

THAT MELANCHOLIC OBJECT OF DESIRE: WORK AND OFFICIAL DISCOURSE BEFORE AND AFTER POLOKWANE

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Where is the dignity in what work? Franco Barchiesi examines the impossible disconnect between official discourses valorizing work as the precondition for social inclusion and citizenship, and the frail, exploitative, precarious reality of waged employment.

In its simultaneous move towards political liberation and economic liberalization South Africa is facing a peculiar paradox: the more waged employment becomes a frail, exploitative, precarious reality for workers directly involved in it, the more central waged employment becomes in the views of social inclusion and citizenship advanced by the left, the labour movement and the government.

South Africa's crisis of wage employment, in fact, is not just a matter of joblessness. Two thirds of waged workers can be categorized as "working poor", according to Miriam Altman's 2007 report

for the Human Sciences Research Council: job creation tends to be more and more pronounced in casual, informal, unstable occupations. The share of wages on the national income is now at its lowest level since 1960, and the share of profits is at its highest (these South African Reserve Bank statistics are quoted in the 2008 *Bargaining Indicators of the Labour Research Service*). Since 1990 there has been a particularly steep redistribution of resources from wages to profits.

Precariousness is not, of course, a new reality for the majority of South African workers. It has rather been the ordinary way in which black workers have experienced the labour market for much of South Africa's history as a capitalist society, especially under conditions of racial segregation, managerial despotism, coercive migration and contract work.

To this the union movement, especially from the 1970s on, opposed a redemptive image of waged work to address the indignities and vulnerabilities of the past and place waged employment and labour rights at the core of the social citizenship provisions seen as a necessary complement of a new democracy. The rhetoric of anti-apartheid struggles saw the formally employed as a major, if not the main, protagonist of liberation. At the same time, however, post-1973 labour movements did not merely accept to confine their claims to the workplace, or to what was deemed feasible by productivity requirements. Labour struggles in fact combined ambitions of redemption of wage labour with powerful themes like the living wage and decommodification, that is, access to universal social provisions (welfare, retirement, housing, health care) funded through redistributive policies. At the dawn of democracy, the rights and entitlements workers had won seemed to

announce a new generation of social rights for employed and unemployed alike, and throughout the life course.

It could be questioned, nonetheless, to what extent organized labour's triumphs, and its official discourse glorifying the formal working class resonated in the lives of the majority of the working class that was not in formal employment, or of those living in impoverished rural areas. The trade unions' heroic imagery of work also replaced a long, glorious history of African resistance to working for wages, which played a decisive role in social struggles in South Africa as well as in the rest of the continent. Far from seeing formal employment as the necessary ingredient of oppositional consciousness, and precarious jobs as a reality of disempowerment, African workers have often *chosen* to be casual and "precarious" as this enabled them to resist capitalist work discipline and manage multiple modes of subsistence. For references one can look at Fred Cooper's discussion of dockworkers in colonial Mombasa and their defiant attachment to casual work in response to the colonial state's attempt to turn them into waged workers; or Paul Lubeck's discussion of the "gardawas" in independent Northern Nigeria, itinerant preachers with a strong working class identity but rooted in casual work to which they tenaciously clung as permanent wage employment would have undermined their religious practices and violated their spiritual integrity; or, closer to South Africa, Hoyt Alverson's discussion of how Tswana migrants distinguished between *tiro* (work as purposeful human activity producing meaningful social interactions) and *mmereko* (alienated wage labour whose meaning Tswana workers saw "as the very opposite of 'doing'".)

African workers have largely resisted capitalism by refusing to become waged working classes, rather than by seeing wage labour as the vehicle of their desire for liberation. A rich tradition of refusal of work surfaces time and again in South Africa as well, a theme emphasized by Yann Moulier-Boutang’s comparative analysis of proletarianization and in some early work by Deborah Posel. Governmental and expert discourse recursively resonated with such themes, during and after apartheid: The 1962 Botha Commission complained of the “work-shyness” of township youth; the 1979 Riekert Commission noted with concern that employers were “forced” to recruit migrant workers from the homelands as township youth refused factory jobs; a 2007 report on the “state of entrepreneurship in South Africa” by the University of Cape Town’s Unilever institute, finally, raised the alarm that African workforce entrants prefer social grants to work. But this tradition of subversion of waged work was somehow missed in 1970s and 1980s trade unions’ view of a working class essentially defined by its permanent location in capitalist production, which later provided crucial impetus to the ANC-led liberation movement in what scholars such as Gay Seidman and Eddie Webster have termed “social movement unionism”.

