

Against Job Creation. Precarious Work as a Challenge to Employment-Centered Normativity in Postcolonial Africa

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Labor and Social Conflict in the Global Crisis of Neoliberalism

In my recent book, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa*, I have critically interrogated the persistence of “job creation” as a signifier of progress in the imagination of the South African government, left forces, and the everyday discourse of ordinary workers. What struck me was not only how faith in employment-based views of social development and emancipation contrasted with the material decay of conditions of employment for most of the country’s labor force. I was also impressed by how workers’ perceptions of economic participation and activity as solutions to society’s ills contrasted with the extremely low esteem in which they held their own jobs even as tools to address basic needs. As an explanation for such a seeming contradiction, I ventured that workers defined the “jobs” whose “creation” they still deemed desirable not only in terms of economic transactions or productive activities, but as metaphors of an idealized future. The vision saw decent and stable jobs, provided by an authentic workers’ government under a decisive, competent leadership, underpinning a desired social order infused with gendered, age, and national hierarchies, where “decent jobs” can reassert the functions of breadwinning masculinity, discipline the youth out of unruliness and work avoidance, and keep women within the unpaid tasks of reproduction instead of having them seek complementary sources of income, which could lead to claims for control of household resources. For some workers I interviewed, decent jobs also meant national jobs, as they accused “illegal” immigrants of contributing to the downgrading of their own, resented actual occupations.

I depicted such discursive modalities as conservative inasmuch their reverence for an idealized world of work – resting on the results of past struggles, chiefly the history of unionization of the black working class – prevented a critical reflection on the current precariousness of employment, including its fragility, poverty wages, and inadequate benefits. To characterize the ensuing politics I used the expression, paraphrased from Judith Butler and Wendy Brown,¹ “working class melancholia”. Butler discusses melancholia as a type of grief that thwarts self-reflection on a loss because the grieving subject flagellates itself rather than criticizing the object that is lost, in my case the idea that under capitalism labor’s meaning is to provide an avenue to a dignified life. For Brown, melancholia has thus come to crucially recode the emancipatory imagination of the left, which comes to be characterized by “a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen.”

I concluded my interviews for the book in 2002, but their continuous relevance was vindicated when, in 2007, what is usually described as an organized labor’s insurgency marked the ascent of Jacob Zuma to the national leadership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) at its conference in Polokwane. As an object of workers’ desire, Zuma’s discourse directly spoke to the melancholic and resentful feelings I observed few years before. His self-consciously masculine persona, emphasis on law and order and border control, injunctions for the youth to be taught by force and for “girls” to stop claiming child support for frivolous expenses emanated a longing for discipline premised on orderly production and virtuous employment. Subsequent interventions to control the media and repress “service delivery protests” deepened the disquieting possibility of an association between a leadership underwritten by workers’ inquietudes and political authoritarianism. Despite the widespread enrichment of new elites, popularly mocked as “tenderpreneurs”, through state contracts and political connections, the centrality of employment and job creation in the ANC’s discourse – both as policy remedies to social emergencies and as moral predictors of the nation’s soundness – remained unassailable. If anything, the abstract normativity of “job creation” and economic

¹ Butler, J. (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); Brown, W. (2000), “Resisting Left Melancholia”, in *Without Guarantees. In Honor of Stuart Hall*, edited by P. Gilroy, L. Grossberg, and A. McRobbie, 21-29 (London: Verso).

participation has never been as central as in the current context, where in practical terms the idea of honest and dignified jobs is undermined by the more socially disruptive example offered by government-supported rent-seeking. The sanctification of “jobs”, finally, provides one of the few shared discursive and symbolic terrains for a labor movement increasingly divided – especially the large Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – over its support for Zuma in light of his administration’s poor policy performance.

In conclusion, my book warned that “the continuous, stolid attachment to production and employment in discourses of social justice would then enable critical powerlessness and renewed subjugation”². Taking aim at the centrality of work in the governmental norms of a society where jobs are utterly precarious, it ended with an exhortation:

The effectiveness of state discourse in shaping workers’ subjectivities cannot ... be taken for granted. The elaboration of precariousness into a challenge for authoritarian and chauvinist identifications, however, requires discarding employment-based understandings of liberation ... To resume such potentialities, one would have to place the precariousness of employment, rather than its idealized celebration, at the core of a new grammar of politics.³

With such a critical task in mind, the aim of this paper is to push my problematization of “job creation” as a priority in public and policy discourse a step further by questioning its position within the current global capitalist crisis. What motivates my analysis is not only the fact that creating employment has retained, in solutions for the crisis proposed by the right and the left alike, a far stronger normative centrality than, say, resource redistribution. It is not even the apparent fact that the systematic degradation of existences forced to rely on, or hope for, capitalist employment for their survival is one of the most evident and painful manifestations of the crisis itself. Those developments require in fact a deeper theoretical and political interrogation of contemporary imageries of progress that have kept economic activity and labor market participation as decontextualized signifiers of empowerment and social virtue regardless

² Barchiesi, F. (2011), *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany: State University of New York Press; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press), 247.

³ *Ibid.*

to all empirical counterevidence. The matter, in other words, is not of weighing the normative centrality of employment against its relative desirability or its practical, sociologically discernible consequences of improving people's lives, which often makes the choice between a bad job and no job at all the only admissible and significant alternative. I am rather interested in the *governmental effects* of "job creation" discourse, its capacity to deploy languages, knowledges, and representations to produce a social order by orientating values and conducts, signifying social existence, and structuring social conflicts.⁴ Removing "jobs" from the normative abstraction of policy categories allows one to study how ideas of economic activity practically make subjectivities and social relations governable by normalizing and ensuring predictability to the tensions, inequalities, and violence of market relations. An alternative – reductive and misleading – approach would be to assume the society in which "jobs" are to be "created" as natural and given rather than the result of political contestation and the policies that do create such jobs as mere techniques rather than a manifestation of discursive forces laden with power.

