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Chapter Five

IMAGINING THE PATRIOTIC WORKER: THE IDEA OF ‘DECENT WORK’ IN THE ANC’S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Franco Barchiesi

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)

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)

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. (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy for South Africa: Strategy and Action Plan, Conceptual Framework, 2009)

WORK AND DIGNITY IN SETTLER COLONIALISM: FROM ANTAGONISM TO CONFLICT

At the end of 2010, the African National Congress (ANC) government announced a New Growth Path (NGP) as the country’s macroeconomic strategy. Prominent in the NGP was the promise, made a year earlier by newly elected 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.’
The document went on to recognise 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.’ The remedy of ‘decent work’ explicitly referred to a concept advanced by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which defines it as employment that incorporates essential organisational rights and freedoms, social protections, adequate working conditions and social dialogue. The powerful ANC ally in the labour movement, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), criticised the NGP for its ‘neo-liberal’ approach, which it saw as an extension of 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 work as a foundation of decency in South African policy discourse – and its concomitant aversion to ‘dependency-inducing,’ non-contributory social provisions for the working poor, precarious workers and working-age unemployed – are not, however, unprecedented. A long-standing trope in the country’s discursive repertoire is the assumption that employment is not merely an economic transaction left to the whim of market forces but can, with appropriate regulations, underpin an equitable social order and a project of universal human emancipation. In different times and contexts, as the opening quotes show, the expression ‘dignity of labour’ has also been normatively used. Forces and actors that – before, during and after apartheid – diametrically opposed each other in the political and ideological realm have nonetheless recursively glorified employment as an icon of progress and modernisation.

To be sure, ‘decent work’ and the ‘dignity of labour’ are conceptually distinct: the former refers to actual measures and conditions under which the work effort takes place, while the latter pertains to the values that work as such supposedly embodies on an ethical plane. In conservative opinion, a job contains an essential dignity, regardless of whether or not it is ‘decent.’ The two expressions have, however, crucially complemented each other in the discursive terrain of Western liberalism, where they converged to elide and expunge exploitation from the imagination of capitalist employment. In Immanuel Kant’s classical formulation ‘dignity,’ meaning a unique and incommensurable value, is the opposite of ‘price’ as a mere monetary equivalent in market transactions. Once an ethical substance thus elevates capital’s extraction of value-creating capacities from the brutalities of, in Marx’s terms, the
realm of necessity, ‘decent work’ is merely an operational definition of such substance from the standpoint of policy-making. My aim is to interrogate critically the ways in which the normative association of capitalist work with images of decency and dignity has inhabited South Africa’s political contestations.

Seeing this chapter as an exercise in conceptual genealogy, I will therefore focus on the period of early industrialisation, particularly the ANC’s first three decades, as symbolising 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 energised African opposition to segregation or, as historiography has recently debated, what such images tell us about the ANC’s class bases or interests. Rather, I want to show how the meanings of capitalist employment in the ANC’s discourse framed 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 organised politics but in fact constitutively required 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 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 (white) ‘Master/Settler’ and (black) ‘Slave’ subsequent to the violent eradication of African subjectivities and their transformation into black bodies as fungible and accumulated objects in the plantation economies of the Western hemisphere. The definition of blackness as a position ontologically constituted by violence, indeed as the ‘non-human’ that makes (white) humanity possible, thus builds ‘civil society’ on the foundations of ‘anti-blackness,’ which identifies black bodies as quintessential targets of gratuitous violence – in forms like colonialism, institutional segregation and mass incarceration – the dehumanising effects of which survive the legal abolition of slavery and the passing of plantation systems. A conflict, Wilderson continues, is instead, ‘a rubric of problems’ – such as national liberation, working-class empowerment, gender emancipation – ‘that can be posed and conceptually solved’ as a progressive recomposition within civil society, not premised on the obliteration of the capacities of one of the contending entities.
Wilderson’s argument helps me chart the genealogy and governmental effects of ideas of ‘dignity of labour’ and ‘decent work’ in South Africa. Such constructs mystified, I contend, an element of antagonism in the colonial situation – wage labour 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 labour, capital and the state – open to possible recompositions through progressive signifiers such as working-class respectability, self-improvement, economic advancement and nation-building. The recasting of antagonism as conflict crucially implied that identities, solidarities and organisations centred on wage labour were embraced as necessary to emancipative visions. They effaced, as a consequence, both wage labour’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, or they resisted wage labour and becoming a working class. Possibilities of a progressive recomposition of conflicts were, in the end, foreclosed by the consolidation of white supremacy under apartheid, which, for four decades, left revolution available as a prospect of black liberation. Throughout the twentieth century, however, white and black elites, as well as segregationist, liberal, socialist and nationalist interests, have partaken of the assumption that waged work is foundational for a dignified and decent life. The ideal of emancipation through economic participation eventually outlived and disabled options of revolutionary rupture, as possibilities of recomposing civil society within the existing capitalist order resurfaced, first with the negotiations to end apartheid between the 1980s and the 1990s then in the post-1994 template of a ‘national democratic revolution’ within a liberal-democratic polity.

