

Zigzag capitalism:

Youth entrepreneurship in the contemporary global South

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Prempal Singh is in his late twenties and lives in Bemni in the Indian Himalayas. He has a Tenth Class (high school) pass and comes from a poor family in the village. After leaving school, he quickly realized that he was unlikely to get a government job. At roughly this time, electricity arrived in the village, and, seeing his chance, Prempal retrained as an electrician. He volunteered to fix cables in the village and learnt about how electricity works. He then borrowed money from an uncle and started to hire himself as a DJ at local weddings. Two microphones strapped to a mule, he hauled his equipment up and down the mountain for village functions, tacking back and forth along the steep rocky paths. He knew how to bribe the local officials to ensure that there is a continuous flow of electricity to the village when a function is taking place and he had developed good relationships with the main electrical equipment supplier in the nearby town. “The whole thing is running alright”, Prempal told us in May 2012.

There are several young people in Bemni who are responding to a difficult economic environment by starting small businesses. They are, in their own words, “entrepreneurs” (using the English word). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an entrepreneur is a “person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit.” Entrepreneurship, unlike the related term “enterprise”, carries with it the specific connotation of risk-taking. It is also often associated with a type of shrewdness. In an influential recent definition, Stevenson (1983: 24) argues that, “Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled”. To date, much of the social science research on entrepreneurship in this sense has focused on business elites. But ordinary people across the global South engage in forms of business that involve considerations of risk, profit, and calculation. The poor in places such as India are not only “surviving” but also making careful, repeated, and much-deliberated decisions about how to capitalize on new opportunities and navigate risks.

People in their late teens and twenties are among the most prominent of these ordinary entrepreneurs. Young people in Africa, Latin America and Asia have moved into formal education in increasing numbers over the past quarter century, often with the intention of escaping agriculture and entering white-collar work. But there is a chronic lack of formal-sector jobs in manufacturing and services in many parts of the global South. One of the implications of this mismatch between ambitions and outcomes has been to propel young people into the informal capitalist economy where they often engage in a bewildering variety of microenterprise (see World Bank 2013; cf Jeffrey 2010).

The rise of a precariously employed youth population is not of course a peculiarity of the global South. It is a theme of Wilson’s (1996) work on jobless youth in the US and a widespread topic of public comment in contemporary Europe. But in the global South the speed of change has usually been more rapid than it has been in Euro-America, in terms of the rise of formal education, cycles of boom and bust, and sudden shifts in the economic landscape that make it necessary to recalibrate expectations and strategies.

Young people are adept at finding economic niches within uncertain economic landscapes. Chiumbu and Nyawahindi (2012) have shown how poor urban youth in Zimbabwe made money during the 2000s through selling pre-paid mobile phone cards, which they sometimes used as a virtual currency in the context of the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar. Thieme (2010) worked with young people in a Nairobi slum who were involved in the recycling of waste. Young people's entrepreneurship is also a central theme in Jamie Cross's ongoing work on the marketing of solar panels in eastern India, and Naaf's (2011) research in Indonesia, where young women have worked as marketing agents in large retail outlets.

The quality of the institutional environment mediates opportunities for entrepreneurial action within any specific sphere. Langevang and Gough's (2012) research on hairdressing and dressmaking businesses in contemporary Ghana bears this out. The introduction of new technologies, growing demand for customized hair styling, and the existence of business associations encouraged the emergence of a set of young women running small hairdressing businesses in urban Ghana. But local dressmaking declined in the same region because of a lack of technological innovation and the absence of supportive craft organizations.

Notwithstanding the difficulties confronting young people in becoming entrepreneurs, the notion that youth can and should develop small businesses has become a powerful development discourse. In an oft-cited report, the World Bank (2007) urged young people to take responsibility for their futures through entering business. Similarly, the Indian Government has recently established a National Innovation Council with the goal of fostering local entrepreneurship across India, especially among youth. Enterprise is also being celebrated in the media. The recent BBC documentary *Welcome to India* is full of images of poor young people becoming grassroots entrepreneurs.

There are ideological risks attached to celebrations of youth entrepreneurialism. The notion that people can "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" can serve as an ideological fig leaf for state non-investment in core services. In addition, the rise of market-oriented approaches to development may promote the idea that people are solely responsible for their success, and this "responsibilization" can decrease the pressure on government to improve people's lives, distract from issues of persistent inequality, and lead young people to blame themselves for their situation - the World Bank's (2007) language of giving young people "second chances" in their late teens and twenties (as if they had a first chance) is especially disingenuous. Moreover, young people may become so imbued with notions of individual success that they downplay community solidarities and ideas of shared citizenship; a type of neoliberal mentality may take hold that has a destructive effect on young people and their wider social milieu.

