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Prologue: Dying for Decent Work with Welfare

Amid the shock that followed the massacre at the Lonmin Marikana platinum mine, on August 16, 2012, when the South African police killed thirty-four striking black miners and wounded approximately eighty others, a team of sociologists from the University of Johannesburg produced an “instant book” detailing the events, based on the oral narratives of survivors (see Alexander et al. 2012). The interviews make for somber reading. One respondent reckoned: “We were killed for nothing . . . we were not fighting with management. We simply wanted to know when they were going to give us our money” (108). Others read the lethality of the event through the persistent racial predicament of the South African workplace: “The white people pay each other better, but we get nothing” (110). The conspicuous presence of white law enforcement commanding officers that day is also frequently remarked upon.

There is some general agreement that the strike concerned demands for adequate wages to meet the most basic needs and for workers’ voices to be heard by management without the mediation of discredited and unrepresentative unions.
In fact, little seems to indicate, beneath a sense of urgency in the quest for better employment conditions, a budding sense of class consciousness on the eve of the strike, and a worker’s sentiment probably spoke for many: “I was desperate looking for work and so I ended up coming here in the mines . . . I was regretting being there” (133). A clear contrast emerges between such ethnographic materials and the opening and closing commentaries, of a somewhat orotund grandiloquence, with which the book frames them. The editors reassure the readers that “on the battlefield . . . they [the miners] did not die in vain” (42). A concluding, stentorian call to arms—“worker organization on the mine will never be the same again”—projects the deaths onto a familiar progressive temporality (191).

In South Africa’s history as a capitalist society, mostly occurring under white rule, rhetorics of class have often promised to redeem the injuries of waged work on black lives—economic compulsion ensuring the destruction of independent livelihoods, the experience of forced migration, lethal working conditions, and racial despotism and discrimination—with a promise of solidarity and liberation grounded in the critique of political economy. In fact, the role union movements have played, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, in the downfall of apartheid embodied in many ways that promise of turning labor from a reality of daily abuse and precariousness into a horizon of dignity, freedom, economic achievement, and social stability in a deracialized future (Barchiesi 2011). In practice, and despite its revolutionary overtones, that imagination has mostly resulted in demanding redistributive social compacts underwritten by a postapartheid state committed to radical reforms alongside tenets akin to social-democratic welfarism. Progressive and labor discourses have advocated, as levers to social transformation, job creation and policy shifts toward greater equality, perhaps even universality, in the provision of social insurance and assistance, medical care, housing, education, and municipal utilities. State intervention and a vibrant civil society, with labor recognized as a driving force, have been praised as remedies to the legacy of apartheid from radical anticapitalist perspectives (Bond 1991) as well as proponents of a new democratic corporatism (Adler and Webster 2000).

Yet, as the country, now ruled by the African National Congress (ANC), in a strategic alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), embraced a path to economic liberalization and departed from erstwhile expectations for redistribution and structural change, the promise of work has faded. Persistently high unemployment, officially hovering at around 25 percent of the economically active population but easily surpassing 30 percent if discouraged job-
seekers are counted, is compounded by vast unprotected sectors without benefits and job security. While stable occupations are limited to an estimated one-third of employable South Africans and social assistance grants provide a basic safety net for nonworking recipients (mainly the young, the elderly, and the disabled) and many low-wage household members, there are hardly any noncontributory social provisions for the working poor, the long-term unemployed, or permanent job seekers. As I have discussed at length elsewhere (Barchiesi 2011), the articulation of social assistance, working poverty, and the persistent commodification of life (most evident in cost-recovery policies for municipal services), if anything, have generalized to society at large the precariousness and elusiveness of jobs upon which the poor, who remain overwhelmingly black, are forced to depend for their lifeline.

The state system of social grants itself is conceived not as a form of income replacement or an alternative to miserable employment prospects but as an incentive to self-activation and job-seeking behavior. In fact, as working-class constituencies are steadily eroded and fragmented, left expectations for an inclusive welfare state have been superseded by official deprecations of dependency on public “handouts,” while “welfare” itself has been replaced in governmental parlance with “social development,” an expression neoliberal rationality finds far more palatable.

Social policy has thus veered toward notions of public-private partnerships premised on individual initiative and the centrality of the labor market in projects of collective uplift, toward which the state plays a facilitating role heavily relying on moral and pedagogical injunctions. Structural change was left out of the frame as postapartheid governance celebrated consensus and nonadversarialism around the national economic goals of a competitive corporate economy. A liberal constitution and policy frameworks enthroned private property, fiscal discipline, and redistributive restraint. In the end, as white interests continued to control heavily financialized corporations and landownership, and a black politically connected elite joined them, black workers and the poor faced a continuous interdiction to autonomously determining the meanings and practical payoffs of democratization.

Trying to revive the promise of employment and its usefulness for social cohesion in such a predicament, the government of President Jacob Zuma, who rose to power in 2009 thanks to COSATU’s decisive support, brought to South Africa’s social policy debates aspirations of “decent work” popularized on the international stage by the International Labor Organization (ILO). At the level of formal enunciation, decent work means forms of employment that are conducive—even under the sway of global competition
and liberalized markets—to social dialogue and provisions, organizational rights and freedoms, and adequate working conditions. Zuma thus claimed that decent work “will be at the centre of our economic policies and will influence our investment attraction and job creation initiatives” (quoted in Department of Economic Development 2010: 1). At stake seemed to be the very viability of work as a foundation of progressive social compacts capable to withstand the impact of neoliberal globalization.

It is at this point apparent how, at a practical level, the demands of the miners killed at Marikana resonated with claims for decent work, or perhaps the notion that work can underwrite decent lives and a modicum of well-being, rather than portentous announcements of socialism to come. Was having reclaimed decent employment conditions on their own terms as distinct from institutionalized policy talk—including the “impossible” demand for a R12,500 monthly wage (actual wages were as low as one-third that figure)—what the Marikana miners died for? Was their taking long-standing promises of work with welfare seriously what led to their fatal demise?