The 1990s conjunction of liberation and liberalization emphasized, however, the limitation of earlier redemptive discourses of waged work. As work proved clearly unable to guarantee decent life and meaningful social citizenship for the vast majority of those directly employed, let alone for society at large, waged employment and de-commodified social provisions were no longer seen by the ANC – now in power – as complementary, but as mutually excluding. Social programs were intended for specific



Joe Slovo Settlement
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categories of vulnerability and claims (children, the elderly, the disabled) and the government fiercely opposed any idea of universal, non-work related redistributive program, as seen in the, by now defunct, debates on the Basic Income Grant. In line with Western emphases on “welfare reform”, work, and work only, was supposed to be the vehicle of social inclusion for the “working age able-bodied”.

As the government’s emphasis on waged employment justified the limitation of redistributive programs, the Left and trade unions remained, nonetheless, stuck in an imagination that glorified wage labour as the cumulatively, linearly, mechanically necessary vehicle of advanced forms of solidarity, consciousness, and citizenship. Marxist or *Marxisant* arguments in this case did not, singularly, echo Marx’s own deeply felt horror at wage labour, which Marx evoked in dramatic images of the “stocks, whips and gallows” (*Grundrisse*) initially required to turn human beings into working classes before the “labour market” could take its normal course.

At the same time we are witnessing a further paradox: poverty levels in South Africa are such that social grants initially intended as a means-tested and selective to cover specific conditions (Child Support Grant, Old Age Pensions, disability grants) ended up being claimed by a large share of the population: social grants are now claimed by almost 13 million people, one quarter of all South Africans, 2.5 times the number of people paying income taxes.

On one hand, this should caution those, like Patrick Bond and Naomi Klein, who see post-apartheid South Africa as a textbook case of take-no-prisoner neoliberalism, akin to Pinochet’s Chile. Neoliberal governments, in fact, usually don’t put 25% of their population on non-contributory social grants.

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But the current situation, on the other hand, hardly confirms Jeremy Seekings’ and Nicoli Nattrass’ view of South Africa as an “exceptionally generous” social welfare system, a sort of Scandinavia of the southern hemisphere. More useful would be rather to see social grants as a specific biopolitical intervention. Taken individually, they are in fact so meagre that even receiving more than one in a single household is no guarantee of a life out of poverty. Not destitute, but not even “included” as the dominant parlance of the day would want them, households relying on social grants are compelled to see in the labour market, in whatever low-wage, insecure, exploitative job available out there, their only hope of salvation. The 2002 Taylor Committee put it clearly: it saw social grants, even a possible Basic Income Grant, which it

supported, as inducements for productive economic activity, not as an alternative to depending on the labour market. By making its target population active and ready for low-wage employment, the South African system of social grants has therefore the effect of generalizing, institutionalizing, and perpetuating social precariousness.

Throughout these processes, powerful imaginative and ideological forces were at work, which cannot be merely reduced to the impact of globalization or, as many in the disappointed left want it, to the ANC's neoliberal "sell-out". Rather, as Mark Gevisser shows in his biography of Thabo Mbeki, political liberation happened at the culmination of a very long process of resignification of one of the ANC's historically cherished themes, that of self-reliance. Once used to define social formations and practices essentially averse to working for wages (peasant agriculture, cooperative production), the idea of self-reliance came increasingly to praise, in the ANC's discourse, access to waged employment, a line the left endorsed as the working class was finally recognized as the driving force of the "national democratic revolution". The more recent neoliberal vicissitudes of the ANC in power only confirmed the centrality of waged work in its imagination of the democratic social order. This time, however, such a centrality was no longer declined in the dying idiom of twentieth century socialism but in that of market discipline, individual initiative, and the deprecation of the "culture of entitlement".