AFRICAN REFUSAL OF WORK AND ITS SILENCE

The process of industrialisation and consolidation of a segregationist state in twentieth-century South Africa created a problem which, in the second half of the century, colonial states throughout the continent came eventually to recognise: how to incorporate class politics within ‘civil society’ as a realm, in Michel Foucault’s terms, of governmental practice or, in Frederick Cooper’s formulation, how to turn rebellious African multitudes into a working class as ‘a predictable and productive collectivity.’

At this level, the problem can be compared to the reality of Western capitalist countries, which contained the class turmoil of industrialisation 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 colonised peoples. The ‘coloniality of power’ in settler governance explicitly defined working for wages as the touchstone of a hierarchical social order – whereby whites acceded to the worker-as-citizen status while Africans were confined to that of ‘native’ as natural ‘labourer’ – even when it invested it with universal values of individual freedom. Not only was the African structurally interdicted from becoming a citizen, settler colonialism ontologically predicated the idea of (European) citizenship upon such an interdict.

It was only within the settlers’ 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 anti-colonial insurgency – after World War II on 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 exposed colonial governance as an unstable combination of technologies of unfreedom and supposedly universal norms, among which the ‘dignity of labour’ hinted to ‘modern’ Africans the habits – hard work, personal responsibility and ambition – of the Western homo oeconomicus, even without corresponding rights.

Opposition by urban wage-earners to colonialism initially appropriated, nonetheless, ideas of universal rights and citizenship to demand African equality with European conditions. In South Africa, criticism by the ANC-led liberation movements of the pseudo-traditional ethnic and cultural divisions codified by the racial state postulated, as Ivor Chipkin shows, ‘industrial individuals (modern humankind) as the authentic bearers of the nation.’ Despite its survival as an object of historical inquiry, ‘resistance to proletarianisation’ was rapidly discarded as a political strategy and was cast with pre-modern, pre-capitalist, pre-national marks of backwardness. In fact, the embrace of proletarianisation gained prominence in the grammar of freedom of nationalist, labour and socialist forces. The strategic shift became most evident 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 chapter, where black labour organisations energised opposition to state racism. The connection between waged work and emancipation had, however, deep discursive and significational roots at a time, the early twentieth century, when proletarianisation was harder to conjugate with a sense of historical necessity, resistive practices indicated a wide variety of options and nationalist or labour leaders struggled to define and assert their normative visions. It was in that period that the elaboration of cognitive co-ordinates 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, presented itself as a problem.