The current global crisis and its social impacts foreground what Christian Marazzi calls the "violence of financial capital."⁵ By that expression he means that profit-making in the current context of corporate globalization depends on the colonization and capture of life by finance, which turns life into an immediate factor of production, subject as such to the full destructive impacts of fluctuations of financial markets. Echoing a philosophical trajectory spanning from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, "life" does not mean here just *zoë*, mere biological subsistence, but rather "life forms" as the relationships of *social cooperation*

⁴ My use of "governmental effects" follows the use of "dispositif" and "apparatus" in Foucault, M. (1980), "The Confession of the Flesh", in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, 194-228 (New York: Vintage) and Agamben, G. (2009), "What is an Apparatus", in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, 1-24 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

⁵ Marazzi, C. (2010), "The Violence of Financial Capitalism", in *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*, edited by A.Fumagalli and S.Mezzadra, 17-60 (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e)).

bodies have to one another in order to increase their potentials to transform material reality.⁶ Therefore, financial capital colonizes life through the appropriation and commodification – or the transformation into profit and private property – of the constitutive elements of social cooperation: knowledge, language, and desire, which are part of what Hardt and Negri call “the common.”⁷

Under the specific profit expectations of financial capital, Marazzi continues, the labor force has undergone a profound transformation as the commodification of knowledge, language, and desire has created a “cognitive proletariat” for which old distinctions, such as that between workplace and society, or between producer and consumer, no longer apply. Older unionized constituencies are fragmented along differentially precarized employment relations with variable duration and juridical status. The erosion of jobs goes hand in hand with the decentralization towards the consumer – or, at this point, “prosumer” – of parts of product development (as in the online testing of new software products) and actual production and distribution processes (as in the transportation and assembly of furniture or the self-scanning of purchases in megastores like Ikea or WalMart), which reduce the demand for stable employees. More generally, companies appropriate the cognitive, linguistic, and communicative skills individuals develop throughout their social life course while striving to become employable in a context of declining guarantees and social protections. A case in point is provided by the exponential expansion of “internship” as a mode of first employment in developed and developing countries alike.⁸

But financial capital does not only precarize labor through its restructuring of manufacturing and commerce. It has also indirectly put forms of life to work by, for example, recasting desire into consumption backed by personal debt and securitized home equity loans, in themselves major factors of the current crisis. Non-wage income, of which personal and household debts are a large share, has by now surpassed wages as the driving force in the

⁶ Armstrong, A. (1997), “Some Reflections on Deleuze’s Spinoza: Composition and Agency”, in *Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer*, edited by K.A.Pearson, 44-57 (London: Routledge).

⁷ Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2010), *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press).

⁸ See Perlin, R. (2011), *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy* (London: Verso) and Ross, A. (2010), *Nice Work If You Can Get: Life and Labor in Precarious Time* (New York: New York University Press).

realization of profit through the sale of products incorporating surplus value.⁹ As a move towards accumulation based on finance, neoliberalism was a response to both the shrinking profit margins caused by militant working classes with a “social wage” in the postwar manufacturing economy and the constraints of low-wage labor regimes in realizing value within the subsequent context of globalization. Financial capital thus finds new avenues of profit less by directly extracting value in the labor process than by capturing the living across the workplace-society continuum and commodifying – through indebtedness and the privatization of basic utilities and social provisions – the expression of desire and the satisfaction of needs.¹⁰

We are dealing, in other words, with a pervasive process of enclosure, not dissimilar from the “primitive accumulation” observed in previous transitions to new modalities of accumulation. Contrary to the “old” enclosures, which focused on natural resources like land and water, the new enclosures of financial capital, its processes of turning the common into property, has life – desire, language, knowledge, social cooperation – as its object.¹¹ The producers of capital are thus no longer encompassed by the direct production process, the workplace, and the waged working class. Capitalist valorization relies in fact less and less on measuring, negotiating, and appropriating labor power according to quantifiable entities, such as work effort, the duration of the working day, the cost of workers’ reproduction. Rather, as life is put to work under the aegis of finance, capital incorporates at virtually no cost the productive potentials of an everyday social cooperation that *pre-exists* capital, is autonomous from it and, most importantly, is capable of *discursively and linguistically signify* its autonomy. The move implies few decisive consequences. First, once capital’s arbitrary enclosure and appropriation of the common of living labor exceeds the wage relation, the distinction between the traditional Marxian categories of profit and rent tends to disappear.¹² Second, the precarization of employment is thus not

⁹ Marazzi, “The Violence”, 30.

¹⁰ Morini, C. and A. Fumagalli (2010), “Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value”, *Ephemera* 10 (3/4): 234-62; Roggero, G. (2010), “Five Theses on the Common”, *Rethinking Marxism* 22 (3): 357-73.

¹¹ Hardt, M. (2010), “The Common in Communism”, in *The Idea of Communism*, edited by S. Žižek and C. Douzinas, 131-44 (London: Verso).

¹² Vercellone, C. (2010), “The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit”, in *Crisis in the Global Economy*, 85-118.

primarily determined, as in the conventional wisdom of much productivist sociology,¹³ by the breakup of existing working classes forced to lose protections, collective organizing, and rights, which underpinned welfarist ideologies of work with dignity. Instead, precarization consists in making a living substance of labor, which otherwise deploys its productive powers in autonomously pre-existing capital, depend on market competition and the imperatives of value creation. I am using here the word “pre-existing” in a non-essentialist manner; it does not refer to a social realm that comes “before” capital (as in “pre-capitalist modes of production”) or stands “outside” it (as in experimentations with alternative lifestyles or the idealization of “noncapitalist” subsistence economies in some activist literature).¹⁴ It rather means that capitalist development, including its most recent version as the globalization of financial capital, is a *response* to the challenge of turning the living and the common into profit.

By addressing that challenge through the direct colonization of life – which disposes of the prior passages of turning life into “abstract labor” and waged employment – capital also exposes itself to new potential fractures and instabilities. As a source of value creation, living labor is different from waged work: the latter is created by capital, the former is not. Rather, the cognitive (linguistic, discursive) autonomy of living labor defines precarious employment, with its attendant expectations, claims, and needs, as a *contested field of signification*.¹⁵ Furthermore, turning social cooperation into profit and subjecting it to market discipline, both necessary functions of capital, also profoundly destabilize capital. They in fact require a “freezing” of the

¹³ See for example Bauman, Z. (1998), *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press), Beck, U. (2000), *The Brave New World of Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press), and Sennett, R. (2000), *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton).