Whereby past proletarian struggles had actively subverted waged work, both through direct refusal or through workers' unwillingness to confine their claims to productivity requirements, a powerful disciplinary narrative has now emerged to celebrate

the "dignity of work" as a disciplinary construct that marginalizes, stigmatizes and criminalizes specific social categories identified as disruptive of wage labour discipline. Now "dignity of work" is a commonly used term in ANC parlance, but the term is of straightforward colonial origins. The first time I have found it used is in Cecil Rhodes' endorsement of the Glen Grey Act of 1894. Under pre-apartheid segregation governments it was part of what Saul Dubow terms a "South Africanist" ideological discourse where, through hard work for wages, the "native" could become a modern "worker", possibly even a "citizen". Under apartheid there was of course no talk of equal citizenship for the "natives", but the National Party government praised work discipline over resource redistribution for whites and blacks alike. As a normative construct, the imperative to work operated across the board. The South African state imagination of work, before and after 1994, reversed Immanuel Kant's line that "every thing has either a price or a dignity", where by dignity he meant a value that precedes and stands above market exchange. In South African official discourse, instead, the labour market and the wage relation stand simultaneously as measure and reward of human dignity.

After apartheid, the revived parlance of "dignity of work" and individual labour market initiative also, as Ivor Chipkin shows in his book *Do South Africans Exist?*, came to depict a virtuous condition of active citizenship rightfully enabling the full, practical enjoyment of formal, on-paper constitutional rights. As work becomes the normative premise of virtuous citizenship, it provides an epistemic device with which South African society can be "known" as an objective, socially ascertainable hierarchy ordered

according to the seemingly natural, immutable laws of the labour market. (This view is clearly expressed in Thabo Mbeki's "two economies" scenario.) At the pinnacle of such a hierarchical order stands a, by now largely imaginary, patriotic, respectable, hard working, socially moderate, conflict-averse, de-racialized worker as the virtuous citizen of democratic South Africa. Precisely as a creation of official imagination, however, such a subject indicates the practical conducts the poor have to follow, as workers-in-waiting, on their path to actual citizenship: avoid complaining, stay away from social conflicts, and actively seek the "employment opportunities" available in poverty-wage schemes of mass precariousness like the Expanded Public Works Programme. A work-centered citizenship discourse also marginalizes and stigmatizes the, conversely, all too real subjectivities that try to navigate their way in conditions of precariousness, social duress, and the systematic violence of market relations: yesterday it was "workshy" township youth, women devoted to "immoral" activities, peasants recalcitrant to the market; today is the "tsotsi" element, the "girls" claiming child support grants, and those who "illegally" reconnect water and electricity.

work becomes the normative premise of virtuous citizenship

As Fred Block and Margaret Somers have shown, the connection of state normativity and seemingly unassailable scientific reasoning confers to official discourses of citizenship the material capacity, made almost impervious to empirical counter evidence, to shape attitudes, dispositions and proclivities. It does not really matter for the centrality of work in South

African citizenship discourse that in no way most experiences of work resemble the exalted social condition imagined in governmental pronouncements. What matters is that, by making social conditions, if not what it means to be human, orbit around labour market participation, the citizens of democratic South Africa are educated to position themselves within prevailing social and economic power relations.

In the interviews with workers I have conducted, wage labour clearly emerges as a place of insecurity, exploitation, unfair and racialized treatment, and inadequacy in relation to household needs. More than that, it is a reality of, as Felix Guattari called it, “systematic endangering”, or continuous exposure to unpredictable, potentially catastrophic labour market contingencies. As wage labour’s early promise of liberation and redemption went unfulfilled, workers tended to characterize waged employment as a place that they have to endure, but from which they would happily escape. Escape could be either material or symbolic, most often a combination of both. Sometimes it has to do with fantasies of self-entrepreneurship, often nurtured in the ascending religious language of individual empowerment of born-again Christianity. In this regard, workers may even be available to accept layoffs to cash benefits and buy a bakkie for a transport business, or the tools for a small electric repair shop, even if such money most often goes into the repayment of debts and school fees. Sometimes respondents idealize rural life – despite the grinding poverty many of their relatives’ experience in rural areas – as a symbolic, desirable counterbalance to the chaos and unpredictability of the city as regular employment and male “breadwinning” authority decline and collapse. Ruralism becomes therefore an imagined

space where masculine power and age authority continue to structure social life. Another theme surfacing in my interviews are xenophobic feelings of blaming non-South African migrants’ acceptance of low-wage jobs as responsible for turning work from “what it is supposed to be” to “what it is”.