It is, indeed, a core contention of this chapter, and an indication of avenues for further research, that the early ANC pioneered a normative connection of capitalist work and socio-economic modernity which, in many ways, preceded similar developments in the rationality of the settler-colonial state. The celebration of working for wages in governmental discourse continued, in fact, to rely on predominantly moralistic motifs well into the 1930s, when the Native Economic (Holloway) Commission finally and decisively veered towards a systematic promotion of the dynamism of African wage labour against the ‘stagnation’ of ‘tribal life.’ Before that, however, the abstract official celebration of capitalist work ethic sat uneasily with a prevalent governmental imagination hinging on the ‘native question’ as the attempt to counterbalance the African’s incorporation into capitalist social relations, and their underlying tensions, with a reassertion of ‘tribal’ tradition. The ANC had, by then, however, already ventured into advocating wage labour as a condition of ethical as well as material elevation. The intriguing possibility for further research is that rather than seeing in colonial rationality the prime mover towards the enforcement of capitalist work discipline as central to South Africa’s ‘labour question’ one should consider the important, pre-figurative and innovative role played by early African nationalism. The ANC was, in other words, co-constitutive of a colonial situation that was crucially geared at containing, disciplining and defusing everyday opposition to wage labour by colonised subalterns maintaining a resistive posture to capitalist work practices to which they were only partially connected.

Emphasising the association of waged work, not with crude necessity but with decency and dignity, was central to organised anti-colonial and anti-segregation politics. As African labour scholarship and subaltern studies have repeatedly illustrated, workers’ identities among colonised peoples were hardly the linear
outcome of the structural contradictions of capitalism and rather represented attempts to negotiate the impact of capitalism on the terrain of Western modernity. In the (post)-colony, the working class as an historical agent was the contested result of competing imaginative projects. Two important consequences follow. First, as African nationalist organisations 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 – on one side the leaders of the ANC, labour unions and workers’ organisations and on the other employers, governmental experts, segregationist politicians and white reformers. Second, the glorification of the emancipative potential of waged employment was not limited to the level of enunciated speech, it also had the quite material effect of foreclosing alternative strategies that refused wage labour or subverted its discipline. At stake here, and given the limitations of this chapter I can only indicate this as a problem for further investigation, 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 and fold emancipation and subjection together rather than articulating them as logically or chronologically distinct.

The opening quote from Cecil Rhodes is indicative of a concern in the early segregationist state with attaching moral qualities to waged work as a way to contain and defuse its social disruptions. Official discourse peddled the ‘dignity of labour’ as a pivot for 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 post-emancipation ideologies of the US South or the Caribbean, indicating a global circulation of the white supremacist pretence of exclusively defining the meaning and conditions of black access to modern humanity.

Early African resistance to, or negotiations of, wage discipline defended non-capitalist social formations or independent agriculture, often by preferring casual and self-employed occupations ‘to exist at a distance from the disciplines of time, productivity and monotony that the more deeply proletarianised sections of the work force were experiencing.’ Ethnic identities and rural support networks underwrote ‘noncapitalist work rhythms’ in opposition to brutal conditions in the mines and the ‘compounds.’ The indeterminacy and unpredictability of African casual labour – often within economies of domestic service, smuggling, sex work and beer brewing
in the crevices between legality and illegality – remained a persistent challenge to the capitalist labour process. Its subjects – women illegally moving from the reserves to the cities, long-term unemployed youth – stood in a precarious relationship to governmental images of order.\textsuperscript{21}

Shadowing parallel processes of industrialisation and black unionisation were ‘dangerous classes’ of the habitually jobless and tsotsis whose disreputable morals were deemed liable to infect and prey on the respectable working class envisioned by state policies.\textsuperscript{22} As I show elsewhere, the image of the idle and ‘work-shy’ black township youth haunted the imagination of institutions and employers, providing a major concern for labour policies well into the last two decades of apartheid.\textsuperscript{23} Refusal of work and resistance to wage labour are difficult to investigate sociologically due to the paucity of historical sources and oral narratives, which has somehow reinforced official depictions of these practices as backward, anomic, anarchic and deprived of political significance. Their recurrent emergence in scholarly discussions indicates, nonetheless, underlying tensions troubling the early ANC’s embrace of the ‘dignity of labour’ and working-class respectability. It also indicates, as the following section elaborates, the strategic salience of work ethic in the ANC’s attempt to establish its credentials as a disciplined modern force for nationwide political change.

