

Labour, laziness and distribution: work imaginaries among the South African unemployed

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In a speech in March 2015, South Africa's president at the time, Jacob Zuma, imagined what would be different were he a dictator instead of an elected official. His top priority: changing the culture of laziness in the country, especially among entitled and 'idle youth'. Such idle youth would be put to work, rather than sitting around asking for government handouts (Molatlhwa 2015).

Zuma is not alone in decrying the idle youth: there is widespread belief in South Africa that social grant beneficiaries abuse government money, and that grants encourage teenage pregnancies and dependency on the state (Patel 2016). This belief persists – and powerfully shapes public policy – despite a total lack of evidence. Indeed, the rhetoric of the lazy and entitled welfare dependant is echoed around the world. It is repeated frequently by neoliberal critics of the welfare state in the US and the UK, long spurred on by books such as Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, which points to welfare dependency rather than poverty as a key social problem (Murray 1994 [1984]). But such rhetoric is particularly striking in South Africa, with a 29 per cent official and 35–40 per cent expanded unemployment rate (StatsSA 2019),¹ which has persisted since the mid-1970s (Seekings and Nattrass 2005). Unemployment for young people is even higher: the official unemployment rate among people aged fifteen to thirty-four is 66 per cent (StatsSA 2016). It is not laziness but rather structural economic dynamics that underpin the predicament of South Africa's unemployed youth (Altman and Valodia 2006). South Africa is thus a reflection of broader trends in the neoliberal world order: a concurrent fixation with the symbolic figure of the lazy, unemployed welfare dependant along with rising unemployment, precarity, inequality and wage stagnation (Li 2010; 2017).

An increasingly considered intervention in this context is expanding social protection by guaranteeing a minimum livelihood to those who cannot reliably access sufficient income through labour. This guarantee can come in various

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¹The strict definition of unemployment counts only those who are actively seeking work but do not have a job. Expanded unemployment rates include discouraged work seekers. Even the expanded rates are likely to be underestimates, as in South Africa any money-making activities are considered to be employment by the strict definition.

forms, be it unconditional or conditional cash transfers to the poor,² or universal basic income (UBI) – a redistributive policy that guarantees an income to all, regardless of employment, age or other status. Some scholars of such direct forms of distribution argue that they have the potential to decommodify work and decent employment as the key distributive and developmental mechanism (Ferguson 2009; 2015; Fouksman and Klein 2019; Weeks 2011). Together with this surging interest in direct distribution, scholars such as Ferguson and Li (2018) have called for a conceptual shift away from a normative and teleological orientation towards the idea of the ‘proper job’ as the necessary aim and end of development. This article directly takes up this call. Rather than focusing on policy interventions or the views of intellectuals and elites, here we focus on the views of the very ‘surplus populations’ left out of labour markets. In particular, we explore why the unemployed poor, the very people who stand to benefit the most from the decommodification of work and the decentring of employment within distributive systems, often continue to insist that labour and cash must remain intertwined.

This article focuses on unemployed or marginally employed able-bodied young men in urban South Africa as a prism through which to understand the ways in which the poor themselves think about labour and income. In particular, we examine the symbolic rhetoric of ‘laziness’ frequently invoked by our informants. Tracing this ‘laziness’ discourse in an informal settlement in South Africa allows us to uncover the ways in which labour and income are linked together within a bidirectional logic that posits both that income must be deserved through work, and that the hard-working deserve income. Anything that breaks apart this logic – be it a grant recipient or a government official who does not labour sufficiently but does access money, or, in a paradoxical twist, an immigrant who works hard but does not receive a viable income in return – is dismissed or reviled.

In this article we examine the broad contours of this link between work and distribution via three forms of the laziness discourse: the lazy cash grant recipient, the exploited migrant who makes refusing low-paid work appear to be laziness, and the lazy government bureaucrat. These three iterations of laziness allow us not only to tease out the logics linking waged work and direct distribution, but also to explore their underlying contradictions and complexities, including those of gender, relational obligations, expectations of citizenship and the inevitable tensions between aspirational hopes and economic realities. Ultimately, we make the case that to begin thinking ‘beyond the proper job’ (Ferguson and Li 2018), we must first understand and then interrogate the nuanced logics that continue to bind together hard work, deservingness and income, even for those no longer needed by labour markets.

²The World Bank now (cautiously) supports cash transfers as a tool of development (World Bank 2015); the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have been actively promoting the idea of ‘universal social protection floors’ (comprising a minimum income guarantee and other public goods such as healthcare) (ILO 2012). For more on cash transfers, see Hanlon *et al.* (2010), and for a meta-review of their impact, see Bastagli *et al.* (2016).

Context: labour and distribution in South Africa and beyond

South Africa amplifies many global economic trends around growing precarity, inequality and labour force surpluses. In the context of surging inequality around the world, South Africa is one of the world's most unequal major countries, both in income and in wealth or asset inequality (World Bank 2016; Orthofer 2016), and has some of the world's lowest levels of social mobility (Houle 2019). This inequality is occurring within the context of ongoing and long-term unemployment mentioned above. And while South Africa's economy has been growing over the past few decades (though slowly and with occasional setbacks and periods of contraction), this growth has failed to lead to any substantive reduction of unemployment – a situation increasingly common in the post-recession world economy (Trading Economics 2018).

