The illusion of capitalism in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa: a case study of the Gambia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to evaluate critically the meta-narrative that there is no alternative to capitalism. Building upon an emerging body of post-structuralist thought that has begun deconstructing this discourse in relation to western economies and post-Soviet societies, this paper further extends this critique to Sub-Saharan Africa by investigating the degree to which people in the Gambia rely on the capitalist market economy for their livelihood. Reporting the results of 80 household face-to-face interviews (involving over 500 people), the finding is that only a small minority of households in contemporary Gambian society rely on the formal market economy alone to secure their livelihood and that the vast majority depend on a plurality of market and non-market economic practices. The outcome is a call to re-think the lived practices of economic transition in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and the Gambia in particular, so as to open up the feasibility of, and possibilities for, alternative economic futures beyond capitalist hegemony.

Design/methodology/approach – Some 80 households (involving over 500 people) were interviewed face-to-face on their livelihood coping strategies.

Findings – Reporting the results of 80 household face-to-face interviews (involving over 500 people), the finding is that only a small minority of households in contemporary Gambian society rely on the formal market economy alone to secure their livelihood and that the vast majority depend on a plurality of market and non-market economic practices.

Practical implications – The outcome is a call to re-think the lived practices of economic transition in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and the Gambia in particular, so as to open up the feasibility of, and possibilities for, alternative economic futures beyond capitalist hegemony.

Originality/value – This research gives us an empirical understanding of the implications of lived experiences of people's day-to-day livelihood coping strategies, which refutes the capitalist's thesis and calls for a re-think on economic and sustainable development policies and strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords Market economy, Developing economies, The Gambia, Africa

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A recurring meta-narrative that prevails not only amongst journalists, business leaders, policy-makers and politicians, but also many academic commentators, is that there is an unstoppable permeation of everyday life by the market (see, for example, Carruthers and Babb, 2000; Gudeman, 2001; Rifkin, 2000; Watts, 1999). There is a widespread belief that capitalism is becoming totalising and hegemonic, stretching its tentacles ever wider and deeper into every orifice of everyday life across the globe. Indeed, even those opposed to the deeper penetration of the market due to its deleterious socio-cultural consequences have begun to view the on-going colonisation of capitalism as indisputable, irrefutable and irreversible (e.g. Corneliou, 2002; Rifkin, 1990; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). Indeed, so commonly heard and widely held is this dominant discourse of an inescapable shift towards capitalist hegemony that it is perhaps difficult to imagine or envision any other future. The
widespread acceptance seems to be that there really is no alternative to capitalism (e.g. Ciscel and Heath, 2001; Gough, 2000; Kovel, 2002).

The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate this meta-narrative that closes off the future to anything other than capitalist hegemony. To do this, theoretical inspiration is here drawn from an emerging corpus of post-structuralist thought that has begun to contest the validity of this marketisation narrative by re-figuring the trajectories of economic development in both advanced western economies (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2003, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, 2001; Williams, 2002, 2003, 2004a,b, 2005) and post-Soviet societies (e.g. Smith and Stenning, 2006; Williams, 2006) as well as “third world” countries (e.g. Escobar, 1992, 1995, 2001; Esteva, 1985; Latouche, 1993). By extending the critique of this discourse that there is an ever wider and deeper encroachment of capitalism in Sub-Saharan Africa (Gambia), the intention here is to further contribute to this post-structuralist deconstruction of capitalist hegemony and to open up the economic trajectories of “developing” economies to alternative possibilities.

Firstly, therefore, how the post-structuralist literature has set about contesting the meta-narrative of capitalist hegemony will be reviewed. Following this, the paper further contributes to this emerging critique by reporting a study of livelihood practices in the Gambia. This will reveal the relatively weak penetration of market economic practices in this Sub-Saharan African country. The final section then concludes by calling for a re-representation of the nature of economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa so as to open up the future of developing nations in this region to re-signification.