Africanist scholars looking at the rise on the continent of the ‘labour question,’ meaning the deployment of policies and ideologies aimed at ‘stabilising’ the colonised working classes, often tend to see it as the offspring of the European rulers’ concerns with proletarianisation and class struggle. Anti-colonial nationalism then appropriates, in this view, working-class identities in response to shifts in colonial governance. James Ferguson’s landmark work has moved the signposts for the origins of the African ‘labour question’ by showing how, in a mining-based economy, the colonial imperative of working-class ‘stabilisation’ had already emerged in the 1930s rather than being a product of late colonial reforms.\textsuperscript{24}

The rest of this chapter suggests that in the case of South Africa, one may want to dare a step forward conceptually (and backward chronologically): it appears, in fact, that in the 1910s and 1920s the ANC developed, on its own terms and for its own purposes, a normative imagination centred on economic activity and participation, which did not mechanically proceed from governmental and corporate elaborations of the ‘labour question,’ by then still nascent and tentative. To be sure, the ANC’s work ethic drew inspiration from forces such as missionary Christianity or liberal ideas of individual achievement, which were central to the settler enterprise. Overlap-
ping patterns of convergence and competition, as African nationalism and colonial governance fought each other while simultaneously trying to discipline subaltern subjectivities, appear then more adequate to understanding South Africa's colonial situation than a periodisation merely centred on cycles of domination and resistance, or settler policy initiative and organised African response.

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 liberties ostensibly guaranteed by the Empire as its main terrains of claims. Central to the nascent nationalist imagination was the vision of redeeming work from the injuries of racist legislation and turning it into a condition of personal and social development for an African nation geared to equal market opportunities.

Peter Limb’s recent, exhaustive study of the Congress’s early decades is an important addition to a vast left scholarship celebrating the ANC’s roots in labour politics. While Limb recognises the ‘petty bourgeois’ background of most of the ANC’s first leaders – ministers, clerks, professionals, small entrepreneurs, landowners, labour supervisors – he nonetheless criticises the view, proposed among others by Alan Cobley, according to which this ‘elite’ class extraction reflected a programme advancing those very class interests. In Limb’s view, despite being relatively privileged, the ANC’s leadership was concerned about African workers, a concern which became increasingly visible in the pronouncements of the organisation.

Even though it was led by moderate elites, Limb continues, the ANC was not an elitist party. Indeed, it was necessary to plant roots in popular politics to counterbalance the vulnerability, the limits to accumulation and the structural impediments faced by the African middle class. As capitalist production and state imagination started to cast the ‘modern’ African in the labourer’s role, the ANC’s picture of ‘the nation’ could not but emphasise the importance of workers’ claims. Even if the Congress showed, in its first three decades, little or no interest in the unionisation of black workers, it established connections, steeped in affinity or rivalry, depending on periods and locales, with organisations that claimed to
represent the African proletariat, among them the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), established in 1919, and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), launched in 1921. In the end, Limb concludes, as the ICU collapsed and the CPSA faded, the ANC entered the 1940s, a decade marked by growing mass mobilisation on the nationalist and labour front, as the foremost representative of black working-class interests.

Despite their differences, Limb and Cobley share the common approach of reading the ANC’s political discourse according to how it reflected class conflict and addressed demands to overcome 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 configured subjectivities and imaginative possibilities by operating in everyday politics as a plane of immanence. Such a task would, conversely, require a careful consideration of what registers were enabled or disabled in the organisation’s repertoire. It would also invite one to look at how the ANC’s ideological positions were part – through contestation, negotiation or appropriation – of a broader political conversation among the nascent nationalist movement and its allies or fellow travellers on one side and capital and the state agencies on the other.

Recognition by other participants as a legitimate player in that conversation buttressed 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 that alternated repressive control with the quest for ‘responsible’ interlocutors among ‘modern’ Africans. The terrain of clear-cut oppositional agendas premised on class interests and their conscious or unconscious self-representation must therefore cede ground to the analysis of discourse as a reflection of shifting, ambiguous relationships between contesting political forces. Moving the inquiry in this direction would also require studying the ANC’s ideology of work, not only for what it says about the Congress’s overall anti-colonial, anti-segregationist stance, but also for its governmental effects, in Foucauldian terms, or its capacity to construct normatively 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 labour (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 institutionalisation 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 ‘civilised labour’ politics of racial favouritism 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 that over the previous decade had criticised mining-centred, British-imperial political hegemony.\(^{27}\)

