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

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“It is a proposition submitted to employ [the natives’] minds on simple questions in connection with local affairs; it is a proposition to remove the liquor pest; and last, but not least, by the gentle stimulant of the labour tax to remove them from a life of sloth and laziness; you will thus teach them the dignity of labour, and make them contribute to the prosperity of the state.”

(Cecil Rhodes, describing the aims of the 1894 Glen Grey Act)\(^1\)

“The able-bodied should enjoy the opportunity, the dignity and the rewards of work. We would rather create work opportunities than have an income grant.”

(Joel Netshitenzhe, member of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress and head of the Government Communication and Information Systems, 2002)\(^2\)

“The policy case for a massive programme of public employment in South Africa is strong. . . . What is required is a fiscal and policy commitment to build the institutions and capacity required to take this to scale, as a vital part of rebuilding a sense of the dignity of labour amongst those who have no alternatives.”


\(^1\) Cit. in Verschoyle, F. (1900), *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900* (London: Chapman and Hall), 390.


Work and Dignity in Settler Colonialism: From Antagonism to Conflict

At the end of 2010 the government of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa announced a New Growth Path (NGP) as the country’s macroeconomic strategy. Central to the NGP’s vision was the promise, stated a year earlier by the new president, Jacob Zuma, that “the creation of decent work will be at the centre of our economic policies and will influence our investment attraction and job creation initiatives.”\(^4\) The document went on to recognize that, despite years of sustained economic growth, inequality and joblessness had remained at unacceptably high levels and even “amongst the employed, many workers had poorly paid, insecure and dead-end jobs.”\(^5\) As a remedy, “decent work” reflected here the definition provided by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as policies aimed at creating employment that incorporates essential organizational rights and freedoms, social protections, decent working conditions, social dialogue, and tripartism. The powerful ANC ally in the labor movement, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), criticized the NGP for its “neoliberal” approach, which it saw in continuity with the much deprecated Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy of 1996, but nonetheless welcomed its focus on decent work as a departure from that background.

The emphasis on decent work in South African policy discourse – and its concomitant aversion for “dependency-inducing” noncontributory social provisions for the working poor, precarious workers, and working-age unemployed – are not, however, unprecedented. Its underlying assumption that employment is not merely an economic transaction left to the whim of market forces but it can, with appropriate regulations, underpin an equitable social order and a project of universal human emancipation, reflects indeed the idea of the “dignity of labor”, which, as this paper will show, is a long-standing trope in the country’s discursive repertoire. As the opening quotes illustrates, it has been indeed voiced at very different times by contending


\(^5\) Ibid., 3.
forces that, no matter how diametrically opposed in the political and ideological realm, have seen in it an icon of progress and modernization.

Even if conceptually distinct, “decent work” and the “dignity of labor” have nonetheless complemented each other in the discursive elision of exploitation from the imagination of capitalist employment in Western liberalism. In Immanuel Kant’s classical formulation, “dignity”, meaning a unique and incommensurable value, is the opposite of “price” as mere monetary equivalent in market transactions. Once an ethical substance thus elevates the extraction of value-creating capacities by capital from the brutalities of, in Marx’s terms, realm of necessity, then “decent work” is merely an operational definition of such substance from the standpoint of policymaking. I will thus critically interrogate the ways in which the normative association of capitalist work with images of decency and dignity has entered political contestation in South Africa. As I see this paper as an exercise in conceptual genealogy, I will focus on the period of early industrialization, particularly the first three decades of the history of the ANC as symbolizing the nascent opposition between the racial state of settler colonialism and African nationalism. I am not interested in examining how images of decent and dignified work inspired or energized African opposition to segregation or, as much historiography has focused on recently, what such images tell us about the ANC’s class bases or interests. My aim is rather to show how imaginings of “dignified” capitalist work in the early ANC “formatted” the colonial reality as one of domination and resistance, how they defined the African working class as a protagonist of emancipation, and how the process cannot be represented as linear and cumulative in its development of collective consciousness and organized politics but rather constitutively requires the suppression of alternative modalities of political desire.

Frank Wilderson has recently proposed the analytical distinction between “antagonism” and “conflict” as ways to define the structural and ontological position of actors in conditions of

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7 I use this concept with broad reference to Michel Foucault’s idea of genealogy as the constitution in the past of knowledges and discourses that recursively enable the operations of governmentality, or practices consisting in the definition of a subject’s conduct and field of options. See Foucault, M. (1984), “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, 76-100 (New York: Pantheon).
suffering and violence. An antagonism is “an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions.” For Wilderson antagonism chiefly defines the relations between “Master/Settler” and “Slave” subsequent to the eradication, by means of gratuitous violence, of African subjectivities and their transformation into Black bodies as fungible and accumulated objects of the plantation economies of the Western hemisphere. A conflict, he continues, is “a rubric of problems”, such as national liberation, working-class empowerment, gender emancipation, “that can be posed and conceptually solved” as a progressive recomposition not premised on the obliteration of the capacity of one of the contending entities. Wilderson’s argument allows me to chart the genealogy and governmental effect of ideas of “dignity of labor” and “decent work” in South Africa. They mystified, I contend, an element of antagonism in the colonial situation – wage labor as part of violent processes through which capitalism constituted itself as the dispossession of African land, political authority, and economic independence – into a conflict – the relationships between labor, capital, and the state – open to possible recompositions through progressive signifiers – the respectability of working-class lives, self-improvement, economic advancement, nation building, and civil society.

