Hybrid Social Citizenship and the Normative Centrality of Wage Labor in Post-Apartheid South Africa
Franco Barchiesi

The Declining Wage Labor-Social Inclusion Nexus in Post-Apartheid South Africa

On November 6, 2006, South Africa’s deputy president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka declared before Parliament that, even in case her government will achieve its official growth targets by the year 2015, it will still fail to create as many formal jobs as initially projected to reduce the country’s unemployment rate by half. In the best case scenario, two million jobs will still fall short of official employment goals. Mlambo-Ngcuka’s admission came in the wake of a prolonged period of optimism fostered by three years of uninterrupted growth, which for the first time made the achievement of the 6 percent growth rate set as a goal by the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy a realistic possibility. It also followed a recent interventionist shift in economic policy making, heralded by the new Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA). Through ASGISA, which encompasses a set of initiatives ranging from increased social grants for the poor, to infrastructural investment and the targeting of strategic industries, the ANC government aims to correct the neoliberal, market-oriented approach of GEAR, which was primarily aimed at ensuring sound “fundamentals.”

Yet, despite the shifting mood in policy debates and public opinion enthuasisms, the employment crisis remains, from a policymaking standpoint, an urgent, unresolved social issue. At the same time, many scholars are raising public awareness of the complex, diversified nature of the problem. The rate of unemployment, presently standing at around 25 percent of the economically active population, does not in itself explain the full extent of
the crisis, or its nature. Nor does the fact that two-thirds of the working-age, able-bodied population aged 18 to 34 have never worked in their lives, or the fact that only one third of the African economically active population is in full-time, formal jobs. More generally, South African society is facing — and this is a reality remarkably impervious to shifts in the economic cycle and in the economic policy discourse — a widespread decline of waged employment as a condition of stable social insertion, citizenship, and the enjoyment of social rights. The most visible impacts of wage labor’s decline are deepening labor market inequalities and the expansion of working class poverty, which, encompassing a growing number of workers with formal occupations as well as casual ones, is engulfing urban as well as rural areas.

Recently produced research shows that 44 percent of workers deemed “informal,” without guaranteed jobs and benefits (80 percent of whom do not have a written contract of employment), are in a de facto permanent relation with the same employer, while as many as 16 percent of workers officially registered as “formal” are not. Casual, fixed-term, and subcontracted occupations have come to cover one third of the employed population, as increasing numbers of such workers are hired by formal enterprises. There, they drive older, unionized employees in a race to the bottom that undermines their wages and benefits. Almost 90 percent of informal workers have no company-based retirement coverage, but this also applies to 35 percent of formal employees. Data on unionization, constantly eroded throughout the private sector over the past ten years, see 40 percent of formal workers and less than 10 percent of informal ones belonging to a union, with a national union density rate that from 1996 to 2005 has fallen from 35 percent to 26 percent.

Rather than being confined to unemployment statistics, South Africa’s employment crisis mirrors a deepening process of informalization of formerly stable union jobs, bearing witness to a generalized decline of wage labor’s capacity to act as a vehicle for social citizenship. South Africa’s black urban waged workers are far from being a “privileged” strata of “winners” — as authors like Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass have recently argued, echoing the “urban bias” argument familiar in structurally adjusted Africa. Rather, they have had many of their expectations from the post-apartheid democratic transition sorely frustrated. Their disappointment has clearly underpinned organized labor’s opposition to former President Thabo Mbeki, booed by delegates at the September 2006 conference of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the country’s largest (and ANC-allied) union federation. Riots in the labor-ANC alliance dramatically culminated in the December 2007 ANC national conference in Polokwane, where a grassroots insurgency led to the removal of Mbeki and much of the party’s leadership, and the rise of Jacob Zuma, a populist leader supported by COSATU, to the position of party president. Following its “recall” by the ANC a few months later, Mbeki had to resign from the presidency of South Africa, while party notables opposed to Zuma staged a historical split from the ANC and the formation of a new centrist party, the Congress of the People (COPE), competing for the symbolic mantle of the liberation movement. Divisions and convulsions in the country’s ruling elite have much to do with the malaise emanating from waged employment, which, rather than acting as a vehicle of social transformation, solidarity, and emancipation as promised by labor struggles against apartheid, has confirmed its precarious and vulnerable reality for most black workers. Part of the picture are the levels of strike activity, unprecedented since 1994, which have accompanied the crisis of the ANC, culminating in highly militant industrial actions as the 4-month long security guards’ strike in early 2006, which saw the death of 59 people.

