The persistence of informal and unpaid labour: evidence from UK households

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Colin C Williams and Richard J White

> "The search for an alternative to capitalism is fruitless in a world where capitalism has become utterly dominant…" (Fulcher, 2004, p. 127)
>
> "The reality is that capitalism has always been contested and that people have created many other ways of providing for themselves" (Parker et al., 2014)

Introduction

The dominant market-orientated reading of economic practices assumes that there are no longer alternatives to capitalism. It is the word *assumes* that is here significant, for the Achilles heel of any apologist for a hegemonic capitalism is the lack of robust empirical evidence that can be drawn on to justify such claims. As Williams (2010: 29-30) has asserted, "One of the most disconcerting and worrying findings… is that hardly any evidence is ever brought to the fore to provide corroboration that commodification is in fact taking place."

In recent years, various analyses have revealed the persistence of "alternative" economies (e.g. Araujo, 2016; Krueger et al. 2017; North 2014; Ince and Hall, 2018; White and Williams, 2010, 2016a,b; Zanoni et al. 2017). The aim of this chapter is to further advance this burgeoning literature that contests the view that there is no alternative to capitalist forms of work and economy. We use Household Work Practice Surveys (HWPS) to provide an empirical focus on the forms of labour used by UK households to get everyday tasks done. Through analyzing these surveys we shed light on the persistence of informal and unpaid labour in UK households and the complex range of transactions animating these forms of labour/work. While not denying the importance of a feminist analysis that positions unpaid household labour as domestic reproductive labour that is harnessed "for the support and maintenance of a productive labor force" (Mills, 2016, 283), our aim here is to better recognise and make more visible, the range and persistence of informal and unpaid labour practices in contemporary economies, such as the putatively 'capitalist' UK economy. To show this, a "total social organisation of labour" (TSOL) approach is used to visualise the diversity of labour practices that prevail in everyday life. This approach recognises that labour practices range from wholly paid to wholly unpaid practices, and from wholly formal to wholly informal practices.

The chapter concludes by revealing how it is entirely mistaken to view formal paid labour as dominant and always the preferred option of citizens. The implications of this analysis point to the potential feasibility of alternative futures for work beyond market-oriented paid formal labour, or what is associated with 'capitalist' work.

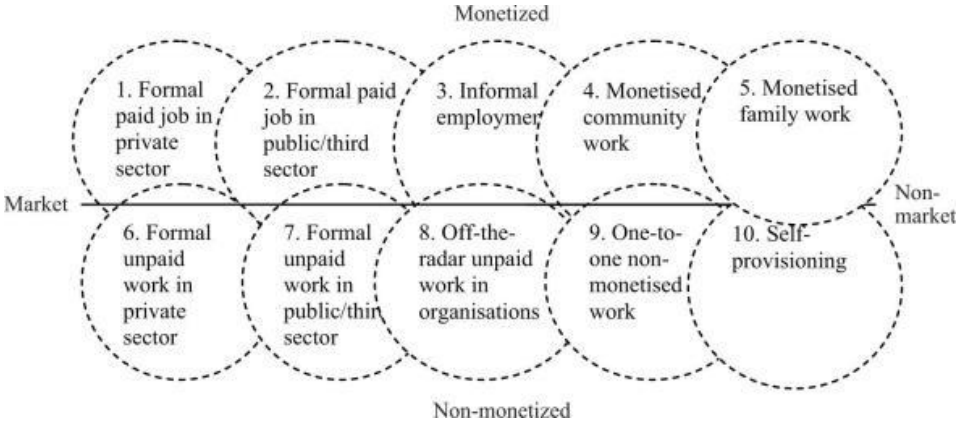
Making diverse economies visible: a total social organisation of labour taxonomy

A key challenge is how to effectively communicate, represent and make visible the persistence of diverse economies, and how to de-centre and de-legitimise capitalism from its assumed hegemony. In the action research applications of the diverse economies approach this has been achieved through reframing and representing the economy as an iceberg (see Gibson-Graham et.al, 2013). What is normally regarded as "the economy", namely wage labour, market exchange of commodities and capitalist enterprise, is portrayed as the tip of the iceberg above the water line, whilst beneath the surface are a multiplicity of other activities which are hidden from view. Included in the 'iceberg' representation of economy are a diverse range of labour practices, many of which have been documented by sociologists, anthropologists and geographers.

