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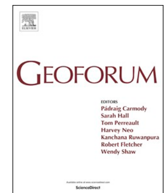

Debate Piece

Barriers to decolonizing economic geography: The inconvenient case of rhino horns in rural African futures

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Within economic geography, recent engagement with broader conceptualizations of African futures is a hopeful development in a field still largely dominated by Western scholars. The panel session titled 'African futures and the future of global capitalism' at the 2018 Global Conference in Economic Geography offers one example of promising dialogue and debate. The effort opens up possibilities to enhance theories of economic development and build a more relevant and actionable body of empirical work. Yet the success of such a project rests on the ability of scholars to work towards decolonizing the knowledge production that takes place within contemporary academic research. As Radcliffe (2017) aptly notes, decolonizing geography as a discipline is an uncomfortable process. Alternative narratives of the future, and actions taken to realize these alternatives, can raise difficult questions. For example, what if some people desire a future that is unpalatable to Western conservation ideals? Drawing from over a decade of research on poverty and inequality in southern Africa, I find Western conservation sensibilities act as a barrier to decolonizing knowledge within economic geography.

Decolonial enquiry requires broadening the range of experiences that inform scholarly discourse (Pulido, 2002). Sen's (1999) capability approach and Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire offer a promising framework for conceptualizing African futures in a manner more deeply informed by contextually relevant worldviews, values, and wider socio-economic relations. Sen (1999) views development as the freedom to live a life one has reason to value, while explicitly recognizing that values will vary across cultural contexts. Appadurai (2004) eloquently advocates for considering both aspirations and aspirational capacity of economically marginalized and otherwise disadvantaged peoples. Asking people about aspired-to states, and the strategies undertaken to achieve them, reveals locally feasible and acceptable ways to pursue a better life.

In my research on rural transformation in southern Africa, I find capability framings can reveal alternative narratives of African development. However, the 'alternativeness' does not always emerge in ways that are anticipated or, in some cases, hoped for. In interviews and surveys, respondents challenge mainstream visions of rising agricultural productivity as the dominant pathway to (and experience of) a better life in rural Africa. However, the alternative pathways they discuss can be as ecologically disruptive as other forms of capitalist development. In one case study, for example, the most successful material development pathway involves participation in the illegal rhino horn trade (Silva et al., 2018). Inconvenient findings emerge on two fronts (cf. Ferguson, 2006).

First, the hopes and goals of respondents suggested a much stronger desire to reproduce mainstream capitalism than to resist it. Since 2008, my collaborators and I have been investigating the effects of parks and protected areas on rural development in Namibian and Mozambican regions characterized by high economic poverty and other disadvantages (see Silva and Khatiwada, 2014). We found local aspirations for capitalist forms of development were the norm in that salaried jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, and asset accumulation dominated descriptions of the good life. Findings such as these could be viewed as inconvenient insofar as they fail to support popular theories of peasant resistance to capitalist exploitation. Perhaps Fletcher (2001) states it best when he asks "What do we [academics] do when the so-called 'oppressed' embrace the very cause of their supposed 'oppression'? (p. 43). The empirical literature offers few lessons for researchers grappling with this question. Scholars of Southern economies have produced an impressive body of work on rural resistance to ecologically-disruptive capitalist development. Studies analyzing the politics of consent remain rare (cf. Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen, 2017).

When alternate narratives of African futures do materialize, these can also prove inconvenient and, for myself, an even greater challenge. The use of the capability approach in itself cannot alter the positionality of researchers steeped in Western discourses of conservation. Limitations to analytically engaging with the potentialities and, perhaps, actualities of African futures can quickly emerge when findings are incompatible with Western ideologies and values. The alternative aspects of the local narratives under discussion stem less from what constitutes a good life than from what is viewed as an acceptable means to obtain it. In one case, the issue lies in confronting development pathways that involve potential species extinction.

Such findings emerged from a southern Mozambican case study involving three villages located near the border of South Africa's Kruger National Park. Results from a socio-economic household census in 2009 revealed few statistically significant differences between villages in income, assets, and a suite of other well-being indicators. However, by 2012, we were receiving consistent reports of engagement in the rhino

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horn economy in two of the three villages. In these villages, our second census in 2015 revealed a stunning change in asset values for a sizable share of households. In a few cases, households that had not owned bicycles in 2009 now had cars.