Yet like most other capitalist economies around the world, wage labour remains key in both the radical and reformist political and cultural discourse in South Africa. The centrality of waged work in the social and political imaginary in South Africa is linked to its history of capitalist development and accumulation (Hull and James 2012). The destruction of peasant agriculture and restrictions on the informal economy under apartheid created a society that was overwhelmingly reliant on waged work (Seekings and Natrass 2005). Migrant waged work in the mines, in particular, offered a powerful image for social order and citizenship, what Ferguson (2013) calls 'work-membership', which oriented and organized people's lives throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, people's incorporation within the labour market was never 'uniformly voluntary' and was often synonymous with forced migration, oppression and abuse (Bolt 2013: 243). Pass laws during apartheid limited the movement of black South Africans and tied urban residence to state-recognized employment. The racialized spatial legacy of townships and homelands located far from economic opportunity and the enduring legacy of inequality in the acquisition of skills and education persist in South Africa today (Philip 2010). As we shall see, these legacies continue to affect the economic realities and attitudes of our (poor, black, unemployed) interlocutors.

South Africa's recession in the mid-1970s marked a shift from labour shortages to mass unemployment, with a labour market that required fewer people and more skilled labour, a pattern that has continued to the present (Seekings and Natrass 2005; 2015). This coincided with a process of de-agrarianization and a spatial shift away from rural employment to a concentration of work in cities – hence increased urban migration (Du Toit and Neves 2007). The restructuring of the economy in the 1990s towards more free-market conditions ushered in 'jobless growth' (Hull and James 2012: 4). Increased labour market casualization and subcontracting are the outcome of these economic changes (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Kenny and Webster 1998). Like many other high- and middle-income countries, South Africa struggles in the wake of deindustrialization as manufacturing both automates and continues its search for cheap labour elsewhere. The rise of precarious work and the persistently high rates of poverty and inequality in South Africa³

³Official poverty rates remain at over 50 per cent (StatsSA 2017), and 54 per cent of South Africans are in danger of regular or intermittent hunger (Shisana *et al.* 2013).

challenge the promise of progress and emancipation that waged work had come to embody throughout black working-class struggles (Barchiesi 2008).

In response to such challenges, South Africa seriously considered implementing a small universal basic income grant in the early 2000s, but rejected the proposal, despite widespread support from labour unions and civil society.⁴ Instead, South Africa chose to implement a system of social grants that explicitly excludes those who are physically capable of work. Only ‘the deserving poor’ – the elderly, the disabled or children – receive welfare grants (Seekings 2008). Even such policies engender controversy: political elites continue to fear that the poor remain dependent on the welfare state, rather than being model workers or entrepreneurs growing the economy (Barchiesi 2007a; 2007b).⁵

Yet despite such concerns, South Africa’s current social grant system is substantial. Indeed, James Ferguson (2015) argues that South Africa is leading the way in the universality of its policy response to lingering unemployment, inequality and poverty. About a third of the country’s population now receives a transfer from the state in the form of a social grant.⁶ Many more are dependent on the financial support of social grant recipients.

Ferguson celebrates the expansive nature of these grants as heralding the beginnings of a new politics of distribution. While acknowledging that grants are still pointedly unavailable to the able-bodied who are not primary childcarers, and that the South African state explicitly rejected the idea of universal basic income, he argues that the South African grant system will ‘gradually creep toward a kind of universalistic, citizenship-based entitlement’ and will thus achieve the ‘result of universal income support through the back door’ (2015: 205). Ferguson’s optimism rests on what he sees as ‘an explosion of new thinking suggesting that such payments are warranted as a kind of “rightful share,” often rooted in arguments for the social origins of wealth’ (*ibid.*: 205). Ferguson makes the case that such new thinking, along with ‘new distributive developments that exist not in some proposed future but right here and now, before our eyes’ (*ibid.*: 200–1), might be counterbalancing (or even winning out against) ‘the continued political power of a nostalgically productivist vision’ (*ibid.*: 200). This article complicates such arguments by exploring the frictions and contradictions

⁴The South African treasury claimed that a basic income grant of 100 rand (£9 at the time) per month for each South African was fiscally irresponsible, but a number of social commentators claim that even more pressing were ideological concerns about giving handouts to those who should be gaining income through wage labour (Barchiesi 2007a; Marais 2018; Matisonn and Seekings 2003; Seekings and Matisonn 2012; Standing and Samson 2003).

⁵It is worth noting a tension in the ANC government’s discourse between a commitment to ‘comprehensive’ social protection and their ambivalence towards expanding social assistance. While it is perhaps fair to say that the majority of policymakers would prefer an expansion of employment to an expansion of social assistance, they differ in their hostility towards the latter in the face of failure on the former (Seekings and Natrass 2015: 150–61).

⁶These grants come in three forms: a child support grant of 430 rand (roughly £22) per child per month (paid to the child’s primary carer until the child turns eighteen), a disability grant of 1,780 rand (£93) per month, and an older person’s grant of 1,500 rand (£80) per month for those who are sixty years old or older. In 2019, to receive the child support grant, one could not earn more than 4,200 rand (£220) per month. To access the disability or the older person’s grant, one could not earn more than 6,866 rand (£360) per month, and one’s assets could not be worth more than 1,174,800 rand (£62,000) (figures taken from the South African Social Security Agency website at <<https://www.sassa.gov.za/>>).

between such ‘new thinking’ and the ongoing importance of narratives of deservingness, hard work and labour even among those who stand to benefit most from such new politics of distribution.