The recasting of antagonism as conflict crucially implied the acceptance of identities, solidarities, and organizations centered on wage labor as necessary moments in an emancipative dynamics. Effaced are, as a consequence, both wage labor’s ontological salience in defining African bodies as objects of imposition and violence and the fact that Africans responded to such structural positioning by refusing, not embracing, the identity of employees and producers of value, or that they resisted wage labor, their own becoming a working class, and attendant images of progress and emancipation. In South Africa, possibilities of a progressive recomposition of conflicts were foreclosed by the consolidation of white supremacy under apartheid, which for four decades left revolution available as a prospect of black liberation. On the assumption that waged work could be the foundation of a dignified and decent life, however, white and black elites, segregationist, socialist, and nationalist interests have found a discursive

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convergence since the early twentieth century. Such an ideal path eventually proved deeper and more resilient than options of revolutionary rupture, as the possibility of recomposition within the existing socioeconomic order resurfaced first with the mid-1980s negotiations between the ANC and the state and capitalist interests then in the post-1994 template of a “national democratic revolution” within a liberal-democratic order.

**African Refusal of Work and Its Silence**

The process of industrialization and consolidation of a racially segregationist state in early twentieth-century South Africa confronted a problem, which in the second half of the century came eventually to be recognized as such by colonial states across the continent: how to incorporate class politics within “civil society” as, in Foucault’s terms, a realm of governmental practice or, as Cooper puts it, how to turn rebellious multitudes of African producers into a working class as “a predictable and productive collectivity.”\(^9\) At this level, the problem can be compared to the reality of Western capitalist countries, which incorporated the class turmoil of industrialization through an array of public policies and state-regulated social interactions. The comparison can, however, go no further if we consider that the Western capitalist state addressed the challenge with a register, citizenship (including political representation, individual freedoms, social provisions, industrial relations), that it made unavailable to colonized peoples. The “coloniality of power”\(^11\) in settler governance explicitly defined working for wages as a foundation of a hierarchical social order – whereby whites acceded to the worker-as-citizen status while Africans were confined to that of “native” as virtual “laborer” – even when it invested it with universal values and ideas of individual economic freedom. Not only did the African face a structural interdiction to becoming a citizen, but settler colonialism ontologically

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predicated the idea of (European) citizenship upon such interdiction. It was only within the settler’s own conversation that the idea of citizenship could be represented as a shared inclusive horizon, whereas in its practical, intersubjective operations it stood for the exclusion and subjection of the African majority. Only under the direct threat of anticolonial insurgency – after World War II in most of the continent, from the late 1970s in South Africa – did reforms in European and white minority rule deploy protocols of limited citizenship rights and participation in civil society as modalities to govern the African. As a manifestation of a system of rule in terminal decline, however, such reforms turned colonial governance into an unstable scheme combining technologies of unfreedom with the normativity of assumed universal values, among which the “dignity of labour” is a condition prescribed for “modern” Africans to access the habits – hard work, personal responsibility, and ambition -- of the Western *homo oeconomicus* even without the related rights.

Opposition to colonialism by urban wage earners often took nonetheless the initial form of appropriation of ideas of universal rights and citizenship to demand African equality with European conditions.12 In South Africa the criticism by the ANC-led liberation movements of the pseudo-traditional ethnic and racial divisions codified by the racial state has imagined, as Ivor Chipkin shows, “industrial individuals (modern humankind) as the authentic bearers of the nation.”13 Despite its survival as an object of historical inquiry, “resistance to proletarianization” was rapidly discarded as a political strategy, which cast it with the pre-modern, pre-capitalist, pre-national marks of backwardness. The embrace of proletarianization rather came to prominence in the grammar of freedom of nationalist, labor, and socialist forces. Sure enough, the strategic shift gained significance in the workers’ struggles of the 1940s, the development of mass nationalist politics in the 1950s and early 1960s, the reconstitution of independent trade unionism in the 1970s, and township insurgency in the 1980s, all periods, beyond the scope of this paper, where black labor organizations energized opposition to apartheid. What concerns me here, however, are the discursive and significal roots of the connection between waged

12 Cooper, F., *Decolonization*.

work and emancipation at a time, the early twentieth century, when it was harder to conjugate proletarianization with a sense of historical necessity, resistive practices left open an especially wide variety of options, and nationalist or labor leaderships struggled to define and assert their normative visions. It was in this period that the problem of elaborating cognitive coordinates to insert the African worker as a protagonist of national liberation, something scholars and activists of later decades tended to take more or less for granted, gained visibility.

Emphasizing the association of waged work not with crude and brutal necessity, but with decency and dignity was central to anticolonial and anti-segregation politics. As such it illustrates the point, stressed by African labor scholarship and subaltern studies alike, that the concept of colonized working classes and its association with progressive politics is hardly the result of the structural contradictions of capitalism or the outcome of a linear emancipative process charted by the universals of Western modernity. In the (post)colony the working class as a historical agent is rather a subjectivity produced in contested ways through competing imaginative projects.14 Two important consequences follow. First, as African nationalist organizations wrested the decency and dignity of work from colonial discourse and reinscribed them as signifiers of progressive claims, they also defined a terrain on which advancing such claims relied on the mutual recognition of elites, of the ANC, labor unions, workers’ organizations on one side, employers, governmental experts, segregationist politicians, and white reformers on the other. Second, discursive strategies that praised and glorified the emancipative potential of waged employment were not limited to the level of enunciated speech. They also had the quite material effect of foreclosing alternatives based on the refusal and subversion of wage labor as the ontologically marker of African bodies as receivers of the violence and abuse that constituted white civil society. What is at stake here, and given the limitations of this paper I can only indicate this as a problem for further investigation,15 are the ambiguities of political liberation as a project based on subjectivities, claims, and political struggles that simultaneously


enable and disable desire, allow some discursive registers while silencing others, fold emancipation and subjection together rather than articulating them as logically or chronologically distinct.