¹⁴ See Bennholdt-Thomsen, V., N. Faraclas, and C. von Werlhof, eds. (2001), *There Is an Alternative. Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization* (London: Zed Books). In the case of South Africa, Prishani Naidoo and Shannon Walsh have documented a variant of this discursive modality in the idealization by organic intellectuals of social movements of the community life of the poor and shackdwellers as an embodiment of truth, purity, and authenticity. See Walsh, S. (2008), “Uncomfortable Collaborations: Contesting Constructions of the Poor in South Africa”, *Review of African Political Economy* 116: 73-96 and Naidoo, P. (2010), “Subaltern Sexiness: From a Politics of Representation to a Politics of Difference”, *African Studies* 69 (3): 439-56.

¹⁵ Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation*, 6-12.

creative potential of social cooperation into the narrow, and usually painful and anxiety-ridden, path, of market competition. That “freezing” of living labor around the imperatives of survival in a context of growing insecurity, cutbacks of public services, and socioeconomic inequality ignites thus new conflicts where, as it surfaced in some of the Arab revolutions of 2010-2011 or the insurrections against austerity in Southern Europe and the United Kingdom at the time of writing, demands for “dignity” autonomize themselves from the labor market and the requirements of production. Conversely, such movements displayed the capability of cognitive labor in structuring, for example through the use of electronic media, the space of confrontation.¹⁶ Social contestation can now hardly be explained by the dialectical modalities dear to the old left, where the development of the forces of production clashes with prevailing relations of production. It is rather that, as capital tries to incorporate pre-existing relations of social cooperation into its forces of production, these latter find a terrain of struggle in the definition of their productive capacity in autonomous terms.

The “Job Creation” Imperative as a Modality of Capitalist Appropriation of the Living

It is common for the left to regard the precarization of employment mostly as the result of a successful neoliberal offensive on stable, secure, and unionized working classes. By doing so, the left has cast on precarious workers the socially pathological marks of defeat, domination, and disempowerment. Short of victorious, and often utterly improbable, attempts by labor movements to “organize the unorganized”, precarious work is represented as a condition of invisibility, anomie, and speechlessness. Thus Axel Honneth, for example, contrasts the atomized, purposeless emptiness of insecure jobs with what he imagines as the warmth and solidarity of the Fordist social contract.¹⁷ For Richard Sennett flexible jobs amount to nothing less than to a “corrosion of character”, a loss of sense and meanings coincidental with the

¹⁶ Revel, J. and T. Negri (2011), “The Common in Revolt”, <http://uninomade.org/commoninrevolt/>, retrieved on August 28, 2011.

¹⁷ Honneth, A. (2004), “Organized Self-Realization. Some Paradoxes of Individualization.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 7 (4): 463-78.

decoupling of individuals from socially useful, community-nurturing productivity.¹⁸ Guy Standing, evoking age-old ghosts troubling governmental imagination, comes to the point of seeing in the “precariat” a “new dangerous class” that, unless brought to the fold of progressive politics premised on employment, can become fodder for all sorts of reactionary and authoritarian adventures.¹⁹

In a quite ironic leap away from early proletarian deprecations of “wage slavery” and the “tyranny of work over life”²⁰, the hegemonic discourse of productivism that has accompanied the ascendant lefts of the twentieth century – welfarist social democracy in Europe, liberalism in North America, nationalism in the postcolonial world – has made of waged employment the fulcrum in a grammar of dignity, rights, and emancipation. The idealization of stable and decent jobs has thus encapsulated both the left’s capacity to make claims independent of neoliberal rationality and its last bastion of relevance against the ravages of market forces. Such a symbolic investment on work has underwritten the left’s critique of neoliberalism as determining a chasm between precarity and dignity, which makes it impossible for labor to provide existential meaning and social stability.²¹ By casting precarious employment as a condition that obliterates the wholeness of personality and political agency, however, the left has achieved the result of silencing workers’ strategies, autonomy and signifying practices as effectively as the economic liberalization it deprecates.²² Not only does the representation of precarity as a social problem fail to politically contest the productive and cognitive potentials of precarious workers, thus consigning them to neoliberal narratives of individual entrepreneurship. It also simplifies and reifies precarity into a mere occupational category and labor market position, which misses the

¹⁸ Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.

¹⁹ Standing, G. (2009), *Work Under Globalization. Building Occupational Citizenship* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar); Standing, G. (2011), *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury).

²⁰ Joyce, P. (1980), *Work, Society & Politics. The Culture of the Factory in Late Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press), 125.

²¹ Strangleman, T. (2007), “The Nostalgia for Permanence at Work? The End of Work and Its Commentators.” *Sociological Review* 55 (1): 81-103.

²² Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation*, 202.

broader political implications of precarious jobs as a social condition determined by the contrast, well captured by Claus Offe, between the declining significance of work as a foundation of decent life and its normatively enforced centrality in a social order averse to social equality and redistributive provisions.²³

As a result of their celebration of productive employment, left and right forces alike have ended up sharing a policy emphasis on “job creation” as the cornerstone of their images of progress and development. In the encounter, the left’s demands for “decent jobs” have melancholically longed for a lost world where capitalism could be allegedly attuned with solidarity and social justice. The move could do little to counter capital’s definition of jobs as dependent variables of market laws, which allowed corporate discourse to assert “job creation” as a hegemonic theme under rather different pretenses. For globalized and financialized capital, in fact, “job creation” does not even mean, as Paolo Virno aptly put it, the actual purchase of labor power, let alone its recruitment under “decent” conditions.²⁴ Job creation is rather shorthand for a discourse of self-responsibility and employability where occupational opportunities rely on individual initiative and the dismantling of fiscal and redistributive burdens on private enterprise. As jobs and social provisions stand thus in direct opposition to each other, with the former ascending to the role of master signifier of social existence, the policy emphasis on job creation has come to operate, at the micropolitical level of everyday lives, as a pedagogical technology, a mode of biopolitical “governmentality” in the Foucauldian sense. Its effect is that of directing the conduct of populations towards imagining themselves as workers in waiting, factors of production and human resources constantly optimizing and fine-tuning their potential for labor market competition, the reliance on which becomes the only virtuous modality of social inclusion. A left discourse that shares the right’s emphasis on economic activity and its pathologization of the “dangers” of not working or working intermittently has thus put little in the way of waves of pro-business interventions – including reduction of corporate taxes, the

²³ Offe, C. (1997), “Towards a New Equilibrium of Citizens’ Rights and Economic Resources?” In *Societal Cohesion and the Globalising Economy: What Does the Future Hold?*, edited by W. Michalski, R. Miller, and B. Stevens, 81–108 (Paris: OECD).