To do so, this article uses ethnographic and qualitative data collected by Dawson during twelve months of ethnographic research, conducted primarily between 2015 and 2016. This research focused on unemployed and marginally employed able-bodied young people, especially young men, in Zandspruit informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs. It uses data from long-term participant observation and informal conversations in people’s houses, on street corners and at taverns and a local youth-run NGO that provides a structured environment for youth to pass time, build friendships, and get information about educational and economic opportunities. We also draw on data from a series of twelve facilitated focus-group discussions that took place at this NGO, together with repeated in-depth interviews with a group of thirty-seven young people.⁷

Zandspruit started as a small squatting community on private agricultural land in 1994 but grew exponentially in the following decade as people flocked to Johannesburg to look for employment and better lives. Zandspruit’s population is now over 30,000, almost entirely black African, and is particularly youthful – 55 per cent of Zandspruit residents are classified as youth (age fifteen to thirty-four years). Only 25 per cent of Zandspruit’s residents were born there: over half migrated from South Africa’s other eight provinces, and 19 per cent are immigrants from other African countries (StatsSA 2011).

Zandspruit has been the site of widespread, recurring and violent protest action, which is a reaction to many young people’s experience of being excluded from opportunities to access education, work, housing and urban space, and echoes service delivery protests in townships around the country (Dawson 2014a; 2014b; von Holdt 2013). This feeling of exclusion is accentuated by the juxtaposition of Zandspruit with nearby upmarket golf estates, townhouse complexes and a large government housing development, a juxtaposition that exposes the acute inequality that characterizes post-apartheid South Africa. It is in this context that this article looks at how the unemployed poor, and in particular urban young men outside formal employment, think about labour and income.

The lazy grant recipient: those who get money without labouring – part I

Most of the young unemployed men we spoke to in Zandspruit are concerned with the moral consequences of welfare abuse and laziness, and hold strong beliefs that income should not come without work. For instance, in a focus-group discussion on extending South Africa’s current child support grant from age eighteen to

⁷All direct quotes and observations in this article are drawn from interview transcripts and field notes from fieldwork conducted by H. J. Dawson between June and September 2011 and from June 2015 to February 2016. The field research for this article was conducted in English, both because all of the young men involved in this research were fluent in English, and because not one of South Africa’s eleven languages is spoken by more than 15 per cent of Zandspruit’s population as their home language (or language of origin) (StatsSA 2011).

twenty-three held in the NGO office (an off-white prefab container behind the local clinic), all but one of the young men in attendance dismissed the idea.⁸ They worried that others – though never themselves – would use the money for drugs and alcohol or would choose not to work. The focal point of the dismissal was the ‘lazy people’ who would benefit from the system and get even lazier if they were given a grant. What these young men proposed as an alternative was that the government provide jobs, skills training or free tertiary education rather than money.

Arnold,⁹ age thirty-one, who lives alone in a shack in the most poorly serviced section of the settlement and runs his own small garden-service business, was against the proposal. ‘[If] you’re not working for [money],’ he said, ‘you misuse it.’ A number of men reiterated this belief, insisting that youth would use such money to buy alcohol and drugs that would further destroy their communities. The overriding concern with detaching livelihood from waged labour, with getting money for ‘doing nothing’ or ‘for free’, is that it would discourage young people from enrolling in post-school education, starting a business or entering the labour force. ‘When you get things for free it turns to make your mind to relax,’ said Sibongile (age thirty-one), who was the volunteer secretary of the youth-run NGO. ‘If you get that money you will be more lazy,’ said Arnold. Both Arnold and Moses (age twenty-three) admitted that a few hundred rand was not enough to cover even basic essentials such as electricity and food, but still felt that the grant would result in young people sitting at home and waiting for the grant to be paid instead of looking for work. Only one of the young men in the discussion that day challenged other youths’ labelling of black South Africans who receive social grants as lazy. ‘I think this is an insult to the people [who depend on grants] when you say social grants create laziness,’ he argued, emphasizing the impossibility of living off a child support grant. He instead insisted that black South Africans were not lazy and rather ‘deserve to live better because South Africa is rich’.

None of the ‘lazy people’ our interlocutors worry about were present at the conversation: none of the participants identified themselves or each other as lazy. But these young men insist that the lazy are out there, and evoke laziness as the reason to give up on a policy from which they themselves stand to gain. ‘Lazy people’ was a recurring theme in many other conversations we had with young men, including those who, instead of passing their time at the local NGO, spent their days sitting with friends on street corners or outside the many taverns and carwash stands. Christine Jeske (2016; *forthcoming*) has noted the way in which the ‘laziness narrative’ is used by poor, unemployed young people to explain their own economic

⁸This policy idea was debated in South Africa in 2012 and 2015, in the form of both a new ‘job-seekers’ grant’ and an extended child support grant. Although such an expansion might seem to be a move towards more universal forms of social protection, the South African government framed it in workfarist terms, as a policy that would enable young people to find work more effectively. Yet despite government insistence that such grants would increase employment and would not act as an alternative to work, the policy proposals were widely condemned in popular discourse as increasing laziness and dependency (Ferreira 2015; Jones 2012; Pressly 2015). Instead of a jobseekers’ grant, the government opted for a ‘youth wage subsidy’, which is meant to incentivize the private sector to employ young people through tax benefits.