The opening quote from Cecil Rhodes is indicative of a mindset in the early segregationist state concerned, especially as it was grappling with the shift from the domination of mining and imperial capital to a more diversified manufacturing base, with attaching moral qualities to waged work as a way to contain and defuse its social tensions. Official discourse peddled the “dignity of labor” as it started to oppose productive waged natives to indocile tribalized ones, recalcitrant to capitalist production. It recentered individual ambition and initiative in the market, where work ethic found stimulus in consumption based on the creation of “artificial wants.” The project mirrored similar utterances in the postemancipation ideologies of the US South or the Caribbean, indicating a global circulation of the white supremacist pretense of exclusively defining the meaning and conditions of black access to modern humanity.

Scholars have often referred to how Africans defied pressures to work for wages or were primarily concerned, even when entering market relations, with defending noncapitalist social formations or independent agriculture. What is conventionally referred to as “resistance to proletarianization” took many forms, from the preference for casual and self-employed occupations in order “to exist at a distance from the disciplines of time, productivity and monotony that the more deeply proletarianized sections of the work force were experiencing”


smuggling, sex work, and beer brewing in the crevices between legality and illegality – remained a persistent challenge to capitalist work discipline. It in fact involved subjects – women illegally moving from the reserves to the cities, long-term unemployed youth – in a precarious relationship to the governmental images of order.\textsuperscript{20} Well into the process of industrialization and black unionization, they ominously stood as “dangerous classes” of habitually jobless and tsotsis whose disreputable morals were deemed liable to infect and prey on the respectable working class molded by governmental policies.\textsuperscript{21} As I show elsewhere, the image of the idle and “work-shy” African township youth has haunted the imagination of the state and employers and provided a major concern for labor policies well into the last two decades of apartheid.\textsuperscript{22} In South Africa, however, the refusal of work and resistance to wage labor are hard to investigate sociologically due to the paucity of historical sources and oral narratives, which has somehow reinforced the presentation of these subjects by state and labor officials as backward, anomic, anarchic, and deprived of political significance. The continuous surfacing of these themes in scholarly discussions indicates, nonetheless, an underlying “libidinal economy” of desire that cannot be ignored when discussing the embrace of the “dignity of labor” and working-class respectability by the early ANC.

\textbf{African Nationalism and Waged Work: From Refusal to “Respectability”}

As the institutions of the segregationist state consolidated on the foundations of South Africa’s political unification and the minerals-driven economic boom, the South African Native National


Congress (SANNC), established in 1912 and renamed the African National Congress in 1923, identified the capitalist economy and the political freedoms ostensibly guaranteed by the Empire as its main terrains of claims. Central to the nascent nationalist imagination and its modernizing impulses was the vision of redeeming work from the injuries of racist legislation and turn it into a foundation of personal and social development for an African nation geared to equal opportunities on an unfettered market.

An important addition to the large body of left scholarship celebrating the ANC’s roots in labor politics is Peter Limb’s recent, exhaustive study of the Congress’s early decades.23 While Limb recognizes the “petty bourgeois” background of most of the ANC’s first leaders – ministers, clerks, professionals, small entrepreneurs, landowners, labor supervisors – he nonetheless criticizes the view proposed, among others, by Alan Cobley24, according to which this “elite” class extraction reflected a systematic program of advancement of those very class interests. In Limb’s view, the relatively privileged conditions of its leaders did not hamper the ANC’s concerns for African workers, which came to occupy an increasingly visible position in the pronouncements of the organization. Despite being led by moderate elites, Limb continues, the ANC was not an elitist party. Planting roots in popular politics was indeed necessary for its “petty bourgeois” leaders due to the vulnerability, the limits to accumulation, and the structural impediments faced by the African middle class in a context of social, spatial, and political segregation. As waged employment was capturing indigenous economies and state imagination understood the obvious status of the “modern” African as that of laborer, the ANC’s image of “the nation” could not but emphasize the role of workers’ claims. Even if the Congress showed, in its first three decades, little or no interest in the unionization of black workers, it established connections, steeped in affinity or rivalry depending on periods and locales, with organizations that claimed to represent the African proletariat, like the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), established in 1919, and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), launched in 1921. Such interactions reinforced the class content in the ANC’s discourse and allowed it to

touch vernaculars of struggles in workers’ constituencies beyond its own membership. In the end, Limb concludes, as the ICU collapsed and the CPSA faded, the ANC entered the 1940s, a decade marked by growing mass mobilization on the nationalist and labor front, as the foremost representative of black working-class interests.

Despite their differences, Limb and Coblion share the common approach of understanding the significance of the ANC’s political discourse according to how it reflects or addresses class identities and interests aimed at questioning and overcoming an existing state of things. Their focus is, in other words, on the self-constitution of the ANC as the agent of a politics of *transcendence*. What they do not discuss is how the Congress configures subjectivities and imaginative possibilities by operating in everyday politics on a plane of *immanence*. Such a task would, conversely, require a careful consideration of what registers are enabled or disabled in the organization’s repertoire. It would also invite one to look at how the ANC’s ideological positions partook – through contestation, negotiation, or appropriation – of a broader political conversation underpinned by the mutual recognition between the elites of, respectively, the nascent nationalist movement and its allies or fellow travelers on one side, and capital and the state on the other. As common throughout early African anticolonial politics, mutual recognition buttressed, on the other hand, the early strategies of an embryonic anti-segregation movement that relied significantly on moderation and legalistic discourse. It also responded to the techniques of a colonial state alternating repressive control with the quest for “responsible” interlocutors among “modern” Africans. Moving the inquiry from the terrain of clear-cut oppositional agendas premised on class interests and their conscious or unconscious self-representation to that of discourse as a shifting terrain of ambiguous relationships between contesting political forces would also require studying the ANC’s ideology of work not only for what it says about the Congress’s overall anticolonial, anti-segregationist stance, but also for its governmental effects, in Foucauldian terms, or its capacity to normatively construct social subjects and their conducts.

