Schooling Bodies to Hard Work’: Wage Labor, Citizenship, and Social Discipline in the Policy Discourse of the South African State

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“Schooling Bodies to Hard Work”. Wage Labor, Citizenship, and Social Discipline in the Policy Discourse of the South African State

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Abstract
This paper is an investigation of the social policy discourse of South Africa’s post-apartheid state with specific regard to its conceptualization of the relationships between wage labor and social inclusion within interventions aimed at addressing poverty and social inequality.

The underlying assumption is that discourse and ideology are constitutive aspects of the state’s normativity in relation to social actors and conflicts. The epistemological and ideational authoritativeness of governmental policy discourse depends on its ability to assert ethical and moral constructs aimed at disciplining social agency and expectations. At the same time, social agency is autonomously capable to appropriate categories of rights and entitlements underpinning state policies in order to strengthen popular claims to citizenship rights and social provisions.

In South Africa, the post-1994 ANC-led government has tried to combine institutional interventions aimed at overcoming racialized social inequality with a fundamental acceptance of the need to make the economy competitive within the scenarios of neoliberal globalization. The resulting social policy discourse placed a priority emphasis on waged employment and labor market participation, to the detriment of universal, non-work related redistributive programs. The concept of “developmental social welfare” has combined a positive appreciation of individual self-activation with the stigmatization of “dependency” on state assistance.

The state’s promotion of a form of social disciplining centered on wage labor has, however, clashed with a material reality in which waged employment faces an enduring crisis evident in both spiraling unemployment and the proliferation of precarious and unprotected occupations. The policy discourse’s growing inability to reflect material realities of poverty in relation to the crisis of waged employment raises important questions concerning the capacity of the new institutional dispensation to govern South Africa’s long transition.
1. The Wage Labor-Citizenship Nexus as an Objected of Contested Signification

In his 2007 “State of the Nation” address, South African president, Thabo Mbeki, announced the forthcoming introduction of important changes in the country’s social security system. He proposed, in particular, a new social insurance and retirement program funded with payroll taxes, intended to cover all employed people, and a wage subsidy for low-wage employees, especially young first entrants (Mbeki 2007). Such measures responded to suggestions contained in the 2002 report of the Taylor Committee of Inquiry into Comprehensive Social Security, according to which the existing system of private, contributory and earning-related social insurance schemes fails to cover many workers, especially in casual and informal occupations. The Taylor Committee report, however, also argued for an additional social provision to alleviate the impact of unemployment and working poverty: A modest basic income grant to be allocated to all South African citizens on an individual, non-contributory basis. The income grant would be universal and, in principle, decommodified, meaning that it would be provided to everyone regardless to individual employment status (Esping-Andersen 1990). Mbeki’s government has always been adamantly opposed to the basic income grant idea, regarding it as a state “handout” that would act as a disincentive to jobseeking. Three days after his promise of sweeping social security changes, Mbeki restated the point by arguing that with a basic income grant “the government would be effectively ‘abandoning’ its citizens” (Da Costa 2007).

Mbeki’s rebuttal of the basic income grant quashed the expectations of many, including government members like minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya. Their hopes were that, following three years of uninterrupted growth, the government could be more daring in its move away from the tight budget constraints enforced under neoliberal adjustment during the first decade of post-Apartheid democracy. They therefore expected the government to finally opt for a genuinely redistributive, fiscally funded program that does not subordinate access to social provisions to the recipient’s position in the labor market. Mbeki’s opinion was, however, ultimately consistent with a long-standing discourse, which, having accompanied the government of the African National Congress (ANC) since the first democratic elections in 1994, has seen waged
employment and individual self-activation on the labor market as the main avenues to social inclusion and social citizenship. It also responded to a growing alarm, expressed by various academics as well as by the powerful Treasury minister, Trevor Manuel. They warned that one quarter of the South African population, almost 12 million people, are now covered by non-contributory social assistance, mainly state old-age pensions and child support grants, despite the fact that such programs are means tested, addressed to the very poor, and intended to target specific vulnerable groups outside the labor market. Child support grants, disability grants and state old age pensions often represent the main source of income for unemployed or underemployed household members. This situation, deemed “untenable” by the government (Daniels 2006), is on the other hand a further reflection of the levels of social marginality in a country where 18 million people, or 45% of the population, live below the poverty line. Mbeki’s proposed wage subsidy and basic social insurance for low-wage jobs would, therefore, contribute to make such occupations preferable to receiving social grants, which, while well below the poverty line, are currently more generous than most entry-level low-skill occupations.