At the outset of this paper, however, it is necessary to state that here, “marketization” (or what is sometimes called “commodification” or “commercialisation”) refers to the process by which “goods and services […] are [increasingly] produced by capitalist firms for a profit under conditions of market exchange” (Scott, 2001, p. 11). Breaking this definition down into its component parts, the advent of market hegemony thus refers to a form of work organisation where first, goods and services are produced for exchange, second, these exchanges are monetised and third and finally, monetary exchange is imbued with the profit motive. Non-marketised work practices are thus those that do not possess one or more of these characteristics. First, there is non-exchanged work, where a household member engages in unpaid work for themselves or another member of their household. Second, there is non-monetised exchange, where a household member engages in unpaid work for somebody who lives outside of the household and third and finally, there is not-for-profit monetised exchange where monetised exchanges take place but for-profit motives are not to the fore.

The de-centring of capitalism in post-structuralist theory

Every society must produce, distribute and allocate the goods and services required by its citizens. As such, all societies have an economy of some type. Economies, however, can be structured in different ways. To highlight the alternative structures and possibilities, many commentators commonly differentiate three modes of delivering goods and services, namely the “market” (private sector), the “state” (public sector) and the “community” (informal or third) sector (Giddens, 1998; Gough, 2000; Polanyi, 1944; Thompson et al., 1991), although different labels are sometimes used, with Polanyi (1944) referring to “market exchange”, “redistribution” and “reciprocity”, and Giddens (1998) discussing “private”, “public” and “civil society”.

At present, the near universal belief is that of the three modes of delivering goods and services, the market or capitalist sphere is growing while the other two spheres are contracting (e.g. Polanyi, 1944; Scott, 2001; Watts, 1999). There really does appear to be no alternative to capitalism. Few can imagine a future based on anything other than the ongoing encroachment of capitalism. As Amin et al. (2002, p. 60) pronounce, “the pervasive reach of exchange-value society makes it ever more difficult to imagine and legitimate non-market forms of organisation and provision”. As Marx and Engels (1977, p. 24, cited in Rupert, 2000) underscored:
the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society [...] the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, and establish connections everywhere (Marx and Engels, 1977, p. 224; cited in Rupert, 2000, p. 43).

For Castree et al. (2004, pp. 16-17) similarly, “that this is a predominantly capitalist world seems to us indisputable [...] there’s scarcely a place on the planet where this mode of production does not have some purchase [...] this system of production arguably now has few, if any, serious economic rivals”. The outcome for many is that “Capitalism stands alone as the only feasible way rationally to organise a modern economy” (De Soto, 2001, p. 1) and “all plausible alternatives to capitalism have now evaporated” (De Soto, 2001, p. 13).

This is the capitalist hegemony thesis. The belief is that one mode of exchange, namely capitalism, is colonising the world and replacing all others. Seen through this lens, capitalism is becoming the economic institution rather than one mode of producing and delivering goods and services. What is disturbing, however, is that those extolling this thesis seldom provide evidence to support their claim. For example, when Rifkin (2000, p. 3) argues that “The marketplace is a pervasive force in our lives”, Ciscel and Heath (2001, p. 401) that capitalism is transforming “every human interaction into a transient market exchange” and Gudeman (2001, p. 144) that “markets are subsuming greater portions of everyday life”, no supporting evidence is provided to justify such assertions. Similarly, the claim by Carruthers and Babb (2000, p. 4) that there has been “the near-complete penetration of market relations into our modern economic lives” is justified by stating that “markets enter our lives today in many ways ‘too numerous to be mentioned’” and that the advent of market-like ways of viewing various spheres of life (e.g. the “marriage market”) are evidence that the market has indeed stretched its tentacles deeper into daily life. Watts (1999, p. 312) similarly justifies his assertion that although “commodification is not complete [...] the reality of capitalism is that ever more of social life is mediated through and by the market” by stating with no substantiation that subsistence economies are today increasingly rare.