Commentators with different ideological persuasions have seen the Lonmin strike as a “scandal,” but not only because of its violent repression. The collective and embodied practices of those who staged it also drew repudiation. Thus a relatively conservative voice like journalist David Bullard (2012) contextualized, even lauded, police violence by casting it against the irredeemable otherness of the strikers and their (actual or imagined) cultural formations: “How on earth do you negotiate rationally with people who still believe that smearing animal fat over their bodies will protect them from bullets?” Even for professedly liberal commentators, like Mark Gevisser, condemnation of the killings and the responsibility of the state and the mining company could not override suspicion over the workers’ motivations and rationality. Gevisser (2012: 8) thus hinted at the machinations of black populist politicians “whipping miners into a froth against their bosses and the government,” jeopardizing the hard-won yet fragile (com)promises of liberal democracy. Such tones evoke a past that overwrites labor conflicts and their predicament in the contingencies of a neoliberalized world and finds roots in the country’s colonial history. In South Africa, settler rule and persistent white privilege have solidified themselves around white civil society’s perception of blackness as a “monstrous” condition of inherent backwardness, superstition, impulsiveness, work aversion, and natural proneness to the seductions of extremism and unreason, unless guided to the properly human and distinctly modern status of sufficiently civilized and predictably controllable “natives.” Contemporary representations of black
bodies as both refusing to work and disposable (see also Maart 2014) thus echo a deeply entrenched and still pervasive antiblackness.

I intend in these pages to focus on the nexus of work and welfare as it acted to shape and curtail the politics of blackness in South Africa. The assumption that employment imperatives and the requirements of political economy endow whiteness with ethical legitimacy, purportedly validated by the moral elevation and socioeconomic improvement of Africans, has sustained South Africa’s antiblack social order. To accomplish the task of governing Africans through waged work, the white-ruled state enforced capitalist production discipline not merely through repressive means but also by structuring wage labor as a terrain for claims to recognition by respectable “native” producers and consumers. While white rule systematically disallowed that terrain from enabling black demands for political equality or common humanity, it did nonetheless become fertile ground for early black political organizations in their attempt to conceptualize an autonomous African nation.

Since its earliest beginnings, African nationalism has posited economic participation as the pathway to aspirations for political rights, educational opportunities, occupational advancement, economic independence, and social provisions, replicating thereby key features of twentieth-century labor-centered welfarist imagination. The white racial state, on the contrary, proceeded from assumptions that for the Africans work and welfare are essentially coincidental, defining thereby the task of social policy in terms of governing socioeconomic interdependence between settler and native as to forestall expectations for political equality by the black majority. By attaching different norms and desires to working for wages, the conflict between white settler governance and African political imagination validated nonetheless the imago of wage labor as a pillar of the “natives’” moral and socioeconomic welfare. The consequence of structuring conflict along these lines was to antagonize, marginalize, and sidestep blackness to the extent that it reflected not identities conducible to national claims sustained by capitalist work ethics but a more deep-seated rejection of waged work and related ideas of welfare and progress as they gave sinews to white rule and the obliteration of black sovereignty.

White governance of economic interdependence has resulted in South Africa not merely in a historically and institutionally contingent “racial contract” (Mills 1997) sans political equality, which excluded blacks from the plenitude of citizenship and social rights otherwise enjoyed by whites. If anything, in fact, even under racist governments before and during apartheid
participation in the wage economy did deliver access to some social provisions such as unemployment insurance and retirement funds for limited numbers of Africans allowed into urban occupations and residence (Seekings and Nattrass 2005). At the same time, however, a broader paradigm was in operation, in which white ethics relentlessly condemned Africans’ refusal to work for wages and cast it as a symptom of blackness represented as a condition deprived of capacities for rational conduct and self-determination proper to the human world. The ways in which discourses of national welfare and prosperity specifically reinforced the imperative to work vis-à-vis blackness did not only emphasize the role of the racial state in reproducing and amplifying the constitutive precarity of capitalist production along racial lines. The limited recognition the “native” could aspire to on account of work ethics and socioeconomic interdependence also reinforced the devaluation of black social life as foundational of white-ruled civil society.

My opening question, what did the Marikana miners actually die for?, can thus be rephrased on a society-wide scale: Do black demands for decent life under political democracy still invite lethality when put at the service of an autonomous subjectivity rather than deference to the institutions and the ruling party? Does death remain a price that such a subjectivity should be prepared to pay, even when voicing a discourse—work as a pathway to human dignity and social welfare—otherwise part of a political vocabulary of reforms ostensibly in the interest of the black majority? Is the present precarity of black labor about political economy, or does it also point at the part political economy and wage labor have long played in a paradigmatically violent subjugation of blackness?

The Antiblackness of Political Economy: Of Labor and Virtuous Natives

With these questions in mind, the rest of this essay explores how notions of precarious work reveal, but only partially address, a set of problems emerging from South Africa’s history of the “native question” and the “labor question” as interconnected modalities of white settler governance and the problems posed to it by the fact of blackness. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, both questions converged on the dilemma of turning the African into a productive participant of a modern economy premised on capitalist work ethics and liberal notions of individual responsibility. In the context of mining-driven economic development, white opinion across a wide ideological spectrum concurred in positioning the “native” as a worker on account of both moral imperatives and naturalized economic laws (Bozzoli 1981).
Thus the injunction to working for wages, in official rhetoric, took the form of claims about the “dignity of labor” (a direct antecedent of the modern notion of “decent work”) relying at one and the same time on both ethical and economic imperatives to motivate African workers (Barchiesi 2012). Cecil Rhodes’s parliamentary speech in support of the 1894 Glen Grey Act firmly established in the South African lexicon the “dignity of labor,” toward which the legislation was presented as a “gentle stimulant,” with its provisions limiting African land rights and envisaging a new labor tax, as well as a measure “to remove” the natives “from a life of sloth and laziness” (quoted in Verschoyle 1900: 390), which Rhodes considered ontologically consubstantial to the condition of blackness as uncivilization. Rhodes’s bestowing upon political economy the ethical motives of African welfare provided a touchstone for white debates on the “native question” and its implications for the capitalist “labor question.” The “dignity of labor” asserted, in particular, that the ethical foundation of white settler governance consisted in using the laws of political economy to emancipate a modern, productive, and respectable “native” from blackness intended as a condition of atavistic stagnation and barbarism, more attuned, to recall Jacques Derrida’s (2005: 197) reading of Aristotle’s classical treatment of the subject in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to the Slave than to the Man.

