

**Beyond capitalocentrism: are non-capitalist work practices "alternatives"?**

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## **Beyond capitalocentricism: are non-capitalist work practices “alternatives”?**

### **Abstract**

It is widely believed that there is no alternative to capitalism. Over the last two decades however, the critical geography literature on diverse economies has demonstrated the existence of alternatives to capitalism by revealing the persistence of non-capitalist forms of work and organisation. The aim in this paper is to question the validity and usefulness of continuing to frame these non-capitalist practices as "alternatives". Positioning non-capitalist economic practices as “alternatives” fails to capture not only the ubiquity of such practices in everyday life, but also how those engaging do not see them as “alternatives” in the sense of a second choice, or less desirable option, to capitalist practices. The intention in doing so is to reveal that it is not non-capitalist practices that are “alternative” but rather, capitalist practices themselves, thus opening up the future to the possibility of a non-capitalist world more fully than has so far been the case.

**Key words:** Economic geography    qualitative    UK    capitalism    diverse economies  
community self-help

### **Introduction**

During the early 1990s, with the supposed failure of the ideology of communism, a consensus of opinion began to emerge that "there is no alternative to capitalism" both among those celebrating its advent (De Soto 1989) as well as among many decrying its ever greater penetration (Thrift 2000; Watts 1999). The outcome has been the advent of a hegemonic depiction of a capitalist world in which ‘goods and services ... are [increasingly] produced by

capitalist firms for a profit under conditions of market exchange' (Scott 2001: 12). For the last two decades however, a small stream of economic geography, inspired largely by the diverse economies literature associated with JK Gibson-Graham (1996 [2006a], 2006b), has contested this end of history view of the hegemony of capitalism (see Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2015). In direct riposte to the "there is no alternative" (TINA) perspective, this literature has not only comprehensively demonstrated that there are alternatives but also that they are attainable (see Leyshon et al 2003; Fuller et al 2010; Jonas 2013; Wilson 2013; Fickey and Hanrahan 2014).

The aim of this paper is to seek to further advance this literature by questioning the validity and usefulness of framing such non-capitalist practices as "alternatives" to capitalism. Our argument is that positioning non-capitalist economic practices as "alternatives" fails to recognise not only the omnipresence of such practices in everyday life, but also perhaps suggests that capitalist practices are the first choice and non-capitalist practices the second choice and/or less desirable option. In consequence, our argument is that denoting them as "alternative" economic spaces (see Fuller et al 2010; Leyshon et al. 2003) reinforces a "capitalocentric" reading of the economic which positions capitalism at the centre, and consequently further mythologizes capitalism as a dominant master-signifier. Here, however, through an examination of the practices people use in everyday life and their preferences, the intention is to reveal that it is not these non-capitalist practices that are "alternatives" but rather, capitalist practices themselves. The outcome will be to open up the future to the possibility of a non-capitalist world more concretely than has so far been the case.

To achieve this, the first section reviews and critiques the use of "alternative" to describe non-capitalist economic practices in the diverse economics literature. Following this, we re-position these non-capitalist work practices by reporting evidence from an English Localities Survey which reveals not only their prevalence and ubiquity, but also how

capitalist work practices are frequently the last resort rather than first choice of populations when selecting a means of getting tasks completed. The outcome in the final section will be a call to view capitalist rather than non-capitalist practices as “alternative” practices, resulting in a re-positioning of capitalism and an opening up of the future more fully to the possibility of a non-capitalist world.

### **Beyond capitalocentrism**

The starting point for the diverse economies literature is that much economic discourse adopts a capitalocentric reading of the economic. As Gibson-Graham (1996 [2006], 7) assert:

When we say that most economic discourse is "capitalocentric" we mean that other forms of economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modelled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit.

A deeper understanding of the complex geographies of the economic that refutes a capitalocentric discourse is then advanced in several inter-connected ways. Firstly, diverse economies commentators articulate and make visible hidden non-capitalist forms of work in a society which tells itself it is (increasingly) capitalist (Gibson-Graham 2003, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al 2013; Gordon 2012; Kinna 2012). Examples of how this challenging of capitalocentric discourse and de-centring of capitalism (showing it as one possible mode of economic organisation among many) has occurred is Gibson-Graham's iceberg model of the array of non-capitalist practices (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013), and the increasingly complex