The centrality of wage labor in the government’s responses to poverty was confirmed, on the other hand, by prominent functionaries. Shortly before Mbeki’s announcement Minister Skweyiya himself declared that social grants “could promote dependency instead of boosting self-reliance” unless they are accompanied by policies designed to put welfare recipients to work (SAPA 2007). His department was, on the other hand, committed to providing, on a “case management approach” basis, grant recipients with “half jobs” and training to encourage them to “migrate from welfare benefits” (Gallagher and Russouw 2007). More inventive, minister of Labor, Membathisi Mdladlana, suggested a program of militarization of the unemployed, arguing for conscription in the army as an alternative to joblessness and a way to “inculcate discipline” in unruly unemployed youth, who could in this way “understand better the importance of defending our hard-earned liberation” (SAPA 2007).

A public discourse that so starkly prefers wage labor to decommodified social provisions, and asserts the centrality of labor market participation on such strong disciplinary and moral grounds raises many questions in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. The country is in fact witnessing a persistently high unemployment, with
27% of the economically active population (EAP) out of jobs – a figure that rises to almost 40% if discouraged jobseekers are counted – and with one third employed in casual or informal occupations, without benefits, job security or wages above poverty levels. In mid-2000s, 65.8% of the unemployed aged 25 to 34 and 37.9% aged 35 to 44 had never worked in their lives (Bhorat and Oosthuizen 2005).

Low-wage, temporary occupations provide a large share of the jobs that have been created in the wake of economic growth, especially between 2004 and 2006. South Africa’s employment problem cannot in fact be confined to high unemployment rates, as government officials, policy-orientated academics and pro-business pundits recurrently do, but it crucially encompasses the expansion of working class poverty within wage labor itself. Altman (2006) observes that by defining the “working poor” as employed persons earning less than R 2,500 per month (approximately the bottom individual threshold for income tax exemption), then 65% of South Africa’s waged population can be defined as “poor”, with half of them earning less than R1,000 per month. It should be incidentally noticed, however, that, in this study, workers with incomes between R1,000 and 2,500 (which include more stable, unionized employees) are, paradoxically, the ones who most frequently report chronic food shortages and the inability of their wages to provide for basic family needs. In fact, income levels below R 1,000 more likely benefit from paltry, means-tested state grants, which provide a form of household income integration from which higher incomes are excluded. Altman (2006) concludes that, given the predominance of low skills in the South African labor market, policies that facilitate job creation in labor intensive activities will most likely expand low-wage occupations. As a result, a pattern of rising inequalities and declining earnings in low-skill activities – especially for women – which has accompanied the first ten years of post-apartheid democracy (Woolard and Woolard 2006), would in all likelihood be confirmed. Persistently high unemployment has also proven to be, on the other hand, quite impervious to upswings in the economic cycle. At the end of 2006, even deputy president Mlambo-Ngcuka had to admit that even if official growth targets are met, by 2015 the country will still fall two million jobs short of the government’s target of a 15% unemployment rate (Hamlyn 2006).
Concomitantly, the informalization and casualization of South Africa’s economy is driven not so much by the entrepreneurialism of the poor, but by technological innovations, outsourcing and work reorganization as part of the restructuring of formal enterprises, which produce flexible employment contracts that expand the scope of exploitation within the wage relation (Cheadle and Clarke 2001; Theron 2004). According to Devey, Skinner and Valodia (2006) if “informal” work is defined not in terms of the nature of the employer (registered or unregistered) but according to the nature of the work performed (in terms of the enforcement of legal provisions, statutory benefits, and protections), formality and informality tend increasingly to overlap. In fact, 44 percent of “informal” workers (80 percent of which have no written employment contract) are in permanent relations with their employers, while 16 percent of “formal” workers are not. Apart from casuals, more and more “informal” workers are hired as subcontractors by “formal” enterprises, even in manufacturing sectors where the externalization of functions was once limited. While almost 90 percent of informal workers have no company-based retirement coverage (and in South Africa there is no national state-subsidized retirement system), this also applies to one third of formal employees. Finally, while 44 percent of formal workers are members of trade unions, only 8.4 percent of informal ones are. Posel (2003) observes that the remarkable resilience of domestic long-distance and commuting migration – well after the end of apartheid’s system of coerced migrant labor – is linked not only to historic patterns of rural-urban inequality, but also to the movement of African women into low-wage, informal jobs that replace the income lost by laid off or casualized male household members.

This paper investigates the persistence of a wage labor-centered social policy discourse throughout South Africa’s post-Apartheid democratization, contrasting it with wage labor’s widespread decline as a form of dignified social existence. It argues that the seeming contradiction between wage labor centrality in the new democracy’s policy discourse and the frail, problematic realities that characterize waged employment as a social reality reveal, at a closer look, peculiar features of post-Apartheid’s governance project. Rather than envisaging universalistic citizenship frameworks, wage labor has reproduced a stratified, hierarchical social space. Whereas current social hierarchies are
profoundly different from apartheid-era ones, reflecting the deracialization of the political order, labor markets continue to play a decisive role in structuring social disparities. In this scenario, universalistic citizenship discourse operates mainly in the promotion of a national work ethic and the intimation to hard work and minimization of welfare “dependency”. At a practical level, however, the responsibility for social inclusion is shifted towards the individual, relieving the state of redistributive functions undermined by budget constraints and macroeconomic adjustment. The contradiction between a universalizing state morality based on work, and the material inequalities shaped by waged employment reproduces for the democratic state the dilemma, already experienced by the Apartheid regime, of using wage labor as a form of social discipline, while remaining unable to place it as the foundation of meaningful social citizenship.