The shift heralded by the employment figures quoted above is truly momentous as an indication of the social trends of the South African transition. Not only had black trade unions and workers’ struggles acted in the past as decisive factors in the demise of the Apartheid regime and in the rise of the ANC to power in the 1994 elections. In fact, throughout this process the very notion of wage labor was rescued, for the majority of the racially oppressed population, from being a condition characterized by precariousness, forced migrations, legislated racial discrimination, and racist workplace despotism towards providing a vehicle of solidarity, grassroots power, and expectations of decent life and social rights to accompany the new democracy. Vibrant community-union alliances underpinned social movement politics and black township insurgencies during the 1980s, when organized labor articulated broad demands for social citizenship rights based on transcending the shop-floor as the primary locale of workers’ identities and struggles. After the fall of the racist regime — and despite their opposition to GEAR and the government’s “neoliberal” orientations — most unions, and COSATU in particular, have remained a vital source of support for the ANC in power.

Conversely, the conservative macroeconomic policies adopted by the democratic government have substantially constrained the ability of public institutions to address social and racial inequalities inherited from the past. Within the first five years of GEAR’s implementation, tax rates on the undistributed profits of domestic companies have been reduced from 35 percent to 30 percent, while the Secondary Tax on Companies was halved...
from 25 percent to 12.5 percent. Moreover, tight deficit-to-GDP ratios have hampered the expansion of public spending. The concentration of economic policymaking in the hands of Mbeki’s inner circle, the Reserve Bank, and the government’s Treasury department has insulated it from societal contestation, recodifying growth strategies as predominantly technocratic exercises.

Resource constraints defined at this level have undercut the corporatist arrangements and tripartite institutions with which, on the other hand, organized labor was given a significant institutional voice in bargaining with representatives from the state and business over industrial relations and social policies.

The uneasy combination of macroeconomic neoliberalism and developmentalist pretensions in the new democracy’s social policy underpinned a hybrid social citizenship regime, which I have examined elsewhere. There, I addressed some basic questions: what is left of wage labor’s emancipatory potential after 15 years of transition? Has waged employment fulfilled its promise of combining political democracy with social citizenship for the vast majority of predominantly African poor? How has the ANC government articulated its policy discourse with the meanings emerged from black workers’ insurgency against apartheid? Which kinds of working class practices and strategies have responded to the current combination of political liberalization and economic liberalization? The rest of this article will focus on the contradictory location of wage labor in post-apartheid social citizenship arrangements, between a material reality of erosion and decline and a policy discourse that tried to normatively reassert its centrality.

Wage Labor’s Normative Centrality in South Africa’s “Hybrid” Social Citizenship Regime

The post-apartheid social citizenship regime displays markedly hybrid features, originated by the intersection of labor market stratification and an uneven and selective social policy model. The combination of neoliberalism and developmentalism that shaped the transition had the effect of stratifying the South African population in three main groups. Each of these groups is constituted through a combination of what in Foucauldian terms can be defined as episteme—a modality of knowledge enunciated as policy discourse and moral-behavioral prescription—and dispositive—the actual, material practices through which the state intervenes in the administration and orderly reproduction of such groups. The specificity of the epistemic and policy determinants of such groups—i.e., the operation of governmentality in each of them—is what defines the hybrid nature of social citizenship in South Africa today. It also provides each social group with ways to structure its claims according to its position as a target of state knowledge and policies, and according to the resources deployed to that effect. Rather than “smoothing” the social space in the direction of homogenization and universal rights, South Africa’s hybrid social citizenship regime defines a straited and hierarchical social space, whose crucial principle of differentiation is provided by each group’s relation to waged employment.