²⁴ Virno, P. (2004), *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Autonomedia).

systematic degradation of employment conditions, cutbacks in social services and safety nets – implemented in the name of job creation. More troublingly, the left has been consequently incapable of contrasting the ideological drifts that gave demands for jobs the sound of working-class nationalist closure, cultural resentment, xenophobia, and anti-immigration hysteria.²⁵

The policy centrality of job creation operates as a biopolitical device that disciplines popular values and conducts while fusing the imperatives of accumulation and governance. It makes the precarious multitudes generated by the systemic violence of globalized corporate capital governable by recentering desire around production and displacing it from a critique of that very violence. Should such a critique express itself, it might conversely lead to claims for a decent life, sustained by adequate forms of redistribution and decommodification, regardless to one's employment status. The idealization of employment as the cornerstone of inclusive citizenship is premised on a combination of moral and socio-scientific reasoning – the praise of self-reliance and responsibility blended with purportedly self-evident considerations of social and fiscal sustainability – that for Margaret Somers and Fred Block defines its “epistemic privilege” as impervious to empirical counterevidence.²⁶ It is on these premises that, despite the unrewarding, insecure, and fretful reality accompanying for the precariat the job-seeking imperative, “decent work” has acquired center stage in the imagination of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and many self-defined progressive governments as a sensible, practical policy option.

Yet, as Peter Waterman argues, the “decent work” agenda is a purely normative and prescriptive assertion, bankrolled by trade unions and left-liberal technocrats in the desperate quest for policy relevance after having been overwhelmed by the ruthlessness of economic liberalization. It consists of the protestation that a return to a mythical, universalized protected

²⁵ See Cowie, J. (2010), *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press) for a brilliant discussion of how in 1970s United States the defense of labor identities by older working classes took the form of a politics of “cultural pride and social resentment”, which, by obscuring the class dimensions of economic inequality, opened the way for white workers' ill-fated alignment with conservatism and the “Reagan revolution” of the 1980s.

²⁶ Somers, M. and F. Block (2005), “From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets, and Institutions over 200 Years of Welfare Debate.” *American Sociological Review* 70 (2): 260-87, 265.

labor force with benefits and rights can indeed square the circle of enhancing human dignity, enable growth, build communities, and equip workers with tools to compete in unforgivingly flexible labor markets.²⁷ One can indeed doubt, Waterman continues, the historical plausibility of this working-class mythology as its ostensible protagonists often were instead, in practical terms, male and white producers of imperial societies that imposed unfree labor to colonized peoples and unpaid women in the household. Instead of taking stock of this problematic genealogy, Waterman concludes, the “decent work” idea projects into the future its assumptive logic according to which it is in the nature of capitalist globalization to obviously evolve, in conditions of liberal democracy, in a gender-sensitive, worker-friendly, environmentally sustainable direction. At the same time, precisely because it draws its legitimacy from the purely imaginative premise of a capitalism with a human face and a moral conscience, “decent work” disallows an understanding of the power relations underpinning actually existing liberalization and the reasons why it makes work indecent for so many. It therefore forecloses other discursive virtualities – such as the idea that a decent life can be autonomous from work and the ethics of labor altogether – as it dispatches the liberation “from” and not only “of” work to the ranks of utopian reasoning. “Decent work” is thus a typical example of a “feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen”, the “mournful attachment” to which constitutes for Wendy Brown the stuff of progressive melancholia.

The convergence of left and right around “job creation” has given it an unassailable centrality in policy responses to the current global crisis of neoliberalism. It has, for example, been central to the debate on the US federal budget deficit, where it legitimized a range of competing proposals otherwise united in their determination to impose austerity and draconian cuts to public spending. As Archimedean points of the policy discourse, it is then little wonder if productivism and work ethic underpinned both the right-wing populism of the “Tea Party” and the Obama administration’s embrace of fiscal favors to corporations. Yet, as the “middle class”, American shorthand for workers with decent, stable jobs with benefits, has eroded and faded into a purely imaginary construct, productivist rhetoric has provided scant solace to the swelling

²⁷ Waterman, P. (2005), “From ‘Decent Work’ to ‘The Liberation of Time from Work’. Reflections on Work, Emancipation, Utopia and the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement”, unpublished paper.

ranks of the working poor navigating their way through widespread downward social mobility. In Europe, French president Sarkozy has made of “rediscover[ing] the worth of work”, against the presumed dependency-inducing indignities of social provisions not attached to employment, his rallying cry. Meanwhile, France’s system of social security and universal access to public healthcare and retirement has steadily declined. In its place there has been, in line with European Union orthodoxy, an explosion in privatized social insurance and “active labor market policies” aimed at pushing individuals into the labor market instead of protecting them from its deprivations, malfunctions, and inequalities.

But also experiments – followed with interest by a left eager to break free from the limitations of the “Washington consensus” – in the emerging economies of the southern hemisphere have hardly departed from a script that prioritizes economic activity and labor market participation. India’s “employment guarantees” projects and Brazil’s *Bolsa Familia* are the two most celebrated examples of this kind, consisting of conditional and limited public provisions such as periods of casual, underpaid work in the former case, cash payments for poor families sending children to school in the latter. Their rationale is to provide recipients with tools to replenish their human capital needed for labor market competition, but in practice they operate as active inducements towards precarious work. The compulsion to work for low-wages becomes then part of the solution to poverty, rather than part of the problem. The global economic elites and the international financial institutions have enthusiastically endorsed such projects as they combine political stability with limited budgetary and fiscal burdens for the upper classes.²⁸ The left’s support, on the other hand, praises these interventions for improving uncritically accepted indicators defined by development technocrats on often quite conservative bases, like the two US dollars per day that for the World Bank are the threshold of poverty.²⁹ Thus, in two of the most unequal societies in the world, progressive discourse ends up abetting interventions educating the

²⁸ See World Bank (2004), “Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Adaptable Program Loan in the Amount of US\$ 572.2 Million to the Federative Republic of Brazil for a *Bolsa Familia* Project in Support of the First Phase of the *Bolsa Familia* Program”, and World Bank (2001), *Social Protection Sector Strategy: From Safety Net to Springboard* (Washington, DC: World Bank).

