

Liberation of, through, or from work? Postcolonial Africa and the problem with “job creation” in the global crisis

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Abstract

The precarity of employment in an age of globally financialized capital cannot be reduced to the sociological problems of erosion of stable jobs with benefits and proliferation of insecure occupations. It is rather a political issue that interrogates the ability of state and capital to turn multitudes into governable and productive subjects. As such it is underscored by attempts by financial capital to “capture” living labor beyond the confines of production and across the social spectrum. It is also characterized by the widening gaps between official norms that center social inclusion around work ethic and economic activity and material realities where jobs, regardless of how “stable” they are, are no longer conducive even to the satisfaction of basic needs and necessities. By positioning itself as a concept along these lines of fracture, precarity is thus not only a condition of domination and disempowerment, as sociological discourse and left politics alike tend to present it, but reveals innovative political potentialities. A look at the transition from colonialism to postcoloniality in Africa sheds light on the possible impacts of precarity as a force that subverts the normativity of capitalist employment. Since well before the advent of neoliberalism and the current wave of financialization, in fact, capitalist strategies of asserting work ethic as a disciplinary condition for African workers have been met with the articulation of struggles and life strategies around casual and “informal” jobs as conditions to negotiate, alleviate, or refuse capitalist work discipline.

Labor and social conflict in the global crisis of neoliberalism

In her recent *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks has critically scrutinized the contrast between realities of employment under global neoliberalism – as characterized for growing numbers by insecure, oppressive, and unrewarding conditions heralding a return to earlier epochs of hyper-exploitation – and a public imagination that more than ever places work at the core of normative and policy-based representations of human fulfillment. She nicely captures the gap with a quote from André Gorz:

Never has the ‘irreplaceable’, ‘indispensable’ function of labour as the source of ‘social ties’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘integration’, ‘socialization’, ‘personalization’,

'personal identity' and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfill *any* of these functions (cit. in Weeks 2011: 77).

It is a useful perspective because it allows us to understand precarious employment not as a mere problem in the sociology of work, or a condition of instability predominantly experienced in the workplace or the labor market and solvable through technical fixes and social compacts, but as a challenge of a political nature, or a force that destabilizes the capacity of the existing socioeconomic order to produce governable subjects. The precarity of jobs in fact has much to do with the inability of a work-centered official imagination to make sense of experiential worlds where work, regardless of how "stable" it is, can no longer satisfy basic needs and necessities, let alone act as a conduit of social solidarity and emancipation. Being able to continuously direct conducts, desire, discipline, and ambition toward employment emerges therefore as an urgent problem of governance for an increasingly financialized capitalism.

My own research on South African black workers in the postapartheid transition, for example, has critically interrogated the persistence of "job creation" as a signifier of progress in the imagination of the country's government, left forces, and the discourse of unionized workers (Barchiesi 2011). In that case, faith in employment-based views of development and empowerment contrasted markedly with the material decay in the conditions of work for most of the country's labor force. In their daily lives, interviewed workers kept their own jobs in extremely low esteem as avenues to basically decent lives even when they extolled the virtues of economic participation as the solution to society's ills. As an explanation for such a seeming contradiction, the study proposed that workers defined the "jobs" whose "creation" they still deemed desirable not only in terms of economic transactions or productive activities, but as metaphors of a romanticized future with reassuringly conservative overtones. It was a vision of stable employment – provided by an authentic workers' government under a decisive, competent leadership – laying the ideal foundations of a desired social order infused with gendered, age, and national hierarchies. "Decent jobs" thus stood for breadwinning masculinity, disciplining the youth out of unruliness and work avoidance, and keeping women within the unpaid tasks of reproduction instead of having them seek complementary sources of income, which could lead to claims for control of household resources. For some respondents, decent jobs also meant national jobs, as they accused "illegal" immigrants of contributing to the downgrading of their own, resented, actual occupations.

The massacre, on August 16, 2012, by the South African police of thirty-four black workers striking for decent wages at the Lonmin Marikana platinum mine dramatically confirms this line of analysis. On one hand those tragic events revealed how having a "formal" job in a context of widespread poverty and extreme social inequality hardly provides the social inclusivity and political stability the postapartheid liberal-democratic constitution promised. On the

other, as the strikers formed their own militant union organization, most mainstream labor bodies, especially those aligned with the ruling African National Congress (ANC), came out in opposition to radical wildcat industrial actions and workers' demands they deemed "unreasonable". The strike's ultimate success in achieving substantial wage increases did not deter the ANC-aligned Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) from reiterating its concerns that "unprocedural" strikes can undermine orderly industrial relations and the productivity required by national development (Letsoalo and Molele 2012, 6).

Such discursive modalities are conservative not only in their political utterances but also in their reverence for an idealized world of work – resting on the results of past struggles and unionization – which prevents a critical reflection on the current precariousness of employment, including its fragility, poverty wages, and inadequate benefits. It can be defined as a politics of, paraphrasing Judith Butler (1997) and Wendy Brown (2000), "working-class melancholia". Butler discusses melancholia as a type of grief that thwarts self-reflection on a loss because the grieving subject flagellates itself rather than criticizing the object that is lost, in this case the idea that under capitalism labor's meaning is to provide an avenue to a dignified life. For Brown, melancholia has thus come to crucially recode the emancipatory imagination of the left, which comes to be characterized by "a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen."

In South Africa's case working-class melancholia found an outlet in 2007, when what is usually described as an organized labor's insurgency at the annual congress of the ANC launched Jacob Zuma onto a path leading to the nation's presidency two years later. Zuma directly assuaged longings for a work-centered social restoration by self-consciously boosting his masculine persona, emphasizes on law, order and border controls, injunctions for the youth to be taught by force and for "girls" to stop claiming state child support for frivolous expenses. Despite the widespread enrichment of new, ANC-connected postapartheid elites, popularly mocked as "tenderpreneurs", through state contracts and political favors, the centrality of employment and job creation in the ANC's discourse – both as policy remedies to social emergencies and as moral predictors of the nation's soundness – remained unassailable. If anything, the abstract normativity of "job creation" and economic participation has never been as central as in the current context, where in practical terms the idea of honest and dignified jobs is undermined by the more socially disruptive examples offered by government-supported rent-seeking.