For the past decade or so, however, this dominant depiction that there is only one development path and that it is one in which capitalism becomes ever more hegemonic has started to be questioned. A small but growing body of post-structuralist literature has emerged that has started to re-read the trajectories of economic development of both advanced “market” economies (e.g. Byrne et al., 1998; Community Economies Collective, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2003; Williams, 2004b, 2005) and majority (third) world countries (e.g. Escobar, 1995, 2001; Esteva, 1985; Latouche, 1993; Sachs, 1996). Representing the thesis that there has been a marketisation of economies not as an abstraction seeking to reflect reality but as what Butler (1990) calls a “performative” discourse that is seeking to shape the world by making the reality conform to its image, this post-structuralist corpus of thought has revealed that accepting the capitalist hegemony thesis not only serves the vested interests of capitalism (by constructing market hegemony as a natural and inevitable future) but also results in a failure to consider alternatives. The net outcome is that the real world ends up conforming to the image. For these post-structuralist commentators, in consequence, there is a need to deconstruct the discourse of impending capitalist hegemony and articulate alternative representations of both how work is organized and its trajectories, not least by recognizing and valuing the existence of non-capitalist economic practices which shine a light on the possibility of constructing alternative futures beyond capitalism.

To contest the thesis of capitalist hegemony, two broad strategies are used. On the one hand, and employing Derridean discourse analysis (Derrida, 1967), the capitalist/non-capitalist binary hierarchy is challenged that endows the capitalist sphere with positivity and the subordinate non-capitalist realm with negativity. To do this, two methods are used. First, commentators seek to revalue the subordinate term (non-capitalist work) such as by attaching a value to unpaid work (Goldschmidt-Clermond, 1982; Luxton, 1997). The problem, as Derrida (1967) points out, is that revaluing a subordinate term in a
binary hierarchy is difficult to achieve since it is closely associated with the subordinate terms in a whole raft of other dualisms (e.g. non-capitalist work is associated with reproduction, emotion, subjectivity, woman and the non-economic, and capitalist work with production, reason, objectivity, men and the economic). A second method is therefore to blur the boundaries between the terms, highlighting similarities on both sides of the dualism so as to break down the solidity and fixity of identity/presence, displaying how the excluded other is so embedded within the primary identity that its distinctiveness is ultimately unsustainable. For example, the household might be represented as also a site of production – of various goods and services – and the factory also as a place of reproduction (Gibson-Graham, 2003). Both methods, therefore, can challenge the hierarchical binaries that pervade contemporary thought and have until now stifled recognition of non-capitalist work as anything other than a residual minor “other” that is dwindling and receding from view.

On the other hand, some post-structuralist writings pursue not the Derridean approach but the path laid by Foucault (1981) by seeking to deconstruct the capitalist hegemony thesis through first, a critical analysis of the violence and injustices perpetrated by this theory or system of meaning (what it excludes, prohibits and denies); and second, a genealogical analysis of the processes, continuities and discontinuities by which the discourse came to be formed. Exemplifying this is Escobar (1995) who reveals that prescribing the development pathway of capitalist hegemony has violently “subjected” individuals, regions, and entire countries to the powers and agencies of the development apparatus. Rather than accept the vision of the “good society” emanating from the west, Escobar’s Foucauldian approach to development discourse allows the “unmaking” of the third world, by highlighting its constructedness and the possibility of alternative constructions (Escobar, 2001). In doing so it repositions subjects outside a capitalist hegemony discourse that produces subservience, victimhood, and economic impotence.

Like Escobar in relation to the third or “majority” world, Gibson-Graham (1996) re-read the economic development of western economies through a post-structuralist lens. For her/them (i.e. they are two authors writing as one), and adopting a similar Foucauldian approach, employing marketisation as a benchmark for “development” and “progress” and measuring countries against it, imposes a linear and one-dimensional trajectory of economic development that represents non-western nations as backward, traditional, lagging and so forth and positions those western nations who are at the front of the development queue with a closed future of ever greater marketisation and nothing else beyond that (see also Williams, 2002, 2004b, 2005; Williams and Windlebank, 2003a,b). For them, this is a representation of reality and discursive construction that reflects the power, and serves the interests, of capital. By depicting the future as one of a natural, inevitable and immutable shift towards capitalism, one is engaged in the active constitution of economic possibility, shaping and constraining the actions of economic agents and policymakers.