What I am proposing here is not an abstractly theoretical exercise as it draws historical significance from the context of the ANC’s rise and early development. The 1910s and early 1920s witnessed an intensified confrontation between the state and both white labor (culminating in the 1922 Rand Revolt) and African workers (for which the 1918 strike of the “bucket boys” in the Johannesburg municipality was an important turning point). On the former front, conflict
found its institutionalization first in the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act then, the same year, in the Nationalist-Labour Party “Pact” government, which charted a path towards the incorporation of white trade unionism through a “civilized labor” politics of racial favoritism and state intervention in whites-only job creation. But the “Pact” also marked the political ascent of “South Africanism” as a current of white politics emerged over the previous decade as a critique of mining-centered, British-imperial political hegemony.²⁵ South Africanism presented itself as a form of white colonial patriotism, underpinned by the rise of inward-looking manufacturing industries, which combined a commitment to white supremacy and racial segregation with the attempt to expand African markets for domestic production. As a result, the South Africanist state faced the task of how to think “natives” as regular workers with wages and consumption levels commensurate with urban status; in other words, not only semi-proletarianized laborers, albeit not citizens either. As a manufacturer’s journal editorialized the dilemma: “If Henry Ford can pay a man five dollars a day for screwing nuts onto bolts, surely native labourers can be paid up to 10s a day for working jackhammers”.²⁶

As the institutionalization of African waged work acquired for the white government a socioeconomic rationality, above and beyond Rhodes’ “dignity of labour”, it also defined a possible terrain to displace antagonism – the persistent African resistance to working for wages – into conflict – a realm in which the white government could respond to the desires of Africans-as-wage earners. The nascent ANC had emphasized from the start its appeal to the values of imperial citizenship, including Victorian and Christian exaltations of individual responsibility and hard work, as a terrain to advance African demands. That imagery held firm even when the strengthening of segregationist legislation – especially the 1913 Native Land Act – had convinced ANC leaders that such demands ought to rely on the political autonomy of the African nation, rather than on optimistic assumptions on the evolutionary potentials of settler


²⁶ Cit. in Bozzoli, The Political Nature, 196.
colonialism. Despite the commitment of South Africanism to white supremacy, its idea of socioeconomic interdependence between the white economy and African labor provided the ANC and African labor organizations with new opportunities to make their case in the language of institutionality. As a result, rather than being mutually exclusive, the nationalist advancement of African political agency and the dynamics of mutual recognition between African and white elites premised on waged work as the practical expression of such advancement went hand in hand.

Significant currents of Congress politics, particularly those with connections to late nineteenth-century Cape liberalism, had seen in African proletarianization and urbanization opportunities for capital accumulation and the consolidation of African landownership. Even if white administrators in the Cape had sometimes appreciated this argument as they regarded a limited African peasantry as a stabilizing element, proto-nationalist activists saw in the demand for land also a potential to resist the compulsion to working for wages. As the development of the mining economy and its requirements on African labor forces gradually foreclosed that avenue, the utterances of SANNC leaders also tended to shift, appreciating the ethical qualities of capitalist employment in more explicit opposition to work avoidance. Working for wages was for them, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century less of a problem in itself while critical emphasis was placed on the unfairness of racial legislation – land expropriation, the Masters and Servants Acts, the pass laws – that condemned African proletarians to the status of manual laborers, precluding avenues to skilled work. The shift embraced the idea that industrial and urban modernity could provide Africans with paths to advancement, which were previously largely bestowed upon land claims.

John Dube, the first SANNC president and small capitalist himself, was a staunch follower of protestant work ethic and an advocate of discipline through work, for which he drew like many of his contemporaries inspiration from American missions and the work of Booker T.

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Washington. His loyalties went to Victorian liberalism and imperial civilization rather than labor radicalism and he indeed commented disparagingly that African reluctance to work for wages depended on a “lack of industrial habits”, which decent working conditions, fair wages, and proper housing could ultimately overcome. Dube’s conceptualization of the African nation relied less on equality than on a hierarchical ordering of functions whereby waged employment was the precinct of civilized Africans, “the better class Native” as opposed to “the ruck of the Natives.” He thus appealed to the settler state’s own conception of labor as a fully human condition to demand from it recognition for the African workers’ legitimate demands for training and improved wages. The burden of fulfilling the promises of waged employment was thus on the white government’s shoulders, failing which the “natives” would fall “into the hands of agitators” preaching “racial ill-feeling” rather than “responsible Native leaders.” Sol Plaatje’s interactions with the De Beers corporation in Kimberley, interspersed with his protestations of loyalty to the Empire and the Union of South Africa, were explicitly inspired by the idea that African work ethic could act as a device of moral persuasion leading to a social compact with the white elite to stave off the penetration of socialism and trade unionism. In the end, in Plaatje’s words, “Kimberley will be about the last place that these black Bolsheviks from Johannesburg will pay attention to, thus leaving us free to combat their activities in other parts of the Union.”

More radical SANNC founders, like Josiah Gumede, also did their best to stress that “natives are very fond of work . . . all they want is an incentive . . . to work by being paid a higher wage”.

Far from a sign of capitulation and passive deference towards white liberal ideas, such

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28 Hughes, H. (2011), The First President. A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC (Johannesburg: Jacana)
29 Limb, The ANC’s Early Years, 96.
32 Limb, The ANC’s Early Years, 98
developments indicated a profoundly original elaboration on the part of nationalist elites of the workplace and the urban areas as terrains where the meanings and expectations of modernity could be negotiated with colonial rulers. They also revealed that, as the early ANC grappled with the task of conceptualizing the “native” as an autonomous political agent, the worker’s place was that of a member of the African nation, perhaps as the embodiment of its specific injuries, rather than a class actor with an independent stance critical of capitalism.