representations of "the economic", including the total social organisation of labour model - see Figure 1 - (Williams 2011, 2014) and whole life economics framework (Williams and Nadin, 2010).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The second challenge has been to demonstrate not only that pluralistic forms of the economic exist, but also that the array of non-capitalist practices identified are widely used by people in their everyday lives (Burns et al., 2004; Williams and Windebank 2001; Williams, 2005, 2014). Empirical studies in western societies using for example time use surveys (e.g. Gershuny and Jones 1987; Murgatroyd and Neuberger 1997) and household work practice surveys (e.g. Pahl 1984, Burns et al, 2004; White, 2009; Williams 2007, 2010; White and Williams 2012, 2014 Williams and Windebank 2001) reveal the pervasive richness and diversity of non-capitalist forms of work. They display the persistence of non-exchanged labour, of exchanges that are not monetised and of monetised exchanges that are not driven by the capitalist profit-motive (Williams 2005). These studies also display the extensiveness of such non-capitalist economic practices. For example, time use surveys have consistently shown that in so-called "capitalist" economies, capitalism's penetration been far less extensive than imagined and has diminished in relevance over time. For example, examining data on time use, Burns et al (2004, 52) show that "unpaid work occupied 48 per cent of people's total working time in 1985-86 (Gershuny and Jones, 1987) but 58 per cent by 1995 (Murgatroyd and Neuberger, 1997). Non-market work, therefore, not only persists in Britain but it is growing relative to market work".

The third challenge has been to better understand the nature of these non-capitalist "alternative" practices (see the Community Economics Collective 2015). One problem

confronted has been that it is often assumed that such practices are small-scale marginal activities relative to capitalism. To counter this, research undertaken through household work practice surveys, as Table 1 illustrates, has been significant. This examines the type of labour used to undertake 42 common everyday tasks the last time a task was undertaken (see Williams 2004). The findings drawn from Fulbourn (Cambridgeshire), Chalford (Gloucestershire), Grimethorpe (Yorkshire), Wigton (Cumbria), St. Blazey (Cornwall), Fulwood, Manor, Pitsmoor (Sheffield), Basset/Chilworth, St. Mary's and Hightown (Southampton) demonstrate the pervasive use of non-capitalist work practices as a means of undertaking a broad range of everyday tasks within both affluent and deprived urban and rural areas.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Examining such evidence, there is thus much support for Gibson-Graham's (2006a, vii-viii) assertion that, "Alternatives, whatever that disputed term might be taken to mean, are no longer simply jottings in the margins of a central text about global neoliberalization". As White and Williams (2014) assert, these alternatives are not only important means by which material, social, and emotional needs are currently met, but also display that what Shannon et al (2012, 25) call the "seeds of a future, post-capitalist economy" already exist in the present.

### **Are non-capitalist practices “alternatives”?**

While these developments in the diverse economies literature have been important in resisting and refuting capitalocentric representations epitomised by mantras such as TINA, there is a need to go further, and question the notion that these practices are "alternatives". Denoting these practices as “alternatives” not only fails to recognise their centrality and

omnipresence in everyday life (as displayed above in Table 1), but also perhaps implies that capitalist practices are the first choice and non-capitalist practices the second choice and/or less desirable option. In doing so, this does little more than to reinforce a “capitalocentric” reading of the economic by depicting capitalism as the master-signifier, and thus continues to position “noncapitalism in relations of subsumption, containment, replication, opposition and complementarity to capitalism as the quintessential economic form” (Gibson-Graham 1996 [2006]).

Yet a review of UK household work practice surveys, as will be shown below, reveal that in everyday life, many of these non-capitalist economic practices are seen by populations as their preferred practices and are used as a matter of choice, rather than due to a lack of choice. Rarely are capitalist practices the preferred choice. The English Household Work Practices Survey, that is, examined how a range of everyday tasks were undertaken (ranging from house maintenance and home improvement, through routine housework, to car maintenance and gardening activities). Against each task, the participant was asked whether the task had been completed, by whom, were they paid or unpaid and why that person/arrangement had been made (see Burns et al, 2004; White, 2009; Williams and Windebank 2001, Williams 2007, 2010; White and Williams, 2014). Below, we briefly report how the first choice of people was to use non-capitalist economic practices to get everyday tasks completed and that people often actively resist any transfer of activity to the capitalist sphere.

### *Non-exchanged labour*

A recurring assumption in depictions of capitalist hegemony is that non-exchanged or subsistence labour is now little more than a small footnote found only in the margins of the economic landscape. However, to re-state, the empirical evidence rejects this assumption comprehensively, and the household work practice surveys in particular indicate that this

non-capitalist practice remains commonly used by all households to undertake a wide range of material tasks. Indeed, the outsourcing of domestic services to the capitalist economy is very limited, and in many cases it is framed explicitly as an alternative (i.e., second-choice) option, only used as a last resort such as due to the time-pressures that result from having a formal job and no other options open to them than to source from domestic cleaning companies. Even higher-income populations, who outsource a larger proportion of their domestic workload, still engage in significant amounts of non-exchanged labour.