²⁹ See Seidman, G. (2010), “Brazil’s ‘Pro-Poor’ Strategies: What South Africa Could Learn”, *Transformation* 72/73: 86-103.

poor to accept as the only viable, realistic choice the one between utter destitution and a level of pure biological reproduction adequate for labor market participation. The preservation of *zoë*, bare life as the receptacle of human capital – often disguised in the newly fashionable idiom of “resilience” – supersedes in this way the possibilities of the social *bios*, or common “forms of life”, to structurally criticize relations of power and resources. In other words, biopolitics marks the end of politics.³⁰

At a more practical level, the glorification of work in the decline of neoliberalism maintains a sturdy allegiance to old narratives of modernity as the unlimited development of the forces of production, whereas a crisis of employment is essentially defined by joblessness and measured through the unemployment rate. It is, conversely, hard for this modality of thought to locate employment crises in the predicament of the working poor and the unyielding policy-determined compulsion to rely on poverty wages as the primary means of survival. It is even harder for the left, as long as it confines itself in such policy and discursive strictures, to differentiate its demands for work from a mainstream rationality and commonsense exalting low wages as a path from poverty to personal responsibility and empowerment. It is precisely in such a conundrum that ideas of “decent work” show their practical and political limitations as they are constantly expected to recede in front of what conservative opinion calls the more realistic alternative between any job, at any condition, or no job at all.

South Africa is an interesting arena for these debates, as the sheer vastness of social inequalities, the current fragility of the ruling party, a reality of deep social confrontations, and significant vestiges of working-class assertiveness stand in the way of a coherent governmental biopolitical project. As I show elsewhere, the country has a remarkable policy “discursive heritage” centered on the virtues of employment, which even during the harshest conflicts between the apartheid regime and the liberation movements provided a shared horizon for divergent views of modernity, progress, and nation-building.³¹ It is also a country where two-

³⁰ Bonnie Honig well captures the opposition between “mere life” as the only ethical and political horizon allowed by neoliberal governance and “more life” as a hypothesis for a politics of liberation, see Honig, B. (2011), *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

³¹ Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation*, 135.

thirds of workers, overwhelmingly black, live in poverty and only between one quarter and one third of the economically active population has access to regular jobs. The New Growth Path (NGP) announced in 2010 by the Zuma administration claimed, reassuring its powerful labor constituency, a revision of the free-market utterances of its predecessor, the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. In presenting the NGP to the ANC, president Zuma, in particular, acknowledged that the jobs created in the wake of rapid economic growth for most of the 2000s did not have a satisfactory poverty-reducing impact. Yet, despite the centrality of “decent work” in the NGP, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) blasted the strategy as an updated version of neoliberalism and a betrayal of the workers’ mandate that underpinned the rise of Zuma’s leadership in 2007.³² The labor federation is particularly critical of the absence, in the strategy, of concrete redistributive social policies apart from the priority on the employment-orientated areas of education and skills.

It is, on the other hand, to be noted that such a comprehensive subordination of social policymaking to the requirements of labor market participation has a longer history than narratives of “betrayal” allow us to understand. It goes back at least to the social policy debates of the early 2000s, when for the first time in the history of the country the idea was advanced of a universal basic income grant independent of individual occupational status. The proposal was eventually killed by the ANC’s and the government’s resolute opposition to any generalized noncontributory provision that could be remotely perceived as a “disincentive” to seeking jobs. Despite its firm support for the basic income grant idea, however, COSATU too regarded it as a measure to facilitate economic participation rather than a form of income replacement for working-age unemployed, precarious workers, and the working poor. Organized labor’s lack of imagination on how redistribution can play a role in opposing the compulsion to poverty jobs, rather than just being an inducement towards them, greatly contributed to evacuate the proposal for a basic income – the amount of which was set at a paltry R 100 (US \$ 18) per month – of all transformative potential before its eventual demise. As a result, even if the 2002 governmental Taylor Committee in charge of restructuring the country’s social security system endorsed such a minimalist framing of the grant, the most important outcome of that debate was a paradigm that

³² Congress of South African Trade Unions (2011), “Government’s New Growth Path Framework: One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward.”

reasserted once and for all the centrality of employment and self-entrepreneurialism as the only salvation for the poor and the inviolable boundaries of the policy discourse.³³

The demand for “jobs” has, on the other hand, also characterized the imagination of redress of social movements – like the Anti-Privatization Forum and Abahlali baseMjondolo – that in the 2000s have opposed the ANC from staunchly “anti-neoliberal” positions, before slowly declining once confronted with the ANC’s renewed familiarity with left-sounding populist posturing in the age of Zuma and the impetuous leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema. In 2006 a social movement think-tank, the Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC) even launched a campaign for the recognition of the “right to work” as a state-sanctioned human right, thus giving new life – by bathing it in the stream of liberal-democratic constitutionalism – to a phrase elsewhere associated with the union-bashing right wing. The centrality of economic participation to ideas of freedom is not here, nonetheless, a mere byproduct of a contingent conversion of South Africa’s democratic experiment to the seductions of neoliberalism. It is rather the manifestation of deep historical trends that on one hand reflect the country’s colonial incorporation in global capitalism and on the other speak to the contradictory and contested position of work in Africa’s postcolonial modernity. It is to this latter aspect that I will thus turn my attention, which will then allow me, in my concluding observations, to bring into sharper focus my initial question on the relationships between jobs and emancipative imagination.

Africa and the Future History of Living Labor

In conclusion of his survey of the marginalization of Africa in mainstream narratives of globalization, James Ferguson wonders whether, instead of being a context of backwardness finding no place in the triumphalism of conventional globalization theory, Africa is indeed an “advanced mutation” from which the global appears

not a seamless, shiny, round, and all-encompassing totality. . . . Nor is it a higher level of planetary unity, interconnection and communication. Rather, the “global”

³³ Ferguson, J. (2007), “Formalities of Poverty: Thinking about Social Assistance in Neoliberal South Africa.” *African Studies Review* 50 (2): 71-86.

we see in recent studies of Africa has sharp, jagged edges; rich and dangerous traffics amid zones of generalized abjection; razor-wired enclaves next to abandoned hinterlands. . . . It is a global not of planetary communion, but of disconnection, segmentation, and segregation”³⁴.