South Africa is, of course, part of a broader scenario where the imperative of "job creation" underpins, reproduces, and sanitizes all sorts of regressive discursive modalities in the public arena. "Job creation" provided crucial legitimizing ammunition to the ferocious austerity with which European and American elites have rescued corporations and financial capital in their current crisis. In the debates preceding the 2012 presidential elections in the United States, unprecedented corporate power is reclaiming credibility as financial

oligarchs present themselves as “job creators”; extreme social inequalities, tax cuts for the rich, draconian slashes to social programs, environmental devastation, and the constant downgrading of workers’ living conditions get a pass all in the name of “job creation”; the injunction to “go back to work” underwrites the blatant racism of arguments that equate receiving welfare benefits with “ghetto values”. But unions and social movements too, including much of the celebrated “Occupy Wall Street”, find it difficult to articulate any claims without feeling compelled to justify them in terms of their contribution to employment. It seems indeed that almost no basic vocabulary of social justice – let alone change – that is not centered on the labor market is imaginable and speakable in the American civil society. To the extent “job creation” has signified a massive displacement of desire that paralyzes systemic critique, it can well be the case that “the continuous, stolid attachment to production and employment in discourses of social justice would then enable critical powerlessness and renewed subjugation” (Barchiesi 2011: 247).

The left has historically presented its advocacy for economic participation as different from capitalist job creation by echoing a classical distinction between “work” as multifarious, cooperative human productive activity and “labor” as the reproduction of biological life under capital’s dictates. Weeks (2011: 15) has convincingly argued, however, that the distinction between work and labor is irrelevant to critiquing a reality where capitalist work ethics legitimizes itself by fusing economic necessity and normative values. Assuming that unalienated and unexploited work is achievable within the existing order of things would thus run the risk of focusing contestation on the meanings of employment values rather than on the social relations that produce and benefit from them. Liberal, socialist, or social democratic left forces have long argued that job creation, possibly to the point of full employment, constitutes an objective limit on capital’s ability to compress wages and benefits.

The possibility seems however to emerge, on the contrary, that the centrality of “job creation” in an imagination that calls itself progressive, but is increasingly unable to argue for radical redistribution and the types of conflict that makes it possible, normalizes indeed the precarity not only of jobs but of the very existences that are forced to depend upon them. The convergence of left and right around “job creation” has given it an unassailable centrality in policy responses to the current global capitalist crisis. As Archimedean points of the policy discourse, it is then little wonder if productivism and work ethic underpin both the right-wing populism of the “Tea Party” and the Obama administration’s embrace of fiscal favors to corporations. Yet, as the “middle class”, American shorthand for workers with decent, stable jobs with benefits, has eroded and faded into a purely imaginary construct, productivist rhetoric has provided scant solace to the swelling ranks of the working poor navigating their way through widespread downward social mobility.

Meanwhile, the recent Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance in the European Union envisages austerity, labor market liberalization, and the automatic reduction of public expenditures as principles to be inserted, with no

possibility of parliamentary modification, in the constitutions of member states. In line with the European Union's "active labor market policies", austerity pushes under duress multitudes into the labor market, where many will find themselves to have become utterly disposable, instead of offering protection from its deprivations and inequalities.

But also experiments – followed with interest by a left eager to break free from the limitations of the "Washington consensus" – in the emerging economies of the southern hemisphere have hardly departed from a script that prioritizes economic activity and labor market participation. India's "employment guarantees" projects and Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* are the two most celebrated examples of this kind, consisting of conditional and limited public provisions such as periods of casual, underpaid work in the former case and cash payments for poor families sending children to school in the latter. Their rationale is to provide recipients with tools, especially job experience, basic skills, and education, to replenish their human capital and become employable, but in practice they operate as active inducements toward precarious work. They then peddle working for low wages as part of the solution to poverty, whereas it is a crucial facet of the problem.

The global economic elites and the international financial institutions have enthusiastically endorsed such projects as they combine political stability with limited budgetary and fiscal burdens for the upper classes (World Bank 2001, 2004). The left's support, on the other hand, praises these interventions as progress in terms of uncritically accepted indicators defined by development technocrats on often quite conservative bases, like the two US dollars per day that for the World Bank are the thresholds of poverty (see Seidman 2010). Thus, in some of the most unequal societies in the world, progressive discourse ends up abetting experiments educating the poor to accept as the only viable, realistic choice the one between utter destitution and a level of pure biological reproduction adequate for labor market activation. The preservation of *zoë*, bare life as the receptacle of human capital – often disguised in the newly fashionable idiom of "resilience" – supersedes in this way the possibilities of the social *bios*, or common "forms of life", to structurally criticize relations of power and resources. In other words, biopolitics marks the end of politics.¹

Taking aim at the centrality of work in the governmental norms of societies where jobs as such are the constitutive condition of precarity highlights two important political tasks. First, one has to recognize that employment-based understandings of emancipation have to be discarded as their recentering of desire around employment is indeed a uniquely effective enabler for authoritarian identifications and collective realignments along governmental rationality. Second, the precariousness of employment, rather than its idealized celebration, must be placed at the core of a new grammar of politics and

1 Bonnie Honig (2011) well captures the opposition between "mere life" as the only ethical and political horizon allowed by neoliberal governance and "more life" as a hypothesis for a politics of liberation.

modalities of conflict, which can counteract the socially pathologizing representations into which the sociology of work and technocratic policymaking have cast precarity.