⁹Pseudonyms have been used.

marginalization. Yet Jeske argues that these same youths used the word with an ‘apologetic hesitancy’ and spoke with ‘a sense of disappointment both in those being called lazy and in themselves for having to admit they believed in this laziness’ (2016: 35). Part of the utility of this narrative of laziness is as an explanation of unemployment and poverty. Jeske argues that unemployed youth use the category of laziness because they lack an alternative explanation for why people are not working (i.e. a structural understanding of poverty and inequality). This discourse thus reinforces a normative (or at least aspirational) belief in meritocracy (and a distinction of who is deserving) by insisting that cash and hard work should be linked. And yet it is clear that both our own and Jeske’s interlocutors know the aspirational nature of such views: they know that getting a job and a decent wage takes more than working hard or having skills.

This was especially clear in a conversation with Joel (age twenty-five), who had recently moved to Johannesburg from Limpopo Province to look for work. During a discussion about the difficulties he faced finding work, he deplored the necessity of ‘connections’ and the widespread system of paying bribes to secure a job. Our interlocutors are thus well aware that finding a job requires social capital that has nothing to do with merit or hard work. Moreover, when we had further conversations with young men about laziness, they often moved away from saying that they (and other black South Africans) were ‘lazy’ and rather emphasized the precariousness and low pay of most of the jobs available to them. Laziness is thus an unstable signifier for these men: as we shall see later in the article, it is deployed in a variety of shifting and often contradictory ways to support both normative and aspirational views on the ways in which both people and the economy ought to function (and why they fail).

Later in the discussion, Sibongile, who is unemployed but active in local African National Congress (ANC) political structures, said that his support for an expanded grant was predicated on the existence of ‘terms and conditions’ preventing misuse. But misuse is not Sibongile’s only concern: he argued that such a grant should be paired with a ‘process or a policy’ that would help facilitate skills acquisition and ultimately employability. This, he said, would ensure that the programme was ‘sustainable, for an individual, and for government’. Many of our interlocutors said that they would not trust the government to keep giving out grants and asked what would happen after they turn twenty-three. If you ‘give someone 300 rand today’, said Senosi (age twenty-three), ‘it will be over tomorrow ... but give someone skills today and they have the skills forever’. This is the classic ‘teach a man to fish’ argument, which hinges on the continuing future utility of certain skills (such as the ability to catch fish). In quotes like this, these young men refer to employment and skills as permanent states. Yet on other occasions, as we will see later, these views are contradicted by their experiences of finding that education or qualifications hold no guarantee of employment, let alone well-paying and respectable jobs.

Nonetheless, many of our interlocutors repeatedly made a distinction between grants as a fleeting gift for the present, and education, skills and work programmes as an ‘investment’ in the future. Lawrence (aged thirty-three) stressed that the government must ‘not just give [young people] money and leave them’ but rather ‘invest in children from primary school until university’, because ‘once you invest in education you invest in the country’. Similarly, Senosi justified his preference for ‘investing’ in young people’s skills and work opportunities over ‘giving’

them money directly because this would ‘better the chances for the future’. These young men echo other findings regarding the views of young women in Soweto (Hochfeld and Plagerson 2011) as well as those of older women in rural KwaZulu-Natal, who see grants as ‘being temporary and vital for the present, but not especially good for the future’ (Dubeld 2013: 215).¹⁰ Stability and perpetuity are thus key factors in the preference for education, qualifications and jobs over grants – the assumption (or perhaps the hope) that once you are educated and working you have both security and the prospect of social mobility.

A few young men suggested a counterproposal to grant expansion: the government should give large corporations (Coca-Cola was one suggestion) subsidies to hire unemployed youth on traineeships. In other words, these men were suggesting that state revenue could be better spent subsidizing hugely profitable private corporations to hire young people.¹¹ Others proposed that government scrap the child support grant altogether. Lindokhule (age twenty-eight) said that instead of giving childcare grants, the government should hire local people directly. He suggested that the government could hire locals to do small-scale agriculture projects on urban peripheries, supply school feeding schemes, or clean police stations – and pay a ‘reasonable’ monthly salary of between R3,000 and R4,500 (£170–£250). ‘We don’t want grants,’ said Lindokhule. ‘There is nothing you can do with R300.’ Instead, the government must focus both on work programmes such as these and on enforcing minimum wage policies, which would enable him to take better care of his children rather than being reliant on social grants.

This dismissal of R300 (£17) raises an important question: to what extent does the small size of already existing grants, which are designed to help those who are unable to work due to disability or age survive at a minimal level, and which therefore cannot be taken seriously as a means of provisioning in any permanent sense, contribute to the dismissal of grants? Lindokhule’s reference to needing ‘reasonable’ wages to take care of his children is revealing in this sense. It suggests that understanding men’s hesitance towards a more expansive social grant system requires us to explore their attitudes towards the existing grants, as well as the deeply held and long-standing links between wage labour and a social order premised on the ‘male breadwinner’ (Hunter 2010; 2011; Moodie 1994).

Young men’s resistance to expanded social grants are thus part of wider social anxieties and contestations around the reconfiguration of intergenerational and gendered social relationships and obligations. This reconfiguration is itself at least in part a result of the distribution of social grants. For instance, Joel, who had lived with his grandmother and had been entirely dependent on her state pension before moving to Zandspruit, described social grants as ‘causing destruction’ by facilitating the breakdown of social and gender roles. Another young man called Mandla (age thirty-two) refused to support his two children financially, despite making sizeable amounts of money informally through letting out

¹⁰Our focus in this article is on the views of young men. We need more research to differentiate with more finesse the views of men and women, as well as the young and the elderly. These differences are beyond the scope of this article, but are important to further our grasp of the real and imagined relationship between distribution and labour.