In the tradition of the modern democratic nation-state, policy discourse embodies forms of ideas and knowledge aimed to structure social actors’ fields of action (Hall 1989). Following Michel Foucault, and Zukin and Di Maggio’s notion of “cognitive embeddedness”, Somers and Block (2005) argue that, in particular, discourses of welfare and social rights have operated as “ideational causal mechanisms”, where public narratives must, in order to gain the power of “making themselves true” and influence policy outcomes, gain an “epistemic privilege” based on the power of their internal claims to veracity and their imperviousness to empirical challenges. Such is the case, for them, of the late twentieth century neoliberal rollback of Keynesian welfarism.

In industrialized capitalist countries, the idea of “welfare reform” enjoyed a substantial epistemic privilege due to its combination of seemingly unassailable economic logic (the unsustainability of “big government” in a context of growing diversification of social claims), moral proscriptions (the stigmatization of “dependency” on state handouts), and positive incentives (the reevaluation of individual responsibility and work ethics). The empirical evidence suggesting a decline in the living standards of many former welfare recipients that were pushed into low-wage employment under coercive “workfare” schemes (DeParle 2004; Schram 2005), therefore, did not disrupt the cognitive embeddedness of welfare reform. The fact that the removal of social programs deepened existing racial and gender income inequalities did not act, likewise, as a deterrent. The ideational turn of welfare reform, on the other hand, served to displace a
previous public narrative, which, in a context of growing working class organization, had also celebrated wage labor as the main avenue to social citizenship, but in different ways. T.H. Marshall’s welfarist ideas were, in fact, based on the assumption that productivity and social peace could make full employment the basis of universal, state-funded social provisions (Mezzadra 2002). In both cases, which reflected seemingly diverging policy trajectories, the social field of action of the individual as citizen of the nation-state was structured around the idea of wage labor as a morally superior and economically sounder form of membership of the body politic.

The policy discourse that has linked social citizenship to wage labor in the trajectory of industrialized capitalism can be understood as an example of what Jacques Lacan (1977) conceptualized as chains of signification through which subjectivity is constituted. Social citizenship’s institutional discourse defines rights that are inseparable from the conceptualization of wage labor as a subject in relation to other – the unemployed, the poor, the disabled and so on – which, lacking access to a stable wage, become specific problem areas and targets of social policy. The assumption, on the other hand, that waged employment is the normal condition of social existence, acts as a “signifier” (langue, in Lacanian terms) that to build a signification requires a signified, or a “non-overlapping set of the concretely pronounced discourse” in the form of the desired effect of policy interventions. As a signifier, the idea of wage labor implies a prescriptive ethical horizon, as in the praise of waged employment as a condition of independence, probity and respectability. At a “signified” level, conversely, wage labor represents the enunciation of a disciplinary discourse aimed at shaping behaviors, proclivities and attitudes.

Signification for Lacan (1977: 137) does not refer to a “real” thing. Similarly, the “epistemic privilege” of wage labor does not necessarily need empirical validation of its actual functioning as a form of social inclusion, or even as a generalized condition characterized by decent jobs with benefits. The Keynesian welfare state collapsed under the weight of mass unemployment and the struggles and claims of a range of workers, including young casuals and women employed in unpaid household reproduction (Fortunati 1996). For them, the view that productivity and employment lead to social provisions did not apply. Indeed, many of them rejected the Marshallian idea of
citizenship as the imposition of despotic factory discipline (De Angelis 2000). Neoliberalism responded to this early crisis of wage labor ideology with a further, aggressive reassertion of waged employment at the center of the policy discourse, this time in the guise of cutbacks of social provisions for beneficiaries reluctant to seek employment (Peck 2001; Jessop 2002).

In both cases, despite being materially invalidated as a condition of generalized social uplift, wage labor emerges as an ordering principle through which disorderly, diversified living experiences and desires are regulated by state institutions. Despite their divergent outcomes, both Keynesianism and neoliberalism share the goal of enforcing a work-centered universalistic discourse (social citizenship rights in the former case, the responsibility of a disembodied individual in the latter) to contain, channel, and discipline a multiplicity of social existence perceived by the state as unruly and threatening (Ranciere 2003; Hardt and Negri 2000; Virno 2004). The fact that social disciplining operated in the former case as “modern” enforcement of social homogeneity (full-employment policies), and in the latter as “postmodern” regulation of social difference (Hong 2005) in the case management of welfare-to-work programs, is more a matter of procedural diversity than of substantial divergence in principles.