The contradiction entailed in such invocations of political economy, as something presented as natural and self-fulfilling but also an imperative to be enforced by the powers of the state, should not mislead us about their rationale. The grounding of Western humanitarianism in early liberalism, of which the work of John Stuart Mill is exemplary, clearly defined blacks as “savage races” and quintessential targets of coercive violence. Hence for Mill, even temporary “slavery” was deemed necessary for the objective forces of the markets and individual freedom to take their course. Mill rationalized that violence on account of the yet incompletely human condition of its targets—a sort of exception that established the norm, in Schmittian terms—suggesting that liberalism made human freedom rest on capacities for rational self-determination and self-deliberation (see also Losurdo 2011: 255).

The articulation of norm and exception, which accompanied the application of liberal universals to the culturally different, stood in a particularly problematic relationship to blackness in the post-emancipation and colonial context. A vast scholarship on the aftermath of the legal abolition of racial slavery in the Western hemisphere concurs that the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by white disappointment, among supporters of imperialism as well as its missionary or reformer opponents, at the progress
of formerly enslaved blacks as they were expected to evolve toward putatively human work ethics, Christian conduct, and liberal individualism (Holt 1992; Hall 2002; Blackburn 2011). Black desire to autonomously signify and practice freedom, for example, by independently accessing land or determining the terms and conditions of work, stood in the way of forms of life that whiteness upheld as orbiting around wage labor as the key condition for thrift, morality, productivity, ambition, and commodified consumption habits.

Following the reluctance of former slaves to enter labor contracts and the watershed experience of events like the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion of black peasants and the black poor in British-ruled Jamaica, white opinion coalesced around the conviction that blacks could not yet be entrusted with defining the meanings and material conditions of their freedom, their relationship to alternative forms of subsistence, or indeed the reproduction of family and community life. Unless properly guided into standards of civilization that inevitably required a persistent subjugation, blackness was perceived as an ontological positionality characterized by sloth, laziness, disolute sexuality, and capitulation to impulse and instinct, all attributes that were inimical to self-deliberation and, in the absence of white governance, inherent to the status of slavery.

The dilemma of freedom as one of making “post-slavery subjects” (Hartman 1997; Sharpe 2010) into subordinate entities in white civil society maintained a symbolic and discursive association of blackness with slavery, which survived legal abolition and accompanied the transition from “emancipation” to African colonization. In that transition, coercion, across a spectrum of interventions ranging from taxation and “masters and servants” legislation to the violent eradication of African political sovereignty and economic independence, superseded earlier optimisms. Although white liberals had initially assumed that legal freedom alone could make African and African-descended populations governable, in the condition of post-emancipation blackness was then cast as an atavistic condition of barbarism and submission to irrational forces, which were hence understood as always liable to regression into servitude. The assumptive logic of post-slavery rule is one in which, as Christina Sharpe (2010: 9) puts it, “proximity to whiteness” is what allows claims to humanity.

Overtly racialized white rule, of which South Africa became an extreme example, has been regarded in recent revisionist historiography as an imperial repudiation of liberalism and its ultimate commitment to universal human equality (Mantena 2010). Andrew Sartori (2014), however, has shown how that approach underestimates a dimension of liberalism that an
exclusive focus on its prime principles cannot account for: the production of liberal subjects out of culturally diverse nonwhite and colonized subjectivities, in which the use of state power is less at odds with liberal principles than it is rather a precondition for their eventual operation. Rhodes’s values, including the “dignity of labor” as “gently induced” through racially specific laws among the “natives,” combined coercion and ethico-economic meditations within a vision of rule through the fostering of liberal proclivities—a project upon which whiteness came to rest as it became globally hegemonic.

The early twentieth-century civilizational framework of South Africa, as a unified national space, rested on the assumption that there were two ways of being African, neither of which, to be sure, was conducive to political equality, actual citizenship, or economic independence. One was the figure of the native as a virtuous and orderly wage laborer, a productive implement with significational and desiring capabilities constrained by racial hierarchies and labor contracts (the interruption of which was criminalized by “masters and servants” laws) and who was forced to relinquish all claims to political sovereignty and most claims to landownership. The other is what I defined before as “blackness” as an ontological and paradigmatic positionality of enslavement (to passion, impulse, unreason, backwardness, stagnation), which called forth, without destabilizing white humanitarian pretenses and the universalism of liberal values, coercion and violence akin to the actual “social death” of slavery.

The imaginary bifurcation of ways of being African shaped white debates on the “native question” and the “labor question” in forms that validated liberal faith in political economy and its civilizing influence, regardless of whether it was reflected in the overt adoption of liberalism as an ideology. Therefore, settler voices in the British colony of Transvaal, established after the 1899–1902 South African War, resented both imperial philanthropy and the paternalism of Alfred Milner’s administration and longed for more straightforward forms of forced labor for the Africans (Denoon 1973). They approved, however, of wage labor as a lever not only for the natives’ productivity but also for their conduct and ambitions. It is at this juncture that the precarity of black waged work acquires a paradigmatic quality throwing it outside the boundaries of sociological contingency, the twists and turns of policy making, and the vicissitudes of labor markets. Not only does that precarity mean, literally, dependence on jobs that, then as now, would prove exploitative, evanescent, unstable, unrewarding, dangerous, and undevine to social advancement. It also characterizes a position black workers enter into under assumptions, or at least official expectations, that their
blackness, including attendant residual attachments to “primitive” society and precapitalist reproduction, lowers their standards of income and social welfare.