First, we have a shrinking minority of permanent, unionized workers with access to a stable wage and social insurance, largely in the form of company-based schemes for healthcare and retirement benefits, and employer-subsidized unemployment provisions (the Unemployment Insurance Fund, or UIF), with basically no contributions from the state. Second, a growing share of long-term unemployed, and non-able bodied (youth and the elderly), whose main income depends on social assistance, in the form of non-contributory state grants, which are means-tested and linked to specific vulnerabilities and conditions. The two main such grants are a state old-age pension for women aged 65 and above and men aged 60 and above, and a child support grant for caregivers of children aged up to 14. Rapid expansions in social assistance spending and coverage currently see almost one quarter of the South African population receiving a grant of one kind or another. The amount of such grants is, however, quite limited: two thirds of recipients receive only the child support grant, which is approximately US$20 per month per child, while the poverty line for a family of four is about US$150 per month. Finally, there is a growing share of able-bodied, working-age intermittently unemployed or casual workers, who mostly do not belong to unions, have no company-funded social insurance, and are not in the age brackets covered by state-funded social assistance. Apart from casual jobs, their main sources of income are, similarly to the long-term jobless, monetary transfers from either employed or grant-receiving family members.

The lack of universalist social policies and state-funded social security programs underpins the hybrid nature of South Africa’s social citizenship regime. It also mirrors a radical separation, within the country’s system of social security, between social insurance, relatively generous but linked to stable employment, and social assistance, generalized as a safety net for the very poor and the excluded from waged labor, but rather limited in its amount. Social citizenship in the new South Africa, in short, is characterized by a high degree of commodification, intended, borrowing from Gosta Esping-Andersen, as the dependence of social provisions and living standards on individual labor market positions and waged employment, rather than on subsidization from either employers or the state.
In the unions’ earlier social expectations, wage labor was supposed to act as a vehicle for social citizenship rights and social solidarity, through interventionist state policies that could create jobs and redistribute resources. For the unions, employment was supposed to build generalized social provisions across society, including non-working populations and phases of life; thereby it was supposed to ultimately decommmodify the social existence of workers and the poor.\(^\text{19}\) What, on the contrary, wage labor has turned out to be — in the current “hybrid” context of wage-based provisions for the minority and limited, targeted assistance for the majority — is a condition for new social hierarchies and inequalities. On the other hand, the position of the formally employed themselves, as well as their wages and benefits, are becoming increasingly embattled as a result of casualization, as evident from the spiraling increase in households’ indebtedness and predatory lending, which prominent policymakers — from the Reserve Bank governor, Tito Mboweni, to the Minister of the Treasury, Trevor Manuel — have however regarded as signs of consumerism that accompany the country’s alleged, newly-found prosperity.\(^\text{20}\)

The hierarchical functions of wage labor in the new democracy are given, on the other hand, official recognition in former President Mbeki’s template of the “two economies” as a metaphor that characterizes the country’s social predicament.\(^\text{21}\) In his view, first articulated in 2003, a first “advanced, sophisticated economy, based on skilled labour, which is becoming more globally competitive” coexists with a second one, presented in clearly pathological 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”.\(^\text{22}\)

The results of the combined operation of global economic forces and state policies are here presented both as a naturalized condition and as a result of purely individual dispositions towards work, enterprise, and competitiveness. Wage labor becomes therefore an objective principle of social stratification, and its enforcement becomes a scientific tool of state policy intervention. In this sense, South Africa constitutes an example of what Aníbal Quijano has termed “coloniality of power,” or the persistence in postcolonial societies of modes of governance and discipline based on social hierarchies determined by wage labor positions. For Quijano, in fact, a continuity between colonialism and post-coloniality can be discerned in non-Western societies in the operation of “protected” wage labor as a condition reserved only to the minority for which effective social inclusion and social citizenship apply, while the majority, faced with the state’s abdication of the task of providing universal social rights, has to provide for its own survival within highly exploitive market relations and employment conditions.\(^\text{23}\)

Mbeki’s metaphor of the “two economies” alerts us to the importance of the policy discourse, of the state’s episteme, over and above the structural determinants of the condition of the South African working class. Looking at this aspect of South Africa’s “social question,” one can realize the limitations of approaches that see South Africa’s poor as mere passive victims of global market forces, and their condition as mainly determined by the hegemonic narrative of neoliberalism. The state’s knowledge of the country’s “social question,” as re-elaborated in Mbeki’s “two economies” image, reveals therefore a peculiar paradox: the less actual, material wage labor contributes to decent livelihoods and social rights for the majority, the less it functions as the foundation of a universal, inclusive social citizenship regime, and the more central it is in the government’s policy discourse and governmentality.