At the same time, the policy linkage between wage labor and ideas of social rights is a slippery slope for the state and capital, and it is not entirely controllable by the rationality of the institutions. Such links, in fact, enable claims and expectations from below, which act as “symptoms” of underlying grassroots social worldviews, alternative rationalities, and what Zizek (2000) calls “leftovers” of unspecified desires outside the labor market. The existence of life forms that are unassimilable to the logic of capital (Chakrabarty 2000), and whose claims are unintentionally triggered by the discursive and policy connections between wage labor and social rights, is particularly relevant to the transition from colonialism to postcoloniality, in Africa as elsewhere (Chatterjee 2004).

Wage labor in Africa has never represented a generalized social condition, much less the foundation of a discourse of citizenship. The despotic forms of labor exploitation introduced by colonialism have not only limited wage labor numerically and confined it geographically to the urban and mining areas. They have also placed it in a privileged position within a discourse of colonial modernity that was overly hierarchical and
unequalizing (Ferguson 1999; Quijano 2000). Initially feared by the colonial state as a threatening organized proletariat, African urban waged workers came to be regarded under late colonialism as partners in the state’s project of “development” (Escobar 1994), where they admittedly embodied wage labor’s “civilizational” qualities. Late colonial welfarism used universalistic European discourses of citizenship and rights to elicit the collaboration of urban waged social layers (Cooper 1996; Lewis 2000). Here too, however, the universalism of citizenship ideologies belied the material unevenness and inequality that wage labor presided upon. But in this case as well, however, the linkage between wage labor and ideas of citizenship unintentionally encouraged African workers’ social claims and demands for meaningful family allowances, retirement benefits, and unemployment insurance. These underpinned the struggles of the “urban subaltern” (Bayat 1997), despite the fact that only few of them were full-time waged workers, and many indeed preferred casual, informal jobs as alternatives to capitalist work discipline (Cooper 1987; Scarnecchia 2000). Colonial administrations eventually left postcolonial African nation-states with the task of addressing their citizens’ claims. Continued dependency on Western markets, and later the imposition of neoliberal structural adjustment, allowed on the other hand the perpetuation of Western hegemony in new, globalized and deterritorialized forms.

A further legacy of the wage labor-citizenship linkages transmitted from colonialism to the postcolonial state, and then to the World Bank ideological templates, was the idea that those excluded from formal waged employment had to rely for the satisfaction of their claims not on public spending but on “community development” and self-help. The fact that these groups were now fully-fledged citizens of African nation-states did not interfere with such inequalities of treatment. Actually, the idea of citizenship provided a powerful weapon to limit state obligations to the poor and the unemployed, for whom citizenship status was supposed to facilitate the acceptance of sacrifices and renunciations needed for the purpose of an orderly, united nation-building (Chatterjee 1994). Traditionalist themes (the allegedly solidaristic, egalitarian basis of the African community) and new ethical imperatives (pride in one’s hard work as opposed to depending on state transfers) were mobilized to provide a cultural foundation to the social discipline enabled by the postcolonial citizenship discourse (Eckert 2004). More recently,
such themes have powerfully resurfaced in World Bank-inspired literature on the self-regulated resourcefulness, safety nets and social capital of the African poor (Bahre 2007; Ferguson 2006).

To summarize, a main terrain of continuity between colonialism and postcoloniality has operated through a chain of signification that, by linking wage labor to citizenship, reproduced the seeming contradiction between the promise of rights that citizenship implies, and the material hierarchies and inequalities structured through wage labor. Two main outcomes emerged: Public policies cannot ultimately interfere with objective social hierarchies determined by the functioning of the labor market; and public policies’ claims to veracity and their imperviousness to counter-evidence are enabled by the state’s ability to prescribe virtuous behaviors for its citizens. The following section will look at South Africa’s post-apartheid transition as a particular case of passage to postcoloniality, revealing important commonalities with the scenario here outlined. It will in particular focus on the ways in which the links between wage labor and social citizenship have been conceptualized in the policy discourse of the post-1994 democratic dispensation.

2. South Africa’s Racial State and the Emerging Wage Labor Pedagogy

The formative processes of a black industrial proletariat in South Africa present obvious, vast differences from the rest of the continent. The nature of social inequalities and legal hierarchies made particularly evident in this case a reality where, as Trapido (1971: 313) put it, “South Africa has not incorporated the major part of its working class into its social and political institutions”.