Yet, even if they see their actual jobs as “elsewhere” from what they would consider a dignified life, most respondents remain attached to work and “job creation” as the solution to the country’s social problems. Such apparent paradox is reflected in their approach to the ANC, seen simultaneously as cause of the current social crisis and the imagined deliverer from it.

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It would, however, be wrong to conclude that, as many conservative commentators and government consultants try to reassure us, despite all odds all South Africa’s poor want is “work, not handouts”. When I probed the meanings of “work” in workers’ discourse of “job creation”, I found that it is not “work” as a mere economic transaction that such narratives are primarily about, and surely not about the work such workers actually have. They are rather about a whole imagined social order ideally premised on an equally imagined idea of respectable work. Work regains its centrality in these narratives not so much for its economic importance, but as the repository of an imaginary that tries to find validation by harking back to the state’s and the unions’ work-centered citizenship discourse. As such, it



Promises and reality pt2

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tends to be a conservative workers’ imaginary too: for most of my respondents, images of decent work, what is left of past promises of redemption of wage labour, are deeply linked with ideas of family respectability, strict gendered division of household tasks, masculine power and national purity, where “disrespectful”, crime-prone youth are kept out of the streets and under control, women are confined to domesticity, reproduction and care, and migrants don’t “steal” national jobs.

If actual work is a place to escape from, such an escape is, however, expressed, in the absence of a political alternative to the hegemonic work-centered citizenship discourse, in conservative, when not overtly reactionary and authoritarian forms of what I call worker melancholia. Contrary to the nostalgic, who yearns for an idealized past, the melancholic yearns for the imagined yet unrealized possibilities. As Ranjana Khanna defines it: “Melancholia is not only a crippling attachment to a past that acts like a drain of energy on the present Rather, the melan-

cholic's critical agency, and its peculiar temporality that drags it back and forth at the same time, acts towards the future".

What I identify as the emerging politics of worker melancholia provides some insights into the rise of Jacob Zuma and the post-Polokwane phase of ANC rule. Zuma's rise has a lot to do with the country's crisis of waged employment, manifested in organized labour's resentment at Mbeki's betrayal of the democratic promise of working class power and proletarian redemption. Zuma's self-consciously masculine persona and his message of family values, social discipline, subservient womanhood, toughness on crime, and border control respond to the anxieties generated by employment precariousness by abetting the melancholic fantasies of a working class embittered by decades of disappointments and by the inadequacies of its putative political representatives. Under such conditions, the continuous glorification of work as the foundation of citizenship is at serious risk of contributing to an authoritarian, chauvinist social order presiding over the continuous brutality of the market.

Three lessons emerge from this discussion. First, precariousness of work is not just produced by labour market dynamics but by the intersection of wage labour transformations, institutional dynamics and official imagination. Claus Offe puts it nicely in defining precariousness as "harmful unpredictability" arising from a condition where work declines as a foundation for a decent, meaningful life and yet it is maintained by the state's policy discourse as the foundation of the social order. Second, precariousness is not, however, just a condition of domination and disempowerment, but can also open spaces to imagine strategies of liberation



Carry_barrel_chain: sculpture by Louis M. Chamane, a retrenched gold miner
Photo: Flickr/Christo Doherty

from the compulsion to work for wages. The history of proletarian struggles in South Africa and Africa shows that the crises of waged work are the result not only of the unfettered power of capital but also of everyday strategies of refusal, confirming indeed Mario Tronti's point that "wage labour is the provider of capital; the refusal of wage labour means the destruction of capital". Finally, social research needs to move beyond a purely normative understanding of citizenship as a desirable ideal of "inclusion" and focus instead on the paradoxes, contradictions and quandaries of what Cruikshank terms citizenship as a "technology" of empowerment based on specific disciplining of conducts and hierarchical stratifications where divides between inclusion and exclusion become blurred and uncertain.

Gilles Deleuze wrote: "If you get caught in someone else's dreams, you are lost". Over and over again, before, during, and after apartheid, South Africa's

poor have been caught in the State's unsettling biopolitical dream of ordering populations according to the hierarchies defined by a labour market that can enable decent lives only for a small minority. To avoid getting lost in the rulers' dream, maybe it is time, in these crepuscular times of decline of neoliberalism, for everyday desires recalcitrant to wage labour no longer to be seen as harbingers of chaos and ungovernability but as constitutive elements of a new grammar of autonomy and liberation.

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