By re-imagining and re-visioning western “capitalist” economies as composed of heterogeneous economic practices, the implications are two-fold. First, it is suggestive that there persist economic practices other than capitalist production. Second, by locating non-capitalist production in the present, rather than the past or some previous economic regime, one is engaged in the demonstrable construction and practice of alternatives to capitalism in the here and now. For Gibson-Graham (2006), the act of making such activities visible enables the constitution of alternative economic development trajectories. This re-reading is thus not simply about bringing minority practices to light. It is about de-centring the market from its pivotal position and bringing to the fore the possibility of alternative trajectories and futures beyond capitalist hegemony. By destabilizing the market as a presumed or inherently hegemonic system, questioning its naturalized dominance by representing it as one of a plurality of economic practices, one is opening up the trajectory of economic development to re-signification.

Until now, however, such a post-structuralist approach has been mostly applied to re-reading work organization and economic development trajectories in western economies (i.e. the minority world) and the third (majority) world. Fewer attempts have been made to
re-read Sub-Saharan African economies through such a conceptual lens. Here, in consequence, the intention is to further contribute to this post-structuralist re-reading of economic development by evaluating critically for the first time the extent to which capitalism has penetrated working life in contemporary Gambia.

Examining the penetration of capitalism in the Gambia

Situated on the western coast of Africa, the Gambia extends inland from the Atlantic for about 320 km, along the banks of the River Gambia, at widths varying from 24-48 km, covering an estimated area of 11,000 sq. km. The Gambia’s population is estimated at approximately 1.4 million growing at an annual rate of 4.2 per cent per annum (Central Statistics Department (CSD), 2004). With a population density of approximately 124 persons per square kilometre, the Gambia has one of the highest population densities in the world, which is expected to double in the next 16-17 years, as a result of a high fertility rate, a decline in infant mortality rates, and immigration, which accounts for about 1.7 per cent of population growth (Government of Gambia, 2000). The Gambia is surrounded on the north, east and south by the Republic of Senegal and on the western side by the Atlantic Ocean. Based on the 2003 census estimates, 69 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line. In 2003, over 55 per cent of the population lived in the Great Banjul Area (GBA), indicating a highly urbanized population trend (Central Statistics Department (CSD), 2004).

The youths and women comprise the majority of the population, with the young women and men representing approximately 63.6 per cent (Government of Gambia, 2000). Women represent about 51 per cent of the population and 45 per cent of the labour force, whilst youths represent about 63.6 per cent of the population and more than half of the workforce (Government of Gambia, 2000). The youths, women and the disabled are disproportionately over-represented in the rank of the unemployed and underemployed (Government of Gambia, 2000). Unemployment rate amongst the youths is estimated at over 40 per cent and 70 per cent of women are engaged in low productivity rural subsistence agriculture, and provide about 86 per cent of household income (Central Statistics Department (CSD), 2004). According to the Government of Gambia (2003), income poverty increased from 59 per cent to 74 per cent between 1998 and 2003, whilst 78 per cent of economically active women engaged in agriculture were considered extremely poor. Key socio-economic challenges facing the Gambia among many other things include the declining purchasing power of the poor, rising urban poverty and high rates of youth unemployment (International Poverty Centre UNDP, 2008).

In recent years however, the Gambia experienced increased GDP growth rates averaging about 5.4 per cent in the formal modern sector (International Poverty Centre UNDP, 2008). This growth has mainly concentrated in the services and low manufacturing sectors of the formal modern economy, and accounts for about 10 per cent of the employment of the labour force (International Poverty Centre UNDP, 2008). However, this growth has not sufficiently expanded to generate adequate employment opportunities to absorb the increasing urban young job-seekers, most of whom have little or no employable skills, and are highly concentrated in the Greater Banjul Area (GBA) (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2006). This indicates that the economic growth has only benefited a small segment of the urban elites, with the majority of the labour force living in low productivity activities in the non-farm informal economy.