Not only does the country possess an economic structure that is far more diversified than in the rest of the continent, but it also presents a unique level of industrialization, and a waged working class numerically more developed (Mamdani 1996: 218-284). The specific political regime that has presided over South Africa’s capitalist industrialization, and the peculiar dynamics and timing of its own demise and of the democratic transition, defined here the interactions between wage labor and
citizenship in rather exceptional ways. Institutionalized racial segregation and coercive labor control, in a context of lack of citizenship rights for the black majority, have shaped state policies of reproduction and stabilization of the black working class well after the wave of decolonization that started sweeping the continent in the 1960s. While gradually accepting, and trying to control, African working class urbanization, Apartheid’s labor and spatial policies defined social engineering interventions that deferred the establishment of a formally “free” wage labor system.

Moreover, the post-1948 Apartheid state diverged from most African colonial governments, which were at that time privileging policies of stabilization and social reforms to accommodate and co-opt urban strata of the African labor force. Instead, Apartheid’s project chose to structure the legal status of the African workers as temporary urban residents, subject to coercive controls of movements and residence, and reproduced in the circuits of forced migration and short-term contract employment (Posel 1991). Only at a much later stage, in the reform period of the late 1970s, triggered by renewed African working class insurgency, deepening economic crisis, and shortage of qualified black labor, did the racist regime adopt a policy of urban stabilization and formalization of rights for a section of African waged workers. In this late context, therefore, Apartheid started to experiment in earnest with a project of inclusion based on wage labor and market-determined, not only racial, differences (Ashforth 1990). The project ultimately failed due to the regime’s lack of legitimacy, its violently repressive nature, and the enduring absence of political democracy.

The links between wage labor and social citizenship, however, were not only shaped by institutionally enforced racial divides. In fact, even for the politically enfranchised white minority the segregationist state put in place a welfare model that eschewed decommodified social provisions, non-contributory schemes, and universal public programs. The protection and benefits white workers enjoyed relied instead on their privileged labor market positions, which included better opportunities for education and training, state-sponsored job creation, and job reservations in qualified occupations (Seekings and Nattrass 2005). The South African racial state, therefore, was not only a “racialized welfare” (Posel 2004) in the sense that it enforced differential social provisions for blacks and whites. It was also, quite importantly, a heavily commodified
society where wage labor and employment status, much more than public spending as such (Terreblanche 2002), underpinned and structured, for blacks and whites alike, social provisions or the lack thereof.

On the other hand, the racist state has been traditionally reluctant in enforcing decommodified, non-contributory, or fiscally funded programs, even for its white working class constituency. According to Martin Chanock (2001: 407), highly regulated forms of unfree black labor based on racial occupational segregation “made politically possible the continued dominance of market ideology in other sectors”, which included the overall limitation of the state’s responsibilities in the provision of social services. Only in 1928 did the state first introduce means tested old-age pensions for whites (Meth and Piper 1984), while private provision of healthcare, mainly in the form of company-based schemes, was always preferred to publicly funded universal health coverage (Pillay 1995). The rise of Apartheid, finally, meant the defeat of proposals, which gained momentum in sections of the white establishment during World War II, to expand non-contributory social security programs, including old age pensions, which could have covered limited African strata (Nattrass and Seekings 2000; Meth and Piper 1984).

The idea of wage labor as a moral and civilizational force addressed to the African population was best expressed, in stark contradiction with the oppressive and exploitative conditions in which it was experienced, by the 1932 Native Economic (Holloway) Commission. Its words were particularly keen on underlining the pedagogical impact of wage labor as a signifier of social existence:

> When the raw Native has enough for his wants he stops working and enjoys his leisure (...). *He must learn to school his body to hard work*, which is not only a condition for his advance in civilization, but of his final survival in a civilized environment” (cit. in Ashforth 1990: 84-85. Emphasis added).

Sure enough, however, Apartheid’s social security and welfare policies were aimed primarily at reinforcing racial hierarchies. Therefore the state’s discourse of social insertion based on work ethic and commodification defined a set of social provisions that for most of the twentieth century privileged specifically the white population. Such
objectives were most evident in policies aimed, during the 1920s and 1930s, to uplift urban “poor whites” to standards deemed “civilized”, which could moreover defuse dangers of interracial solidarity among the poor (Giliomee 1992; Grundlingh 1999). The workplace, however, remained the core institution on which a modern civilization based on wage labor ultimately rested. In this sense, the moral and pedagogical overtones with which work ethics was propagated among the white working class were not substantially different from the “schooling bodies to hard work” approach that the Holloway Commission used with regard to African workers. In the context of Afrikaner nationalism’s rise to power, the idea that government-funded non-contributory social programs are a perverse incentive to work avoidance and an encouragement to welfare dependence became the norm. Quite significantly, this discourse was advanced across the racial spectrum, as in the words of J.G. Strijdom:

> Is it not a fact that natives only work to supply their immediate wants, and if you grant them old age benefits and other benefits you would only make them lazy? (…) They only work when starvation stares them in the face (…). There are a large number of Europeans to whom that applies as well (cit. in Meth and Piper 1984: 9. Emphasis added).