¹¹In effect, this is the very youth wage subsidy that the ANC chose to implement instead of a jobseekers’ grant. The subsidy was a controversial policy that has been shown, as of 2017, to have had no statistically significant impact on youth unemployment rates (Ebrahim *et al.* 2017).

property in Zandspruit. He justified his and other men's abandonment of paternal responsibility on the grounds that social grants had come to substitute men's role as 'provider'. He told us that 'if the government cancels this thing of giving them [women] money [i.e. the child support grant], we will support [our children]'. These views echo widespread anxieties over the dissolution of a gender and age hierarchy (premised on male breadwinning), based on the confluence of mass unemployment, the feminization of the labour market (albeit at the more poorly paid end) (Casale and Posel 2002; Skinner and Valodia 2001), and the distribution of social grants largely to mothers and the elderly (Dubbeld 2013: 203). A key source of resistance to the expansion of social grants is thus men's sense of exclusion from a historically close relationship between wage labour and a patriarchal order (Hunter 2010), which some scholars suggest has fed male anxieties and resentment (Mosoetsa 2011).

Of course, not all of our interlocutors hold these views. Many, in fact, could think of people they knew personally for whom a social grant is all that stands between them and starvation. Yet despite this recognition, the young men we spoke with believe that in choosing between government policies of grants, wage subsidies and public work programmes, grants are the least preferable option. What these young men do *not* question is the centrality of the state in accessing wealth. The central question is thus not whether the state should play a role in the distribution of resources, but rather who *deserves* to get a share – and the answer, for these young men, is those who engage in wage labour or entrepreneurship of some form.

This logic often persists in the face of these men's own experience with government programmes. Most of the government interventions suggested by these young men already exist in one form or another – precisely because the state too subscribes to the moral logic linking wage labour and income (Van Rensburg 2016). South Africa's national and local governments run various training, wage-subsidy and public work programmes. These programmes have largely failed to have an impact on unemployment rates or inequality (Ranchhod and Finn 2015; Steyn 2015). This is reflected in the lived experience of many of the same men who advocate for such programmes – they are concerned about the low quality of the free state education they receive; claim many government skills programmes do not result in permanent jobs; and dismiss government work programmes as being beneath them and paying too little. For instance, Arnold, the very same man who argued against grants because free money causes laziness, in a different conversation said that:

[the government] gives money each and every year to big companies for learnerships and in-service training, but it didn't work. After you finish the internship after twelve months you don't have a position ... [and] the other thing of government giving money to the universities for education and training, that is not a solution either as how many people are educated but are not employed.

Yet despite recognizing current government programmes' inadequacies, these young men nevertheless insist that training, wage subsidies or government work programmes are preferable to cash grants, or at least hold more promise as a route to financial security. And while the small size of social grants might seem like an obvious reason for young men to prefer government training or

employment schemes, it is striking that these programmes themselves are vulnerable to the very same criticism. For instance, many young men in Zandspruit chose not to participate in the public Community Work Programme due to its paltry wages. (In fact, most of the participants in the programme are women, underscoring again the complex relations between gender, work, pay and social obligations.) While both government work programmes and social grants (and, as we show in the next section, the labour market itself) have the same problem of offering too little money, the young men we spoke with nevertheless preferred the state to provide work programmes and labour market interventions, rather than insisting on expanding the size and distribution of government grants.

We thus contend that Ferguson's (2015) argument that poor South Africans are demanding a 'rightful share' *via cash transfers and social grants* needs to be augmented by the distinction between expectations and entitlements, between public political demands and internally held preferences. While it is true that, as Ferguson points out, grant recipients in South Africa have come to expect grants for children and the elderly, and would undoubtedly protest against the cessation of grant payments, our research suggests that many young men prefer an alternative solution – one in which the state provides long-term employment rather than direct redistribution. In declaring that they would not choose to demand grants for themselves, the young men we spoke with make clear that they do *not* see cash grants as their right, both because grants are not predicated on work and because they are seen as insufficient to provide a livelihood. As will be discussed in detail in the next section, what our interlocutors do see as their right is decent jobs with sufficiently high wages. Our findings are echoed by others – for instance by Hochfeld and Plageron's (2011) research with mothers who receive the child support grant. Not only do these mothers hold similar views that social grants can encourage laziness and that labour is a more secure and trustworthy source of income, but Hochfeld and Plageron also demonstrate that these mothers express gratitude rather than a sense of entitlement to the child support grant, and they include quotes where their interlocutors speak 'explicitly about the CSG as a "gift" rather than a "right"' (*ibid.*: 56).

While it might be unsurprising for workers in stable, formal employment to insist that wage labour should continue to be the primary source of livelihood, it is striking to hear the unemployed or the precariously employed echo these views. Franco Barchiesi has written about how the South African state has adopted the neoliberal 'moral and pedagogical imperatives that prioritize labour market participation and the individual responsibility of the poor as alternatives to redistributive interventions regarded as conducive to welfare "dependency"' (Barchiesi 2007b: 39). Barchiesi draws attention to the ways in which the state's 'normative fixation' on work (as the basis of social policy and the social order) forces workers into an ever more precarious or exploited position. Moreover, precarious workers – and, we would add, the unemployed – find themselves caught in a 'contradiction between the dignity of employment as imagined by the state and its material realities, between work as it was promised and work as it is' (Barchiesi 2011: 225). Barchiesi contends that the consequence of this is not only nostalgia for a bygone era of stable work (one that was often more aspiration than fact) but what he calls worker 'melancholia', which has as much to do with the desire for material security as it does with an entire imagined social order premised on 'respectable' work, family values and social discipline. Additionally, we

suggest that young men's aversion to divorcing livelihood and labour – in an economy where wage labour is increasingly precarious and hard to access – is more than a top-down imposition by the state, but is also indicative of the powerful moral category and social force of work among the poor and unemployed.