The public image of the SANNC formalized in many ways the discursive blurring of antagonism between African societies and capitalist employment into a conflict, within wage labor, between “natives”, employers, and the state. The Congress’s constitution, adopted in 1919, included the aim to “propagate the gospel of the dignity of labour” while advocating self-help and constitutional means to redress African grievances. It did demand, one year after the organization had for the first time overtly supported African workers’ mobilizations during the 1918 municipal strikes, the removal of the color bars, fair wages, workmen’s compensation, and increased educational opportunities. Its language framed nonetheless decent work as a reality of economic interdependence and a foundation for social partnerships mutually beneficial to white rulers and African workers. Its polemical targets were not market relations as such, but the short-sighted unfairness that held the potential of the “natives” back. The Congress’s optimistic and evolutionary approach to capitalism markedly contrasted with the registers articulated by nascent African workers’ unions or even within specific local realities of the nationalist movement. The Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), launched in 1917, as labor mobilization mounted on the Rand, during meetings between the Transvaal Native Congress (a SANNC affiliate) and the International Socialist League had a constitution committed to class struggle and to “abolish the wage system”.

Unions (including the ICU) and socialist organizations did not necessarily claim a stronger following than the SANNC-ANC, but it is worth noticing that the contestation over the place of work in progressive imagination took place not only between nationalist and socialist

33 Cit. in Ibidem, 123.

34 Cit. in Ibid., 165. Limb also documents nonetheless how national leaders of the SANNC opposed the strikes and attacked radical elements in the Transvaal congress.
forces but also within African nationalism itself as shown, for example, by how the reception of Garveyism in South Africa motivated a diverse range of agendas, from anti-imperial panafricanism to entrepreneurial views of liberation, from rural millennial movements to ICU branches.\(^{35}\) Left scholars have recursively lambasted the moderation of early ANC leaders as out of touch with the structure and the tensions of colonial society.\(^{36}\) The approach relies on a dichotomy between “true” and “false” African nationalism that is normative, not analytical, inasmuch it is derived from a historical judgment that idealizes as a necessary endpoint the ANC’s subsequent developments, namely its alliances within radical and working class politics. Peter Limb is probably correct that the initial adoption by the ANC of the state’s productivist rhetoric was in good measure a form of tactical appropriation dictated by harsh necessity – the ANC’s small numbers and constant exposure to repression – and diffidence towards pro-labor left ideologies in light of widespread racism in white unions.\(^{37}\) The “tactical” intent of its uses notwithstanding, however, political discourse is not only a tool on hand for a purely instrumental use. The terms of its tactical appropriation, in other words, are as revealing of the underlying social imagination as more principled pronouncements. In the context of industrialization and rising white South Africanism, such terms indicated an allegiance by the ANC to the morality of work rather than class politics. Even once it became clear that the “civilized labor” policies of the Pact were determined to confine, contrary to the ANC’s expectations, Africans to the status of manual laborers and foreclose paths to skilled employment, the Congress’s emphasis on the ethical qualities of waged work became louder, rather than subsiding. A language of working-class respectability ended up structuring the grammar of African urban employees.

The idea of “respectable” work draws considerable strength from the projection of present employment conditions upon future aspirations. In the case of black South African workers, it had to do with the assumption that hard work and self-reliance would disclose opportunities for future generations to enjoy political rights, capital formation, and economic


\(^{37}\) Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 128.
success. Mark Gevisser provides a brilliant examination, in his biography of Thabo Mbeki, of how themes of work ethic and self-reliance elaborated within the ANC in its early decades provided deep roots that sprouted in the organization’s post-1994 politics. Mbeki and Trevor Manuel are, for Gevisser, the latest offspring of that ideological path, which they resumed and updated in the form of aversion to governmental “handouts” and a proud defense of fiscal discipline as a condition of national sovereignty in the context of globalization and liberalization.

Goodhew identifies the main characteristics of the ideology of respectability, in his study of Johannesburg’s Western Areas, in the African workers’ attachment to “religion, education, law and order.” Such values define an intersubjective public sphere as a source both of opposition to “unrespectable” township elements and of claims towards the state. Longing for respectability, Goodhew insists, is thus not merely “petty bourgeois” but also constitutes an ambivalent, multifarious pattern of proletarian culture. Underscoring it is a powerful blend of work ethics, political progressivism, and social values extolling masculine notions of breadwinning and propriety to assert the authority of male elders over women in the household and wayward youth in the community. Aversion to employment was thus cast as a pathology of low self-respect leading to crime, alcoholism, gambling, and marital infidelity. The narrative of labor as a universal path to self-improvement enabled overlaps and converges between African workers’ expressions and the state’s condemnation of the “work-shyness” of township youth. Thus, for example, Natal ANC leader Abner Mtimkulu stood in agreement with the government that urban recreational and welfare associations were needed to divert Africans away from vice and towards preparedness for work. The conversation and mutual recognition between the contending perspectives of the ANC and the segregationist state could only take place once proletarian desire had been turned into “social problems” solvable through discipline and self-