The nature of non-exchanged labour in more affluent populations, however, markedly differs to that in deprived populations. More affluent households outsource some of repetitive and routine domestic work so as to free up time to undertake less routine, more creative and rewarding domestic tasks (e.g., do-it-yourself activities). The lowest-income households and residents in deprived communities, meanwhile, perform a relatively narrow range of largely routine, mundane and repetitive tasks (e.g., housework, cleaning). In only 20 per cent of cases was non-exchanged labour used purely out of necessity. Many additional rationales are given including that it is easier to get the job done this way, that it is a pleasurable and satisfying way, and ensures that the jobs were completed to a high standard.

Importantly, and common across both affluent and deprived households, the social/cultural benefits of undertaking jobs "as a family" (to encourage self-care and communal care) were strongly emphasised. Indeed the positive integration of children to help carry out domestic work in the household should not be overlooked both in the UK and elsewhere. For example, drawing on the results of the Norwegian Time Budget Study for example, Solberg (2015: 6) observes that the "proportions of children and adults having carried out various households activities during a given day are found to be surprisingly similar." In this context, children were given responsibility to ensure particular places in the house (bedroom, playroom) were kept clean and tidy. This relationship to housework was a



valuable way of learning skills, taking responsibilities for “personal” possessions, and appreciating the work that other family members do for the collective good.

### *Monetised family labour*

This work practice accounts for situations where individuals have been paid for work provided to other family members living in the same household. The overwhelming majority of these reimbursements only occur for inter-generational (not intra-generational) “transactions” (e.g., from a parent to a child or adolescent), such as cleaning bedrooms, gardening, laundry, washing-up, helping with general housework or indeed a common example of older teenagers baby-sitting/ child minding younger siblings. Here the over-riding rationales were most certainly not economic, that is, seeing (and exploiting) children as a cheaper source of labour. Nor were they considered as alternative coping strategies. Rather, respondents drew attention to a wider variety of positive social and cultural reasons (see also Warton and Goodnow, 1995; Bowes et al 2001; Drummond et al 2015), including teaching them the value and/or worth of the tasks that others performed. In higher-income households, money tends to change hands. In the deprived communities and lower-income households, such exchanges were more likely to involve gifts rather than money.

There is also an important overlap between self-provisioning and paid family work. For instance, couples frequently asserted that in-kind reciprocity is expected in return for them conducting activities. Common statements made were “I do task x because s/he does task y, that is how we share the workload” and “I go out to work and s/he brings up the children and everything else”. Self-provisioning therefore, is here being depicted as involving in-kind reciprocity, which directly calls into question its popular depiction as non-exchanged work, and intimates that this economic practice often overlaps and lies at the interface with paid family work.

### *One-to-one non-monetised exchanges*

Unpaid work by acquaintances, neighbours, friends or kin living outside the household, was used to complete 6 per cent of the everyday tasks across all areas, and such work is firmly rooted in social and cultural rationales. Twice as many residents in the deprived urban localities, than affluent urban ones, participated in this type of exchange. While lower-income households and those in the deprived communities rely more on one-to-one unpaid help from narrower social networks of kin and use it as a survival tactic to meet material needs, higher-income households and residents in the affluent communities use one-to-one unpaid work more to expand their social networks and consolidate their relationships. Typical responses in deprived communities were “I did it to help them out” and “they wouldn’t have been able to get it done without my help”. In more affluent communities, typical responses were “we did it as a way of getting to know them” and “I did it to widen the network of people I can call on for help”. Such endeavour ranged from child care, through doing gardening and shopping to undertaking small repairs and home maintenance activity.

### *Monetised community exchange*

It is increasingly recognised that favours provided by and for closer social relations sometimes involve token cash payments (Williams, 2005). This is reinforced in the localities we investigated. Although money changes hands, in 60% of cases, this is not driven by economic rationales (to make or to save money). Rather as with non-monetised exchanges, broader redistributive and community-building rationales were cited. For example, when non-kin relations were involved (e.g., neighbours and friends), there was a strong preference for token payments and/or gifts to be involved whenever feasible. In this way paying cash for tasks undertaken allows money to be redistributed to close social relations in a manner that

avoids any connotation that “charity” is involved, and also enables people to avoid favours being owed in situations where it may not be feasible to return the favour. Paying for favours therefore facilitates reciprocity in contexts where it might not otherwise feasibly take place, such as when one is physically unable to return favours, or too time pressured to be capable of offering in-kind labour in return.

