DISCOURSES AND VALUE STRUGGLES IN GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS - EXPLORING NORMATIVE DIMENSIONS BEYOND PROFIT

“Why does capitalism feel so right? Ethical imaginaries of prison labour and sisterhood solidarity”

Lisa Ann Richey, Professor of Globalization, Lri.msc@cbs.dk
Copenhagen Business School

CBS COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

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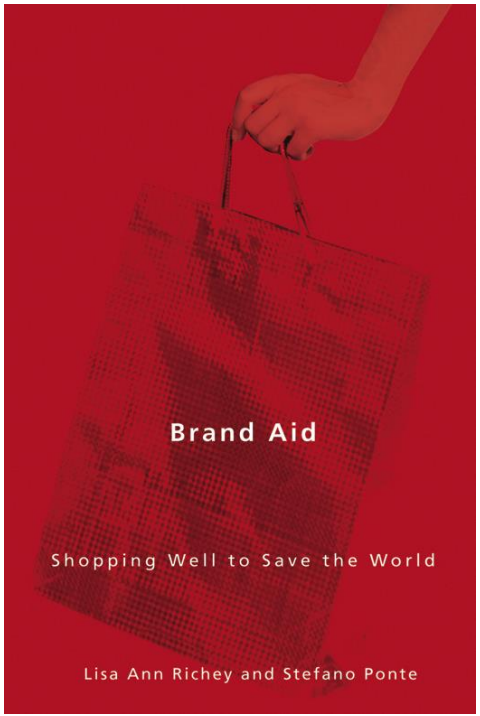
From Brand Aid to Commodifying Compassion



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analytical framework

- Cultural economic geography can deepen our knowledge of how ‘helping’ can produce surplus value through the maintenance of inequalities embedded in strategic and habitual forms of dis/association from global ills (see Ibert *et al.*, 2019; Thomsen and Hess, 2022).
- International political economy has shown us how sustainability can be strategically used by corporations to extract value created by other actors in global value chains – especially producers (Grabs 2020; Grabs and Carodenuto 2021; Ponte 2019, 2025).
- We argue that these are two facets of the same coin, which facilitates the extraction of value by (European) corporations, citizens and consumers from those who are supposed to be ‘helped’ (smallholder producers, labour, humanitarian subjects in the Majority World).

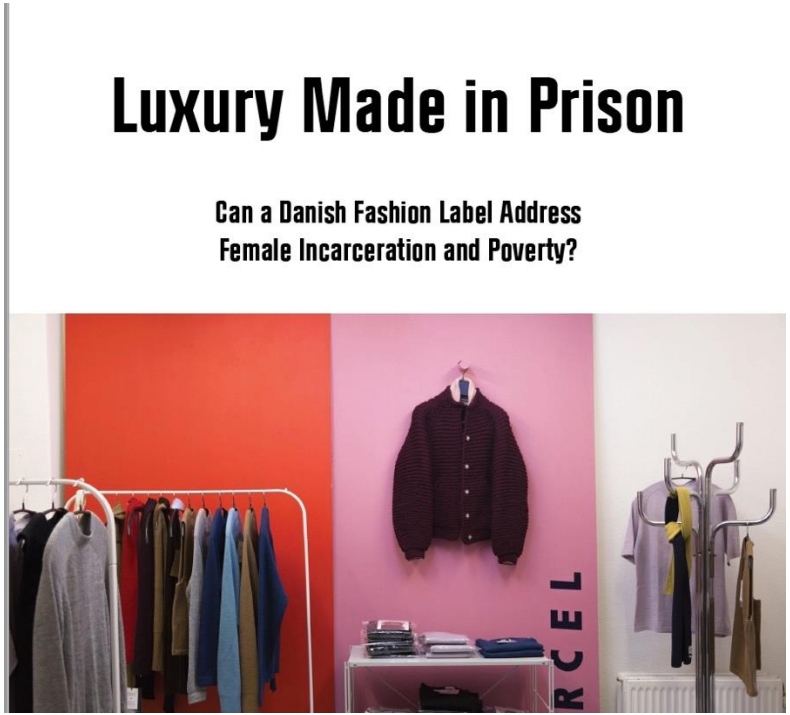
argument

- Global helping and sustainability certification create forms of value that are fundamentally based on dissociative relational work.
- These dynamics have been previously conceptualized as the ‘commodification of humanitarian sentiments’ – symptomatic of late capitalist structures (Richey, Hawkins and Goodman, 2021)
- The value of helping emerges from imaginaries that depend on the emotional labour of idealized, worthy beneficiaries.