control. Goodhew’s analysis of working-class township life in Johannesburg questions, however, the soundness of the equation, in the discourse of policymakers at the time, of work-shyness, unemployment, and criminality. He also shows that unemployment was not only due to lack of jobs. Rather, many African youth deemed tsotsis fell outside the boundaries of “respectability” mostly because they intentionally refused exploitative and demeaning jobs on a regular basis and rather preferred intermittent occupations.\(^{41}\) ANC-aligned elders and law enforcement officials often indeed expressed a shared alarm at undisciplined youth challenging patriarchal authority by disrespecting the values and hierarchies of production.\(^{42}\) Insubordination and escape from waged work as the manifestation of the oppressive racial order of settler colonialism constituted thus social concerns for which nationalist leaders and state officials agreed that the “dignity of labor” was the remedy. In African anticolonial discourse, fears of proletarianization – or more accurately of the threat those trying to escape it posed for age and gender authority – had by now completely replaced resistance to proletarianization as a political signifier.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the ANC’s discourse was way readier to represent the tsotsi and “dangerous classes” rather than capital as its adversary. The domination of Congress politics by middle-class and entrepreneurial strata – for Dube “capitalists are the black man’s best friends”\(^{43}\) – helps explain this only to an extent. The breeding ground for such a normative production was in fact the reciprocal intelligibility of white and African elites as they focused, from radically different standpoints, on the imperatives of social control over unruly, unpredictable subjectivities. Black and white notables found a terrain of encounter in the Joint Councils of Europeans and Natives, which started in 1921 at the initiative of white liberal critics of strict segregation with the support of American missionaries and the reassurances of Congress president, Sefako Makgatho, about the “loyalty” of African workers. The ANC’s leaders supported the Councils and, despite their gradual marginalization in them and the overt attempt by these organizations to co-opt African leaders into class collaboration and away from radical

\(^{41}\) Goodhew, “Working-Class Respectability”, 249.


\(^{43}\) Limb, The ANC’s Early Years, 290.
temptations, by the 1930s the Joint Councils were the only arena where the ANC articulated and voiced a labor policy.\textsuperscript{44}

The Congress’s stand was there articulated in the language of race and occupational pride dear to cadres like Mtimkulu. Under the authoritarian, anti-labor leadership of Pixley ka Seme in the first half of the 1930s, business interests and the template of self-help and entrepreneurialism channeled labor’s claims to emancipation. Liberal critique of segregation anticipated in many ways the ultimately short-lived hopes for reform and a more inclusive South Africanism that accompanied the United Party cabinet led by Jan Smuts from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s. Opposition to “civilized labor” and the pass laws was here motivated not so much by demands for equal rights but by the nature of statutory racial privileges as a bureaucratic intrusion in the laws of the labor market, which sapped productivity and undermined African work ethic.\textsuperscript{45} White liberals saw urbanized Africans not only as a nuisance or an unwelcome necessity but as a layer of modern “natives” to be “stabilized” and developed as human capital. John D. Rheinallt Jones, one of the intellectual architects of the Joint Councils, argued in an influential paper that “natural economic laws know no colour bar, whether protective or repressive” to demand market regulation of wages in a competitive labor market where only demand and supply and the “wage for the job” would determine the occupational status of Africans. In this regard, he went as far as to support the ICU’s demands for including African workers in the industrial relations and conciliation system. In his view, liberal assistance could help move African labor organizations from radicalism and “racialism” towards “genuine” industrial unionism.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, 278-79, 379-83.


\textsuperscript{46} Rheinallt Jones, J.D. (1928), “The Native in Industry”, Memorandum No.3, Johannesburg Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (NYPL/Schomburg Library, Micro R-4022, No.21). If anything, in his support for a “wage for the job” Rheinallt Jones could well have been on the \textit{left} of some ANC leaders, like Selby Msimang, who testified to the 1931 Native Economic Commission that he opposed minimum wages for low-paid workers, a long-standing union demand, as a distortion of free labor markets. See Limb, \textit{The ANC’s Early Years}, 400.
Liberal interventions were not confined to policy conversations but included direct advocacy for higher African wages before governmental commissions of inquiry and the deployment of socio-scientific expertise – especially through the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), founded in 1929 – to document African living and working conditions. They found therefore receptive ears in ANC politicians already engaged in advancing their own version of South Africanism where “free and open competition” on the labor market could galvanize a “Bantu patriotism” capable of moving beyond claims to imperial citizenship and asserting the full and equal inclusion of the African nation in the political community. Differently from the mere recognition within political contestation that African nationalist elites where seeking from the segregationist state, the Joint Councils provided an important arena to fine-tune technologies of discipline and social control through direct, sympathetic interactions between white liberals and ANC cadres. R.H. Godlo, a prominent Congress leader in the Cape, Sol Platje protegé, and Joint Councils participant, approvingly quoted the words of John Ayliff, a provincial secretary for Native Affairs in the 1870s, who once intoned (in defense of forced labor!):

Experience having shown us that [natives] will not labour from free choice, and that there is no necessity sufficiently pressing to induce them to labour continuously, it is surely no injustice to expect that, in return for the many benefits we confer, they should supply that moderate amount of labour which will prevent positive perpetual idleness, and afford an auxiliary to the introduction of fresh news, new habitats and the creation of artificial wants.⁴⁸

After labor taxes and market discipline had shaken the “Bantu” from “the lethargic life of his ancestors”, Godlo continued, “the gospel of the dignity of labour found many a convert and artificial wants were created and increased.” He argued that such changes had led the natives to

⁴⁷ The quotes are, respectively, from the ANC’s Seme and Richard V. Selope Thema, both of which emphasized collaboration between white capital and black labor to oppose socialist influences and independent working-class organizations. See Limb, The ANC’s Early Years, 394, 398.

the city as their most fittingly modern social locale, where they could lift themselves up from manual labor and build a nation of productive individuals. In a striking mirror image of the governmental discourse of South Africanism – and in direct reference to the conclusions of the 1925 Economic and Wages Commission – Godlo legitimized demands for improved African wages and working conditions as “reasonable requirements” with the argument that urbanization had forged a new economic complementarity between blacks and whites.49