The description recalls, and indeed allows to globally locate, the many wastelands of deindustrialization and environmentally destructive industrialization that, in affluent and emerging capitalist economies outside Africa, have accompanied the collapse of older working classes and the rise of new productive multitudes, employed or not, in conditions of generalized precariousness.

Underscoring Africa’s prefigurative potential is the fact that one has here hardly to wait for neoliberalism, financialization, and their crises to see precarization emerge as a mode of appropriation by capital of the social cooperation of living labor. Rather, part of the narrative of progress and modernity shared by colonial and postcolonial governments alike is the assumption that waged work can make unruly multitudes recalcitrant to capitalist discipline governable by turning them into “a predictable and productive collectivity”³⁵. Central to the elaboration of this vision was the role of international NGOs, aid agencies, trade unions, and organizations like the International Labour Organization. The “dignity of labor” was indeed a recurring rhetorical device for the colonial state to subjugate African labor power and was initially translated into overtly coercive and repressive practices.³⁶ The link between capitalist market discipline and Western modernity relied then on a moralistic understanding of civilization that represented Africans as falling short of the humanity guaranteed by whiteness and the imagined rationality of the *homo oeconomicus*. It was only in the experience of late colonialism, confronted with

³⁴ Ferguson, J. (2006), “Globalizing Africa? Observations from an Inconvenient Continent”, in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, 25-49 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 48-49.

³⁵ Cooper, F. (1996), *Decolonization and African Society. The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

³⁶ Isaacman, A. (1996), *Cotton Is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann); Penvenne, J.M. (1995), *African Workers and Colonial Racism. Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877-1962* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

incipient African nationalist movements and working class insurgencies, that the imperative to work for wages relinquished its purely didactic and paternalistic accoutrements and became instead part of a self-presentation of colonialism as a social and economic force conducive to “development”. Under the stimulant of late colonial social reforms, waged employment, which remained confined to small minorities of the African population, propagated nonetheless Western ideas of social integration premised on productivity pacts and industrial relations system, albeit on an unequal footing with European citizenship rights. The legalization of African trade unions, the regulation of employment conditions, and new social provisions represented not only the reluctant recognition by European employers and administrators of their dependence on African workers, the acquiescence of which could no longer be the result of overt coercion. They also provided African elites and nationalist leaders with images of social discipline, infused with gender and age authority, predicated upon the respectability of male breadwinning and its capacity to keep indocile women and youth under control.³⁷

The colonial project of governmentality through work faced two insurmountable contradictions. First, as Fred Cooper has shown, within a politically illegitimate system of rule African workers used the openings of colonial reforms to expand rather than settle their radical claims.³⁸ Capitalist work could not thus bridge the chasm between the proclaimed universality of its values and the material hierarchies, inequalities, and oppressions it actually reproduced. Second, it is ultimately impossible to deploy labor as a condition of human dignity, agency, and claims within a structure of social relations that makes blackness a less than fully human condition, or a position that disallows the autonomous definition of its own humanity.³⁹ The humanist and universalist pretensions of white civil society as a governance project in colonial and settler contexts did not, in fact, only justified the exploitation of non-white workforces. They also corralled with the imperatives of colonial production the meaning of black personhood. The idea of African “free labor” as the end of personal subjection went hand in hand with policies of

³⁷ Lindsay, L. (2003), *Working with Gender. Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

³⁸ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.

³⁹ Wilderson, F. (2010), *Red, White & Black. Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

unfreedom – like legislation punishing vagrancy, desertion, and the refusal of work – geared to turning black bodies into producers of capital.⁴⁰ Like nowhere else, the association of labor to ideas of decency revealed in colonial Africa a problematic tangle, constitutive of the capitalist imagination of work, of progress and domination, emancipation and subjection, while a rhetoric of civilization (moral first, socioeconomic later) disciplined black bodies and desires.

The African connection between work and decency as an overt project of disciplining beings considered less than human is troubling for the current normative imagination of work-based social inclusion, within and outside the continent. It is not only an unsavory but ultimately historically contingent precedent. Colonial Africa and postemancipation societies in the western hemisphere were in fact also laboratories for experimenting with ideas of market initiative, freedom, and rationality as ways of governing populations recalcitrant to capitalist employment and prone to express their unruly desire through work avoidance and the subversion of labor market discipline. Far from seeing proletarianization as a necessary process or the condition for more advanced forms of consciousness and organization, African workers have resisted working for wages throughout the continent's colonial history. Faced with the violence, racism, and inadequate rewards of the capitalist workplace, even the minority with access to wage-earning occupations often preferred casual employment, which, despite its insecurity, cushioned the impact of capitalist production discipline and preserved multiple modes of livelihoods, cultural practices, and support networks across urban and rural spaces.⁴¹ The refusal of waged work as a structuring principle of life was as important in African proletarian strategies and claims as workplace bargaining, unionization, or productivity. As a result, and to the great disappointment for their dreams of social discipline, “capital and the state had not created a reserve army of the

⁴⁰ See Eudell, D. (2002), *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press).

⁴¹ Examples are provided in Cooper, F. (1987), *On the African Waterfront. Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), Burton, A. (2005), *African Underclass. Urbanization, Crime and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam, 1919-1961* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), and Lubeck, P. (1985), “Islamic Protest under Semi-Industrial Capitalism: ‘Yan Tatsine Explained.’” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55 (4): 369-89.

unemployed but a guerrilla army of the underemployed”⁴² fighting with the weapons of “desertion, slowdowns, and efforts to shape their own work rhythms”⁴³. Instead of being a condition of disadvantage, as currently portrayed in progressive narratives of productivism, precarious jobs profoundly subverted Western modernity by exploding the contradictions of labor-centered fantasies of social integration. Eventual European decisions to decolonize Africa and put local elites in charge of their labor and social conflicts had thus much to do with the refusal by the colonized to identify themselves with the laboring subjects desired by the colonizers. The newly independent states inherited both these multifarious social subjectivities steeped in the refusal of work and the challenges they implied for governance. As former colonial subjects acceded to civil and political equality, the new rulers also had to rely, for their ability to govern, on a shaky nexus of work and citizenship shaped by the contradiction between the universal values of employment and the social hierarchies it creates. Those hierarchies were indeed deepened by the fact that only a minority of African workers could actually enjoy the stability and benefits of regular waged employment.