By 2015, colorful Western style houses with verandas and tile roofs were scattered throughout the villages where some residents had reportedly turned to illegal rhino hunting. Indeed, some front doors had images of elephants and rhinos carved into the wood. The new houses had water catchment systems and large storage tanks. Solar panels now powered refrigerators and televisions. A few houses had artistic murals near the front door depicting geometric designs. Some now had house pets. Cats sunned themselves on windowsills. A resident explained that, like foreigners, he now fed his dog inside the house. In stark contrast, little had visibly changed in the one village where no accounts of illegal rhino hunting emerged.

Other changes included the proliferation of small, round veneration huts in many household compounds. In 2009, only the traditional healers had such structures. Most residents described them as a means to honor their ancestors. At the community level, access to goods, entertainment, and transportation services had markedly improved. Stores and bars played music, one now had a billiard table where crowds of men played most evenings. Two private minibus services now provided transportation to the provincial capital. Local residents throughout the southern Mozambican case study attributed the dramatic transformation to income from illegal rhino hunting.

From a capabilities perspective, as well as from a more simply economic perspective, signs of remarkable progress exist in the villages associated with illegal rhino hunting. Though the gains go in the first instance to the hunters themselves, interviews indicate that they have broader effects. Consider, for example, the case when an alleged poacher sets up a minibus service and employs local drivers. Consider also the greater life advantages of the driver's children as his wages improve their access to schooling and health care. The expansion of education, mobility, and economic security all fit comfortably within standard Western conceptions of progress and development. At what point, if any, do these indirect effects become evidence of legitimate progress to researchers with a Western conservation ethic?

Putting aside the ecological consequences of illegal rhino hunting, the economic benefits are considerable. Thus, we can understand why people might hunt rhinos, especially given the severe lack of other opportunities in the area. Yet Western researchers may still be reluctant to say that what has happened in these villages is a good thing. Personally, I struggled to describe this case in a positive way, despite the evident gains. Arguably, this hesitancy serves to maintain colonized knowledge production. Given my desire to do the opposite, this raises questions of why one might be reluctant in this way.

There are two obvious arguments against seeing these changes as positive. One is to argue that the economic and other capability gains do not outweigh the extreme risks. An estimated 500 Mozambicans were shot and killed by South African park rangers between 2010 and 2015 (Smith, 2015). However, this cost is itself largely the result of South African conservation policy and policing decisions (See Lunstrum, 2014). Arguably. it is the value that the international conservation community places on rhinos that ultimately leads to the human costs of illegal hunting.

The second argument rests on the ecological implications of illegal rhino hunting. One could argue that the economic and capability gains are outweighed by the effects on already scarce rhino populations. Even if some rural areas benefit in a manner consistent with economic development or progress more generally, participating in the rhino horn trade can still be considered wrong for conservation reasons. It is there, however, that this line of thought encounters local resistance. For it is seen as privileging animals over people. Although locals had a long tradition of hunting for bushmeat, they only became rhino hunters in response to international demand. They see that there are few of them left and acknowledge that the hunting cannot continue for long. Still they think that their human gains are more valuable than the conservation losses. This is a fair and recognizable argument. It is hardly a uniquely African one.

The question, then, is why Western researchers find it hard to write about illegal wildlife hunting in a more balanced way that at least acknowledges the benefits of the activity and the structural conditions which give rise to it. Here we can see a connection to the themes of decolonizing the curriculum, the academy, and economic-geographical knowledge. If we pay attention to the Mozambican voices of those involved, we can see how rhino poaching can, in some circumstances, be judged as an effective strategy to reach valued development goals. It is not an optimal strategy, but many things are good without being optimal. Yet, if we prioritize conservation goals, or (less reflectively) just feel outrage at pictures of rhinos lying dead and stripped of their horns, we will never see the benefits of rhino hunting as a form of progress.

A decolonized academic debate and curriculum will require Western scholars to consider what ideologies act as barriers to decolonial scholarship. The case of the illegal rhino hunting points towards to the possibility for a sort of decolonizing, one that involves taking a variety of local perspectives about value seriously – not just views about what has value, but also views about the appropriate ranking of valuable things. Reevaluating long-held ideologies of progress will inevitably cause discomfort, but it is a necessary step in engaging analytically with alternative futures.

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