Z.K. Matthews, an influential African nationalist intellectual, SAIRR executive committee member, and then among the minds behind the ANC’s radical Programme of Action of 1949, took more direct aim at work avoidance and ordinary Africans’ preference for non permanent jobs. Arguing that recalcitrance to work discipline was the result of a “Bantu life” still stuck “in a very backward condition”, he praised “white education”, which “while [it] will not do everything, it will open the eyes of our people to their own nakedness”.50 To that end it would impart “a social conscience or a sense of social responsibility” suited to replace the “sense of oneness” of “old tribal life” with the importance of being useful to the modern state. Central to this pedagogical enterprise was the need for the African to learn “the necessity of working at his job not intermittently but permanently.” Only thus would the native become “an intelligent subject and an industrious worker.” Work, more than political or social struggle, would emancipate Africans through a path of self-improvement and teach them to stave off “vice and social degeneration” through “physical, mental, social efficiency” underwriting claims for a fair share of the fruits of modernization. Matthews’ conclusions are worth quoting in full:

We need education as prospective workers and producers in this country. Think of the awful waste of money, time and other more valuable things caused by the inefficiency of the Native worker, by the frequent interference with his work of his old-fashioned ways of regarding work as a temporary and not a permanent affair! Complaints about

49 *Ibid.*, 103-04. Complementarity here meant, on the other hand, an agreement on the unequal positions blacks and whites occupied in the hierarchical order of settler colonialism. As an example of the agreement Godlo mentioned the segregated native locations enabled by the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act, which he called “outposts of Bantu civilization.”

the Native unwillingness to work are silenced when we remember that not many people even amongst other races work for work’s sake, but do so because they have to or perish or run the risk of civil imprisonment for failing to meet their obligations. Our people’s needs are few and are easily satisfied and, once satisfied, a man is left with no incentive to return to work. But give the people an education and so create new needs and wants which have to be met by the results of hard work.\textsuperscript{51}

The patriotic worker, averse to social radicalism and at the same time aspiring citizen of the South African(ist) state and member of the African nation was by now fully systematized as the agent of emancipation and popular sovereignty in the ANC’s political discourse.

The Joint Councils fulfilled the pedagogical intent of a work-centered governmentality also by acting as intermediaries through which white liberals could disseminate international debates in the local context. They used the Councils not only as a crude device to co-opt black leaders but also as echo chambers for the reception and circulation of new ideologies. Those were times when the meaning of forced and free labor in colonial societies was intensely debated in international forums dominated by colonial and capitalist nations, leading to the 1926 Slavery Convention. The ILO deployed then its criticism of compulsory labor in the colonies as an erstwhile laboratory for a universalist imagination of “decent work”.\textsuperscript{52} In that intellectual milieu, philanthropists, unionists, social reformers, missionaries, and social scientists were heavily invested in providing philosophical and policy content to wage labor as a path of modernization for “backward” peoples and the foundation of a not merely coercive colonial governance. Acting as trait d’union between those conversations and African nationalist politics were figures like William R. Ballinger, a British Independent Labour Party member and advisor to the ICU, and Mabel Palmer a Fabian socialist and workers’ educationalist. Palmer was consistently active in the Joint Councils, where she preached “authentic” – meaning bread-and-butter – trade unionism as a way of moderating black workers and paternalistically guiding them towards cooperation with capital and away from extremism and anti-white sentiments. Organizations like the ICU had

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 141-42.

thus to be directed to “Mr. A. Creech-Jones and Mr. W.R. Ballinger . . . and not to the Third International at Moscow.”

Institutionalizing labor conflicts into a deracialized industrial relations system was a way, she insisted, of coopting African labor activists and “help” them fight the temptations of Communism. She criticized the crude segregationism of the Pact government and its Native Affairs Department for holding a schematic vision of the Africans as “docile Natives” steeped in immobile rural cultures: “They tend to envisage Native questions as part of a static ethnology, instead of a dynamic science of economics.” Social and economic sciences, by contrast, were for her ideally suited to grasp the evolutionary potentials of urbanization and bring forth, above and beyond the employers’ short-term demands for “cheap labor”, collaboration between blacks and whites grounded in work and market discipline as long-term guarantees of political stability.

The leader of the ICU, Clemens Kadalie, indeed acknowledged Palmer and other white advisors for putting him in contact with Creech-Jones, Ballinger and other moderates, which influenced his anti-radical views, culminating in the purge of Communists from the organization in 1926.

It then appears that the ANC’s interactions with left working-class organizations, especially the ICU and CPSA, which Limb credits for sharpening the Congress’s pro-worker arguments and amplifying its potential to reach the proletarian masses, should probably be placed in a more complex and indeterminate light as such connections, so to speak, cut both ways. Emblematic was the case of ANC and ICU leader A.W.G. Champion. His approach to labor organizing and opposition to segregation eschewed confrontation – the ICU in general was notoriously averse to strikes – remained suspicious of socialist ideologies, despite occasional collaborations, and privileged entrepreneurialism and self-reliance, for example by promoting the


54 Ibid., 138.

formation of worker cooperatives.\textsuperscript{56} Despite his conservatism, his stance as a trade unionist was surely not narrowly economistic, but he believed nonetheless that African workers had ultimately to rely for their political emancipation not on collective action and structural change but on decent work opening avenues for accumulation within a capitalism unfettered by racial privilege. He encapsulated the strategic aims of trade unionism as “working through the middle class to the capitalist class.”\textsuperscript{57}