Milner, high commissioner of the former Afrikaner republics of the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony and one of the architects of South Africa’s postwar reconstruction, provided early in his mandate a notable normative exposition of wage earning as a mode to govern the native question. Invited by colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain to respond to criticism from the Aborigines Protection Society (APS) that British administration was merely an updated form of old Boer brutality and racial despotism, Milner overrode Chamberlain’s opinion that the APS was a moribund and inconsequential body whose objections could be perfunctorily dispatched. He offered instead an articulate defense of colonial rule. Vehemently denying that his administration stood for forced labor, he nonetheless approved of racially coercive measures, such as the pass laws in the former republics, which he saw as compatible with “civilized” pedagogical methods for instructing natives otherwise lacking the responsibility to enforce labor contracts on their own.

Holding firm that manual labor was “the greatest benefit that could be bestowed upon them [“natives”] or South Africa generally,” he concluded that the laws of the labor market and the requirements of the mining industry were not merely coercive but expressed instead a cure for the Africans’ self-destructive instincts and temptations to refuse wage labor “in a mere access [sic] of childish levity.” Since passes were the mark of a less than complete humanity, Milner advocated exemptions for nonwhite subjects, like Cape coloreds, who “conform in their habits and conduct to civilised standards and are much further removed from the raw Kaffir, than they are from Europeans.” Godfrey Lagden, Milner’s commissioner of native affairs and the chairman of the 1903–5 South African Native Affairs Commission, elaborated on the childishness of Africans pointing to their irredeemable otherness. Lagden maintained in fact that, outside European supervision and employment, the Africans’ “lack of intellect” and physical features “create the impression of being not unlike baboons.” Working for wages in daily contact with white masters, instead, had for him the almost miraculous effect of improving even the native’s appearance, making it less monstrous and more intelligent.

Yet such crude biological racism was still presented in the service of political economy as a law of human evolution, rather than mere coercive subjugation. Lagden insisted, in fact, that once natives had entered a subordinate waged position—stepping away, so to speak, from a condition of inherent
savagery—then it would no longer be justifiable to treat blacks “like animals.” Indeed, wage labor was for him the precondition for a properly human, liberal subjectivity centered on white consumption and family norms:

> What we have got to do is to consider what will induce the native to work; to create in him a certain number of wants, and according to the standard of the native’s wants, so will his efforts be to gratify them, and, if he wants to wear decent clothes, and decent boots, and his wife wants to wear decent clothes, and have a looking-glass, and a chest of drawers, and a decent house overhead, and if the children—taking example from them—want also to be clothed, then it means that every man who has ideas of that standard, together with his wife and children, has got to work harder to maintain that standard.4

In his deposition before the 1904 Transvaal Labour Commission, Lagden elaborated on the conduct wage labor was aimed at instilling in terms that strikingly, if ominously, portend the neoliberal reality the Marikana miners would face a century later. By advocating what contemporary technocratic parlance would call the “bankability” of the poor, he emphasized in particular the role of saving and credit in molding the native into an individual calculating and risk-taking actor. The Africans’ work ethics would benefit, he argued, from a propensity to save stimulated by access to the financial system as an alternative to storing money in more volatile assets, like cattle. Instead, “If we could induce them to put [money] in banks and get the interest on it, we would get more labour” as a payoff for new “artificial wants.”5 Bankable income underwriting credit (and therefore debt) was for Lagden a decisive incentive for Africans to accept low-wage, precarious, often deadly jobs in the mines. The persistence of such modalities of managing precarity as a principle of governance, but also its possible failures, is evident in the case of Marikana, where workers’ debt to predatory lenders was a major determinant of both their wage demands and the desperation with which they met physical death (see also James 2014).

It is worth noting that, despite their ultimate deference to settler opinion and priorities and although they were ideologically distant from a genuine liberalism, Milner and Lagden spoke from the moderate end of the spectrum in Transvaal white politics. In fact, their paternalism represented an intermediate position between London’s proclaimed imperial humanitarianism, the hardening of settler sentiment, and liberal critics of racial extremism. In contrast, more straightforwardly liberal voices—like those in the Cape colony, where a small and shrinking black minority still enjoyed voting rights—hardly departed from the script of political economy as the foundation of the
native’s true humanity. Having colluded with Afrikaner interests in curtailing the native franchise once it raised the threat of a meaningful African electorate, Cape liberals endorsed the prohibition to extending nonwhite voting rights outside the colony, which in turn paved the way to establishing the Union of South Africa in 1910 (Odendaal 1984). Despite having a somewhat more expansive view of the natives’ rights accruing from the “civilizing” mission and entertaining actual collaborations with African leaders (anathema for Milner and Lagden), Cape liberalism partook of the dominant consensus that no such thing as a black political subjectivity was admissible and the natives’ subjecthood had to be corralled by white-directed manual labor and its attendant ethical values.

When a notable voice like John X. Merriman intensified his interactions with John L. Dube, the first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC)—founded in 1912 and renamed the ANC in 1923—he took care to emphasize that there was no question of dealing with Africans on equal grounds. In a diary entry he noted: “John Dube . . . may be a valuable agent if properly handled, or a very great source of danger if allowed to feel no-one sympathizes” (Merriman 1969: 252). Work ethic was a key ingredient in Merriman’s handling of Dube, a mission-educated kholwa (believer; as Christian Africans were known) from Natal and small capitalist, who had embraced during his studies in the United States the gospel of self-help and elevation through hard work preached by Booker T. Washington. Merriman himself was an enthusiastic reader of Washington, drawing from his work the lesson that “in education of the right sort lies the true solution both of the [Native] labour and the stockstealing difficulties. Doubtless education will bring other difficulties in its train, chiefly social and political, but if you create wants men must work to supply those wants and educated men do not steal stock” (Merriman 1966: 381–82). The “right sort” consisted in training geared to commodity-producing operations, which white supervision would discipline in order to minimize the inherent “difficulties” that might arise from the expectations education would induce in Africans. Liberal discourse contributed therefore to a language of economic interdependence in which African welfare would reside in circuits of production and consumption that confirmed, nonetheless, the social and political subordination of blackness.