With such critical tasks in mind, the rest of this paper pushes the problematization of “job creation” discourse a step further by questioning its position within the current global capitalist crisis. What motivates my analysis is not only the fact that creating employment has retained, in solutions to the crisis proposed by the right and the left alike, a far stronger normative centrality than, say, resource redistribution. It is not even the apparent fact that the systematic degradation of existences forced to rely on, or hope for, capitalist employment for their survival is one of the most evident and painful manifestations of the crisis itself. To be satisfactorily addressed, in fact, those developments require a deeper theoretical and political interrogation of contemporary imageries of progress that have kept economic activity and labor market participation as decontextualized signifiers of empowerment and social virtue regardless to all empirical counterevidence.

The issue, in other words, is not of weighing the normative centrality of employment against its relative desirability or its practical, sociologically discernible consequences of improving people’s lives, which often makes the choice between a bad job and no job at all the only admissible and significant alternative. I am rather interested in the *governmental effects* of “job creation” discourse, its capacity to deploy languages, knowledges, and representations that produce a social order by orientating values and conducts, signifying social existence, and structuring social conflicts.² Removing “jobs” from the normative abstraction of policy categories allows one to study how ideas of economic activity practically make subjectivities and social relations governable by normalizing and ensuring predictability to the tensions, inequalities, and violence of market relations. An alternative – reductive and misleading – approach would be to assume the society in which “jobs” are to be “created” as natural and given rather than the result of political contestation and the policies that create such jobs as mere techniques rather than manifestations of discursive forces laden with power.

The global crisis and its social impacts foreground what Christian Marazzi (2010) calls the “violence of financial capital.” By that expression he means that profit-making in the current context of corporate globalization depends on the colonization and capture of life by finance, which turns life into an immediate factor of production, subject as such to the full destructive impacts of fluctuations in financial markets. Echoing a philosophical trajectory spanning from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, “life” does not mean here just *zoë*, mere biological subsistence, but rather “life forms” as the relationships of *social cooperation* bodies have to one another in order to increase their potentials to transform material reality (see Armstrong 1997).

² My use of “governmental effects” follows the use of “dispositif” and “apparatus” in Foucault (1980) and Agamben (2009).

Therefore, financial capital colonizes life through the appropriation and commodification – or the transformation into profit and private property – of the constitutive elements of social cooperation: knowledge, language, and desire, which are part of what Hardt and Negri (2010) call “the common.”

Under the specific profit expectations of financial capital, Marazzi continues, the labor force has undergone a profound transformation as the commodification of knowledge, language, and desire has created a “cognitive proletariat” for which old distinctions, such as that between workplace and society, or between producer and consumer, no longer apply. Older unionized constituencies are fragmented along differentially precarized employment relations with variable duration and juridical status. The erosion of jobs goes hand in hand with the decentralization towards the consumer – or, at this point, “prosumer” – of parts of product development (as in the online testing of new software) and actual production and distribution processes (as in the transportation and assembly of furniture or the self-scanning of purchases in megastores like Ikea or WalMart), which reduce the demand for stable employees. More generally, companies appropriate the cognitive, linguistic, and communicative skills individuals develop throughout their social life course while striving to become employable in a context of declining guarantees and protections. A case in point is the exponential expansion of “internships” as a mode of first employment in developed and developing countries alike (Ross 2010, Perlin 2011).

But financial capital does not only precarize labor through its restructuring of manufacturing and commerce. It has also indirectly put forms of life to work by, for example, recasting desire into consumption backed by personal debt and securitized home equity loans, in themselves major factors of the current crisis. Non-wage assets, of which personal and household debts are a large share, have by now surpassed wages as the driving force in the realization of profit through the sale of products incorporating surplus value (Marazzi 2010: 30). As a move towards accumulation based on finance, neoliberalism was a response to both the shrinking profit margins caused by militant working classes with a “social wage” in the postwar manufacturing economy and the constraints of low-wage labor regimes in realizing value within the subsequent context of globalization. Financial capital thus finds new profit avenues less by directly employing workers than by capturing and commodifying the living across the workplace-society continuum (Morini and Fumagalli 2010, Roggero 2010).

We are dealing, in other words, with a pervasive process of enclosure, not dissimilar from the “primitive accumulation” observed in previous capitalist transitions. Contrary to the “old” enclosures, which focused on natural resources like land and water, the new enclosures of financial capital, its processes of turning the common into property, has life – desire, language, knowledge, social cooperation – as its object (Hardt 2010). The producers of capital are thus no longer encompassed by the direct production process, the workplace, and the waged working class. Capitalist valorization relies in fact less and less on measuring, negotiating, and appropriating labor power according to quantifiable entities, such as work effort, the duration of the working day, the

cost of workers' reproduction. Rather, as life is put to work under the aegis of finance, capital incorporates at virtually no cost the productive potentials of an everyday social cooperation that *pre-exists* capital, is autonomous from it and, most importantly, is capable of *discursively and linguistically signifying* its autonomy. The move implies a few decisive consequences.

First, once capital's enclosure and appropriation of common living labor exceeds the wage relation, the distinction between the traditional Marxian categories of profit and rent tends to disappear (Vercellone 2010). Second, the precarization of employment is thus not primarily determined, as in the conventional wisdom of much productivist sociology (Bauman 1998; Beck 2000; Sennett 2000), by the breakup of existing working classes forced to lose protections, collective organizing, and rights, which underpinned welfarist ideologies of work with dignity. Instead, precarization consists of making labor's living substance – which otherwise deploys its productive powers in its autonomously pre-existing capital – depend on market competition and the imperatives of value creation. I am using here the word "pre-existing" in a non-essentialist manner; it does not refer to a social realm that comes "before" capital (as in "pre-capitalist modes of production") or stands "outside" it (as in experimentations with alternative lifestyles or the idealization of "noncapitalist" subsistence economies in some activist literature; see Bennholdt-Thomsen; Faraclas, and von Werlhof 2001).³ It rather means that capitalist development, including its most recent version as the globalization of financial capital, is a *response* to the challenge of turning the common into private property and rent/profit.