The centrality of wage labor in South Africa’s policy discourse was strengthened throughout the Apartheid age. The movement of white workers into managerial and supervisory positions, and their greater access to private benefit schemes, encouraged a further withdrawal of state interventions in the realm of social security. For example, between 1949 and 1981, the share of state contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), created in the late 1930s and from which Africans were largely excluded from 1948 to the mid-1970s, was reduced from 50% to 7% (Meth and Piper 1984: 27).

The struggles of the black working class, powerfully resumed in the wake of the 1973 “Durban strikes”, placed the links between wage labor and social citizenship, and the role of decommodified provisions within them, once again at the center of social contestation. The strikes were motivated by a deepening collapse of the living conditions
of the urban black working class. Their wage demands responded to the needs of expanded social reproduction, which generally included migrant workers’ families in the rural areas. Within this context, the government-appointed Riekert Commission identified widespread refusal of work by African township residents as a major impediment to capital’s profitability (RSA 1979). The late-1970s reports of the Riekert and Wiehahn commissions promoted, respectively, a limited urban stabilization and trade union rights for Africans, which were reminiscent of late colonial social reforms in the rest of the continent. Wiehahn’s and Riekert’s purported aim was to redefine waged employment, private corporations and the labor market as institutions of social cohesion, citizenship, and “legitimate” socioeconomic inequalities, rather than ambit of mere racial despotism and discrimination (Ashforth 1990: 205). Black trade unions generally rejected the government’s reforms agenda, and used newly gained state recognitions to escalate their demands during the 1980s. The struggle of the African working class came then to encompass not only workplace issues, but revolved around black people’s living conditions, social security pensions, resistance to township residents’ evictions, and demands for social rights and political democracy (Friedman 1987; Ruiters 1995). The unions’ participation in social movement politics and community struggles underpinned a new discourse of citizenship (Seidman 1994), for which wage labor was at the same time an enabling condition and a constraint to be transcended via broader social claims.

3. The Long Post-Apartheid Transition: Restoring the Dignity of Wage Labor?

The failure to make wage labor the foundation of a new discourse of citizenship, this time partially deracialized, was one of the main factors in the collapse of late Apartheid reforms, and expressed the capacity of South Africa’s subalterns to turn that discourse into an opportunity for subversive social claims and desires. The task of managing such claims and desires was therefore inherited by the post-1994 ANC government as a decisive challenge. On one hand, democracy, political citizenship, and a newly found juridically “free labor” regime restored the moral credibility of wage labor as an icon of state governance and policy discourse. As “reconstruction”, “development” and “nation-building” replaced “resistance”, “ungovernability” and “people’s power” in public
discourse and intellectual narratives, “job creation” became the main demand for the labor movement – especially the 2-million strong, ANC-allied Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) – as well as for vast sections of the civil society. Massive unemployment, poverty and social inequalities, on the other hand, conferred to this demand a particularly dramatic urgency.

Recognizing the importance of working class organization and expectations, the new democratic dispensation established corporatist-style organs of tripartite bargaining over labor and social policy, like the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), which included representatives from the government, business and trade unions (Adler and Webster 2000). At the same time, however, the negotiated nature of the transition and its underlying compromises underpinned the ANC government’s choice to privilege the terrain of global competitiveness, private investor confidence, and economic liberalization as avenues to economic recovery (Hirsch 2005). The institutionalization of the labor movement within corporatist organs, therefore, was corralled by a program of structural adjustment, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) – adopted by the government in 1996, unilaterally and despite COSATU’s opposition – which reproduced the basic tenets of macroeconomic orthodoxy (Bond 2005; Gumede 2005). Particularly evident were the constraints imposed on public expenditures and budget deficits, while the state’s fiscal capacities were concomitantly undermined by rapid reductions in corporate taxation and the government’s advocacy of corporatization of municipal services.

A program of macroeconomic liberalization and fiscal discipline contrasted therefore the expectations derived from political liberation, which included the survival needs of a largely poor, unemployed population. The contrast was conducive to the resumption by the ANC government of a social policy discourse that once again placed wage labor, once discredited and reviled by Apartheid-age black worker insurgency, in the position of master signifier of social existence, main response to poverty, and central form of social inclusion.

In its frequent warnings and admonitions to its COSATU allies, the ANC was well aware of the imperative of taming and controlling labor radicalism. In an important 1996 discussion document on *The State and Social Transformation* the party strikingly
recalled post-independence African governments’ calls to national unity and consent. It emphasized

the centrality of the continuing and special role of the progressive trade union movement and its leadership to the mobilization of black workers to understand and adhere to the broader objectives of the process of democratic transformation, in their own interest. The instinct towards "economism" on the part of the ordinary workers has to be confronted through the positioning of the legitimate material demands and expectations of these workers within the wider context of the defence of the democratic gains as represented by the establishment of the democratic state (ANC 1996: 6.10).