This means that while the economy seems to grow, poverty in the Gambia is on the increase. The Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world, and indications are that it is getting poorer, as evidenced by its Human Development ranking (International Poverty Centre UNDP, 2008). Poverty in the Gambia has a strong gender dimension, which is buttressed by the results of the 2003 Integrated Household Survey (HIS). According to these results, 61 per cent of the country can be classified as poor, of whom 63.3 per cent is rural and 57.2 per cent is urban. By gender however, 48 per cent of males and 63 per cent of females are classified as poor, with 15.1 per cent of females and 8.5 per cent of males classified as extremely poor. The HIS further indicates that while poverty is found in all parts of the country, extreme poverty can be found more in rural areas (15 per cent) than in urban areas (13 per cent).
According to Meagher (2003), the Gambia, like most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa saw the prospects of economic globalisation through trade, free market economic policies, foreign direct investment, technology, capital and financial flows as stimulants for sustainable productivity, and socio-economic growth. Thus for a significant number of years, most of its activities, policies and strategies for sustainable human development and socio-economic growth have been informed by this belief, despite the fact that poverty, measured in terms of a lack of the basic household needs and powerlessness in decision making processes, has increased by 52 per cent from 1993 to 1998 (Government of Gambia, 2003). The Gambia's approach of pursuing sustainable human development and socio-economic growth through economic globalisation has resulted in less attention being paid to the informal sector, which it perceives as an insignificant sector that cannot stimulate socio-economic growth and thus has little, if anything, to do with economic development (Meagher, 2003). A partial explanation for such a stigmatisation of the informal sector by the Government of the Gambia has been based on the belief that economic globalisation is the route to economic prosperity and the trajectory of economic development. Grounded in this view, the belief is that the informal economy is weak and in demise and a distortion of market forces, which will eventually cease to exist once modern economic development through industrial development and mechanisation takes effect (Meagher, 2003).

Given the lack of any attempt to collect data on the full array of work practices in the Gambia, in late 2005 and early 2006, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 80 households through a structured questionnaire on their economic practices in a diverse range of localities. The structured questionnaire was used to help better understand economic life in the Gambia, as well as measure the embeddedness of the formal and informal economies in people's daily livelihood coping strategies. The structured interview (questionnaire) first of all asked interviewees (households) to state the spheres upon which they most heavily relied on to maintain their standard of living using a flashcard that lists: formal and informal work, which was sub-divided into subsistence work, barter with neighbours, friends, etc, cash-in-hand work and formal employment. In addition, socio-demographic background data was collected, including the number of years they had spent living in their locality and also the number of members within their households. They were also asked to state their age, gender, work status and work history. For each of these categories, a core list of codes was presented to them in order to enable them to identify the category to which they belonged.

Drawing upon previous research on household coping practices in both the advanced and transition economies (e.g. Leonard, 1994; Pahl, 1984; Williams and Windebank, 2003a,b), the second part of the structured questionnaire consisted of examining the sources of labour used to undertake a core list of some 25 everyday household tasks, which included indoor painting, wallpapering, plastering, improving the kitchen and bathroom, plumbing, routine housework, shopping, ironing and washing, cooking, babysitting, hairdressing, repairing furniture, tools, curtains and clothes. Where an activity did not take place, the interviewees were asked whether this was not necessary or whether it was necessary but they could not afford it. Where an activity took place, interviewees were given a list of 17 sources of labour to highlight both the source of labour used the last time that it was undertaken as well as whether household members, neighbours, friends and or others supplied these tasks on an unpaid or paid basis in the past five years or month. Where the service given or received was monetised, then interviewees were asked to disclose the amount that was involved. In the same vein, they were asked to state their reason(s) as to why they chose a particular source of labour over the others. They were then asked to identify their preferred source of labour.

The third section of the structured interview focused on work undertaken for others. Just as in the second section, interviewees were presented with the same core list of 25 activities. They were asked to state if any member of their household undertook any work activity on the core list for others and whom they did it for. They were also given the opportunity to mention any work activity that was undertaken for others, but which was not mentioned on the core list. Where the work activity was undertaken by a member of the household, they were asked to
state who the work was done for, why it was undertaken and if monetised how much they were paid.

The fourth section of the structured interview with households was centred on the process of acquiring goods. This particular section was designed to determine and ascertain the sector in which the provisioning of goods was embedded, whether it was the formal economy (global market) or the informal sector. Households were presented with a list of common items such as bed, fridge, car, shoes, television, cigarettes etc. and asked to identify any of the products they acquired. Where they do not possess an item, NO was put down but where they were in possession of an item, they were shown a flashcard of eight sources to determine how they acquired it. Where the acquisition of an item was monetised, they were then asked to state the price of the item or product. The last part of the structured questionnaire was more qualitative as it comprised open-ended questions, which tried to generate more in-depth information about the coping strategies households used. It also involved in-depth interviews with all 80 households, who adopt formally orientated, mixed and informally orientated strategies both successfully and unsuccessfully in terms of coping capabilities. This was purposefully done so as to provide richer qualitative insights into the issues emerging from the statistical analysis. Households were asked questions relating to their extra work, household difficulties and problems, medical care, basic household needs, economic future, and day-to-day living challenges. They were also asked how government development initiatives and socio-economic policies were addressing their basic daily needs, and whether the work carried out by NGOs was helping them in overcoming their daily challenges.