The relationships between Dube and Merriman, or the much deeper connections between Cape liberals and African intellectuals and protonationalists in that colony, are indicative of the place of political economy and work ethics in the birth of organized African opposition to the post-1910 racial state. The ANC vehemently rejected not only Milner and Lagden’s brand of
racial paternalism but also the idea of white trusteeship as a condition of native civilization. The organization’s opposition to land expropriation, job reservation, the color bar, pass laws, and black disenfranchisement was steeped in notions of reclamation of the African nation as the embodiment of popular sovereignty. In fact, nationalist leaders and thinkers wrested the terrain of civilization from the Europeans’ exclusive definitional domain by stressing, for example, in the early interventions of Pixley Seme and Sol Plaatje, the dignity of African culture. In the terrain plowed by the productive ethics of colonial rule, the ANC sought not only an adversary to be in conflict with but also an *interlocutor* in the hopeful quest for mutual recognition.

At stake here is not just a matter of political “moderation,” which the ANC adopted in various forms until the early 1940s. More to the point of this essay, Congress members shared with colonial and liberal opinion assumptions about the duality of being African. Therefore, the fruit of civilization the organization reclaimed was not for all but only for natives who were educated in modern norms of production, work ethics, personal responsibility, and Christianity. The remaining African population—encompassing ordinary residents in “tribalized” and backward rural areas alongside urban township youth who refused to work or “disreputable” women who rejected patriarchal authority and established gender roles—belonged to a distinct category of African, the representation of which echoed the childlike and impulsive blackness whose threatening otherness was the stuff of Milner’s, Lagden’s, and Merriman’s worst nightmares.

### Governance through Precarity versus the Black Refusal of Work

It is an underresearched paradox of African nationalism that, despite its intensifying opposition to white rule and its rejection of ideas of trusteeship, the vocabulary of the ANC mirrored the white civilizational imaginary in forms that are too close to be merely dismissed as coincidental, tactical, or just a reflection of the prevailing zeitgeist. A much more substantial and elaborate intellectual and symbolic investment in political economy on the ANC’s part was at stake. Dube, for whom “capitalists are the black man’s best friends” (quoted in Limb 2010: 290), posited participation in the wage economy as sustaining the hierarchical distinctiveness of the civilized African as “the better class Native” from “the ruck of the Natives” (Dube 1929: 145).

It was upon the foundation of work that Africans could rise and claim human respect in the guise of better wages, working conditions, and training opportunities. White failure to heed the call would inevitably push the native
toward a more anarchical position, “into the hands of agitators” propagating “racial ill-feeling” and away from “responsible Native leaders” (Dube 1929: 145–46). The ANC was not insensitive to the plight of African workers, whose wage demands it consistently advocated. The organization’s support of strikes, however, was couched in deprecation for radicalism and appeals to class collaboration, without which industrial action could degenerate into disruptions that the leadership was firmly committed to avoiding. It condemned the 1918 municipal workers’ strike in Johannesburg, endorsed by the Congress’s own Transvaal branch, blaming it on young immigrants from the rural areas, whom the official mouthpiece Abantu-Batho defined, in a striking echo of governmental terminology, as immature “children” (Landau 2012). In the political discourse of early African nationalism, lurking beneath the guise of respectability and acceptable practices guaranteed by waged employment, and the mutual recognition it was said to promise, was the more unruly and messy question of what officials referred to as “raw natives.” ANC leaders, however, routinely used that very expression well into the 1930s. In a famous speech that launched his political career, Alfred B. Xuma (1930) (then ANC president from 1940 to 1949) praised the Cape educational curriculum for turning an earlier generation of African leaders from “raw ‘Kaffir boys’ . . . primitive men so-called, not a day removed from savagery or from the life of barbarism” into “citizens in their common country.”

African nationalism did redirect the civilizational pretenses of white ethical universalism against its own selectiveness and hypocrisies as it fore-shadowed new forms of black political subjectivity. Yet, in grounding that subjectivity on the tacitly or explicitly agreed terrain of political economy and wage labor, the ANC incorporated underlying visions of African emancipation, modernization, and welfare. It is not merely, as Peter Limb (2010) correctly notes, a question of collaborationism, co-optation, or incomplete class consciousness, which later generations of left scholars chastised by contrasting the early, “moderate” ANC with the later, purportedly “radical” organization, fully throwing its lot with anticolonial revolutionaries and working-class struggles. Such idealized binaries privilege overt ideological pronunciations and organizational strategies in ways that obscure what makes a field of political contestation possible to begin with. In South Africa’s case, not dissimilar from a range of other colonial situations, the ANC’s articulation of conflict around political economy and production values was necessary to leaving open at least the possibility of recognition, but only on condition that conflict was clearly separated from more intractable antagonisms that would threaten not only those values but also the social ontologies sustaining them.
I am using here the terminology of Frank B. Wilderson III (2010), in which a “conflict” is a set of problems that opposing entities can contend with in ways that are open to a progressive resolution, whereas an “antagonism” is a radical incompatibility that does not allow such a resolution but can only be terminated by the obliteration of one of the contending entities. The articulation of “conflict” in white-ruled South Africa permitted the voicing of grievances, routinely heard by official commissions of inquiry and by the colonized claiming rights on account of their role in national modernization. The possibility of conflict was at the same time fundamentally predicated upon the antagonism, shared by all contending actors, toward the notion of blackness-as-barbarism and, as such, a threat not only to civil society but also to the contestations it authorized. In the nexus of conflict and antagonism blackness ceased to be a mere referent for “race” (even as social and labor policy maintained it as the target of intense practices of racialization). It rather defines a positionality, akin to Frantz Fanon’s “phobic object,” of paradigmatic abjection the constitutive violence of which the colonized is only allowed to alleviate (but never fully escape) by becoming a native productive asset for the white economy. Wage labor inscribes precarity on the black body in the absolutely specific double sense of fixing boundaries of recognition through self-improvement that remain dependent on the ethical meditation of white civil society while sanctioning the relegation of blackness, as antinomical to working for wages, into an object of silencing and incapacitation.