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, South Africanist policy-makers started thinking of ‘natives’ as regular workers with wages and consumption levels commensurate with urban status; in other words, not merely semi-proletarianised labourers, albeit not citizens either. As a manufacturer’s journal editorialised 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.’\(^{28}\)

The institutionalisation of African waged work acquired for the white government a socio-economic rationality, above and beyond Rhodes’s ‘dignity of labour.’ It also defined a possible conduit to displace antagonism – the persistent African resistance to working for wages – into conflict – a realm in which the white government could respond to the demands of Africans as wage-earners. The nascent ANC had appealed from the start to the values of imperial citizenship, including Victorian and Christian exaltations of individual responsibility and hard work, as a terrain on which 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 optimistic assumptions about the evolutionary potential of settler colonialism.\(^{29}\) Despite the commitment of South Africanism to white supremacy, its idea of socio-economic interdependence between white capital and African labour provided the ANC and black labour organisations with new opportunities to make their case in the language of institutionality.

Significant currents of Congress politics, particularly those with connections to late nineteenth-century Cape liberalism, had seen in African proletarianisation and urbanisation opportunities for capital accumulation and the consolidation of African land ownership. Even if white administrators in the Cape had sometimes appreci-
ated this argument, as they regarded a limited African peasantry as a stabilising element, proto-nationalist activists also saw in the demand for land a potential to resist the compulsion to work for wages. As the development of the mining economy and its requirements of African labour forces gradually foreclosed that avenue, the utterances of SANNC leaders also tended to shift towards appreciating the ethical qualities of capitalist employment in more explicit opposition to work avoidance. For them, by the end of the 1910s, the problem was no longer working for wages as such but the unfairness of racial legislation – land expropriation, the Masters and Servants Acts, the pass laws – that condemned African proletarians to the status of manual labourers, precluding opportunities for skilled work. Industrial and urban modernity came thus to be represented as paths to African advancement.

John Dube, the first SANNC president and a small capitalist himself, was a staunch follower of the 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 Washington. His loyalties were to Victorian liberalism and imperial civilisation rather than to labour radicalism and, indeed, he 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 concept of the African nation relied less on equality than on an hierarchical ordering of functions whereby waged employment was the precinct of civilised Africans, ‘the better class Native,’ as opposed to ‘the ruck of the Natives.’ He thus appealed to the settler state’s own conception of wage labour as a fully human condition to demand African access to 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 endorse ‘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 an African work ethic could be the pillar of 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 merely being a sign of capitulation to and passive deference towards white liberal ideas, such developments indicated profoundly original elaborations on the part of nationalist elites, which regarded the workplace and the urban areas as arenas in which to negotiate with colonial rulers the meanings and expectations of modernity. As the early ANC grappled with the task of conceptualising the ‘native’ as an autonomous political agent, it positioned the worker as a member of the African nation, perhaps the embodiment of its specific injuries, rather than a class actor with an independent stance critical of capitalism.

The public image of the SANNC formalised in many ways the discursive blurring of antagonism between African societies and capitalist employment into a conflict within wage labour, among ‘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 organisation had, for the first time, overtly supported the mobilisation of African workers during the 1918 municipal strikes, fair wages, workmen’s compensation, increased educational opportunities and the removal of the colour bar. However, in the absence of a critique of capitalist social relations, it saw decent work as conducive to social partnerships that were mutually beneficial to white rulers and African workers.

The SANNC’s optimistic and evolutionary approach to capitalism contrasted markedly 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 labour mobilisation 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 the abolition of ‘the wage system.’

The contestation over the place of work in progressive imagination took place not only between nationalist and socialist forces but also within African nationalism itself, as shown, for example, by the way the reception of Garveyism in South Africa motivated a diverse range of agendas, from anti-imperial pan-Africanism to entrepreneurial views of liberation, from rural millennial movements to ICU branches. Left scholars have recursively lambasted the moderation of early ANC leaders as out of touch with the structure and tensions of colonial society. The underlying
dichotomy between ‘true’ and ‘false’ African nationalism is, however, normative, not analytical, inasmuch as it is derived from an historical judgement that idealises as a necessary endpoint the ANC’s subsequent developments, namely its alliances within radical and working-class politics.