Given that previous studies reveal significant disparities in the types of economic practice used between affluent and deprived as well as urban and rural populations (Leonard, 1994; Renooy, 1990; Williams, 2005), maximum variation sampling was employed to select seven contrasting localities. In selecting the households for the survey, the study used a number of factors as criteria. The first criterion for selecting households was based on the geographic setting of these houses – that is: whether they were located in a rural or urban setting. This was done to include diverse coping strategies used by households since livelihood strategies may vary between urban and rural households. Hence Banjul and Kanifing Municipalities were selected for the urban households, whilst Kerewan Area Council was selected for the rural households. Both Banjul and Kanifing Municipalities are regarded by the Department of Local Government and Land as 100 per cent urban whilst the Kerewan Area Council is 80 per cent rural.

Apart from using geographic setting for selecting households, socio-economic affluence and deprivation was also used as another criterion. Deprived communities in the Gambia were characterised by high levels of poverty, malnutrition, infant mortality, limited access to health facilities, low literacy rates, high crime, unemployment and drug rates, whilst the socio-economically affluent communities are characterised by high employment and low poverty rates (Gambia Census, 2003). This criterion was used in order to enable the study capture the widest variety of coping strategies by households since those strategies used by affluent communities could be different from those used by deprived communities. In this regard, Banjul and Serrekunda were selected as the most socio-economic affluent communities within the Banjul and Kanifing Municipalities, whilst Essau was selected in the Kerewan Area Council. Similarly, Old Jeshwang and City Bazaar were selected as the most deprived communities in the Banjul and Kanifing Municipalities whilst Nuimi and Kanuma were selected as the most deprived communities in the Kerewan Area Council (Gambia Census, 2003).

The process of selecting households in these affluent and deprived communities was largely influenced by the local guides who were assigned to me. In order to gain access to these households, I had to meet and introduce myself and my mission to the community heads of these communities who included the “Alkaloo” (chiefs/village heads) of Old Jeshwang, City Bazaar, Kanuma, Nuimi, Essau and the mayors of Banjul and Serrekunda (Kanifing). It was these community leaders who assigned the local guides to me, in an effort to facilitate my access to households in their respective communities. The company and presence of the
local guides was meant to create trust between the households and myself, and also to serve as a means of reassuring the households that their respective leaders did approve my research. Hence the selection of households in these communities was mainly determined by the local guides based on their familiarity with households and their knowledge of the local communities.

Evaluating the penetration of capitalism in the Gambia

How do people secure a livelihood in the Gambia? The results of asking respondents to name the primary means they use to secure their livelihood, along with what is second most important, are reported in Figure 1. The finding is that 1 per cent of households interviewed chiefly depend on the formal economy (which includes not only the capitalist sphere but also the public sector and not-for-profit enterprises). Well over 83 per cent of households primarily depend on sources other than the formal economy.

Analysing solely the primary strategy, however, masks the degree to which households in practice draw upon the resources of several spheres. When both the primary and secondary spheres upon which households rely are analysed, the finding is that less than one in ten households (9.5 per cent) depend on the formal economy as both the principal and second most important contributor to their livelihood. The majority of households (83 per cent) draw on the resources of informal spheres to secure their livelihood. To refer to the Gambia as capitalist, therefore, when only 1 per cent of these households define themselves as reliant on the formal sphere, is thus a grave misnomer. In these Gambian localities, plural economic practices are the norm, similar to other Sub-Saharan African countries.