By 1928, the CPSA, now espousing a “native republic” strategy, had jettisoned its early condemnation of the ANC as a tool of the ruling class and rather saw it as a component of a “nationalist revolutionary bloc” open to small African landowners and capitalists. Opposition to this orientation within the party criticized it for excessively relying politically on otherwise socially insignificant African middle classes.\textsuperscript{58} The shift was, however, not a mere Comintern imposition, as it found fertile ground in the many Communist leaders that had already joined the ANC. From it they gained opportunities to reach urban working classes, but, as Cobley shows, also internalized “petty bourgeois” notions of economic activity and work ethic.\textsuperscript{59} The CPSA glorified waged work as a vehicle to build, based on objective conditions of exploitation, nonracial alliances between black and white workers, overcoming racial divisions in an horizon of popular unity. The Communists, however, praised wage labor not only as an outlet of revolutionary politics but also as a pedagogical and moral force, reflecting the views of social reformers and bourgeois nationalist leaders. The party press used oral histories of African workers to present working for wages as a progressive exit from the stagnation of smallholding agriculture and a rural life presented as a reality of poverty and violence.\textsuperscript{60} In the second half of the 1930s and the early 1940s – after a declining CPSA had embraced in 1935 a “popular front” approach and took to more closely cooperate with an ANC emerging from the conservatism of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Champion, A.W.G. (1927), \textit{The Truth about the ICU} (Durban: African Workers’ Club).
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Cit. in Limb, \textit{The ANC’s Early Years}, 303.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, 275.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Cobley, A., \textit{Class and Consciousness}, 200-01.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} “Country Life: How Capitalism Has Changed It. A Native Viewpoint”, \textit{The South African Worker} 11 (528): 4.
\end{itemize}
the Seme leadership – official party statements would glorify wage labor and its organizations in more clearly moralistic terms, as barriers to “the increase of delinquency amongst the youth, especially the non-European youth” whose penchant for avoiding employment could thus be channeled towards “the struggle for work”61. The Stalinist celebration of hard work thus joined the nationalist priority on self-reliance as a new terrain of oppositional politics.

Conclusion

Many of the dynamics at work in the 1920s and early 1930s, on which this paper has focused, were slowly exhausted at the onset of World War II. The ANC’s reliance on the negotiation of sociopolitical conflicts between elites committed to respectability, law and order, and productive discipline showed its limitations once South Africanism took an increasingly authoritarian and repressive direction. The 1935 Hertzog Bills and the elimination of the Cape native franchise the following year were a rude awakening for those who had thought the white minority regime was amenable to moral persuasion. Under Seme, the ANC made one final attempt, with the evanescent experience of the All-African National Convention, to appeal to the progressive instincts of South Africanism with an idiom of class collaboration. The Joint Councils movement was ultimately thwarted by the hardening of white rule, but the illusion of a progressive, inclusive South Africanism dragged on until Smuts’s ill fated wartime flirtation with welfarism and possibly universal social provisions. The transition to apartheid and the radicalization of the ANC inaugurated a new season of struggle burying all prospects of mutual recognition.

The discursive seeds planted in the 1920s and 1930s were nonetheless resilient enough to constitute a heritage for the ANC. As it became the country’s ruling party in a context of liberal democracy and capitalist globalization, it in fact placed specific emphasis on defusing radicalized claims and demobilizing social expectations in the name of productivism, hostility to social provisions inducing “dependency”, and intimations for the poor to be patient and

enterprising in their quest for, more or less decent, “work opportunities.” Charting that heritage, with regard to both its ideological origins and its imagination of the social, was the main aim of this paper. I was, therefore, not interested in joining a historiographical debate that has disputed how the early ANC reflected class interests or structural conditions, or how it paved the way for subsequent generations of resistance, or it determined strategic limitations that those generation would be expected to overcome. If anything, on these aspects I agree with Paul La Hausse that, to understand nationalist politics, a look at the ways in which popular aspirations are mediated in ordinary lives by seemingly incongruous imageries and practices is more useful than linear, “ex-post” narratives of progress or mechanical correspondences between objective realities and subjective interventions.62

Of more pressing importance is for me to underline “genealogical” modalities of ideological imagination as they define a sort of cognitive long duration, without which many of the utterances of the present ANC and its governments are at risk of being seen as contingent capitulations to “neoliberalism”, when not of becoming fodder for conspiracy theories. The idea of decent and dignified work has played a particularly prominent and deep-seated role in the ANC’s project of defusing antagonisms into conflicts manageable within a capitalist social order. That discursive path challenges, on the other hand, narratives, of which left scholarship is fond, of Congress politics as embodying an inherently progressive, even socialist, transformative substance based on its concern for the black working class. This paper has rather shown that the forms in which that concern has been expressed leave open a much messier and more complicated range of political outcomes.

The embrace of entrepreneurialism and the respectability of waged employment in the ANC’s imagination of the “nation” has territorialized and “conjugated”, in Gilles Deleuze’s sense, around capitalist production a multitude of practices and desires otherwise expressed through the refusal, escape or subversion of work and labor market discipline. Regardless to how “radical” the concern of the early ANC for the fate of the black worker was, its most enduring remnant, seen from the standpoint of the post-1994 dispensation, is the deployment of workers’

sacrifice and the poor’s hopes for “job creation” to give flesh and blood to a patriotic imagery aimed at stifling those very subjects’ potential for more far-reaching transformation. The African nationalist embrace of workers’ struggles has consecrated the black proletariat as an agent of popular sovereignty in a nonracial liberal democracy that questions neither socioeconomic structures of inequality nor the ways in which they practically reproduce white privilege. In this sense, in the transition of the 1990s a process started with the imaginative projects of the 1920s and momentarily rerouted by the parenthesis of the revolutionary passions of the 1960s-1980s came full circle, a process where political legitimacy and social stability are underwritten by a juridically “free” capitalist labor market as an abstractly equalizing condition of economic emancipation.

The discursive suture is, however, far from unassailable as it remains to be seen how far the “dignity of work” as an antidote to radical demands can hold in a material reality where work is a condition of dignity and decency for a shrinking minority of the population. To grasp the full range of transformative potentialities generated in such a precarious context one would need an open-ended approach, on which this paper has also insisted, to the autonomous capacity of social subjectivities to generate contestation. Foregrounding how ordinary multitudes autonomously signify their conditions and potentials would not only avoid the pitfalls of prescriptive frameworks, which plague both class essentialism and visions of modernity in liberal-democratic discourse. It would also place the actual, immanent engagement of such potentials, rather than the elaboration of programs and alternatives by leaders and elites, at the core of the political.