In the political orders of postcolonial Africa, the precariousness of work as a condition of political stability kept undermining both the reach of governmental authority and its attempts to discipline working classes through the cooption of trade unions.⁴⁴ For the minority of regularly employed workers, the incorporation of organized labor in the political system was nonetheless central to defuse social conflicts, depicted as inimical to general prosperity and to the uplift of the poor and unemployed. For the majority of workers excluded from wage earning – many of which on their way to what expert and policy parlance would define as the “informal economy” – the modernizing promise of work turned into the injunction in developmentalist discourse to forgo redistributive claims and moderate expectations for the sake of nation building. For both,

⁴² Cooper, F. (1993), “Africa in the World Economy.” In *Confronting Historical Paradigms. Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America* by F. Cooper, F. Mallon, S. Stern, A. Isaacman, and W. Roseberry, 84-201 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 134.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Freund, B. (1988), *The African Worker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 81-109.

the rhetoric of production and development determined the boundaries of agency in relation to the political order and their respective, unequal social positions within it.

Maybe the nationalist-developmental promise of job creation did outline, in the imagination of the elites, what Carmody calls Africa's "postcolonial social contract".⁴⁵ But once governmental practices are apprehended from the standpoint of ordinary lives and vernaculars, such a social contract and its underlying discipline of work took distinctive repressive forms. States used the register of work ethic and measures derived from colonial anti-vagrancy legislation to impose compulsory employment programs on newly perceived "dangerous classes", usually "work-shy" youth.⁴⁶ The fact that such interventions often remained limited and symbolic – also because in Africa the state's "power to inflict violence did not match the power to force people to work"⁴⁷ – is beside the point of how they signified their avowed targets. First, the discipline of work is integral to techniques "producing", as Basile Ndjio argues, "violence and coercion through which the state authority attempts to bring the bodies of its subjects under an endless process of tight discipline, subordination and servitude"⁴⁸. The process stands in an antagonistic relationship, he continues, with the "popular practices of insubordination and impoliteness" of multiple actors deemed as the *detritus* of neoliberal structural adjustment. They include laid off workers whose hopes of state-driven development were sorely frustrated and jobless youth for which such promises are hollow and inessential to begin with. In Ndjio's study of the *carrefours de la joie* ("crossroads of joy") in Yaounde' (Cameroon), the state's

⁴⁵ Carmody, P. (2002), "The Liberalization of Underdevelopment or the Criminalization of the State? Contrasting Explanations of Africa's Politico-Economic Crisis under Globalization." In *Globalization, the Third World State and Poverty-Alleviation in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by B.I. Logan, 47-62 (Aldershot: Ashgate), 53.

⁴⁶ For examples see Momoh, A. (2000), "Youth Culture and Area Boys in Lagos." In *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, edited by A. Jega, 181-201 (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet), Droz, Y. (2006), "Street Children and the Work Ethic. New Policy for an Old Moral, Nairobi (Kenya)", *Childhood* 13 (3): 349-63, and Shaidi, L. (1984), "Tanzania: The Human Resources Deployment Act 1983: A Desperate Measure to Contain a Desperate Situation", *Review of African Political Economy* 31: 82-87.

⁴⁷ Bayart, J.F. (1989), *The State in Africa. The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman), 23.

⁴⁸ Ndjio, B. (2005), "*Carrefour de la Joie: Popular Deconstruction of the African Postcolonial Public Sphere*", *Africa* 75 (3): 265-294, 266.

monumentality of production and order contrasts therefore with cultural, aesthetic, and musical expressions in which drunkenness and ostentatious sexuality feed irreverence towards power.

Second, the centrality of regular employment as the imagined foundation of virtuous identities provides the African state with ammunition to repress subsistence activities, as in the case of women running “informal” market, especially as they reclaim autonomous control of space and its organization.⁴⁹ What Bayat terms “quiet encroachments of the ordinary”, for example urban or rural land invasions, are thus “quiet” not in the sense of “hidden” forms of resistance but because they produce political effects – they affect the distribution of power and resources – as immanent to their very social cooperation rather than as a result of consciously political action.⁵⁰ Such political spaces are, for sure, often rife with violence, subjugation, inequality, and chauvinism. Besides, their autonomy from the state and capital is always relative and contingent to opportunistic negotiations and dynamics of capture, which, if anything, highlight their relevance as a conflictual terrain of engagement. From this paper’s point of view it is, however, more important to underline that these spaces’ *potential* for autonomy resides in their participants’ “signifying practices”, in Ferguson’s sense as “a capability to deploy signs” that position actors in relation to realities of exploitation, duress, and economic necessity.⁵¹

As I argue elsewhere, “signification also reclaims a political space out of what would otherwise be mere survival: it expresses the subversive claim that the work-citizenship nexus of official discourse is incommensurable with, and untranslatable into, workers’ quotidian experiences”⁵². Spaces of political potentiality as spaces of incommensurability, finally, also disrupt the neoliberal attempt to fill the void left by the collapse of authoritarian developmentalism with new narratives celebrating, in ways echoed in South Africa by the “two

⁴⁹ Lindell, I. (2010), “Introduction: The Changing Politics of Informality. Collective Organizing, Alliances and Scales of Engagement”, in *Africa’s Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa*, edited by I. Lindell, 1-30 (London: Zed Books).

⁵⁰ Bayat, A. (2000), “From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’: Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South”, *International Sociology* 15 (3): 533-557.

⁵¹ Ferguson, J. (1999), *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 66.