Interrogating further the spheres relied on to secure a livelihood, Figure 1 reveals that some 9 per cent primarily depend on pensions/state benefits, 64 per cent on self-provisioning (non-exchanged work), 19 per cent on the social economy (non-monetised exchanges) and 6 per cent on undeclared work (cash-in-hand). In these Gambian localities therefore, 51 households primarily rely on subsistence work for their livelihood. Even if subsistence economies are defined narrowly as meaning economies where households rely chiefly on subsistence production for their livelihoods, therefore, such a practice is alive and well in the Gambia.

Figure 1  Household’s most important activity for standard of living
It is important, moreover, not to assume that the 6 per cent of households depending primarily on undeclared work (cash-in-hand) for their livelihood are engaged in “hidden” capitalist endeavour. Although many have discussed the magnitude and even growth of undeclared work (International Labour Office, 2002; Williams, 2006; Williams and Windebank, 2005), there has been little analysis of the motives of those engaged in such work. Instead, it is often simply assumed that such undeclared work is a form of informal capitalism involving profit-orientated monetary exchanges. This study, however, reveals that some 55 per cent of all undeclared work identified in this survey was conducted for people previously known to the supplier, such as kin, friends or neighbours, and primarily undertaken for reasons other than profit, such as help out others in a way that avoids any connotation of charity being involved. In these areas of the Gambia, therefore, over half of all undeclared work is more akin to mutual aid than capitalist endeavour in terms of the social relations and motives involved, as has been earlier identified in western nations (Williams, 2004c).

In these areas of the Gambia, in sum, even where the formal sector is relied on to secure a livelihood, it is nearly always combined with other economic practices. A diverse portfolio of work practices is thus the norm rather than the exception with over 90 per cent of households relying on sources other than the formal sphere as either their prime or second most important livelihood practice. These data thus clearly portray the relatively limited importance of the formal sector (where goods and services are provided by workers engaged in formal employment), never mind the capitalist economy (where this formal provision is conducted by private sector firms for profit-motivated purposes rather than the public sector or not-for-profit enterprises) in contemporary Gambia.

The permeation of capitalism, however, is not even across all spheres and populations. Table I reports the sources of labour last used by households to undertake 25 common domestic tasks. The finding is that overall, 69.2 per cent of tasks were last completed using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>per cent using different sources of labour to conduct domestic tasks in the Gambia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
<td><strong>Non-exchanged work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home maintenance and improvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor painting</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replace broken window</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain appliances</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double glazing</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumbing</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve kitchen</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve bathroom</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine housework</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean inside windows</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wash/iron clothes</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wash dishes</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressing</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book-keeping</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making/repairing goods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make/repair clothes</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make/repair curtains</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make/repair tools</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make/repair furniture</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime childcare</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening childcare</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>69.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
non-exchanged work (self-provisioning), 0.3 per cent using non-monetised exchange, 27.2 per cent informal employment, 2.7 per cent gift exchange and just 0.5 per cent formal labour. Although the focus here is upon the domestic services sector, which is perhaps somewhat less formalised and marketized than other spheres, this nevertheless further reveals the shallow penetration of capitalism in these Gambian localities.

It also reveals the uneven penetration of capitalism across spheres. Analysing the tasks where formalisation is most prevalent, the finding is that these are painting (which in 1.7 per cent of cases was last completed using formal labour), maintaining appliances (7.1 per cent was last conducted using formal labour), and plumbing (13 per cent). Even here, however, in only few cases was the formal economy used to complete these tasks. The degree to which formal employment (never mind the capitalism) has permeated the domestic services sector, therefore, should not be exaggerated. It is a minority economic practice.

It might be concluded, therefore, that there is a shallow penetration of the formal economy (and capitalism more particularly) in contemporary Gambian society because a large proportion of the population are excluded from this realm. Indeed, this has been a popular argument by those arguing that non-capitalist economic practices are a direct by-product of the advent of a de-regulated open world economy, which is encouraging a race-to-the-bottom in terms of labour standards. In the new post-Fordist era, it is argued, those of little use to capitalism are no longer maintained as a reserve army of labour and socially reproduced by the formal welfare state but, instead, are off-loaded resulting in their increasing reliance on non-capitalist practices as a survival strategy. Such work is thus extensive in marginalized populations where the formal economy is weak (Castells and Portes, 1989; Davis, 2006; Sassen, 1997).