In the 1980s, for example, sociologist Ray Pahl (1984) conducted seminal exploratory work on the various forms of work that households undertook to 'get by' on the Isle of Sheppey. This research started to unpack work beyond paid employment. Pahl distinguished three forms of work beyond employment, namely self-provisioning (i.e., unpaid work by households for themselves), community exchange (i.e., unpaid work undertaken for members of other households) and paid informal work (i.e., paid work that is not declared to the authorities for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes).

More recently, the Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL) approach has been developed to provide a more structured framework of the multiplicity of work practices used in everyday life in contemporary societies (Glucksmann, 1995, 2005; Williams, 2014). The TSOL approach interprets the economy as a "…"multiplex" combination of modes, rather than as a dualism between market and non-market forms" (Glucksmann, 2005: 8). Williams (2014) adapted this TSOL approach and identified ten broad and overlapping work practices as shown in Figure 1. This more nuanced taxonomy situates labour practices along a spectrum from relatively market-oriented to more non-market-oriented labour practices but cross-cuts this with a further spectrum (rather than a dualism) from non-monetised, through gift exchange and in-kind reciprocal labour, to monetised labour. Hatched circles are used to show how each labour practice overlaps along both the marketization spectrum of the *x*-axis as well as along the monetisation spectrum of the *y*-axis.

Figure 1: Visualising a multiplex of modes, difference and diversity of work.



Source: Williams and Nadin (2010: 57)

Ten broad overlapping labour practices are thus depicted that merge at their borders into the other practices surrounding them. First, there is formal paid labour in the private sector that is registered by the state for tax, social security and labour law purposes. Conventionally, this was portrayed as the "home" of the market economy, at the centre of economic life, hegemonic and separate from other labour practices. However, given that private sector organisations are increasingly pursuing a triple-bottom line, whilst public and third sector organisations are also pursuing profit (albeit to reinvest so that they achieve wider social and environmental objectives), an ongoing blurring of the boundaries between formal labour across the private, public and third sectors is occurring, reflected in the overlapping of these two zones.

Formal paid labour (in all three of these spheres) also merges into the sphere of paid informal labour and the realm of formal non-monetised labour. Paid informal labour is labour not declared to the authorities to not pay tax or social security contributions and/or to violate labour law. Two varieties can be identified: wholly undeclared paid labour that is not declared for tax, social, security and labour law purposes, and under-declared labour where formal employees receive from their formal employers a formal declared salary but also an undeclared "envelope" salary (Williams, 2009). This latter labour practice clearly displays how the realms of formal and informal paid labour are not separate from each other.

There is also an overlap between formal monetised labour and formal non-monetised labour, with the types of labour at the border of these two realms perhaps expanding in recent years. Formal unpaid labour in the private (and public) sector in the form of unpaid internships or one-week unpaid trials has perhaps become increasingly common. Moreover, when formal non-monetised labour takes place in third sector organisations, it is widely known as "formal volunteering". Sometimes, however, it takes the form of informal or "below the radar" non-monetised labour, such as when a parent coaches a children's football team but without having undergone the required police checks. There also exists between informal non-monetised and informal monetised labour a realm where labour is provided in-kind or for gifts.