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-labour left ideologies in light of widespread racism in white unions. But even when deployed with ‘tactical’ intent, political discourse is never merely a tool for instrumental use. The terms of its tactical appropriation, in other words, are as revealing of the underlying social imagination as more principled pronouncements. Indeed, choosing the morality of work over class politics suited the leaders’ efforts to establish themselves and their organisation by disabling more radical and risky alternatives within their own ranks. But it also conjugated the languages of urban African popular politics with the grammar of working-class respectability instead of social criticism. Even once it became clear that ‘civilised labour’ policies were determined, contrary to the ANC’s expectations, to confine Africans to the status of manual labourers and foreclose paths to skilled employment, the Congress’s emphasis on the ethical qualities of waged work became louder, rather than subsiding.

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 create opportunities for new generations to enjoy political rights, capital formation and economic success. In his biography of Thabo Mbeki, Mark Gevisser offers a brilliant examination of how themes of work ethic and self-reliance elaborated within the ANC in its early decades planted deep roots that sprouted in the organisation’s post-1994 politics. Mbeki and Trevor Manuel are, for Gevisser, the latest offspring of that ideological path, which they resumed and updated in their aversion to governmental ‘handouts’ and a proud defence of fiscal discipline as a condition of national sovereignty.

David Goodhew, in his study of Johannesburg’s Western Areas, identifies the main characteristics of the ideology of respectability 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 labour as a universal path to self-improvement underpinned the condemnation by African nationalists and state officials alike of ‘work-shyness’ among township youth. Thus, for example, Natal ANC leader Abner Mtimkulu agreed with the government that urban recreational and welfare associations were needed to divert Africans away from vice and towards preparedness for work. The premise that proletarian desire could be turned into a ‘social problem’ solvable through discipline and self-control enabled a reciprocal recognition of the contending perspectives of the ANC and the segregationist state.

Goodhew, indeed, also shows that unemployment was not only due to a lack of jobs. Rather, many African youths deemed tsotsis fell outside the boundaries of ‘respectability’ because they intentionally and regularly refused exploitative and demeaning jobs, preferring instead intermittent occupations. ANC-aligned elders and law-enforcement officials often shared their alarm about undisciplined youths for whom disrespecting the values and hierarchies of production was tantamount to challenging patriarchal authority. Normalising the anxieties of proletarianisation, and the threats posed by those trying to escape it had, by then, completely replaced resistance to proletarianisation as a signifier of African anti-colonial discourse.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the ANC was far readier to represent the tsotsi and ‘dangerous classes’ as its adversary, rather than capital. The domination of Congress politics by middle class and entrepreneurial strata – for Dube ‘capitalists are the black man’s best friends’ – helps explain this only to an extent. Equally important was the conversation between white and African elites as they focused on the imperatives of social control over unruly, unpredictable subjectivities. Black and white notables met 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 marginalisation and the declared attempt by these organisations to co-opt African activists into class collaboration and away from radical temptations, by the 1930s the joint councils were the only arena where the ANC articulated and voiced a labour policy.46

The Congress’s stand in the councils resounded with the race and occupational pride dear to cadres like Mtimkulu. Under the authoritarian, anti-labour leadership of Pixley ka Seme in the first half of the 1930s, business interests and the template of self-help and entrepreneurialism channelled and qualified the ANC’s pro-labour sensitivities. Opposition to ‘civilised labour’ and the pass laws was here motivated not so much by demands for equal rights but by arguments that statutory racial privileges were bureaucratic intrusions into the laws of the labour market, which sapped productivity and undermined the African work ethic.47

White liberals considered urbanised Africans not only as a nuisance or an unwelcome necessity, but as a layer of modern ‘natives’ to be ‘stabilised’ 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.’ For him, a competitive labour market and the ‘wage for the job’ defined by demand and supply should determine the occupational status of Africans. He went as far as to support the ICU’s demands for the inclusion of African workers in the industrial relations and conciliation system. He hoped that liberal assistance could help move African labour organisations from radicalism and ‘racialism’ towards ‘genuine’ industrial unionism.48

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 labour market could galvanise a ‘Bantu patriotism’49 that asserted the full and equal inclusion of the African nation in the political community.