The exploited foreigner: those who labour without money

The moral logic that links labour and income cuts both ways. While money must not come without labour, labour without sufficient money is equally disdained by many unemployed young people in Zandspruit. Our respondents might insist that what they want is jobs, not grants, but many also make clear that they scorn the lowest-paying and arduous jobs that offer no prospect of social mobility. These include work in construction, private security and cleaning, where minimum employment protections are frequently circumvented.¹² The refusal to do certain jobs or forms of work is closely tied to the widely shared disdain towards foreign immigrants, who are more likely to take such work and thus undermine the 'just deserts' equation.¹³

Our interlocutors contend that foreigners are willing to accept 'any job' and settle for wages beneath the already low wages of many workers in South Africa. '[Foreigners] can work just to survive [but] South Africans they don't take any job,' said Prince (age thirty-two). Refusing certain jobs thus becomes a form of South African national identity and pride. Our interlocutors assert that they 'know what they stand for' and see fair compensation as a right of citizenship. Senosi (age twenty-three) explained that, since South Africa is a 'rich country', young men feel they deserve enough income not to live 'pay cheque to pay cheque', and enough to take care of their families and experience some social mobility. In this they are asserting widely held expectations and aspirations promised by South Africa's transition to democracy.

The jobs on offer from the roadside pick-up point opposite the settlement are concentrated in construction, gardening and rubble removal; offer no job security; and pay as little as R50 (£3) and no more than R250 (£13) a day. These are exactly the type of jobs our South African interlocutors brand as 'lousy' and 'worthless'. Succumbing to such work inspires a sense of despair. This is not purely a matter of sufficient livelihood: pay is also important to workers as a signifier of employers' respect (Jeske 2018). The experience of being (dis)respected at work and the (in)ability to provide sufficiently for dependants are key factors in whether South Africans are willing and able to pursue and retain work (Dawson 2019). Tsoanelo, a twenty-eight-year-old South African who was unemployed, felt that foreigners' willingness to accept 'any job' was wrong and 'robbed locals of a decent life'. Immigrants are thus resented not because they take locals' jobs, but because they undercut the labour market by working for pay far below a

¹²This accords with survey data from poor neighbourhoods in Cape Town (Seekings and Natrass 2015: 75–6).

¹³A recent report by the Migration for Work Research Consortium (MiWORC) notes that South Africa is unique because international migrants have a higher probability of being employed than locals. The report, however, shows that the majority of international migrants work in low-paying, insecure 'precarious employment' (Budlender and Fauvelle-Aymar 2014: 4).

liveable wage. Jason Hickel has described how South Africans refuse to celebrate foreign immigrants, who in exemplifying the ‘ideal neoliberal subject’ are seen as ‘devoid of the characteristics that make a person fully human’ (2014: 121). And what offends these young men when foreigners grab ‘every opportunity’, as one young man put it, is that they depict black South Africans as lazy, incapable and unenterprising.¹⁴

While sitting in the afternoon sunshine behind his one-room shack, Tsoanelo described a show he saw on television about women from Lesotho being smuggled into South Africa to work as domestic workers for a ‘couple of rand’. The consequence, he said, was that South African domestic workers are fired, replaced with foreigners, and then accused of being ‘lazy’ because they are unwilling to work for meagre wages. By failing to work according to the ‘required standards’ (i.e. South Africa’s minimum wage and labour law regulations), migrants are ‘betraying us’, Tsoanelo said. Foreigners, he said, are ‘taking us back to the system of Buntu’ (i.e. apartheid), where a black man, no matter how hard he works, takes home a salary incapable of sustaining his family.

This view is centrally tied to an insistence by our interlocutors that jobs must pay enough to go beyond covering simply basic sustenance and redistributive obligations. Indeed, although it is commonly assumed that young men’s domestic commitments and social obligations to siblings, parents, girlfriends, children and friends would compel them to take any job, a number of our informants justify their refusal to work in the lowest-paying and most insecure jobs precisely because of this social burden. Lwazi (age thirty-one) explained that he would ‘rather not have anything than suffer while I’m earning’ by having to give away a large portion of a tiny, hard-earned salary to family obligations. While work might be preferable to grants, in part because grants are simply too small, work must also pay enough to be worthwhile.

For young men in Zandspruit, immigrants’ decisions to take jobs that require too much work for too little pay undermine the link between work and sufficient income. At the same time, the assertion that young South Africans are lazy in comparison to foreigners is common and recounted by a wide range of Zandspruit residents. ‘I think South Africans are lazy,’ said Naledi, age twenty-two, a South African woman, because, unlike foreigners, ‘all they do [is] sit and wait for government ... want[ing] everything on a silver platter’. This sentiment echoes a 2014 statement by then president Jacob Zuma. ‘When foreigners come to South Africa,’ he said, ‘they get here and see opportunities and thrive ... our people are not used to standing up and doing things’ (Sapa 2014). Foreign migrants in Zandspruit who wait on the roadside to be picked up for short-term precarious work also frequently label South Africans as ‘lazy’. Stanford, a Zimbabwean man, age thirty-two, stated that non-citizens like himself ‘come here [to the roadside] to search for a piece [i.e. one-off] job to get

