will be a response from the person, thing, group, animal or plant, or environment that has been cared for. Observing that response and making judgments about it is the fourth phase of care.
5. *Caring with*: *Caring with* occurs when a group of people can rely upon an ongoing cycle of care to continue to meet their caring needs.” (Tronto 2017: 31)

These are the points that Fisher and Tronto wrote down, that should define *care*. The last point was added by Tronto afterwards. (Tronto 2017: 32)

The 'care crisis'

The 'crisis of care' is a topic that comes up in different disciplines, including anthropology. The care crisis refers to the challenges and inequalities in care work, including caregiving responsibilities for children, elderly people, and people with disabilities, as well as household maintenance and community support. It highlights the insufficiency and undervaluation of care work, which is often performed by women and marginalised groups, and the lack of support systems and infrastructure to meet the growing care needs in societies. The care crisis is characterised by a lack of affordable and accessible childcare, limited support for family caregivers, inadequate social welfare policies, and the reliance on unpaid and informal care arrangements. It is a multidimensional issue that intersects with gender inequality, economic disparities, and social injustices, and it requires systemic changes and policy interventions to address the care needs of individuals and promote social well-being. (Fraser 2016) In the last years, the crisis has grown even bigger, prompting the search for solutions.

Transnational care work

Transnational care work is becoming an increasingly significant issue. On the one hand, globalization has led to increasing transnational contacts and more transnational marriages. The transnational labour market has also led to the growth of transnational care work. This complex network of transnational care work is also called the global care chain. One author who deals with this topic is Sarah Schilliger. She researches and writes about commuter migrant women who go to Switzerland from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia to do care work because they do not get paid enough in their home country to feed their families. While they are paid enough in Switzerland to support their families back home, they receive much lower wages than Swiss workers. They are hired as cheap labour, raising significant questions about the fairness and equity of their wages compared to the minimum wage in Switzerland. (Schilliger, 2015) Another problem arising from this phenomenon is that the supply gap is only geographically shifted. Switzerland has fewer problems, but the situation in the workers' countries of origin, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, is worse. There are further problems with the working conditions in Switzerland, with workers often required to be available 24 hours a day. Over time, the commuter migrants have begun to fight back against the poor working conditions. They have formed communities where they can exchange ideas with other commuter migrants and fight together against the circumstances. There is always a catholic mass on Sundays, which has become a meeting point for the community. (Schilliger, 2015)

Another author who explores global care chains is Bianca Brijnath. She gives the example of her grandmother, who migrated from India to the United States and does not receive care or financial support from the government. As a result, the care work has to be organised by the family. Another point is that through the migration of the family members into other countries, family members needing care are left

alone in the country of origin, without the care they require and often in countries in which there is insufficient or no government care support (Brijnath 2009).

Commoning care

There is significant debate about the organisation of care work and who should be responsible for its organisation. Corinna Dengler did research in so-called degrowth societies on how care work is organised. Dengler looks for another solution beyond the private – public dichotomy by thinking of ‘commoning care’. Her paper “Commoning Care: Feminist Degrowth Visions for a Socio-Ecological Transformation” explores the organisation of care work in degrowth societies, which aim for social and ecological sustainability, as well as gender and environmental equality. It is based on degrowth research and the concept of commons and feminist ecology, and questions the strategy of bringing unpaid care work to the monetarist economy. A feminist degrowth concept means destabilising dichotomies and overcoming the border between the monetarist economy and the invisible economy of socio-ecological provisioning. Dengler suggests an emancipatory decommodification and the commoning of care work in a sphere created out of the public and private sphere. It should be a new sphere of common and transformed care work that persists at the margins of capitalism, which is being (re)created by social movements worldwide. (Dengler, 2021)

Impacts of Covid-19

One area that social anthropology has been concerned with in recent years is the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a major impact on how people lived together. Anthropology has been primarily concerned with how people responded to such a pandemic and the different ways this situation was handled. The anthropological literature highlights the different reactions to the situation depending on the country, community and grouping, etc. In this context, the term "vulnerability" is often mentioned and plays an important role.

Drylands during Covid-19

One text that deals with the impacts of Covid-19 is “Pastoralists Under Covid-19 Lockdown” from Joana Roque de Pinho. The text appeared in the book "Drylands Facing Changes," (Kronenburg et al (eds.) 2023) which looks at how drylands are changing and the resulting implications. It presents research into how the pastoralists in Kenyan and Mongolian dealt with and reacted to the situation of the lockdown and highlights how local herders responded to the restrictions imposed on social interactions, mobility, and economic activities. It emphasises that despite the challenges posed by the lockdown, pastoral communities exhibited resilience and adaptability. Roque dePinho describes that the pastoralists relied on their traditional knowledge, institutions, and solidarity to navigate the crisis. The livestock-based food systems, pastoral institutions, and collective action emerged as strengths during this time. While some individuals and groups of the pastoral communities thrived, the research acknowledges that the

pandemic's complexity continued to unfold even after the lifting of lockdowns. Factors such as varying containment measures, viral mutations, vaccination campaigns and economic restart attempts created ongoing challenges. For example, the resumption of tourism and conservation policies in the Maasai Mara and an unseasonable drought further restricted pastoralism and negatively impacted cattle market prices. In Mongolia, infection rates increased, leading to tighter restrictions. It concludes by emphasising the ongoing research into the legacies of the pandemic on marginalised dryland populations and the need to understand the evolving (post-)pandemic processes that continue to affect their daily lives and aspirations. (Roque de Pinho, 2023)

Importance of local commons

Many new commons were built during the pandemic: feminist commons have emerged, and also religious communities have become more important. Due to increasing inequality during the epidemic, local commons have been active in fighting for the rights of marginalised groups.