For African nationalist leaders, the joint councils were not only an opportunity for white recognition of their pleas to the segregationist state but also an important arena for fine-tuning techniques of social control. RH Godlo, a prominent Congress leader in the Cape, a protegé of Sol Plaatje and a participant in the joint councils,
quoted approvingly the words of John Ayliff, a provincial secretary for Native Affairs in the 1870s, who once intoned (in defence of forced labour!):

> 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.\(^{50}\)

After labour 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 the city as their most fittingly modern social locale, where they could lift themselves up from manual labour and build a nation of enterprising individuals. In a striking mirror image of mainstream South Africanism – and in direct reference to the conclusions of the 1925 Economic and Wages Commission – Godlo advocated the ‘reasonable requirements’ of improved African wages and working conditions for the sake of new economic complementarities, forged by urbanisation, between blacks and whites.\(^{51}\)

ZK Matthews, an influential African nationalist intellectual, SAIRR executive committee member and later among the minds behind the ANC’s radical Programme of Action of 1949, took more direct aim at work avoidance and the ordinary African’s 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, he wrote, ‘while [it] will not do everything, it will open the eyes of our people to their own nakedness.’\(^{52}\) To that end, it would impart ‘a social conscience or a sense of social responsibility’ suited to replacing 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 internalisation by the African of ‘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 elevate Africans through self-improvement and help them stave off ‘vice and social degeneration’ through ‘physical, mental, social efficiency’ as the sole guarantees of a fair share of the fruits of modernisation. Matthews’s 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 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.53

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 systematised as the agent of emancipation and popular sovereignty in the ANC’s political discourse.

The joint councils also fulfilled the pedagogical intent of a work-centred governmentality 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 for co-opting black leaders but also as chambers for the reception and circulation of new ideologies. In those times meanings of forced and free labour in colonised societies were intensely debated by international forums, culminating in the 1926 Slavery Convention, dominated by colonial and capitalist nations. The ILO’s criticism of compulsory labour in the colonies was an early laboratory for a universalist imagination of ‘decent work.’54

In that intellectual milieu, philanthropists, unionists, social reformers, missionaries and social scientists were heavily invested in providing philosophical and policy content to wage labour as a modernising force for ‘backward’ peoples and a foundation for 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 guiding them paternalistically towards co-operation with capital and away from extremism and anti-white sentiments.
Organisations like the ICU had thus to be directed to ‘Mr. A. Creech-Jones and Mr. W.R. Ballinger ... and not to the Third International at Moscow.’ Institutionalising labour conflicts in a deracialised industrial relations system was a way, Palmer insisted, to recruit African labour activists and ‘help’ them fight the temptations of communism. She criticised the crude segregationism of the Pact government and its Native Affairs department for holding a schematic vision of 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 potential of urbanisation and bring forth, above and beyond the employers’ short-term demands for ‘cheap labour,’ 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, acknowledged Palmer and other white advisors for putting him in contact with Creech-Jones, Ballinger and other moderates, who influenced his anti-radical views and the decision to purge communists from the organisation in 1926.

It then appears that the ANC’s interactions with left working-class organisations, especially the ICU and CPSA, which Limb credits with 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 cut both ways. Emblematic was the case of ANC and ICU leader, AWG Champion. His approach to labour organising and opposition to segregation eschewed confrontation – the ICU in general was notoriously averse to strikes – and remained suspicious of socialist ideologies, despite occasional collaborations and privileged entrepreneurialism, for example, by promoting the formation of worker co-operatives. Despite his conservatism, Champion’s stance as a trade unionist was 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.’