By addressing that challenge through the direct colonization of life – which disposes of the prior passages of turning life into "abstract labor" and waged employment – capital also exposes itself to new potential fractures and instabilities. As a source of value, living labor is different from waged work: the latter is created by capital, the former is not. Rather, the cognitive (linguistic, discursive) autonomy of living labor defines precarious employment, with its attendant expectations, claims, and needs, as a *contested field of signification* (Barchiesi 2011: 6-12). Furthermore, turning social cooperation into profit and subjecting it to market discipline, both necessary functions of capital, also profoundly destabilize capital. They in fact require a "freezing" of the creative potential of social cooperation into the narrow, and usually painful and anxiety-ridden, path, of market competition.

That "freezing" of living labor around the imperatives of survival in a context of growing insecurity, cutbacks of public services, and socioeconomic inequality ignites thus new conflicts where, as it surfaced in some of the Arab revolutions of 2011 or the insurrections against austerity in Southern Europe and the United

³ In the case of South Africa, Prishani Naidoo (2010) and Shannon Walsh (2008) have documented a variant of this discursive modality in the ways in which academics close to social movements have idealized the community life of the poor and shackdwellers as an embodiment of truth, purity, and authenticity.

Kingdom, demands for “dignity” autonomize themselves from the labor market and the requirements of production. Conversely, such movements unpredictably displayed the capabilities of cognitive labor in structuring, for example through the use of electronic media, the space of confrontation (Revel and Negri 2011). Social contestation can now hardly be explained by the dialectical modalities dear to the old left, where the development of the forces of production clashes with prevailing relations of production. It is rather that, as capital tries to incorporate pre-existing relations of social cooperation into its forces of production, these latter find a terrain of struggle by defining their productive capacity in antisystemic terms.

The “job creation” imperative as a modality of capitalist appropriation of the living

It is common for the left to regard the precarization of employment mostly as the result of a successful neoliberal offensive on stable, secure, and unionized working classes. By doing so, the left has cast on precarious workers the socially pathological marks of defeat, domination, and disempowerment. Short of victorious, and often utterly improbable, attempts by labor movements to “organize the unorganized”, precarity is represented as a condition of invisibility, anomie, and speechlessness. Thus Axel Honneth (2004), for example, contrasts the atomized, purposeless emptiness of insecure jobs with what he imagines as the warmth and solidarity of the Fordist social contract. For Richard Sennett (2000) flexible jobs amount to nothing less than a “corrosion of character”, a loss of sense and meanings coincidental with the decoupling of individuals from socially useful, community-nurturing productivity. Even scholars who, like Guy Standing, propose a non-productivist approach to employment insecurity remain focused on the aim of rescuing – within capitalism, which they do not criticize as a system – an ideal of humanly fulfilling “work” – including volunteerism, cooperatives, and “green jobs” – from the clutches of alienated labor. Standing (2011) evokes instead age-old ghosts troubling governmental imagination as he sees in the “precariat” a “new dangerous class” that, unless brought to the fold of progressive politics premised on socially useful work, can become fodder for all sorts of reactionary and authoritarian adventures. In countries, like South Africa, where poverty wages is all the market has to offer, Standing has indeed advocated universal basic income not as a substitute for the compulsion to take precarious jobs but as “a greater incentive to search and to take jobs, *particularly low-wage jobs or low-income, own-account activities*” (Standing 2003: 13, emphasis in text).

In a quite ironic leap away from early proletarian deprecations of “wage slavery” and the “tyranny of work over life” (Joyce 1980: 125), the hegemonic discourse of productivism that has accompanied the ascendant lefts of the twentieth century – welfarist social democracy in Europe, liberalism in North America, nationalism in the postcolonial world – has made waged employment the fulcrum in a grammar of dignity, rights, and emancipation. The idealization of stable and decent jobs has thus encapsulated both the left’s capacity to make

claims independent of neoliberal rationality and its last bastion of relevance against the ravages of market forces. Such a symbolic investment on work has underwritten the left's critique of neoliberalism as determining a chasm between precarity and dignity, which makes it impossible for labor to provide existential meaning and social stability (Strangleman 2007). By casting precarious employment as a condition that obliterates the wholeness of personality and political agency, however, the left has achieved the result of silencing precarious workers' strategies, autonomy and signifying practices as effectively as the economic liberalization it deprecates (Barchiesi 2011: 202).

Not only does the representation of precarity as a social problem fail to politically contest the productive and cognitive potentials of precarious workers, thus consigning them to neoliberal narratives of individual entrepreneurship. It also simplifies and reifies precarity into a mere occupational category and labor market position, which misses the broader political implications of precarious jobs as they pry open the line of fracture, well captured by Claus Offe (1997), between the declining significance of work as a foundation of decent life and its normatively enforced centrality in a social order averse to social equality and redistributive provisions.

As a result of their celebration of productive employment, left and right forces alike have ended up sharing a policy emphasis on "job creation". In the encounter, the left's demands for "decent jobs" have melancholically longed for a lost world where capitalism could be allegedly attuned with solidarity and social justice. The move could do little to counter capital's definition of jobs as dependent variables of market laws, which allowed corporate discourse to assert "job creation" as a hegemonic theme under rather different pretenses. For globalized and financialized capital, in fact, "job creation" does not even mean, as Paolo Virno (2004) aptly put it, the actual purchase of labor power, let alone its recruitment under "decent" conditions. Job creation is rather shorthand for a discourse of self-responsibility and employability where occupational opportunities rely on individual initiative and the dismantling of fiscal and redistributive burdens on private enterprise.