‘Global Helping’ rests on Unpaid Affective Labour

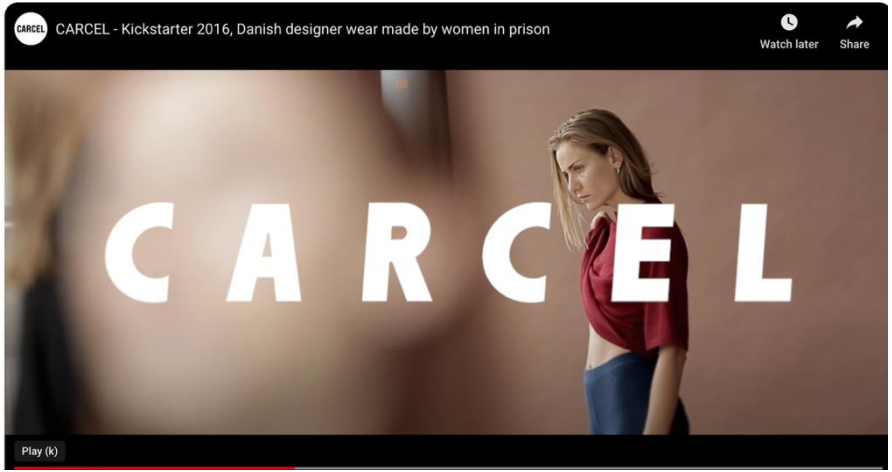
- Development, humanitarianism and the achievement of sustainability (‘global helping’) have been at the core of building a common European identity in the post-War period, especially through the exertion of normative power (Manners 2002).
- They are particularly evident in the attempt of maintaining a self-glorified profile for state and citizens in former (and current) colonial powers
- These processes are grounded in the impulse to help distant others to aggrandize ‘our’ importance as European citizens, consumers and corporate investors
- As a result, these distant others have become commodified products—constructed through the labour of people in the Majority World, yet this labour is neither acknowledged nor compensated.

Case Study: Danish Carcel



Original data come from:

- I am grateful for collaboration with Peruvian anthropologists Mariano Aronés Palomino and Liliana Torre Marcelo, and Peter Leys, a Danish anthropologist whose fieldwork was in Ayacucho
- Data were collected in four languages.
- 13 ethnographic notes (in which conversations with prison guards are included); 12 interviews with inmates; 4 interviews with INPE officials; and an interview with a local representative of "Made in Prison."
- This work is informed by my work as an insider ethnographer, and by my critical analysis of publicly available material including the company's website and social media over a four-year period.
- I also interviewed the founder of Carcel three times and engaged in ongoing discussions by email.



Luxury Made in Prison

At Carcel, fashion meets social entrepreneurship by empowering women in prison through jobs in the fashion industry.

by Julia Migné

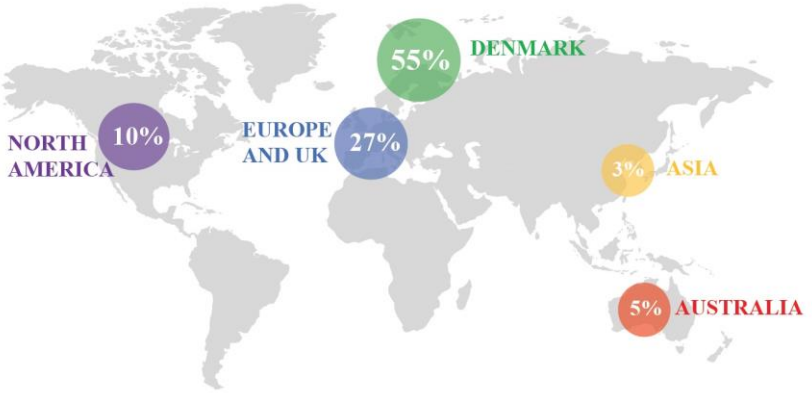


Figure 2: Geographical Proportions of Sales (Carcel, 2018)

CoCo Commodifying Compassion

N R CHAVEZ
JUKI
SIRUBA

The purpose is not to ‘prove’ that it is ‘wrong’ but to explicate why it is powerful

The paper does two things:

(1) it charts how the imaginary of commodifying compassion works through 3 movements around the company, workers, and products of Carcel

(2) it argues that love and sisterly solidarity, connect the company, workers and products in ways that are then commodified for profit.

The paper concludes that understanding how Made in Prison becomes an ethical possibility helps us to see the sleight of hand of using capitalism to practice the supposedly ‘moral sentiments’ that are ontologically outside of instrumentalism, rational calculation, or exchange.

