

## **2<sup>ND</sup> WORKSHOP ON POPULAR ECONOMIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**LSE, 24<sup>TH</sup>-25<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2010**

### **Money-go-round: personal economies of wealth, aspiration and indebtedness**

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Considerable attempts to create a single economy of credit, in part through regularizing microlenders (especially the much-demonized loansharks or mashonisas), have been made by the South African government, notably through the National Credit Act. This paper complements my earlier study of practices of moneylending in context, by exploring how things are seen from the point of view of consumers and of those who aim to protect them. It reinforces my earlier findings: that we should speak of *moneylending* rather than *moneylenders*; that lending is often done by groups rather than by individuals (in a variant of the well-known stokvel), and may represent a response to so-called 'formalisation' (Guyer 2004) of financial arrangements by those who have considerable experience of this, rather than being a bulwark against it.

The paper critically explores prevalent stereotypes of the 'overindebted consumer' and the 'black diamond', seeking evidence both in support and in refutation of them. It discusses those factors which are conducive to and those which obstruct the achieving of the status of upwardly mobile – and simultaneously overindebted – person. It demonstrates that aspiration/upward mobility, and the problems of credit/debt that accompany these, have much longer histories; and that these matters can give us insights into the contradictory character of the South African state. Its 'neoliberal' dimension allows and encourages free engagement with the market and advocates the freedom to spend, even to become excessively acquisitive of material wealth. But it simultaneously attempts to regulate this in the interests of those unable to participate in this dream of conspicuous consumption.