“Imagining the Patriotic Worker: The Idea of ‘Decent Work’ in the ANC’s Political Discourse”

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Much recent historical research – a notable example of which is Peter Limb’s work on the origins of the African National Congress (ANC) – has emphasized the ways in which from its early beginnings the ANC has appealed to the movements and struggles of South Africa’s black working class. Many scholars have regard the ANC’s roots in grassroots politics as constitutive of its identity, even at times when moderate elites set the organization’s political agenda. Others have seen in the ANC’s connections to the social tensions of early industrialization an element of exceptionalism in the South African liberation struggle in comparison to the development of anticolonial nationalism in the rest of the continent. Overall, the ANC’s links to labor politics are celebrated in an emerging historiographical consensus, which this paper will critically problematize. Focusing on the 1912-1955 period, I will discuss the crucially important role played by the theme of work with dignity in the elaboration of the ANC’s emancipative imagination. Reclaiming the redemption of labor from racist discrimination and abuse was important for the ANC to establish a terrain of negotiation and mutual recognition with actors – like the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union or the Communist Party – which also praised the political centrality of the black working class. In the process the ANC ended up representing the black proletariat as a universalized force of nonracial liberation and a virtuous subject of popular sovereignty in a future nonracial democracy. Rather than underwriting radical social transformation, this ideological trajectory combined, in the end, political liberation with a continuous emphasis on productivism, individual responsibility, and work ethic in the ANC’s discourse. As a result, concurrent modalities of social antagonism, most evident in persistent African resistance to and refusal of wage labor, were marginalized as socially pathological categories deprived of political visibility. The ambiguous position of the “dignity of work” in the ANC’s political imagination is not only foundational for of its appeal to a
wide range of social constituencies, but continues to play an important role in current debates on “decent work” and employment-centered policies of social inclusion as opposed to popular demands for radical redistribution and decommodification.