Continuing along the market to non-market continuum, there is one-to-one non-monetised labour, which involves the provision of unpaid help to members of households other than one's own such as friends, neighbours and acquaintances. However, there is again overlap between this labour and monetised labour when there is in-kind reciprocal labour or gifts are given. Examining household members who conduct labour practices within their household for themselves or other members of the household, it is seldom mentioned that sometimes household members are paid by other household members for conducting activities and/or reciprocal in-kind labour or gifts are given in return for the labour provided. Pure monetary payment is in many western societies nearly always for inter- rather than intra-generational labour provision (e.g. from a parent to a child, not between parents). When gifts and in-kind reciprocal labour are included, the distinction between monetized and non-monetised household labour becomes even more fuzzy. Indeed, couples may conduct everyday domestic tasks for each other on an in-kind

reciprocal basis (e.g., one cooks the dinner because the other picks up the children). Reflecting on this, it might even be considered infrequent for domestic tasks to be undertaken on a wholly non-monetised basis with absolutely no expectation of some form of reciprocity. Even unpaid housework often is undertaken based on an expectation of reciprocity in the future in couple households. Furthermore, with the increasing incidence of divorce and re-marriage and increasing disassembly and re-assembly of families, what constitutes family and non-family is no longer clear-cut, since those who are acquaintances, friends and even neighbours might well be past or future family. This results in overlaps between what constitutes self-provisioning and one-to-one non-monetised exchanges.

Applying this typology of multifarious labour practices, the chapter will shortly focus on empirical research conducted on work practices in urban and rural areas, and between affluent and deprived households in one minority world context, the UK. Before doing so it is important to draw attention to the fact that the TSOL has great potential in being used effectively across multiple societal contexts. This would certainly include other majority world contexts where, for example, subsistence 'portfolios' draw on many similar labour practices, or indeed in workplaces or enterprises in both majority and minority world contexts where this range of practices also occur.

Mapping diverse labour practices

To map the size and extent of each of these labour practices, Household Work Practice Surveys have been undertaken since the early 2000s in the UK in urban and rural communities and higher-and-lower income households. Households were considered as lower-income where the gross household income was less than £250/ week. These surveys start with a list of 44 common everyday tasks covering 'home maintenance and repair' (outdoor painting; indoor painting; wallpapering; plastering; mending a broken widow and maintenance of appliances), 'home improvement' (putting in double glazing; plumbing; electrical work; house insulation; putting in a bathroom suite; building a garage; building an extension; putting in central heating and carpentry), 'housework' (routine housework; cleaning windows outdoors; spring cleaning; cleaning windows indoors; doing the shopping; washing clothes and sheets; ironing; cooking meals; washing dishes; hairdressing; household administration), 'making and repairing goods' (making clothes; repairing clothes; knitting; making or repairing furniture; making or repairing garden equipment; making curtains), 'vehicle maintenance' (washing, repairing and maintaining car/ motorbike), 'gardening' (care of indoor plants; outdoor borders; outdoor vegetables; lawn mowing) and 'caring activities' (daytime baby-sitting; night-time baby-sitting; educational activities; pet care).

One-to one interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The starting point in generating this task list were the tasks used by Pahl (1984) in his seminal study of household work practices on the Isle of Sheppey. These were slightly modified to suit the contemporary conditions. To examine the sources of labour households used to get tasks completed, the interviewee was asked whether each activity had been undertaken during the previous five

years/year/month/week (depending on the activity). If conducted, first, they were asked a series of questions to identify which of the ten sources of labour had been used to conduct the task. Firstly, for example, they were asked who had conducted the task (a household member, a relative living outside the household, a friend, neighbour, firm, landlord, etc), secondly, whether the person had been unpaid, paid or given a gift and thirdly, and if paid, whether it was 'cash-in-hand' or formal employment. For each task completed, moreover, the respondent was asked why they had decided to get the work done using that source of labour and whether it was their first choice, or whether they would have preferred to use another source of labour.

Following this, the same task list was used to understand the types of labour that household members had engaged in for other households. Taking each task in turn, they were again asked whether they had conducted the tasks for another household within a particular time frame and if so, for whom, whether it was unpaid, or whether they received money or a gift, and the type of labour involved to classify it as one of the ten forms. They were also asked why they had decided to do that task for the person to understand their motivations (for further details, see Burns et. al, 2004; Williams, 2005; White and Williams, 2012).