Starting from the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme and going through various policy documents on social welfare and social security, the ANC government has foreshadowed what can be defined a wage labor-centered social policy discourse.\(^\text{24}\) In it, job-seeking and individual labor market self-activation are predicated as by far the most important avenue to social inclusion, despite the fact that, as already emphasized, stable waged jobs constitute by now an experiential reality for only a minority of the economically active population. Work ethic and employment preparedness operate at a micro-political level as institutional injunctions and pedagogical devices to promote virtuous citizenship intended as individual spirit of enterprise, and to admonish against the morally degenerative effects of “dependency” on welfare “handouts.”\(^\text{25}\) Indicative of the anti-welfare Malthusianism of the ANC government, and of its impermeability to variations in the economic cycle, is, for example, the ANC’s vehement opposition to the introduction of a very modest, universal, not employment-related basic income grant of approximately US$18 per month. This measure was supported by the government-appointed Taylor committee of inquiry in 2002, just to be lambasted by various government officials that decried its alleged perverse incentives to laziness and work avoidance.\(^\text{26}\) As minister of Trade and Industry, Alec Erwin, remarked, the government’s problem with such a grant would be “not the money, but the idea.”\(^\text{27}\)

At the same time, by refocusing their desire on the prospect of getting a “job” — no longer to be a collective, protected social condition but a reward for individual effort and discipline — the poor are taught to shift towards labor market competition claims that could otherwise be potentially far more
disruptive for the state. One can even argue that, precisely because of its material absence wage labor emerges as a virtual “master-signifier” of social existence, envisaging, in a truly Lacanian sense, an idealized social subject—the patriotic, hard-working, law-abiding, family-responsible, morally frugal, and politically moderate poor. Material social hierarchies, reinforced by the state’s wage-centered social policy, operate to restrain and tame the poor’s potentially unruly desires, a vast repertoire of which, on the other hand, was provided by past black workers’ struggles against apartheid, which were also struggles for de commodified housing, welfare, and healthcare provisions. Seen in this light, post-apartheid South Africa seems to have achieved what had once proved purely utopian for both the African post-colonial state and colonialism in the age of postwar reforms: a “pure” capitalist labor market, regulated by contracts and not coercion, and buttressed by a legitimate state that governs a context of massive poverty and social inequality.

It is important to emphasize how, despite the fact that the ANC government mobilized a pseudo-traditionalist emphasis on “self-help” and community networks among the “poorest of the poor” to support its withdrawal from universal, de commodified social provisions, it actually employed “post-modern” methodologies that have become common stock in debates on “welfare reform” worldwide. Dominant among these are the assumptions that the responsibilities of the public sector have shifted from the promotion of social equality to the encouragement of social “inclusion,” that this latter ultimately is a matter of individual initiative, and that the state’s function is not to provide homogenous standards, but to legislate differences, prioritizing its interventions to specific areas of risk, vulnerability, and stigma. Modulating and segmenting social exclusion are the functions ultimately acquired by social policies whose purported aim remains to facilitate social inclusion.

Workers’ Strategies and Subaltern Responses

The contradiction between the normative centrality of wage labor in the policy discourse of the new South Africa, and its material collapse as a social reality, however, leaves open a distinct set of political possibilities once the focus of analysis shifts to workers’ strategies and subaltern responses. In this sense, it can be argued that the kind of transition to post-coloniality heralded by post-apartheid South Africa, as combining political liberation and economic liberalization, remains an unfinished project. The African colonial and postcolonial state encountered ultimately insurmountable problems in its attempt to discipline the bodies of the workers and the poor under pseudo-objective categorizations like “formally employed,” “casuals” or “unemployed.” Frederick Cooper’s important work, for example, has shown how African “casual” workers have lived such a condition not merely as a legally defined second class citizenship or as a modality of disempowerment. Rather, they have valorized casualization and informality as social and political strategies, as ways to avoid permanent insertion in wage labor under oppressive workplace and political conditions, and as forms of defection that enabled them to negotiate the wage relation under more favorable conditions.