In the text "Building a Feminist Commons in the Time of COVID-19", Miriam Ticktin argues that people create egalitarian forms of connections. The thesis proposes that Covid-19 promoted experiments in the context of emerging feminist commons. She explains that this foregrounds new horizontal forms of sociality and lays the groundwork for resistance by not separating the time of political organisation from reproduction. The three experiments that were made were masked mobs, friendly fridges and pandemic pods. All the three experiments aimed to create new forms of social connections and solidarity during the pandemic and emphasised the importance of communal action and care. The first experiment of 'masked mods' was to continue meeting people while following the safety measures during the pandemic, shielding people from isolation and loneliness. The second experiment of 'friendly fridges' was about open fridges which promoted food sharing. This solution of seeing fridges as a commons is particularly effective for people who find struggle to afford food. The third experiment of 'pandemic pods' was about small and local groups, generally made up of people without a nuclear family or outside of neighbourhoods, who help each other in everyday life. (Ticktin, 2021)

Medicine and contraceptives

The development of and access to medicine or vaccinations is an important and interesting topic. It is evident that access varies globally, by country and society. Social anthropology looks at inequalities and also shows the impact of not having access, and how this can correlate with poverty.

One example in which poverty leads to sexual diseases are the Fish-for-Sex (FFS) practices. Large numbers are observed in Sub-Saharan African Inland Fisheries. (Béné and Merten: 2007: 875) Through these Fish-for-Sex transactions and the lack of contraceptives, women are infected by HIV.

HIV through fish-for-sex transactions

Spread of HIV can also be triggered by processes of commons grabbing (see subtheme 6, the Drama of the Grabbed Commons) as women are losing access to common-pool resources and are looking for alternatives. Sonja Merten and Tobias Haller (2008, 2018) did research on the problems of HIV and AIDS transmission based on fish-for-sex transactions in Zambia and findings are also published by Merten and Béné, The latter publication also shows that fish-for-sex transactions and the resulting HIV infections are a common phenomenon which occur in a significant number of countries, particularly in Southern and Eastern African countries. Fish-for-sex is a practice observed in certain fishing communities, often where mostly women engage in sexual relationships for fish or other fishing-related benefits (see also Haller and Merten 2008, 2018). The study shows that many women who are involved in these transactions are widows, divorced or single. In lieu of any alternative, the fish-for-sex transactions serve as a safety net against poverty. This shows that the vulnerability of certain women leads them to endanger their health to escape poverty (Béné and Merten, 2008, Haller and Merten 2008, 2018). Interestingly a process of bottom-up institution building was set up in the Zambian case by which these issues were also integrated in a new by-law defined by different local stakeholders including women leading to a sense of ownership in the institution building process (called ‘constitutionality’, see subtheme 10) to govern fisheries in a sustainable way and paying attention to health issues (see Haller and Merten 2018)

Access to antibiotics

One debate is about the access to antibiotics. It explores how people should have access to them in order to cure them from diseases but not develop an immunity against antibiotics. Patricia Jane Lucas discusses this topic by studying the pathway of antibiotics in Bangladesh for both humans and animals. She also conducted research on where people in Bangladesh get their medicine from. (Lucas, 2019)

Development of vaccination

The distribution of vaccines, especially those for Covid-19, reveals many inequities. Rich countries, mostly from the western world, made bilateral deals with private pharmaceutical companies like AstraZeneca, financing their research and, in return, receiving an agreed amount of vaccine doses. Such bilateral deals were common during Covid-19 and determined where the vaccines went: rich countries often got more than that required by their populations while poor countries didn’t receive enough to meet demand. (vox)

Commons is also relevant in terms of open access to research into vaccination development. Sharing scientific data through open-access platforms facilitates and enables researchers to cooperate. There are collaborative networks as well, so different scientists can cooperate. (Druehdal et al., 2021)

Conclusion

There are many interesting topics about global health and commons. Care work is one theme that will remain relevant in the future. There might be changes in the care system, how care work is organised and commoning care can be a part of a solution. Covid-19 played an important role in the debates of global health. People experienced the pandemic differently, depending on where they lived. Through Covid-19, we can predict how communities will react to a pandemic in the future. The access to medicine and contraceptives is also important and will remain so in the future. Open research platforms can be useful in developing more medicine and there should be mechanisms to distribute medicine fairly, so that health does not depend on where people live.

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