As jobs and social provisions stand thus in direct opposition to each other, with the former ascending to the role of master signifier of social existence, the policy emphasis on job creation has come to operate, in the micropolitics of everyday lives, as a pedagogical technology, a mode of biopolitical governmentality in the Foucauldian sense. Its effect is that of directing the conduct of populations towards imagining themselves as workers in waiting, factors of production and human resources constantly optimizing and fine-tuning their potential for labor market competition, the reliance on which becomes the only virtuous modality of social inclusion. A left discourse that shares the right's emphasis on economic activity and its pathologization of the "dangers" of not working or working intermittently has thus put little in the way of waves of pro-business interventions – including reduction of corporate taxes, the systematic degradation of employment conditions, cutbacks in social services and safety nets – implemented in the name of job creation. More troublingly, the left has

been consequently incapable of opposing the ideological drifts that gave demands for jobs the sound of working-class nationalist closure, cultural resentment, xenophobia, and anti-immigration hysteria.⁴

The policy centrality of job creation operates as a device that disciplines popular values and conducts while fusing the imperatives of accumulation and governance. It makes the precarious multitudes generated by the systemic violence of globalized corporate capital governable by recoding desire around production and displacing it from a critique of that very violence. Should such a critique express itself, it might conversely lead to claims for a decent life, sustained by adequate forms of redistribution and decommodification, regardless to one's employment status. The idealization of employment as the cornerstone of inclusive citizenship is premised on a combination of moral and socio-scientific reasoning – the praise of self-reliance and responsibility blended with purportedly self-evident considerations of social and fiscal sustainability – that for Margaret Somers and Fred Block (2005) defines its "epistemic privilege" as impervious to empirical counterevidence. It is on these premises that, despite the unrewarding, insecure, and fretful reality accompanying for the precariat the job-seeking imperative, "decent work" has acquired center stage in the imagination of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and many self-defined progressive governments as a sensible, practical policy option.

Yet, as Peter Waterman (2005) argues, the "decent work" agenda is a purely normative and prescriptive assertion, bankrolled by trade unions and left-liberal technocrats in the desperate quest for policy relevance after having been overwhelmed by the ruthlessness of economic liberalization. It consists of the protestation that a return to a mythical, universalized protected labor force with benefits and rights can indeed square the circle of enhancing human dignity, enabling growth, building communities, and equipping workers with tools to compete in unforgivingly flexible labor markets. One can indeed doubt, Waterman continues, the historical plausibility of this working-class mythology as its ostensible protagonists were often instead, in practical terms, male and white producers of imperial societies that imposed unfree labor to colonized peoples and unpaid women in the household. Instead of taking stock of this problematic genealogy, Waterman concludes, the "decent work" idea projects into the future its assumptive logic according to which it is in the nature of capitalist globalization to obviously evolve, in conditions of liberal democracy, in a gender-sensitive, worker-friendly, environmentally sustainable direction. At the same time, precisely because it draws its legitimacy from the purely imaginative premise of a capitalism with a human face and a moral conscience, "decent work" disallows an understanding of the power relations underpinning actually existing liberalization and the reasons why it makes work indecent for

⁴ See Cowie (2010) for a brilliant discussion of how in the 1970s United States the defense of labor identities by older working classes took the form of a politics of "cultural pride and social resentment", which, by obscuring the class dimensions of economic inequality, opened the way for white workers' ill-fated alignment with conservatism and the "Reagan revolution" of the 1980s.

so many. It therefore forecloses other discursive virtualities – such as the idea that a decent life can be autonomous from labor and work ethics altogether – as it dispatches the liberation “from” and not only “of” work to the ranks of utopian reasoning. “Decent work” is thus a typical example of a “feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen”, the “mournful attachment” to which constitutes for Wendy Brown the stuff of progressive melancholia.

In more practical terms, the glorification of work in the decline of neoliberalism maintains a sturdy allegiance to old narratives of modernity as the unlimited development of the forces of production, whereas a crisis of employment is essentially defined by joblessness and measured through the unemployment rate. It is, conversely, hard for this modality of thought to locate employment crises in the predicament of the working poor and the unyielding policy-determined compulsion to rely on poverty wages as the primary means of survival. It is even harder for the left, as long as it confines itself in such policy and discursive strictures, to differentiate its demands for work from a mainstream rationality and commonsense exalting low wages as a path from poverty to personal responsibility and empowerment. It is precisely in such a conundrum that ideas of “decent work” show their practical and political limitations as they are constantly expected to recede in front of what conservative opinion calls the more realistic alternative between any job, at any condition, or no job at all.

South Africa is an interesting arena for these debates, as the sheer vastness of social inequalities, the current fragility of the ruling party, a reality of deep social confrontations, and significant vestiges of working-class assertiveness stand in the way of a coherent governmental biopolitical project. The country has a remarkable policy “discursive heritage” centered on the virtues of employment, which even during the harshest conflicts between the apartheid regime and the liberation movements provided a shared horizon for divergent views of modernity, progress, and nation-building (Barchiesi 2011: 135). It is also a country where two-thirds of workers, overwhelmingly black, live in poverty and only between one quarter and one third of the economically active population has access to regular jobs.

The New Growth Path (NGP) announced in 2010 by the Zuma administration claimed, reassuring its powerful labor allies in COSATU, to be a revision of the free-market utterances of its predecessor, the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. In presenting the NGP to the ANC, president Zuma, in particular, acknowledged that the jobs created in the wake of rapid economic growth during most of the 2000s did not have a satisfactory poverty-reducing impact. Yet, despite the centrality of “decent work” in the NGP, COSATU (2011) blasted the strategy as an updated version of neoliberalism and a betrayal of the workers’ mandate that underpinned the rise of Zuma’s leadership in 2007. The labor federation is particularly critical of the absence, in the strategy, of concrete redistributive social policies apart from the priority on the employment-orientated areas of education and skills.

It is, on the other hand, to be noted that such a comprehensive subordination of social policymaking to the requirements of labor market participation has deep roots. It goes back at least to the social policy debates of the early 2000s, when for the first time in the history of the country the idea was advanced of a universal basic income grant independent of individual occupational status. The proposal was eventually killed by the ANC's and the government's resolute opposition to any generalized noncontributory provision that could be remotely perceived as a "disincentive" to seeking jobs. Despite its firm support for the basic income grant idea, however, COSATU too regarded it as a measure to facilitate economic participation rather than a form of income replacement for working-age unemployed, precarious workers, and the working poor (Barchiesi 2011: 117-120).