The persistence of informal and unpaid labour in the UK

Table 1 reports the results of the household work practices survey conducted in deprived and affluent urban and rural localities in the UK. This reveals that just 16 per cent of all the 44 everyday tasks were conducted by those in a formal job in the private sector (e.g., a formally employed plumber or electrician). Despite assertions of the hegemony of commodification, therefore, just 1 in 6 tasks were conducted using private sector formal labour. The consequence is that 5 in 6 of these everyday tasks are conducted using other forms of labour.

Table 1: Labour practices used by UK households to complete 44 everyday tasks

% tasks last conducted using:	Deprived urban	Affluent urban	Deprived rural	Affluent rural	All areas
Monetised labour					
Formal paid job in private sector	12	15	18	22	16
Formal paid job in public and third sector	2	2	2	2	2
Informal employment	2	8	<1	4	2
Monetised community exchange	3	1	4	1	3
Monetised family labour	1	<1	1	1	1
Non-monetised labour					
Formal unpaid work in private sector	<1	0	<1	<1	<1
Formal unpaid work in public & third sector	<1	0	<1	0	<1
Off the radar/ non-monetised work	<1	0	<1	0	0

in organisations						
One-to-one non monetised exchanges		4	2	8	7	6
Self-provisioning		76	72	67	63	70
Total		100	100	100	100	100
χ^2		102.89	29.87	89.76	28.88	-

Note: χ^2>12.838 in all cases, leading us to reject H_o within a 99.5 per cent confidence interval that there are no spatial variations in the sources of labour used to complete the 44 household services.

Source: White and Williams (2012: 1636)

Over three-quarters (76 per cent) of these 44 tasks are conducted using self-provisioning, namely by household members on an unpaid basis for themselves or for other members of the household. For all of the discussion of the advent of a hegemonic capitalism, therefore, the vast majority of everyday tasks conducted by household have not been outsourced to the formal market economy.

Paid employment is therefore 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. If public and third sector paid employment is included, this figure increases only by 2 per cent. Contrary to the view that capitalism is pervasive, the evidence is that this is not the case. Neither is it even desired. Examining whether households would prefer to use formal paid labour, but do not do so because they cannot afford to outsource to the market, the finding is that this is not the case. Formal paid labour was commonly used only when the household did not possess the necessary capacities or skills to undertake the task themselves or could not source other sources of help. Indeed, formal paid labour was frequently the last resort and was used only if all other possible options were unavailable.

In depictions of capitalist hegemony, self-provisioning (i.e., subsistence labour) is viewed as a mere historical footnote that might persist in a few small margins of the economic landscape. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence from these household work practice surveys refutes this view. Indeed, the outsourcing of these everyday tasks to the formal market economy is very limited, and in most cases, it is seen as a second-choice, only used as a last resort, such as when time-pressures due to having a formal job and the absence of other options leave no other choice open to households other than to source from formal businesses (e.g., domestic cleaning companies). Even higher-income populations, who outsource a slightly higher proportion of these tasks to the formal market economy, conduct a high level of self-provisioning.

Nevertheless, the character of self-provisioning in affluent and deprived populations differs. More affluent households outsource routine tasks (e.g., domestic cleaning) to free up time to conduct more creative and rewarding tasks (e.g., do-it-yourself). The deprived households, meanwhile, undertake a narrower set of mostly routine, mundane and repetitive tasks (e.g., housework, cleaning). In only 20 per cent of cases was self-provisioning stated to be used solely 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.