Nowhere was conflict between colonizer and colonized more evidently reliant on erasing the antagonism between civil society and its black other than in the experience, between the 1920s and 1930s, of the Joint Councils of Europeans and Natives. The joint councils, established at the initiative of white liberal reformers, especially Howard Pim and J. D. Rheinallt Jones, worked with American philanthropists and church leaders experimenting with forums for interracial dialogue in the Jim Crow South. The ANC did not officially endorse the councils, but many of its most distinguished leaders, including Dube, Xuma, R. V. Selope Thema, and Selby Msimang, closely worked with them, even in leadership positions. Limb (2010: 278–79, 379–83) argues that the councils were indeed probably the only forum where the ANC at the time consistently debated its social and labor policies. From the standpoint of white liberalism, the councils were inspired by an updated version of white friendship for the natives, which, departing from the paternalism of an earlier generation, was firmly grounded in the perception of economic interdependence between whites and Africans. It was an idea that fitted a broader conversation on “South Africanism” as the quest for a white
national identity unmoored from residual imperial subjection and in which
industrialization, driven by domestic demand and spurred by blacks as con-
sumers, played an important role (Bozzoli 1981; Dubow 2006).

Fabian socialists and humanitarians, like Durban-based educational-
ist Mabel Palmer, saw the mission of the councils, in alliance with local
native welfare societies, as providing moral and pedagogical continuity with
the newfound status of the African as urbanized producer and buyer. For
Palmer, the councils and welfare associations were harbingers of a new
native working-class civility rooted in healthy forms of leisure, the learning
of gender roles, and a sense of family responsibility as integral to a “dynamic
science of economics” that would connect white prosperity to black aspira-
tions and an evolution beyond merely “cheap labor.” In the process, the coun-
cils would also help steer nascent African labor organizations away from
“antiwhite” extremism and toward an “authentic,” bread-and-butter, trade
unionism that cherished class collaboration, anticommunism, and produc-
tivity (Palmer 1929).

In no way did the joint councils intend to translate socioeconomic
interdependence between “Europeans” and “Natives” into political equality
between white and black. Indeed, the movement endorsed, at a national
meeting convened in 1923 by the Dutch Reformed Church, the principle of
segregation in the form of a motion, which the distinguished liberal aca-
demic Edgar H. Brookes portrayed as a departure from rigid racial separa-
tion and a measure of coexistence “based on Bantu traditions and require-
ments.” Its boundaries would be, following the councils’ inclinations,
permeable in accordance with the spread of economic rationality. In so
doing, the councils stood in opposition to occupational color bars, which
hampered labor markets and the productivity of blacks and whites alike, and
in favor of a relaxation of constraints on movement and residence for urban-
ized Africans, who, it was proposed, would henceforth access state-funded
social insurance and assistance.

Similar measures were also advocated in a series of pre-apartheid social
policy debates. And although these never resulted in the deracialization of
public provisions, proposed policies ranged from old-age pension legislation
in 1928 to ultimately aborted projects of social security reform during World
War II (Barchiesi 2011: 32–36). Despite the councils’ glaring contradictions
and ultimate loyalty to the ideological tenets of white South Africanism, they
appeared to stimulate African nationalist optimism about the possibilities of
the prewar decades. One might even take the councils as a platform in which
African intellectuals and activists sought to deploy the register of political
economy and interdependence to “pluralize” South Africanism through a vision in which interracial economic relations and the mutual welfare they ostensibly guaranteed could foster more directly political claims.

The interventions of council and ANC leader Thema are in this sense illuminating. In 1924 he articulated the rationale of the councils as a body where a “better feeling between the races” could prevail and stave off menaces, which Thema considered equivalent, from both extreme white supremacists and those he called black anti-Christian “demagogues.” Yet it was in regard to the latter that Thema then exclusively directed his objections. He castigated Marcus Garvey’s influence and W. E. B. DuBois’s claims that “the uplift of mankind . . . will rest ultimately in the hands of darker nations,” bequeathing instead such uplift on “Western civilization” and “interracial dependence.”7 Thema explicitly echoed a key theme in emerging South African liberalism, that the country had not a “native problem” but a “race relations problem” as one of reciprocal understanding through economic and social interactions between whites and “civilized” blacks. Thema exalted political economy as the scaffold for such interactions, questioning neither their underlying racial hierarchization nor the antagonism toward blacks who were understood as standing outside the bounds of “civilization.” In fact, African experts speaking at the councils’ meetings routinely focused on themes like urban gangs, lazy township youths, and “the amalaita menace,” which served as stand-ins for a lingering, ominous barbarity and supposed threat to civil society should whites fail to properly reward Dube’s “better class” of Africans and their education and economic initiative.8

Despite their limited practical success and ultimate dissolution, the joint councils are a turning point in conceptualizing the humanity of the “native” within a liberal framework agreed upon by white and African notables. The experiment rendered liberal subjectivity as the product not only of white intervention but also of creative African meditations. Its consequences would be lasting, reaching into the present, when “decent work” would come to stand in firm opposition to “welfare dependency” as a signifier of black social desire. In channeling that desire, participants in the joint councils also colluded in pushing out of the frame the violence and subjugation confining blacks in precarious employment. They were thus exemplary of Wilderson’s (2010: 333) observation that civil society’s composition, and the conflicts through which it fortifies itself, ultimately rest on black decomposition.

The joint councils collapsed, together with African hopes for interracial respect, in the 1930s, as what was left of the “native franchise” was revoked
and racial segregation hardened. The brief wartime flirtation with Keynesianism and British welfarism by the United Party government—which gestured to the possibility of public health insurance and social security for urban Africans but never intended to provide universal coverage for blacks—was ultimately geared at containing black workers’ militancy and never materialized in any practical measure. It was finally buried by the deadly repression of the 1946 African mine workers’ strike, which confirmed, as successive governments during and after apartheid would do, the state’s inclination to use violence as the means for dealing with radical black demands. Blackness was in fact, then as now, the unsurpassable limit for the ability of white corporate capital and governments committed to liberal political economy to conceive waged work as the basis of progressive social compacts. European colonial powers deployed productivity deals to harness white working classes to the task of postwar reconstruction, but they would then drastically curtail them once confronted with the “postcolonial” claims of nonwhite immigrants from the 1970s onward (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). French and British attempts at “stabilizing” their African colonies also included social security regimes, which however overtly exclusively targeted urban residents in formal employment as harbingers of civilization and desirable partners of class collaboration (Cooper 1996).