Made in Prison Imaginary

	Relations of Production	Recipient Actors	Products
Outside the Prison	Sustainable Company, not Aid	Workers as Worthy Beneficiaries	Luxury Products not Handicrafts
Inside the Prison	Labour Relations in Prison	Prisoners, women, mothers, wives, daughters	Materials, historical exploitation, relationship to demanding labour

Normative Dimensions
Intimate Dependency Relationships

Creating Personal Bond(age)

"Each product is handmade, and it's a sign of quality and dignity to have the name of the woman who made it right there with the Carcel label," explains Veronica. "It's also a comment to the current industry where there is no transparency, and few people ask or communicate who made their clothes."

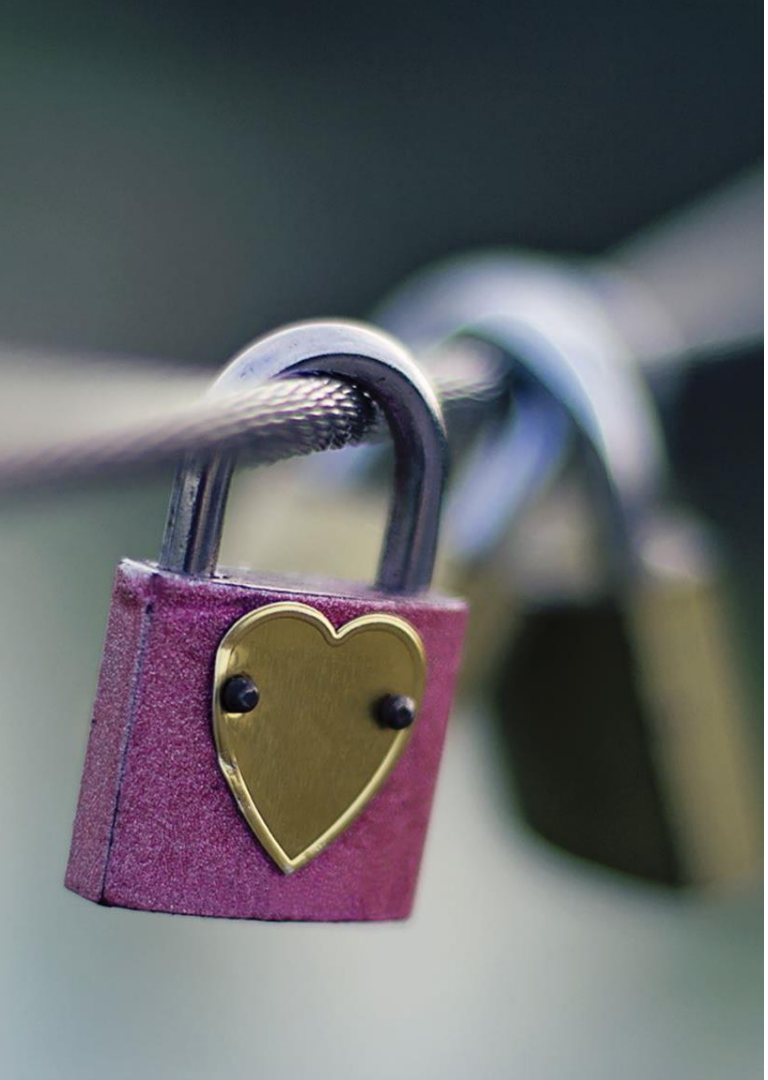
Inmates must pay for their prison stay and many work under the ‘Productive Prisons Program’

A week before my mother died they brought my mother in to visit. She was in poor health, as I worked in "Carcel " I was able to send money for her medications.

It helped me a lot to work in this company. First with the expenses of my mother’s illness, and then with the expenses of my marriage. Only now am I starting to save, so that when me and my husband leave the Carcel, we plan to open our business. Miss Veronica was invited to my wedding.

Overall, the women who worked in other companies characterized them as less structured than Carcel, often without formal contracts or guaranteed salary, but at the same time with a less stressful environment.