⁵² Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation*, 16.

economies” debate, entrepreneurialism in the “informal economy” as building blocks of a liberal-democratic “civil society”. Left projects and social movements are, however, seriously wanting to the extent they contest that void with a melancholic longing for jobs and economic participation that – apart from being surpassed by the potency of the multitude’s living labor, its “uneconomical economies” and ways of “doing things”⁵³ – reflects liberal premises of order while addressing none of the social precariousness and vulnerability they produce.⁵⁴

Conclusion

As the postcolonial promise of decent work has faded in neoliberalized Africa, its inhabitants have responded to the precariousness of employment by detaching economic activities and life strategies from the sites of production. Escape from the compulsions of work, determined by both governmental injunctions and the erosion of social safety nets, has often taken the form of accumulation dependent on more or less undocumented circulation of goods and people or overt smuggling and counterfeiting. As “citizens are those who can have access to the networks of the parallel economy”⁵⁵, the meaning of employment within such a composition of living labor has increasingly come to rely on networks operating in the crevices between legality and illegality. In its attempt to discursively absorb informality and precarious work within its entrepreneurial template, neoliberalism has paradoxically contributed to the implosion of work as a realm of

⁵³ Simone, A. (2004), *For the City Yet to Come. Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

⁵⁴ Indicative in this regard is a recent collection edited by Ilda Lindell (*Africa’s Informal Workers*), whereby the editor’s introduction emphasizes the complexity, fluidity, and contingency of informal work against the dangers of prescriptive idealizations, but then moves to reassure the reader that what informal workers want is to be “recognized as workers”, rest their claims in trade unions and have the ILO’s promise of decent jobs fulfilled. This contradiction between the anti-normative pretenses of empirical analysis and the normative longing for employment-centered discourse is, on the other hand, amplified in most of the book’s country-based chapters, which document production-based organizations and identities recurrently subordinated by states and NGOs or succumbing to chauvinism and xenophobia, or international connections that mostly benefit the conservative and free-trade agendas of “informal” employers rather than their workers.

⁵⁵ Mbembe, A. (2001), *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 84.

predictable conducts and reproducible industrial relations. The poor may well demand “job creation” to make their claims visible to those in power, but by no means does a tactical appropriation of official discourse indicate an embrace of its underlying imagination of discipline and social order. The conditions in which communities survive the structural violence of corporate globalization are complex enough to caution both against the idea that “decent work” is a feasible perspective and the assumption that social emancipation can be equated with employment.

Conversely, the devastating impact of neoliberalism on African labor organizations does not necessarily hamper the capacity of precarious work to disrupt capitalist discipline, a capacity that, it is worth emphasizing, has largely preceded the neoliberal wave as a challenge for Africa’s rulers. To grasp and conceptualize such capacity in *political* terms, however, one needs to move beyond the metaphysics of labor organizing as the core agent of a *transcendent* transformation and engage with potentials that are – in forms that are surely controversial, messy, ambiguous, when not unpalatable – *immanent* to the social and significational practices of living labor. A survey of the African predicament enriches and gives historical depth to current modalities of social conflict, where capital’s capture of living labor and its common – knowledge, desire, language, social cooperation – rather than the mere liquidation of traditional working classes, defines the precariousness of work and its lines of fracture. A politically progressive discourse that is focused on “job creation” (no matter how “decent”) forecloses this terrain of contestation and opens the way to its being pathologized as disorder or sociologized as “marginality”. Silencing the political potentials of precarity plays indeed a crucial role in a broader critical capitulation, which opens the way to all sorts of reactionary interventions that reinforce corporate power in the name of “job creation”. It is thus not the precariat as the “new dangerous class”, as Guy Standing wants us to believe, that provides ammunition to right-wing and authoritarian politics, but a fixation with employment and productivism as norms of social order while these buzzwords are less and less capable of signifying decent existence for the employed and the jobless alike.

Moving, instead, from a normative terrain to one of critical analysis would require one to recognize that at stake is not only (or not necessarily) whether “decent” work is preferable to “indecent” jobs, or whether a reduction in the rate of unemployment can constrain capital’s

options, or whether having a job can make the difference between extreme, paralyzing, despairing and tolerable, resilient, and self-activating poverty. In fact, contrary to normative rationality, critical analysis has to recognize the complexities of emancipative, progressive discourse as characterized by the indissoluble knot of liberation and subjection and the simultaneous enabling and foreclosing of possibilities. Then demands for “job creation” can be tackled from a different angle: as they strive to negotiate capitalist relations of production they miss how capital valorizes itself not only by directly employing people but by turning into property and rent the social cooperation of living labors that capital does not “create” but nonetheless continuously appropriate as the new frontier of profit-making. Turning this into a “job creation” issue would mean that social cooperation is relevant and politically visible only once it has been incorporated in the creation of value for capital. The result would be to subordinate imaginations and practices of liberation to the capitalist dream of freezing the social into the production of commodities while rendering the autonomy of living labor invisible and speechless.

As a condition of political possibility that problematizes work-centered normativity and productivist views of emancipation, precarity discloses instead radically alternative terrains of imagination and claims. It allows, for example, to think decommodification and redistribution, including forms of non-work related universal income, neither as incentives to work, as neoliberalism and part of the left celebrate, nor as “handouts” as they deprecate. They would rather constitute a reappropriation at a society-wide level of livelihoods that otherwise capital appropriates at no cost. At stake would thus be a shift from “welfare” to “commonfare” as a horizon of contestation to reopen across the social fabric the battle deferred (when not lost) at the point of production.⁵⁶ As Mario Tronti once argued, the old factory working class effectively challenged capital when it struggled to abolish itself as a producer and deliverer of capital, not when it allowed to be idealized under the keywords of work ethic, occupational pride, citizenship, and productivity.⁵⁷ Demands for a “living wage” were about refusing the

⁵⁶ Fumagalli, A. (2007), *Bioeconomia e capitalismo cognitivo. Verso un nuovo paradigma di accumulazione* (Roma: Carocci).

⁵⁷ Tronti, M. (1980), “The Strategy of Refusal.” In *Italy: Autonomia. Post-Political Politics*, edited by S. Lotringer and C. Marazzi, 28-35 (New York: Semiotext(e)).

compatibilities of capital as a regulatory principle of life. Those who fought for the eight-hour working day did so as a response to what was then called “wage slavery”, not for the sake of orderly industrial relations and collective bargaining. As the exploitation of living labor worldwide is reverting to the extremes of that age, social struggles are thus coalescing around the question of what the “living wage” of precarious multitudes would look like today.