Organized labor's lack of imagination as to how redistribution can play a role in opposing the compulsion to poverty jobs, rather than just being an inducement towards them, greatly contributed to evacuate the proposal for a basic income – the amount of which was set at a paltry R100 (US \$18) per month – of all transformative potential before its eventual demise. As a result, even if the 2002 governmental Taylor Committee in charge of restructuring the country's social security system endorsed such a minimalist framing of the grant, the most important outcome of that debate was a paradigm that reasserted once and for all the centrality of employment and self-entrepreneurialism as the only salvation for the poor and the inviolable boundaries of the policy discourse (Ferguson 2007).

The demand for "jobs" has, on the other hand, also characterized the imagination of redress of social movements – like the Anti-Privatization Forum and Abahlali baseMjondolo – that in the 2000s opposed the ANC from staunchly "anti-neoliberal" positions, before slowly declining once confronted with the ANC's renewed familiarity with left-sounding populist posturing in the age of Zuma and the impetuous leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema. In 2006 a social movement think-tank, the Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC) even launched a campaign for the recognition of the "right to work" as a state-sanctioned human right, thus giving new life – by bathing it in the stream of liberal-democratic constitutionalism – to a phrase elsewhere associated with the union-bashing right wing. The centrality of economic participation to ideas of freedom is not here, nonetheless, a mere byproduct of a contingent conversion of South Africa's democratic experiment to the seductions of neoliberalism. It is rather the manifestation of deep historical trends that on one hand reflect the country's colonial incorporation in global capitalism and on the other speak to the contradictory and contested position of work in Africa's postcolonial modernity. It is to this latter aspect that I will thus turn my attention, which will then allow me, in my concluding observations, to bring into sharper focus my initial question on the relationships between jobs and emancipatory imagination.

Africa and the future history of living labor

In conclusion of his survey of the marginalization of Africa in mainstream narratives of globalization, James Ferguson wonders whether, instead of being a context of backwardness finding no place in the triumphalism of conventional globalization theory, Africa is indeed an “advanced mutation” from which the global appears

not a seamless, shiny, round, and all-encompassing totality. . . . Nor is it a higher level of planetary unity, interconnection and communication. Rather, the “global” we see in recent studies of Africa has sharp, jagged edges; rich and dangerous traffics amid zones of generalized abjection; razor-wired enclaves next to abandoned hinterlands. . . . It is a global not of planetary communion, but of disconnection, segmentation, and segregation” (Ferguson 2006: 48-49).

The description recalls, and indeed allows us to globally locate, the many wastelands of deindustrialization and environmentally destructive industrialism that, in affluent and emerging capitalist economies alike, have been the stage for the collapse of older working classes and the rise of new productive multitudes, employed or not, in conditions of generalized precariousness.

Underscoring Africa’s prefigurative potential is the fact that one has here hardly to wait for neoliberalism, financialization, and their crises to see precarization emerge as a mode of appropriation by capital of the social cooperation of living labor. Rather, part of the narrative of progress and modernity shared by colonial and postcolonial governments is the assumption that waged work can make unruly multitudes, recalcitrant to capitalist discipline, governable by turning them into “a predictable and productive collectivity” (Cooper 1996). Central to the elaboration of this vision has been the role of international NGOs, aid agencies, trade unions, and bodies like the International Labour Organization.

The “dignity of labor” was indeed a recurring rhetorical device for the colonial state to subjugate African labor power and was initially translated into overtly coercive and repressive practices (Penvenne 1995; Isaacman 1996). The link between capitalist market discipline and Western modernity relied then on a moralistic understanding of civilization that represented Africans as falling short of the humanity guaranteed by whiteness and the imagined rationality of the *homo economicus*. It was only in the experience of late colonialism, confronted with incipient nationalist movements and working class insurgencies, that the imperative of working for wages relinquished its purely didactic and paternalistic accoutrements and became instead part of colonialism’s self-presentation as a social and economic force conducive to “development”. Under the stimulant of late colonial social reforms, waged employment, which remained confined to small minorities of the non-white population, propagated nonetheless Western ideas of social integration premised on productivity pacts and industrial relations, albeit on unequal footings between African material realities and European citizenship rights. The

legalization of African trade unions, the regulation of employment conditions, and new social provisions represented not only the reluctant recognition by European employers and administrators of their dependence on black workers, the acquiescence of which could no longer be the result of overt coercion. They also provided African elites and nationalist leaders with images of social discipline, infused with gender and age authority, predicated upon the respectability of male breadwinning and its capacity to keep non-docile women and youth under control (Lindsay 2003).

The colonial project of governmentality through work faced two insurmountable contradictions. First, as Fred Cooper (1996) has shown, within a politically illegitimate system of rule African workers used the openings of colonial reforms to expand rather than settle their radical claims. Capitalist work could not thus bridge the chasm between the proclaimed universality of its values and the material hierarchies, inequalities, and oppressions it actually reproduced. Second, it is ultimately impossible to deploy labor as a condition of human dignity, agency, and claims within a structure of social relations that makes blackness a less than fully human condition, or a position that disallows the autonomous definition of its own humanity (Wilderson 2010). The humanist and universalist pretensions of white civil society as a governance project in colonial and settler contexts did not, in fact, only justify the exploitation of non-white workforces. They also corralled with the imperatives of colonial production the meaning of black personhood. The idea of “free labor” as the end of slavery and personal subjection went hand in hand with policies of unfreedom – like legislation punishing vagrancy, desertion, and the refusal of work – geared to turning black bodies into producers of capital (Eudell 2002). Like nowhere else, the association of labor to ideas of decency revealed in colonial Africa problematic tangles – constitutive of the capitalist imagination of work – of progress and domination, emancipation and subjection, while a rhetoric of civilization (moral first, socioeconomic later) disciplined black bodies and desires.