As in Africa’s late colonial and postcolonial state-building, the ANC government has maintained that an objective social hierarchy exists, and can be scientifically observed, based on individual citizens’ positions in relation to waged employment. The government has adopted a view of the South African society as constituted by the asymmetrical coexistence of “two economies”. In recent policy documents, South Africa’s “first economy” is defined as “an advanced, sophisticated economy, based on skilled labour, which is becoming more globally competitive” (RSA 2003: 97). The first economy, in short, involves a minority with access to stable wage labor, registered enterprises, and recognized participation in productive employment. In “intersubjective” contrast to the “second economy,” it also defines an ideal status of social inclusion and active citizenry. In fact, the government defines the second economy in socially pathologizing terms as

a mainly informal, marginalized, unskilled economy, populated by the unemployed and those unemployable in the formal sector . . . [which] with the enormity of the challenges arising from the social transition . . . risks falling further behind, if there is no decisive government intervention (RSA 2003: 97).
The trajectory of post-Apartheid social policymaking, on the other hand, has made clear that “decisive government intervention” is not intended to question the idea that no real social citizenship can be conceived of that does not depend on the insertion of the able-bodied within wage labor relations. In continuity, again, with state ideologies of African late colonial and postcolonial modernity, wage labor operates here as an ethical-pedagogical construct that gains an epistemic prominence over the material attributes, rights, and benefits that define actual employment conditions. As Mbeki summarized:

A society in which large sections depend on social welfare cannot sustain its development. Our comprehensive programme to grow the economy, including the interventions in both the First and Second Economies, improving sustainable livelihoods and create work is meant precisely to ensure that, over time, a smaller proportion of society, in particular the most vulnerable, subsists solely on social grants (Mbeki 2004).

The fact that, as noted at the beginning of this paper, regular waged employment is a reality for only a shrinking minority of the black population, and work is currently created mostly in the form of unstable, precarious, low-wage occupations does not function here as a countervailing empirical evidence. Low-wage jobs are indeed regarded by the government as short term alternatives to, rather than part of, social exclusion. The principle of letsema, intended as volunteerism and mobilization for development, in the government’s Vukuzenzele (“arise and act”) program celebrates a work ethic made of self-sacrifice, responsibility, and renunciation of financial rewards (Twala 2004). Before the 2004 elections the government launched an “expanded public works program” presented by president Mbeki as an incentive to “productive employment” for millions that could concomitantly be “moved off social grants” (McCord 2004). For other government officials, the plan would “eradicate poverty” and lift members of the second economy to the level of the first. McCord (2004: 8-9), however, estimated the impact of the program in the creation of a meagre 200,000 temporary occupations, with the households of 90 percent of recipients remaining below the poverty line even in the optimistic scenario that new jobs would pay minimum wages.
The combination in post-Apartheid policy discourse of the absolute centrality of wage labor as a universal imperative of citizenship on one hand, and the material inequalities reproduced by wage labor on the other, shows many continuities with the colonial discourse of citizenship, which point at the permanence of unresolved legacies of Apartheid. The government’s 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA 1997) argued that, as workers in fulltime wage employment already enjoy pension and healthcare benefits through company-based private schemes, government social assistance and social security had to remain residual and focused on specific groups with “special needs”, namely children, disabled, and the elderly. The document phrased such commitments in terms of focusing on the needs of the “poor” and the “vulnerable”. With regard to the able-bodied, long-term unemployed, however, it recommended “active labour market policies”, “more stringent and appropriate means testing and eligibility requirements”, and welfare-to-work training to “divert people from the welfare system” (RSA 1997: 6.22).

Similarly to African colonial welfare discourse, as inherited by post-independence developmentalism and structural adjustment, the reassertion of the centrality of wage labor opposes here the extension of redistributive programs on a universal basis. In South Africa as well, therefore, the state appropriated a discourse of “authenticity” of local traditions to praise notions of “community development” and “self-help” as alternatives to state-based provisions (Sevenhuijsen et al. 2003). The government official that most directly influenced the White Paper’s intellectual orientation, Welfare Department’s director general Leila Patel proposed “family centred and community-based programmes” to replace state expenditures and encourage the spirit of initiative of “disadvantaged groups” (Patel 2001). As in the language of colonial administrators in previous generations, Patel’s rejection of universalism and public delivery of social services was phrased in terms of “self-reliance, dignity and respect of tradition” (Patel 1991: 105). A selective welfare model where working age unemployed would have to fend for themselves was presented as “authentic development which has grown out of the real conditions and traditions of life in South Africa” (Patel 1991: 124).