But this critique of entrepreneurialism discourse must be read in context. To disparage all references to the promotion of "entrepreneurship" as fundamentally tainted by their association with free market capitalist ideas and the pronouncements of the World Bank is to detract attention from the need to support the types of enterprise being pushed forward by young people like Prempal.

These normative questions become still more complex when we turn to what might be called "bad entrepreneurship". Prempal's neighbour, Karminder, dropped out of school after Eighth Class and set up a shop in the local town, which was the front for a local

poaching operation. He then started to ingratiate himself with his brother-in-law, a much older man who had become a successful contractor on government building projects in the region. Contractorships offer the opportunity to accumulate large personal fortunes through the embezzlement of funds ear-marked for government projects. They have become one of the chief ways in which relatively powerful people on the ground capture and control state resources in provincial India, reflecting a marked increase since the early 2000s in the quantity of money invested by central and State governments in infrastructural projects across the country. Karminder spent a couple of years as a lackey for his brother-in-law and politicians and he was duly rewarded with the opportunity to make money from a bridge building project. He soon began to take on projects himself. It is competitive, dangerous and difficult work, entailing regular trips to Nepal to hire workers, numerous visits to politicians to “keep them sweet”, and a constant vigilance with respect to competitors. The aggregate impact of the predatory brokerage performed by Karminder and others has been to prevent poor people from gaining access to basic development goods, including meals for children in schools, cheap grain, and things as fundamental as a roof for their home.

Karminder’s example is highly suggestive in terms of the wider youth literature. Young people are often accumulating money and influence through occupying niches within patron-client networks in the global South, as research in Africa (e.g. Vigh 2006), Latin America (de Vries 2002), and India (Jeffrey and Young 2012) attests. This includes work as mercenaries in areas of conflict, hired thugs for political parties, and activity as brokers or patrons in the corrupt disbursement of state resources – all quite “old” forms of narrowly self-interested accumulative politics into which youth are sometimes breathing fresh life. An especially telling recent example comes from Newell’s (2012) work with young men in Cote D’Ivoire. She charts the widespread move of men into forms of “bizness” a Francophone African word covering activities such as phone fraud, forgery, extortion, blackmail, and dealing in stolen goods. It is a murky world of changing opportunities and risks in which young people are constantly forced to change “lines”.

What emerges powerfully in these studies of illegal enterprise is the extent to which young people use a hyper-entrepreneurial language to rationalize their actions. For example, Jones (2010) argues that young people have responded to economic crisis in Zimbabwe in part through developing a novel vocabulary of capitalist endeavor. Eschewing old models of how to do business, they refer to themselves as people engaged in creative improvisation. This is most evident in the growing popularity of the phrase “kukiya kiya”, a complex term which means at its most simply “making do” or “seizing opportunities in the moment” but also connotes a brash form of pragmatism, *savoir faire*, and an incessant hustle reflected also in the English word “zigzag”. Young people argue that older, “straight” economic transactions are no longer possible or even desirable. Life has become an exercise in “zigzagging”.

The spatial metaphor is surely appropriate, highlighting how - literally and symbolically - young people feel they have to constantly move about, hustle and find novel lines of approach to get things done. But Jones’ analysis is geographically interesting for other reasons, too. Young people adopted the new language of zigzagging in the specific context of feeling that normal life had been suspended in Zimbabwe. The hyper-entrepreneurial mindsets that Jones describes reflect a generalized sense of occupying a type of netherworld in which ordinary rules no longer apply. Suspended animation is a theme of other work, as well. Janet Roitman (2004), in a study of underemployed young men in the Chad Basin, identifies the emergence of a new language of economic activity wherein

young men search for “spoils” while playing roles within the illegal international trade in drugs and weapons. Again, the move away from the economic rules associated with an earlier generation was explicitly bound up in young people occupying a time-space “outside” the market as typically defined.

The larger point emerging in the work of Jones, Roitman, Newell and others is of the emergence of forms of individualistic, self-enterprising discourse that in some ways exceed and bend into a new form the notions of neoliberal responsabilization being promulgated by powerful institutions such as the World Bank. Young people are not only absorbing neoliberal ideas and in some instances rejecting them: They are retrofitting such ideas, which often concatenate with older, to some extent “local” or “regional” ideas of entrepreneurship and individualism. This poses yet another challenge to simplistic accounts of a need to “fight back” against the spread of neoliberal discourse. In policy terms, the state and other powerful forces need to combine a focus on entrepreneurship with attention to improving the institutional environment and addressing social inequalities.

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