The African connection between work and decency as an overt project of disciplining beings considered less than human is troubling for the current normative imagination of work-based social inclusion, within and outside the continent. It is not only an unsavory but ultimately historically contingent precedent. Colonial Africa and postemancipation societies in the western hemisphere were in fact also laboratories for experimenting with ideas of market initiative, freedom, and rationality as ways of governing populations that eschewed capitalist employment and expressed their unruly desire through the subversion of labor market discipline and the defense of independent agriculture. Far from seeing proletarianization as a necessary process or the condition for more advanced forms of consciousness and organization, colonized workers have historically resisted working for wages. Faced with the violence, racism, and inadequate rewards of the capitalist workplace, even the minority with access to wage-earning occupations often preferred casual employment, which, despite its insecurity, cushioned the impact of capitalist production discipline and preserved multiple modes of livelihoods, cultural

practices, and support networks across urban and rural spaces.⁵ The refusal of waged work as a structuring principle of life was – for unemployed and striking workers from Dakar to Mombasa, from Freetown’s dockworkers to Dar-es-Salaam’s *lumpenproletariat* – as important as expectations directed at labor and unionization.

As a result, and to the great disappointment for their dreams of social discipline, “capital and the state had not created a reserve army of the unemployed but a guerrilla army of the underemployed” fighting with the weapons of “desertion, slowdowns, and efforts to shape their own work rhythms” (Cooper 1993: 134). Instead of being a condition of disadvantage, as currently portrayed in progressive narratives of productivism, precarious jobs profoundly subverted Western modernity by exploding the contradictions of labor-centered fantasies of social integration. Eventual European decisions to decolonize Africa and put local elites in charge of their countries’ labor and social conflicts had thus much to do with the reluctance of the colonized to identify themselves with the laboring subjects desired by the colonizers. The newly independent states inherited these multifarious social subjectivities steeped in the refusal of work as well as the challenges they implied for governance. As former colonial subjects acceded to civil and political equality, the new rulers also had to rely, for their ability to govern, on a shaky nexus of work and citizenship shaped by the contradiction between the universal values of employment and the social hierarchies it creates. Those hierarchies were indeed deepened by the fact that only a minority of postcolonial workers could actually enjoy the stability and benefits of regular waged employment.

In the political orders of postcolonial Africa, the precariousness of work as a condition of stability kept undermining both the reach of governmental authority and its attempts to discipline working classes through the cooption of trade unions (Freund 1988: 81-109). For the minority of regularly employed workers, the incorporation of organized labor in the political system was nonetheless central to defuse social conflicts, depicted as inimical to general prosperity and to the uplift of the poor and unemployed. For the majority of workers excluded from wage earning – many of which on their way to what expert and policy parlance would define as the “informal economy” – the modernizing promise of work turned into the injunction in developmentalist discourse to forgo redistributive claims and moderate expectations for the sake of nation building. For both, the rhetoric of production and development determined the boundaries of agency in relation to the political order and their respective, unequal social positions within it.

Maybe the nationalist-developmental promise of job creation did outline, in the imagination of the elites, what Carmody (2002: 53) calls a “postcolonial social contract”. But once governmental practices are apprehended from the standpoint of ordinary lives and vernaculars, such a social contract and its

⁵ Country-specific examples are provided in Cooper (1987), Burton (2005), and Lubeck (1985).

underlying discipline of work took distinctively repressive forms. African states have used the register of work ethic and measures derived from colonial anti-vagrancy legislation to impose compulsory employment programs on newly perceived “dangerous classes”, usually “work-shy” youth (Shaidi 1984, Momoh 2000, Droz 2006). The fact that such interventions often remained limited and symbolic – also because in Africa the state’s “power to inflict violence did not match the power to force people to work” (Bayart 1989: 23) – is beside the point of how they signified their avowed targets. First, the discipline of work is integral to techniques “producing”, as Basile Ndjio (2005: 266) argues, “violence and coercion through which the state authority attempts to bring the bodies of its subjects under an endless process of tight discipline, subordination and servitude”. The process stands in an antagonistic relationship, he continues, with the “popular practices of insubordination and impoliteness” of multiple actors deemed as the *detritus* of neoliberal structural adjustment. They include laid off workers whose hopes of state-driven development were sorely frustrated and jobless youth for which such promises are hollow and inessential to begin with. In Ndjio’s study of the *carrefours de la joie* (“crossroads of joy”) in Yaounde’ (Cameroon), the state’s monumentality of production and order contrasts therefore with cultural, aesthetic, and musical expressions in which drunkenness and ostentatious sexuality feed irreverence towards power.

Second, the centrality of regular employment as the imagined foundation of virtuous identities provides the African state with ammunition to repress subsistence activities, as in the case of women running “informal” markets, especially as they reclaim autonomous control of space and its organization (Lindell 2010). What Bayat (2000) terms “quiet encroachments of the ordinary”, for example urban or rural land invasions, are thus “quiet” not in the sense of “hidden” forms of resistance but because they produce political effects – they affect the distribution of power and resources – as immanent to their very social cooperation rather than as a result of self-consciously political action. Such political spaces are, for sure, often rife with violence, subjugation, inequality, and chauvinism. Besides, their autonomy from the state and capital is always relative and contingent to opportunistic negotiations and dynamics of capture, which, if anything, highlight their relevance as a conflictual terrain of engagement. From this paper’s point of view it is, however, more important to underline that these spaces’ *potential* for autonomy resides in their participants’ “signifying practices”, in Ferguson’s (1999: 66) sense as “a capability to deploy signs” that position actors in relation to realities of exploitation, duress, and economic necessity.