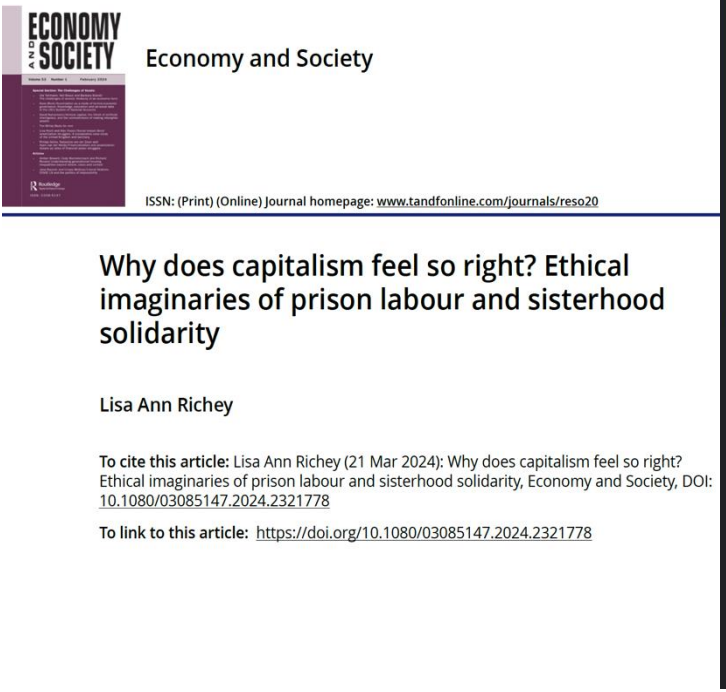
Of the new personnel in Carcel, only I was the one that left the company, because I did not like many things that I saw there. . . "We are not NGOs, we do not just give you money, you will have to do what the company tells you"… Everything you do is controlled in the Carcel company. Where are you going? How long are you going to take? Or, what you are doing outside the workshop? Everything has to be explained to the person in charge. You have to be inside the workshop, even if there is no work. When I left Carcel I felt very good and not stressed.



Conclusions

- ‘Ethical’ capitalism is framed through intimization of the relationship between feminine laborers and their ‘sister’ consumers.
- This commodified compassion distinguishes “Made in Prison” luxury from sweatshop laborers on one hand and from chain-gangs repairing US highways on the other.
- Humanitarian logics enable the unfree labour of racialized capitalism by making visible the beneficence of those who profit.
- Understanding the structure of feelings undergirding these imaginaries will help us to understand why capitalism feels so right.

Danke! Want to know more?



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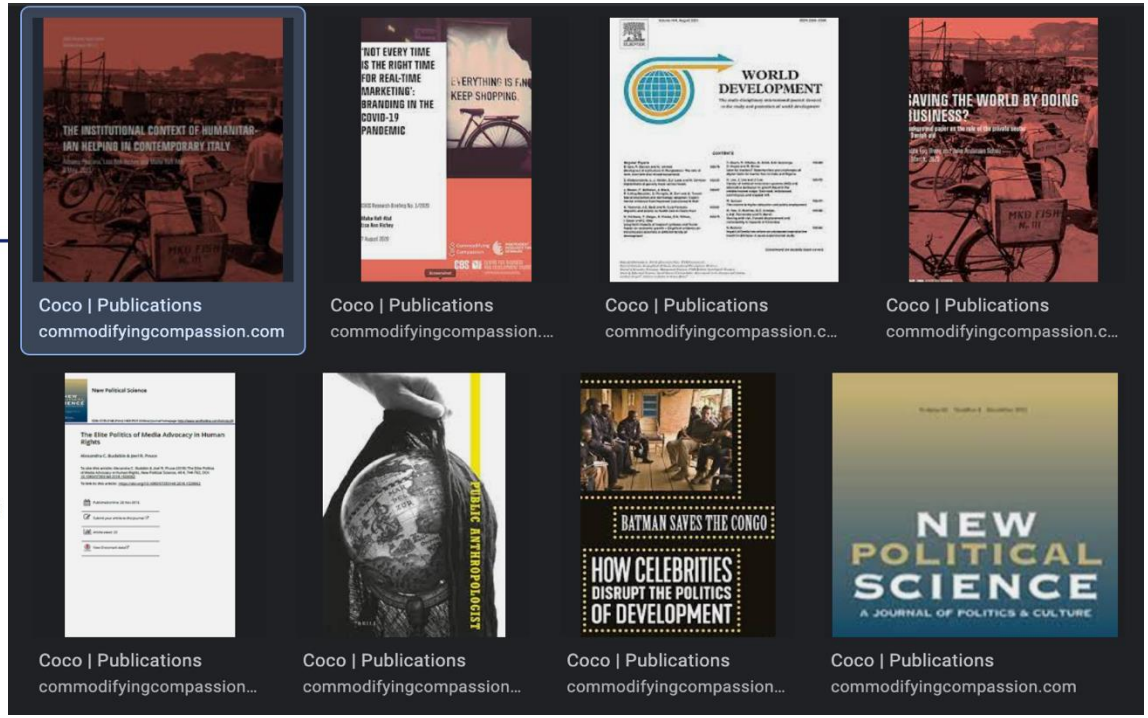

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