Post-1948, apartheid South Africa stood starkly apart from earlier liberal and inclusive tendencies to the extent that the state radically foreclosed black expectations for citizenship and sociopolitical inclusion rooted in waged work. The National Party (NP) regime nonetheless still deployed arguments about work ethics and the condemnation of reliance on state “handouts” across the racial spectrum, perhaps as the only truly color-blind aspect of its political discourse (Barchiesi 2011: 39). It even applied its own ersatz work-based citizenship regime in the form of the “urban labor preference,” which emerged from harsh debates between purists committed to total racial separation and more pragmatic, and ultimately successful, social engineers with an eye focused on white economic dependence on black labor. The “urban labor preference” prioritized the employment of urban Africans living in upgraded “model townships,” in which work continued to be synonymous with moral respectability, personal responsibility, and functional families as the domain of relatively “civilized” Africans (Posel 2005), distinct from black migrants and “homeland” dwellers. In the end, the apartheid state could not completely jettison political economy principles and moralistic rationalizations that were essentially geared at producing social differentiation between modern, individual, liberal African subjects and
backward black tribalized populations, this despite the NP’s ideologically avowed antiliberalism.

In the 1940s, the ANC emerged from a profound organizational crisis by moving toward a more assertive opposition to the racist state. The hold of work ethics on that organization’s agenda persisted well after the decline of the joint councils. A protagonist in ferrying the organization toward a less moderate and deferential position was Z. K. Matthews, a Yale-educated scholar who had been active in both the councils and its major offshoot, the South African Institute of Race Relations. Though averse to revolutionary solutions, Matthews—one of the architects of key African nationalist documents, like the 1943 African Claims and the ANC’s Programme of Action of 1949, and an early proponent of what would become the 1955 Congress of the People—held to a position rather far removed from Thema’s collaborationism.9 He maintained nonetheless a staunch opposition to black radicalism—which in the end alienated him from younger generations of ANC cadres—and remained suspicious of the youth’s attitude and disposition to wage labor. Matthews (1933: 140–41) praised white education and values for “open[ing] the eyes of our people to their own nakedness” and rescuing “Bantu life” from its otherwise natural “very backward condition,” a regression into which was threatened by the township youth’s work avoidance and preference for casual jobs.

Matthews’s statements bring into sharp focus two important and interrelated issues. First, the persistence of the black refusal of wage labor undermined the very claims to work’s normative and civilizational capacities even as alternative sources of income were disappearing. In fact, young township residents could find in the relative protections offered by residential stability motivations to escape capitalist employment rather than buying its promise of respectability. Second, precarious jobs in the form of casual and intermittent activities were not just experienced as a condition of disempowerment but offered the black proletariat opportunities to subvert the dominant labor regime and its work rhythms. Both such aspects of the refusal of work have interested scholars in other colonial contexts (see Cooper 1987). In South Africa such attitudes have been marginalized by progressive scholars, predominantly white and of a left or liberal persuasion, who dismiss refusal of wage labor as a “resistance to proletarianization”—an allegedly premodern behavior when not an impediment to modern forms of working-class identity and solidarity.

Black refusal of work, however, has figured prominently in governmental concerns across the historical trajectory of apartheid. Deborah Posel
(1991: 82–90, 158–64) shows how the “urban labor preference” was doomed to failure because young African township dwellers avoided factory jobs. In 1962 the government’s Botha Commission raised the specter of urban ungovernability by portraying those who refused wage labor as a new, unruly black “type” prone to crime, parasitism, and idleness (Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 170). Ironically, the erosion of the “urban labor preference” led to the growing recruitment from the rural “homelands” of migrant workers, whose unionization would lead in the 1970s to the resurgence of the black labor movement as the most formidable domestic opponent of the regime. The paradox was not lost on the 1977 Riekert Commission of Inquiry into “manpower utilization,” which blamed the growing employment of migrant workers on local township subcultures allowing local residents to stay outside of waged occupations by relying on unwaged and unrecorded networks of smuggling, gambling, illegal liquor production, and sex work (Barchiesi 2011: 47).

Studies seeking to explain the radicalization of the ANC in the late 1950s and early 1960s are usually centered on the tightening of state authoritarianism and repression or the impact of organized community and working-class mobilization. No research has been done on how black subversion of wage labor affected the way the organization conceptualized its transition to revolutionary politics. In his famous statement at the Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela presented the ANC’s turn to armed struggle as a way to give “responsible leadership . . . to canalize and control the feelings of our people” as black insurrection became inevitable. But what part did disobedience to work ethics play in those feelings, which the ANC took charge of reshaping and disciplining through more properly political channels? Was the polarization of conflict a reflection of the intractability of the antagonism between blackness and work-centered civil society? Was it a response to the “political and philosophical critique of work and productivism” that Paul Gilroy (1991: 233) identifies as an expression of global blackness in the afterlife of slavery and colonialism?

The reassertion of working-class militancy in the following decades confronted similar quandaries. In the 1970s, black trade unionism was conceived by white educated activists—who enjoyed leadership roles in the movement that were completely disproportionate to the composition of the rank and file—not only as working-class resistance to racial capitalism at the workplace level but also as a strategic nonracial response to the challenge of blackness as an alternative political identity. By making the working class the privileged site of transformative agency, the resurgent labor movement promised to redeem the shop floor from precariousness, racial despotism,
and abuse and transform it into a prefiguration of democracy and citizenship in a liberated society (see Turner 1978). The centrality of class allowed a redefinition from the left of the terrain of political economy into an arena of emancipation, but it continued, nonetheless, to premise a discourse of progress on work and production.