The 2002 report of the Taylor Committee, and in particular its proposal for a basic income grant as a genuinely universal, redistributive and decommodified provision,
represented to a significant extent a departure from the framework of the 1997 Social Welfare White Paper. As I have argued elsewhere (Barchiesi 2006), the Taylor Report responded positively to the concerns expressed both by labor organizations and large sectors of the civil society, concerns that by early 2000 were publicly uttered by the competent government official, minister Skweyiya. According to them, too many vulnerable sections of the able-bodied population were not covered by basic social provisions, either because unemployed, or because in casual jobs with no benefits, or because they did not fall under the age and income requirements to access existing means-tested grants. Such perceptions were clearly reflected in the Taylor Committee’s remarks that “poverty and inequality in South Africa are rooted in the labour market” (RSA 2002: 25), where “the wage-income relationship is breaking down” (RSA, 2002: 32). As indicated in the introduction of this paper, however, the government’s reception of the Taylor report has been highly selective. While new expansions of work-related social insurance schemes are foreseen, the government's opposition to the basic income grant remains unaltered, despite the extremely reduced monetary amount suggested for the grant, R100 (US$ 15) per month. Throughout its pronouncements rejecting this idea, prominent representatives of the cabinet and of the ruling party have revealed a persistent ideological vehemence, mindful that the task of social policy remains for them to “school bodies to hard work”, rather than running the risk of creating disincentives to jobseeking. The ideological crescendo is, on the other hand, evident in successive statements. Initial opposition to the basic income grant focused on its economic implications, and Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel lambasted the basic income grant as an “unsustainable” and “populist” option (Makino 2003: 19). Subsequently, ANC ideologue Joel Netshitenzhe refused the proposal arguing that the “opportunity, the dignity and the rewards of work” (Coleman 2003: 122) remained the government’s preferred alternative to decommodified social services. Eventually, minister of Trade and Industry, Alec Erwin, admitted that for the government “the problem with the [basic income grant] is not the money but the idea” (Hart 2006: 26).

The idea that social citizenship can rely, in other words, on interventions, no matter how limited, that reduce individual compulsion to work by virtue of universal redistributive provisions continues to be perceived as a threat by the South African
government. Under such conditions, the “epistemic privilege” enjoyed by wage labor as the cornerstone of post-Apartheid policy discourse can be reproduced indefinitely. In a context where the new democracy’s episteme increasingly departs from a reality of deepening waged employment crisis, questions will remain concerning the continuing ability of the current policy discourse to normatively regulate social subjectivities and desires.

4. Conclusion

In interrogating the role of wage labor under Apartheid and post-Apartheid social policy discourse, this paper has emphasized the problematic interactions between waged employment and social citizenship in South Africa as a case of transition from African colonialism to postcoloniality. It has also raised questions concerning the position of the subjectivity of the subaltern in countries that witnessed a transition to capitalism presided over by colonial and minority rule. The choice, apparent in the policies of South Africa’s post-apartheid government, to keep wage labor at the center of policies of social inclusion does not resolve or problematizes the role wage labor played in structuring social hierarchies, inequalities, and exploitation in the African continent.

The fact that, contrary to the experience of welfarist class compromise in Western industrialized capitalism, wage labor could provide in Africa only an extremely weak, highly selective foundation to a discourse of citizenship, turned such a discourse mainly into a set of ethical prescriptions and coercive pedagogical interventions aimed at, as an Afrikaner leader put it, “schooling the native body to hard work”. The overbearing normativity of post-Apartheid South Africa’s policy discourse disguises the constant deterioration wage labor has suffered under the new democracy, after a brief period during Apartheid’s final years in which black workers’ struggles seemed to restore the possibility of a socially emancipatory discourse revolving around wage labor.

At the same time, maintaining a moral imperative for hard work, regardless to what hard work practically means in the daily lives of most black South Africans, is a reminder that the celebration by the postcolonial nation-state of the industriousness and probity of the poor actually endorses a form of subaltern citizenship that can only be
premised on a fundamentally mutilated social subjectivity. South Africa’s labor movement has found it increasingly difficult to square its representing such a mutilated social subjectivity with grand ideas of a future society where work for all underpins effective social citizenship. On the cracks and fissures of organized labor’s identities and discourse, new struggles and conflicts have emerged over the past ten years. Some of them are structured by social movements openly critical of the ANC; most protests, however, take the shape of “service delivery riots” with only a partial and uneven political articulation. Recent upsurges in strike levels and workers’ wage radicalism – in the private and public sector alike – as well as working class support for Jacob Zuma as a populist alternative to Thabo Mbeki also reveal a growing discomfort with wage labor’s failed promise of social emancipation.

Wage labor and its contradictions, therefore, and the unresolved legacies of South Africa’s past in this realm, seem to remain at the center not only of social conflict but of contestation over alternative ways of schooling the body of the citizen.

References