The theme of the refusal of (waged) work, or the workers’ reluctance to make their citizenship claims depend primarily on wage labor, is recurrent in African labor studies. It also emerges in ethnographic analyses of African workers’ ironic commentaries on wage labor, which see it both as a means of survival and a meaningless activity that, as Hoyt Alverson has argued, “violates the very definition of ‘doing.’” In South Africa, refusal of work was an important, albeit understudied, feature of black worker struggles under apartheid. The 1979 Rieker Commission of Inquiry, for example, lamented that one of the main problems for the country’s productivity crisis, and one of the reasons for the utilization of low-wage migrant labor, was the unwillingness of black townships’ residents to accept factory jobs once they realized their oppressive, exploitative nature. Similar themes are now revived in the government’s official positions averse to increasing social grants as they would discourage recipients from accepting low-wages jobs. More generally, these observations are connected to a broad problem experienced by African colonial and post-colonial states alike: that of having, as Jean-Francois Bayart has put it, a capacity to make people suffer which was not, however, matched by a comparable capacity to make them work.

Between 1999 and 2001 I conducted field research for a book project on wage labor and post-apartheid citizenship, looking at workers in the Gauteng province, the country’s economic core, employed at various manufacturing establishments in the East Rand industrial region, and in the Johannesburg city council. Throughout the 1990s, these sectors have been invested by profound labor market restructuring that saw both a growing employment of casual and temporary workers, and deepening feelings of vulnerability and instability among their long-standing union constituencies. Nonetheless, despite the fact that unstable, casualized employment is categorized as second class social citizenship within official social policy discourse and institutional arrangements, workers’ experiences of casual employment, or of the prospect of losing a stable job did not mechanically reflect a condition of mere domination and disempowerment. Rather, a complex variety of responses and strategies emerged, not necessarily oriented towards an ideal
of permanent employment as a benchmark of virtuous citizenship. Instead of passive acceptance of wage labor discipline as the guidance for individual behavior and claims, workers’ strategies and discourse questioned the very boundaries and the rigidity of the nexus between wage labor and social citizenship, which state policy discourse tends to present as unassailable. My research highlighted the complexity of workers’ agency in “resignifying” the relations between wage labor and social citizenship. In general, it seemed to me that the greater is the danger permanent workers perceive for their employment stability, due to looming retrenchments or the introduction of “flexible” labor, the more available they are to explore strategies of escape from the wage relation. This is not necessarily in contradiction with the fact that at a consciously political level they continue to demand “job creation” and “job protection” from the government.

Self-entrepreneurship, or the ability to start independent businesses in alternative to factory employment, plays here an important role. The cessation of the employment relation often provides indeed the initial capital to venture in informal sector micro-enterprises. In many cases, and this confirms a theme that has become quite contentious inside COSATU, workers volunteer for retrenchments, lured by the possibility to use their packages or accumulated retirement contributions to embark in informal vending, repair workshops or, in most ambitious cases, buy a vehicle to start a local transport business. In two East Rand companies out of thirteen, such demands have led to direct confrontations between workers and their unions, for which retrenchments imply loss of membership and a weakened collective bargaining position. Even for those who remain in waged employment, double jobs and moonlighting are rampant, either as a practice, or as a concrete plan generally stifled by the lack of starting capital. The self-entrepreneurial myth is often underpinned by religious inspirations, largely drawn from outside mainstream denominations and revealing the penetration of a “born again” Christian discourse that combines individual salvation with acquisitiveness.