¹⁴Scholarly debates in South Africa sometimes attribute the high unemployment rate to South Africans’ ‘unrealistic’ reservation wages (i.e. the minimum wages South Africans are willing to labour for) (see Kingdon and Knight 2001). This debate has problematically been focused on the characteristics (such as skills or aptitude) of individual workers, rather than the structural conditions underpinning the kinds of jobs low-skilled workers have access to and the social or relational reasons why the unemployed might turn down such jobs (Zizzamia 2018: 17).

money’, but the South Africans are ‘living in Umkuku [shack] and not searching for jobs ... Many people are lazy here.’ ‘We accept everything,’ another Zimbabwean man stated, unlike South Africans, who are ‘choosy’ and ‘know their rights’. Some of the immigrants in Zandspruit thus believe that labour and a reasonable income need to be linked, but are unable to make that demand because they are not citizens. Sterken (2010) has suggested that immigrants’ denigration of locals as ‘lazy’ is part of a strategy to warrant and reinforce employers’ preference for hiring them. In this case, laziness might be a tactical signifier, used from ‘below’ by some social groups to justify their privileges or successes relative to others.

This label, though at times used by young South African men themselves, is contested. Tsoanelo made clear in many of our conversations that he did not believe that youth are lazy for rejecting low-paid work. He defended young people’s (and his own) expectations for work as ‘realistic’ and ‘understandable’ in post-apartheid South Africa. Nonetheless, Tsoanelo is still concerned that unemployment and laziness create a situation in which some people want to ‘stay at home’. He wants the moral logic linking work and money to flow both ways. ‘People must work,’ he said – but they must be compensated properly. Youth should be ‘working and active [in] our national economy’, he insisted. But this must be an ‘environment where they can work, learn and grow, not a *warehouse of exploitation*’ (our emphasis).

While many of our informants resented foreigners for their willingness to be exploited, they were equally scathing of labour brokers and (especially white) bosses, who rob workers of the little they make by bypassing regulations around minimum employment benefits and protections (irrespective of nationality). The rejection of certain forms of labour thus reinforces the idea that work can confer worth and deservingness – but not all work. Young people’s selective incorporation in the labour market can be read as a deep commitment to a bi-directional logic linking labour and income, where work that does not fit with the ideas of ‘just rewards’ for labour, of working to deserve sufficient money, is not in fact work.

The lazy bureaucrat: those who get money without labouring – part II

Grant recipients are not the only people young men in Zandspruit implicate in laziness. Indignation is also widespread towards government officials and bureaucrats, who are accused of being incompetent, corrupt and making ‘easy money’ without working hard. Our interlocutors in Zandspruit are particularly resentful of people who secure government jobs, contracts and tenders because of their political connections to the ANC leadership. People who make extraordinary sums of money through their access to state tenders are called tenderpreneurs. They are seen to encourage a rent-seeking culture (Gumede 2015) by indiscriminately hiring family and friends. The young men we speak to are highly aware – and deeply critical – of those who are able to live off access to government jobs, contracts and patronage, accessed through social capital and political connections.

Caswell (age twenty-eight), who has a university degree and has worked as an intern for the government but was unemployed at the time of our conversation, was aggrieved that individuals without skills but with connections to municipal officials get access to government jobs and contracts. Having connections to the

right people in government, Caswell explained, is all you need to ‘gain access to national riches’. Joel, who had been unemployed for five years apart from the odd short-term job, shared these sentiments. During a conversation about the difficulties of finding work, he launched into an attack on the government. The main problem with the government, he insisted, is that it does not go after ‘talent’, but instead gives jobs to people with ‘connections’. In his view, working for the government was ‘easy’. If you fail to turn up for work, he said, ‘no one will complain’. Joel’s sentiments reflect a widely held view that those working in government do not get their jobs on the basis of effort or competence and would keep their jobs irrespective of how hard they work.

During another discussion at the local NGO, Tebogo (age thirty-one), who had been unemployed for a few years, directed his contempt at parliamentarians who had recently attracted media attention when the Economic Freedom Fighters (the EFF, the far-left opposition party) accused a member of parliament of sleeping on the job. Mbuyeseni Ndozi, an EFF MP and spokesperson, demanded the sleeping ANC MP be woken up before the session continued. ‘You are sleeping on duty,’ he shouted, accusing her of ‘sleeping on taxpayer money’ (Essop 2016). Tebogo extended this criticism to all parliamentarians, including the often boisterous EFF MPs. Parliamentarians, he said, ‘sit there all day making lots of money’ while the majority of people like himself are out hustling every day to survive. Here, the laziness discourse is used strategically to critique, contest and even disrupt what our informants see as unfair distribution and accumulation of resources – unfair because, once again, income is delinked from effort and hard work.

Lawrence, a young man involved in the EFF in Zandspruit, described the people receiving government tenders as ‘sitting at home making money while we work for nothing’. Tsoanelo told us that this had created a ‘culture of offices’ where government officials ‘just sit there’ and do nothing. State officials’ indolence, he declared, is ‘killing our government’. And yet these ‘office jobs’ – especially those that involve working for the state – are precisely the kinds of jobs young people desire and see as a viable route into the middle class. To a significant extent, the rise of a black middle class in South Africa is the result of the ANC government’s ‘deployment’ of party cadres to key positions in the state and affirmative action programmes (Southall 2016).¹⁵ The comparably higher pay, security and benefits of government jobs are especially appealing in a context where stable, well-paid jobs are rare. The focal point of the critique is not the jobs themselves, but rather unfairness in accessing these jobs, and the laziness of those who hold them. Once more, our interlocutors are critiquing the breaking apart of the bidirectional causal link between hard work and livelihood.