As I have argued elsewhere (Barchiesi 2011: 16), “signification also reclaims a political space out of what would otherwise be mere survival: it expresses the subversive claim that the work-citizenship nexus of official discourse is incommensurable with, and untranslatable into, workers’ quotidian experiences”. Spaces of political potentiality in the form of spaces of incommensurability, finally, disrupt the neoliberal attempt to fill the void left by the collapse of authoritarian developmentalism with new narratives celebrating entrepreneurialism in the “informal economy” as a building block of a liberal-

democratic “civil society”. Left projects and social movements are, however, seriously wanting to the extent they contest that void with a melancholic longing for jobs and economic participation that – apart from being surpassed by the potency of the multitude’s living labor, its “uneconomical economies” and ways of “doing things” (Simone 2004) – reflects liberal premises of order while addressing none of the social precariousness and vulnerability they produce.⁶

Conclusion

As the postcolonial promise of decent work has faded in neoliberalized Africa, its inhabitants have responded to the precariousness of employment by detaching economic activities and life strategies from the sites of production. Escape from the compulsions of work, determined by both governmental injunctions and the erosion of social safety nets, has often taken the form of accumulation dependent on more or less undocumented circulation of goods and people or overt smuggling and counterfeiting. As “citizens are those who can have access to the networks of the parallel economy” (Mbembe 2001: 84), the meaning of work within such a composition of living labor has increasingly come to rely on networks operating in the crevices between legality and illegality. In its attempt to discursively absorb informality and precarious work within its entrepreneurial template, neoliberalism has paradoxically contributed to the implosion of work as a realm of predictable conducts and reproducible industrial relations. The poor may well demand “job creation” to make their claims visible to those in power, but a tactical appropriation of official discourse by no means indicates an embrace of its underlying imagination of discipline and social order. The conditions in which communities survive the structural violence of corporate globalization are complex enough to caution both against the idea that “decent work” is a feasible prospect and the assumption that social emancipation can be equated with employment.

Conversely, the devastating impact of neoliberalism on African labor organizations does not necessarily hamper the capacity of precarious work to disrupt capitalist discipline, a capacity that, it is worth emphasizing, has largely preceded the neoliberal wave as a challenge for the continent’s rulers. To grasp and conceptualize such capacity in *political* terms, however, one needs to move beyond the metaphysics of labor organizing as the core agent of a *transcendent* transformation and engage with potentials that are – in forms that are surely

⁶ A recent collection edited by Ilda Lindell (2010) is indicative in this regard. The editor’s introduction emphasizes the complexity, fluidity, and contingency of informal work against the dangers of prescriptive idealizations, but then moves to reassure the reader that what informal workers want is to be “recognized as workers”, rest their claims in trade unions and have the ILO’s promise of decent jobs fulfilled. This contradiction between the anti-normative pretenses of empirical analysis and the normative longing for employment-centered discourse is, on the other hand, amplified in most of the book’s country-based chapters, which document production-based organizations and identities recurrently subordinated by states and NGOs or succumbing to chauvinism and xenophobia, or international connections that mostly benefit the conservative and free-trade agendas of “informal” employers rather than their workers.

controversial, messy, ambiguous, when not unpalatable – *immanent* to the social and signification practices of living labor. A survey of the postcolonial predicament enriches and gives historical depth to current modalities of social conflict, where capital's capture of living labor and its common – knowledge, desire, language, social cooperation – rather than the mere liquidation of traditional working classes, defines the precariousness of work and its lines of fracture. A politically progressive discourse that is focused on “job creation” (no matter how “decent”) forecloses this terrain of contestation and opens the way to its being pathologized as disorder or sociologized as “marginality”. Silencing the political potentials of precarity plays indeed a crucial role in a broader critical capitulation, which opens the way to all sorts of reactionary interventions that reinforce corporate power in the name of “job creation”. It is thus not the precariat as the “new dangerous class”, as Guy Standing wants us to believe, that provides ammunition to right-wing and authoritarian politics, but a fixation with employment and productivism as norms of social order while these buzzwords are less and less capable of signifying decent existence for the employed and the jobless alike.

Moving, instead, from a normative terrain to one of critical analysis would require one to recognize that at stake is not only (or not necessarily) whether “decent” work is preferable to “indecent” jobs, or whether a reduction in the rate of unemployment can constrain capital's options, or whether having a job can make the difference between extreme, paralyzing, despairing and tolerable, resilient, and self-activating poverty. In fact, contrary to normative rationality, critical analysis has to recognize the complexities of emancipative, progressive discourse as characterized by the indissoluble knot of liberation and subjection and the simultaneous enabling and foreclosing of possibilities. Then demands for “job creation” can be tackled from a different angle: as they strive to negotiate capitalist relations of production they miss how capital valorizes itself not only by directly employing people but by turning into property, profit, and rent the social cooperation of living labors that capital does not “create” but nonetheless continuously appropriate. Defining this as a “job creation” issue would mean that social cooperation is relevant and politically visible only once it has been incorporated in the creation of capital-reproducing value. The result would be to subordinate imaginations and practices of liberation to the capitalist dream of freezing the social into the production of commodities while rendering all exceeding autonomy of living labor invisible and speechless.

As a condition of political possibility that problematizes work-centered normativity and productivist views of emancipation, precarity discloses instead radically alternative terrains of imagination and claims. It allows us, for example, to think decommodification and redistribution, including forms of non-work related universal income, neither as incentives to work, as neoliberalism and part of the left celebrate, nor as “handouts”, as they deprecate. They would rather constitute a reappropriation at a society-wide level of livelihoods that otherwise capital appropriates at no cost. At stake would thus be a shift from “welfare” to “commonfare” as a horizon of contestation to reopen across the social fabric the battle deferred (when not lost) at the point of

production (Fumagalli 2007). As Mario Tronti (1980) once argued, the old factory working class effectively challenged capital when it struggled to abolish itself as a producer and deliverer of capital, not when it allowed to be idealized under the keywords of work ethic, occupational pride, citizenship, and productivity. Demands for a “living wage” were about refusing the compatibilities of capital as a regulatory principle of life. Those who fought for the eight-hour working day did so as a response to what was then called “wage slavery”, not for the sake of orderly industrial relations and collective bargaining. As the subjugation of living labor worldwide is reverting to the extremes of that age, social struggles are thus coalescing around the question of what the “living wage” of precarious multitudes would look like today.

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