Monetised family labour is paid work provided to other family members living in the same household. Only 1 per cent of all tasks were undertaken using this source of labour. These reimbursements only occur for inter-generational (not intra-generational) "transactions" (e.g., from a parent to a child or adolescent), such as for gardening, cleaning bedrooms, doing the laundry, helping with housework or baby-sitting younger siblings. Here the rationales are not market-oriented, such as seeing and exploiting children as a cheap labour source. Rather, positive social and cultural reasons are given, including teaching them the value and/or worth of the tasks that others perform. In affluent populations, money changes hands. In deprived populations, gifts are more prominent 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. It was commonly asserted "I do activity x and s/he does activity y; we share the work". Self-provisioning therefore, involves in-kind reciprocity or reciprocal labour, which intimates that this is not entirely separate from paid family labour.

Unpaid community exchange for and by acquaintances, neighbours, friends or kin living outside the household, was used to complete 4 per cent of the everyday tasks. This was more commonly used in deprived than affluent urban localities. However, its character also varies. While deprived populations rely more on one-to-one unpaid help from kin and this is used as a survival tactic to meet material needs, higher-income populations use one-to-one unpaid work more to maintain and grow their social networks.

Monetised community exchanges, meanwhile, were used to complete 3 per cent of all tasks, and involved favours provided by and for closer social relations, often involving token cash payments. Although money changes hands, this is not driven in most cases by economic rationales (to make or to save money). Rather as with non-monetised exchanges, broader redistributive and community-building rationales are cited. For example, when neighbours and friends provide a favour, there was a preference for token cash payments and/or gifts whenever possible, enabling one to avoid owing favours in contexts where reciprocity may be difficult. Paying kin in cash, meanwhile, allows money to be redistributed in a manner that avoids any notion that "charity" is involved. Paying for favours therefore smooths the way for reciprocity in contexts where it might not otherwise occur, such as when one is physically unable to return favours, or too time pressured to be capable of offering in-kind labour in return.

Finally, informal employment involves paid activities not declared to the state for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes, and 2 per cent of all the everyday tasks are completed using this source of labour. Such work ranges from work akin to formal employment in terms of the social relations and motives involved to forms closer to unpaid mutual aid, as discussed above. Even those forms akin to employment were not always undertaken primarily for profit. "Mates' rates" were often charged and paid at rates well below the market price,

especially where elderly customers were involved who would not be able to afford market rates.

Conclusions

In depicting formal paid labour as one work practice among many in this TSOL approach, the rejection of capitalocentric framings of the economic is obvious, and the implication striking. Market-oriented formal labour is revealed to be far from hegemonic. This calls into question the dominance of "the market" and suggests that what are often called "alternatives" are already present and commonly used.

It also shows that approaches which focus upon the household at the unit of analysis, rather than the enterprise, are a valuable way forward. Not only does such an approach highlight the existence of multifarious labour practices in contemporary society but also does so from a perspective that is easily understood by the population. It is, after all, the household which is the lens through which most people look out onto the world to understand it, rather than the enterprise.

By examining whether the labour practices used to undertake tasks is their preferred option, moreover, it is revealed that formal market-oriented labour is not only far from dominant but also seldom the preferred option of citizens. Rather, there is often a preference for using alternative forms of labour other than market-oriented formal labour. The pervasiveness of non-commodified labour practices suggests that the dominance of "the market" is somewhat overplayed. An important contribution of such research is that it *potentially* reveals that "alternative ways of organizing and organization beyond capitalist hegemony" (Williams 2014, p. 116) are not some utopian desire but exist in the here and now.

Until now, far too few studies have been conducted on multifarious labour practices. Of those that have, very few have used the total social organisation of labour (TSOL) taxonomy of labour practices. If this chapter encourages more grounded studies of these diverse economic practices then it will have achieved one of its intentions. Should this then lead to greater recognition that capitalist economic practices are not hegemonic, and that informal and unpaid economic practices not only persist but are often the preferred option of citizens when selecting how tasks are completed, then it will have achieved its wider objective. If these help collectively to bring forward new visions of work that lie beyond market orientated formal labour then it will have served its purpose.

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