In contrast, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which proved quite unsuccessful in its attempts at trade union organizing, analyzed oppression in terms that foregrounded the suffering of blacks as exceeding their predicament as workers and being without analog to anything white employees could possibly experience. For Steve Biko ([1978] 2000: 50), blacks were “the only real workers in South Africa” and their permanent and absolute dereliction was indeed reinforced by the “anti-black attitude” of white workers whose contingent and relative exploitation was alleviated by their racial status, which made them “the greatest supporters of the system.” Proximity in terms of political economy was hardly a guarantor of nonracialism since “the greatest anti-black feeling is to be found amongst the very poor whites whom the Class Theory calls upon to be with black workers in the struggle for emancipation” (50).

Political democratization, in which the black labor movement played a prominent role, validated in the end the ANC’s investment in work and production as imaginary engines of development, social cohesion, and progress. Democratization, however, did not undermine either the constitutive precarity of employment for the majority of South Africans or its implications specifically in relation to black suffering. Nowhere were such investments in work and nation building more visible than in the iconic presidency of Mandela. His vision of rainbowlike reconciliation, globally celebrated (and from far fewer quarters criticized) for falling in line with contemporary neoliberal values, resonated instead with a much deeper genealogy. The terms of postapartheid in fact updated both long-standing ANC optimism regarding respectable waged work, as the mechanism for dissipating social antagonisms, as well as Mandela’s own Rivonia commitments to “canalize and control” black unruliness. In the absence of employment creation and job-seeking discipline to moderate the impatience of the poor, Mandela warned, “We are sitting on a time bomb. . . . Their enemy is now you and me, people who drive a car and have a house. [Their enemy is] order, anything that relates to order . . . , and it’s a very grave situation” (quoted in Saul 2002: 41). The ANC’s commitment to restoring order and productivity while deploying the notion of a work ethic against “their,” the threatening others’, impatience and unreasonable expectations brings my concluding observations full circle back to Marikana.
Conclusion

Starting this essay with the Marikana massacre, or the problematic persistence of black workers’ disposability and death in democratic South Africa, evokes a genealogy of precarity that transcends the dire contingencies of labor under neoliberalism. The country is but one of many places where endowing waged work with attributes of human dignity and decency addressed a core dilemma whiteness faced as it became globally hegemonic: How to put postslavery black bodies to work in ways that interdicted claims to human plenitude? The positing of commodity-producing economic activity at the foundation of desirable human nature added a new dimension to white self-definitions in antagonistic opposition to blackness, now presented as incompatible with modern norms of production-centered subjective self-determination. Serving the ends of governance was the centering of the “natives’” desire around work as a condition in which recognition could become demandable and political conflict could be imagined. The machinations of political economy in structuring the field of conflict, a legacy that lasts to this day, secured the fundamental antiblackness of South African civil society and its perpetuation into the present, despite a political dispensation on behalf of the black majority. In a sense, it is a paradox of democratic politics Giorgio Agamben (1998: 10) enunciated, whereas work as a site of utmost subjection is turned into a playground for freedom, happiness, and collective welfare.

The register of attaching qualities of self-fulfillment to work would then be no more than a liberal dispositif, in Michel Foucault’s (1980) sense, to orientate otherwise ungovernable life into precarious, exploitative, and unrewarding occupations. Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2011) adds that it is in fact a late liberal technique, exempt of neoliberal optimism on the collective welfare accruing from individual enterprise, of “bracketing” and exhausting potentially troublesome postcolonial subjectivities in the “durative tense” of the treadmill of job seeking, retraining, and endlessly negotiating with grant-providing agencies. Precarity is thus produced not by the labor market but by the very discourses that posit degraded employment at the core of social existence and the symbolic order. But understanding exhaustion or precarity as forms of government falls somehow short of accounting for the deadly force used on black workers demanding decent jobs or that “their” government makes finally good on the long-standing promise of wage earning leading to citizenship and social rights.

I have suggested here that to grasp that searing contrast one needs to look at how the image of the inhumanity of blackness still inhabits the South African present, bleeding precarity into absolute dereliction, requiring
responsible and respectable “natives” to separate themselves from dissolute and impolite blacks. Only thus can expectations and imaginations of citizenship be calibrated around injunctions to be patient, beware of welfare “dependency,” and focus on competitive fine-tuning for the next job opportunity. The stark alternative that liberal democracy under nationalist rule seems to offer to many of its black subjects is either acquiescence to permanent precarity or the danger of “magnetizing bullets” (Wilderson 2010: 90) by demanding better jobs. The injuries of precarity thus call for great scrutiny into the violent ontologies of work.

Notes

1 The increase is approximately US$1,040 as of May 2015.
2 Milner to Chamberlain, December 6, 1901, vol. 11, ref. 442/01, ff. 38–60, Transvaal Archives Repository, SNA (Secretary for National Affairs), National Archives (Pretoria).
3 Godfrey Lagden, “Draft Dispatch to Secretary of State,” March 1–5, 1906, A951, Fcc, f. 52, Lagden Papers, Department of Historical Papers (hereafter DHP), University of the Witwatersrand.
6 “Conference on Native Affairs Convened by the Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Church,” AD 1433, Ac.1.2, Records of the Joint Councils, DHP.
7 R. V. Selope Thema, “The Establishment of Joint Councils and a Federal Council,” Conference on Native Affairs, Johannesburg, October 30–November 1, 1924, AD 1433, Ac3.3.11, Records of the Joint Councils, DHP.
8 Amalaita defined youth cultural associations of Zulu migrants, which popular imagination often associated with criminal activities.
9 The 1943 African Claims were a set of basic demands for racial equality inspired by the 1941 Atlantic Charter. The 1949 Programme of Action contained the ANC’s strategy of peaceful defiance to the apartheid state. The 1955 Congress of the People established a national, ANC-led, multiracial alliance of political organizations opposed to the racist regime.
11 Some interesting pointers on white activist perceptions in the debates of the age are in Moss 2014.

References