### *Informal employment*

Informal employment involves paid activities not declared to the state for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes. Such work ranges from at one pole paid informal work akin to formal employment in terms of the social relations and motives involved to at the other pole, those forms closer to unpaid mutual aid, as discussed above. Even those types akin to paid employment were not always conducted primarily for profit. “Mates’ rates” were often charged at well below the market price, especially for elderly customers who would not otherwise been able to afford for the work to be done if they had to pay normal market rates.

### *Formal paid labour*

Engagement in paid employment declared to the state for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes is not extensive. Just 16 per cent of respondents in all the areas studied had sourced employment from the private sector to complete the tasks considered. When public and third sector jobs are included, this figure rises by just 2 per cent. Far from supporting the pervasive nature of capitalism (in a western society that is assumed to be at the stage of "advanced capitalism"), the evidence paints a very different picture. Turning to the preference for using formal paid labour, this was often used only when the household did not possess the necessary skills or experience to be able to undertake the task themselves, or were unable to

draw on other forms of support. Indeed, this was often the last resort used only when all other possible options were not available.

### **Discussion: rethinking the use of "alternative" to describe non-capitalist work practices**

The extent and nature of these work practices paint a very different picture of the relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist work practices to that which is commonly assumed. At the very least, given the pervasive nature of non-capitalist practices, and that this work is often used in preference to capitalist practices, it is essential to ask: what actually is "alternative" about "alternative economic practices"? When representations of "the economic" are constructed and interpreted using the language and rationales as they are understood at the household and community level, then non-capitalist economic practices are rarely denoted as "alternatives". When used to describe coping strategies, "alternative" in this context can be understood either to denote a second choice, one usually pursued when the preferred choice is not available or could not be utilised. In this way, and as highlighted above, it is capitalist economic practices that are often deemed to be the "alternative", not non-capitalist work practices.

Therefore, when these "non-capitalist work practices" are sucked up, re-modelled, and re-presented and re-packaged as "alternatives" (to capitalism), whether by well-intentioned diverse economic geographers or capitalist "realists" alike, something significant and authentic is being obscured or lost regarding lived practices. Talking about these non-capitalist economic spaces as "alternatives" in the context of everyday household life is not only misleading, but it can be offensive too. Consider the example of child care. The dominant preference we found, and as might be expected, was for child care to be undertaken through self-provisioning and through the support given by wider kinship social networks. Deeming such practices (e.g., parents caring for their own children) as "alternatives", and

capitalist care provision as the main and preferred option, is not only unfounded empirically, but also the source of deep opposition in current western cultures. Denoting non-capitalist forms of childcare as “alternative” therefore simply reinforces the notion that capitalism is dominant and the master signifier, and supports the logic of capitalist hegemony by representing other (and thus “othered”) forms of childcare as an “alternative” less desirable option. Indeed, this is not some purely “academic” (which in common parlance means of little practical importance) argument. Such a view currently finds explicit expression in welfare-to-work programmes which coerce the (single parent) into formal employment, forcing that parent to pay an unknown individual to look after their child(ren) in a crèche or other forms of daycare in the commercial capitalist sector.

The point to emphasise here is that the academic gaze of critical geographers writing from a diverse economies perspective has shone a light on making non-capitalist work practices more visible. However, to continue to denote these as "alternatives" is intensely problematic. These non-capitalist forms of work and organisation are not construed as alternatives by the people who use them; rather they are their preferred and desired strategies embedded in a range of positive social and cultural rationales. Instead, it is the use of capitalist forms of work to get tasks completed that is deemed "the alternative".

## **Conclusions**

Driven by the desire to further uncouple the framing of economic production, exchange and consumption from a capitalocentric discourse, this paper has problematized the positioning of non-capitalist work practices as "alternatives". The empirical evidence emerging from time use surveys and household work practice studies highlights firstly, the omnipresence and centrality of non-capitalist work practices in everyday work strategies and secondly, that they are not perceived at the household and community level as some second choice but rather, are

the preferred and desired way to get tasks undertaken. Non-capitalist economic practices, therefore, are for many positive and empowered choices. When we construct the economic “from below” this should come as no surprise. Indeed, as the anarchist Colin Ward (1982, 5) observed, these strategies illustrate the "common experience of the informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationships that...make the human community possible".

Positioning non-capitalist economic practices as “alternatives” is therefore untenable. Not only does this fail to capture the ubiquity of such practices in everyday life, but it fails to engage with the lived reality that these work practices are not construed as “alternatives” in the sense of a second choice, or less desired option, relative to capitalist practices. In short, the use of "alternative" as a description of non-capitalist work practices is problematic because it continually invites the question "*alternative to what?*" Answer: "capitalism".