To assert this, however, is to assume that engagement in non-capitalist practices is more a matter of necessity than choice. This Gambian survey, however, finds that some 46.8 per cent of non-exchanged work was conducted out of choice, as was 44.6 per cent of non-monetised exchange, 41.6 per cent of cash-in-hand work and 39.6 per cent of gift exchange. In the case of formal employment, meanwhile, in only 39.9 per cent of instances was it employed as a choice. When examining the degree of choice in deprived compared with relatively affluent populations and areas, however, deprived populations less often choose to use such economic practices compared with their affluent counterparts. Some 39 per cent of non-capitalist work was conducted out of choice in deprived areas compared with 49 per cent in affluent areas. The outcome is that whilst non-capitalist practices are more likely to be conducted by deprived populations out of necessity and due to the absence of alternative means of livelihood, in more affluent populations such non-capitalist work is more likely to be conducted out of choice and in preference to formalised and commodified sources of labour.

Conclusions

Ever since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and the Economic Recovery Programmes by the IMF and World Bank, the widespread belief has been that Sub-Saharan African countries were transitioning into a global capitalist economy and as a result, economic policy has near enough entirely concentrated on fostering capitalist endeavour in these societies. In a telling metaphor, Ake (1995) likens this mass intervention and investment to facilitate the advent of capitalism in Sub-Saharan Africa as a new form of imperialism that has activated the dynamics of underdevelopment, and brought about mass poverty and environmental degradation. Yet despite this considerable and ongoing effort to promote capitalism, this study reveals that Gambia remains steadfastly grounded in a form of work organisation based on economic pluralism. Only a small minority of households in the Gambia rely on the formal economy alone for their livelihood. The vast majority depend on a plurality of economic practices. This raises a number of crucial questions. Should economic policy continue to focus on the development of formal and capitalist economic practices in these Sub-Saharan African societies? Or should an attempt be made to also facilitate the development of other spheres as either a complement or
alternative to the formal and capitalist spheres so as to enhance the coping capacities of these populations?

Until now, these questions have not been asked in public policy circles. Based on the assumption that these Sub-Saharan African societies are on the road to capitalism, few have asked whether giving primacy to the formal and capitalist spheres is the appropriate policy response. Here, however, it has been shown that non-capitalist work is not a traditional, stagnant, declining, backward or marginal sphere but instead, is large, extensive and widespread. There is perhaps a need, in consequence, for those who have sought to implement formalisation and marketisation with missionary zeal, rather than develop other means of livelihood, to question whether this remains the appropriate way forward.

The tendency amongst post-structuralist theorists has been to read the persistence and growth of these other spheres as signals of “spaces of hope” (Harvey, 2000), viewing them as demonstrative of the existence of alternatives to capitalism (Smith, 2002; Williams, 2005). However, before adopting this somewhat optimistic, perhaps even idealistic, view of non-capitalist work, it is necessary to understand more fully whether these are indeed chosen spaces, or whether they are sometimes spaces of survival into which people are involuntarily deposited. This Gambian localities survey reveals that although it might be appropriate to seek to destabilise the formal sphere in general, and capitalism in particular, by re-positioning them as one of many forms of economic practice (Leyshon et al., 2003), it does not automatically and necessarily follow that it is always appropriate to view non-capitalist practices as sites of resistance that are alternatives to capitalism. Many, especially the poor, appear to engage in such practices out of necessity rather than choice and in the absence of alternatives.

In sum, this paper finds that the capitalist hegemony thesis has resulted in a very limited understanding of the trajectory of economic development in the Sub-Saharan African societies (The Gambia in particular) and prevented us from recognising, valuing and developing other (and “othered”) realms and trajectories of work organization. However, re-positioning capitalism and recognising the potential future role of non-capitalism must not blind us from recognising the way in which some non-capitalist practices might themselves be generated by a market that is seeking to offload populations no longer of use to it. Even if this is the case, nevertheless, the trajectory of economic development in the Gambia and elsewhere remains far more open than previously intimated by exponents of capitalist hegemony, and if this paper begins to foster further consideration of the feasibility of, and possibilities for, alternative forms of economic development beyond a totalising and hegemonic capitalism then it will have achieved its objective.

References


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Further reading


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