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 saw it rather as a component of a ‘nationalist revolutionary bloc’ open to small African landowners and entrepreneurs. Opponents of this orientation within the party criticised it for
relying excessively on socially insignificant African middle classes. The party line was, however, not a mere Comintern imposition, it found fertile ground in the many communist leaders who had already joined the ANC. From it they gained opportunities to reach urban working classes but, as Cobley shows, also internalised ‘petty bourgeois’ notions of economic activity and work ethic. The CPSA glorified waged work as a vehicle for building non-racial alliances between black and white workers, overcoming racial divisions in a horizon of popular unity. The communists, however, praised wage labour 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 wage-earning as a progressive exit from the stagnation of smallholding agriculture and rural life, which it depicted as realities of poverty and violence. After a declining CPSA had embraced, in 1935, a ‘popular front’ approach and took to co-operating more closely with an ANC emerging from the conservatism of the Seme leadership, official party statements would glorify wage labour and its organisations in more strongly 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 channelled towards ‘the struggle for work.’ The Stalinist celebration of hard work thus provided further solace to the nationalist prioritisation of self-reliance.

CONCLUSION

Many of the dynamics at work in the 1920s and early 1930s, on which this chapter has focused, were slowly exhausted at the onset of World War II. The ANC’s moderation and commitment to respectability, law, order and productive discipline showed their 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 that 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 Convention, to appeal to an inclusive South Africanism with an idiom of class collaboration. The joint councils movement was ultimately thwarted by the hardening of white rule, but illusions of a progressive self-reformation of the segregationist regime dragged on until Jan Smuts’s ill-fated wartime flirtation with welfarism and deracialised social provisions. The transition to apartheid and
the radicalisation 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 globalisation, the Congress placed specific emphasis on defusing radicalised claims and demobilising social expectations in the name of productivism, hostility to welfare ‘dependency’ and intimations for the poor to be patient and enterprising in their quest for more or less decent ‘work opportunities.’ The main aim of this chapter was to chart the ideological origins of that heritage and I was, therefore, not interested in joining an historiographical dispute about how the early ANC reflected class interests or structural conditions, or how it paved the way for subsequent generations of resistance, or determined strategic limitations that those generations 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.64

Of more pressing importance is for me to underline ‘genealogical’ modalities of political 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 ‘neo-liberalism,’ 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 chapter has shown instead 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 recentred on capitalist production a multitude of practices and desires otherwise expressed through the refusal, escape or subversion of work and labour market discipline. Regardless of 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 endorsement of workers’ struggles has consecrated the black proletariat as an agent of popular sovereignty in a non-racial liberal democracy that questions neither socio-economic structures of inequality nor the ways in which they practically reproduce white privilege. In this sense, in the transition of the 1990s, a process that started with the imaginative projects of the 1920s and was momentarily rerouted by the parenthesis of the revolutionary passions of the 1960s–80s came full circle; a process where political legitimacy and social stability are underwritten by a juridically ‘free’ capitalist labour market as an abstract condition of economic opportunity.

The discursive suture is, however, far from impermeable, as it remains to be seen how effectively 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 the transformative potential generated in such a precarious context, one would need an open-ended approach, on which this chapter has also insisted, to the autonomous capacity of social subjectivities to generate contestation. Foregrounding how ordinary multitudes autonomously signify their conditions and potential would not only avoid the pitfalls of the 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 potential, rather than the elaboration of programmes and alternatives by leaders and elites, at the core of the political.

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Endnotes
1. Cit. in F Verschoyle, Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1900), 390.
5. Ibid
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 that


10. Ibid, 14.


12. Cooper, Decolonization.


30. H Hughes, The First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011).

31. Limb, The ANC’s Early Years, 96.


34. Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 98
35. Cit. in *Ibid*, 123.
36. 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.
45. Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 290.
48. JD Rheinallt Jones, ‘The Native in Industry,’ Memorandum No 3, Johannesburg Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (1928). If anything, in his support for a ‘wage for the job’ Rheinallt Jones could well have been on the 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 labour markets. See Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 400.
49. The quotes are, respectively, from the ANC’s Seme and Richard V Selope Thema, cit. in Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 394, 398.
51. *Ibid*, 103–4. Godlo was also clear that collaboration between blacks and whites was not premised on equality. As an example of collaboration, he praised the segregated native locations enabled by the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act, which he called ‘outposts of Bantu civilization.’
59. Cit. in Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 303.