Critically addressing the dominant imaginary and framing of non-capitalist work practices is important. As Gibson-Graham et al (2012, 8) state, in reframing the economy we reframe ourselves, indeed the very "practice of reframing is central to social and political transformation". Here, and drawing upon the lived experiences of non-capitalist work practices in everyday life, we find that economic geographers who are seeking to “take back the economy” (Gibson-Graham et. 2013), must pay critical attention to the language they use and the positioning of these practices as "alternatives". Capitalism is neither dominant and nor is it the preferred way of doing things for most people in their daily lives. In many ways, this means, if we are to be consistent with the way in which capitalist work practices are articulated and framed by households, we should be referring to capitalist practices as the alternative, not mainstream non-capitalist practices. Importantly, to do so would not only further move the economic imaginary away from a capitalocentric anchoring which uses capitalism as a central point of reference, but also open up new radical economic futures as

wholly feasible and as grounded in the plethora of mainstream non-capitalist practices already used and preferred in the here and now.

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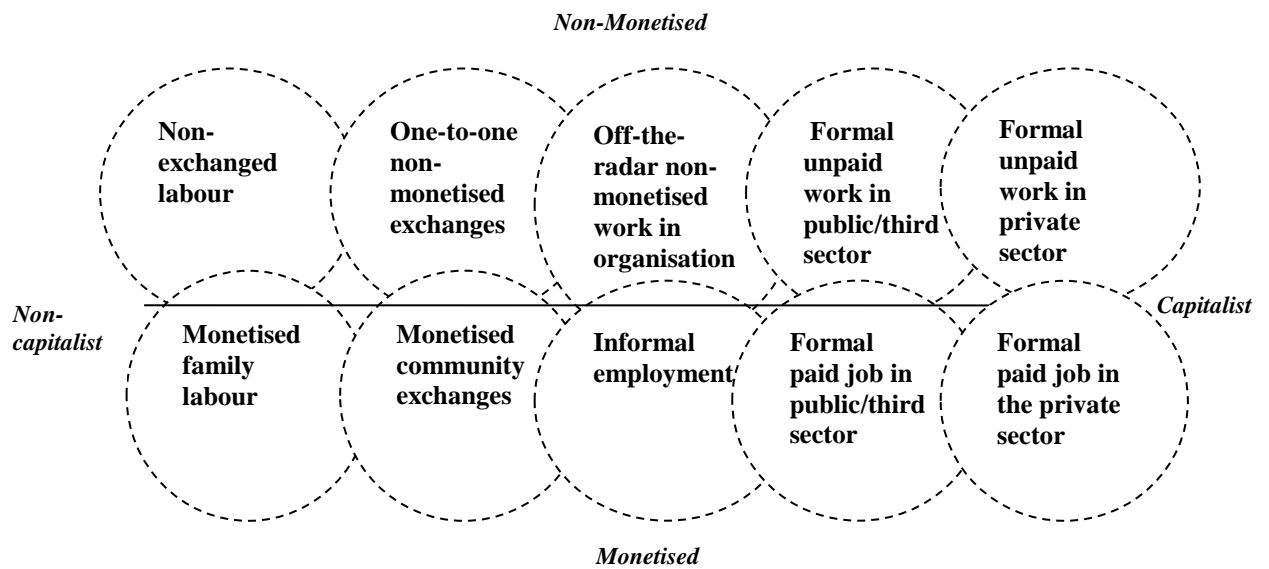
**Table 1 Type of work practices used to conduct 44 domestic tasks in 11 UK localities**

% tasks last conducted using:	Deprived urban	Affluent urban	Deprived rural	Affluent rural	All areas
<i>Non-monetised labour</i>					
Non-exchanged labour	76	72	67	63	70
One-to-one non monetised exchanges	4	2	8	7	6
<i>Monetised labour</i>					
Monetised family labour	1	<1	1	1	1
Monetised community exchange	3	1	4	1	3
Informal employment	2	8	<1	4	2
Formal paid job in private sector	12	15	18	22	16
Formal paid job in public and third sector	2	2	2	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
$\chi^2$	102.89	29.87	89.76	28.88	-

Note:  $\chi^2 > 12.838$  in all cases, leading to a rejection of the  $H_0$  within a 99.5 % confidence interval that there are no spatial variations in the sources of labour used to complete the 44 household services.

*Source:* adapted from White and Williams (2012, 1635)

**Figure 1: A typology of the diverse repertoire of labour practices in contemporary societies**



Source: adapted from Williams (2014: 108)