It would therefore be a mistake to unproblematically read workers’ strategies of escape from wage labor under an overarching progressive light, or worse to see in them alternative avenues of collective, left working class politics. In most cases, workers’ responses to the crisis of wage labor give way indeed to a working class conservatism nurtured in apocalyptic social imagery. The main polemical target becomes here urban society as such, seen as a place of growing destitution, hardship, and anarchy, where established male breadwinner roles are undermined by the failure of wage labor’s promises. In male workers’ narratives, the decline of a wage-based social order leads to generalized subversion of social functions, whereby the youth are ensnared in crime, and women leave the household to seek informal jobs to replace the income lost by their husbands. In some cases, xenophobia surfaces in the form of anti-immigrant resentment. Such a conservative imagery often conjures up views of the rural areas as an ambit where established social hierarchies and roles are immune to the decline of urban waged employment. What can be called resurgent ruralism is evident both among migrant workers and long-term urbanized ones, but is far stronger among male workers than females. Rather than referring to a factual experiential reality, it conveys a nostalgic evocation of a masculine social order rooted in waged employment as the condition for the male breadwinner’s respectability, and therefore for his ability to assert household authority along gender and age lines.

Finally, the correspondence between individual entrepreneurial myths and material conditions that follow the loss of stable employment is also highly problematic. In the vast majority of cases, behind the self-entrepreneurial myth is a reality where the financial resources gained through retrenchment are devoted to survival or the satisfaction of basic needs: repaying debts and funding children’s education are the two most important expenditures cited in this regard. The permanence of survivalism at the core of workers’ responses to the employment crisis, however, confirms the conclusion that in the South African democratic transition wage labor has not fulfilled its promise of social emancipation and rights.

In the final analysis, the crisis of wage labor and of its erstwhile progressive meanings, and the rise of conservative worker responses leave open the question of what alternative avenues are available, or to what extent working class identities are still relevant to emancipatory politics. Over the past decade, a burgeoning body of literature has been produced on South Africa’s “new social movements,” reflecting a dramatic rise of urban-based community activism against the privatization of municipal utilities and in support of the decommodification of basic social services like housing, healthcare, water, and electricity. The organized expressions and the collective identities of community movements, such scholarly production has not thoroughly examined their social composition yet. Nor has it provided in-depth analyses of the ways in which emerging forms of community politics relate to economic and employment change, or of the role that casual and stably unionized workers play in such movements.

A general impression is that their strongest bases of support are, however, among most vulnerable sectors of the urban society: long-term unemployed, youth and old-age claimants of state social grants. The participation of the factory working class remains limited to specific localities and episodes, and it often involves the creation of splinter unions,
as in the case of chemical workers in Durban and Johannesburg, automotive workers in the Eastern Cape, or metal workers in the East Rand. As a longstanding ANC ally, on the other hand, COSATU prefers to contest the ruling party’s neoliberalism through official policy and political channels, and its leadership has generally regarded new social movements with suspicion, accusing them of “counter-revolutionary” adventurism, dogmatic opposition to the government, and divisive sectarianism. Underlying the current difficulties in the dialogue between labor and community politics, however, are fundamental differences between the unions’ continuous attempt to rescue wage labor as a socially emancipatory force — hence COSATU’s continued insistence on “job creation” policies as the solution to South Africa’s social ills — and the subjective experiences of most community movements’ members, in which waged employment has become utterly peripheral. What such divergences seem to indicate is that a left emancipatory project in post-apartheid South Africa increasingly faces a choice between liberation of and from wage labor. The latter option would involve innovative experimentations with radical decommodification and redistribution, such as the elaboration of claims for forms of universal income independent from labor market positions. The lack of a political and strategic imagination adequate to this task could conversely reinforce opportunities for authoritarian and populist responses to fill the social gaps left open by wage labor’s collapse. It would likely facilitate this outcome to have a labor movement stubbornly attached to demands for more “job creation,” which risk finding themselves out of touch with a reality where the nexus between wage labor and liberation seems irredeemably compromised.

Notes
8 Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005).
12 See William M. Gumede, Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC (Cape Town: Zebra, 2005).


Qtd. in Hart, “Post-Apartheid Developments” 26.


See, for instance, Ashwin Desai. *“We are the Poors”: Community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).