Our informants do not accuse all of the wealthy of being lazy. Members of the black middle class who frequent a popular *chisa nyama* (a township restaurant selling grilled meat) in expensive cars and clothes are less a source of resentment than of aspirational admiration. Prince explained that being able to rub shoulders with the black middle class makes people feel, even momentarily, that they too

¹⁵The statistics on the size and growth of the black middle class in South Africa are highly contested, in part due to the difficulties of defining and determining who constitutes the middle class (see Alexander *et al.* 2013; Southall 2016; Zizzamia *et al.* 2016).

have ‘made it’, which thereby ‘gives hope to those people’. For many of Zandspruit’s unemployed, the black middle class demonstrate that it is possible to ‘make it’ through a mix of luck and, equally importantly, hard work. Luck and labour are not diametrically opposed moral categories – our informants seem well aware that ‘connections’ and luck can be essential to getting one’s enterprise off the ground (James 2015: 193) and that some of the black elites and middle class they admire are also aided by political connections (Tangri and Southall 2008). Yet the key difference between such aspirational admiration of the upwardly mobile (most of whom have waged employment or run their own businesses) and resentment towards state bureaucrats and tenderpreneurs seems to revolve around the ‘laziness’ label. The young men we spoke with draw a distinction between those business owners who create wealth, and bureaucrats and the beneficiaries of ill-gotten contracts who are taking money from the state – money that Tsoanelo called ‘national riches’.

‘National riches’ describes money that these young men believe should be accessible to them – though not as grants or as cash transfers, but rather via work programmes or service provision. This brings us back to the rights demanded by these young men as citizens of a democratic post-apartheid South Africa. Not only is fair compensation for labour a key part of these demands, but so are claims to state resources. This supports Ferguson’s (2015) argument that the South African poor are demanding a new politics of distribution, and feel entitled to a share of state wealth. But we would add an important caveat: this is not a politics based on ‘a vision of *direct* distribution’ (*ibid.*: 203, emphasis added) via cash grants. Rather, the young men we speak to remain concerned that entitlements and state programmes do not undermine capitalist labour relations and their moral categories of laziness and hard work.

The accusation that government officials are ‘sitting’ and consequently ‘lazy’ is noteworthy precisely because it is unemployed young men, like Tebogo, Tsoanelo and Joel, who are typically subjected to this exact allegation. These young men are well aware of the irony that government bureaucrats in permanent jobs have the nerve to label those without work like themselves ‘lazy and incapable’. In condemning government officials for their indolence, they reiterate a commitment to wealth being justified through one’s labour – and not through political and personal networks. This commitment to the logic linking work and money thus becomes a politically powerful critique of *who* accesses state wealth, and *how*. But it also demonstrates the pervasive use of and commitment to the belief that money must be deserved – and the deserving are the hard-working.

In conclusion: towards a new social imaginary

The logic linking work and wealth held by the young men in this article is echoed around the globe. One can see it in the rise of the populist right in Europe and the US. Brexit and Trump supporters are not concerned with the redistribution of wealth from the rich or from corporate capital – despite appeals to this by the populist left (such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn) and the clear and mounting evidence of tax abuse widely publicized by the Panama Papers (Harding 2016). Instead they are concerned above all with the perceived threats to jobs, whether seemingly due to immigration or to trade treaties. The discourse of laziness and labour discussed in this article, in the words of Tania Li, does

'powerful cultural and political work' (2013: 2). Until we engage with this deeply held attachment to labour, and its entanglement with gender, race and citizenship, its ramifications will continue to shape our public policy and our politics.

Why would laziness be such a concern in the context of prevailing high rates of structural unemployment – especially among those who have themselves experienced the hopelessness of finding work in South Africa today? Where does the discourse of laziness come from? One answer is that it comes from above: from South Africa's political and economic elite who want to justify the country's high rates of inequality (Barchiesi 2007a; 2007b; 2011; Standing and Samson 2003); from the global neoliberal hegemony that wants to do the same; and from the internalized legacy of apartheid and colonial history and racist visions of 'lazy natives' and 'idle youth' (Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 169; Zulu 1991: 118), themselves rooted not only in racial hierarchies but in broader legacies of a Calvinist work ethic and Victorian concerns with the lazy poor (Thompson 1967; Weber 2009 [1930]).

Yet while an elite discourse must certainly influence the views of the poor, simply labelling such views as nothing more than hegemony, ideology or false consciousness collapses the complex roots and utilities of these views. Laziness is used by our informants as an explanation for economic marginality and exclusion, and to underscore their belief in meritocracy. Yet these young men are also aware of the hollowness of the meritocratic myth in a context of racial and class inequalities, where one might remain structurally excluded or marginalized irrespective of how hard one works. Moreover, this same discourse is appropriated or manipulated for our informants' own purposes, for instance to reinforce patriarchy (via claims that grants transgress appropriate gender norms by turning women into providers), or to critique the legitimacy of the distribution of wealth (via the accusation that government officials or tenderpreneurs are 'lazy'). At the same time, these young men contest the 'lazy' label they themselves employ by emphasizing the righteousness and agentive nature of refusing certain forms of work. Thus, Zandspruit residents are using the laziness signifier *tactically* (to lay a claim to resources), *aspirationally* and *paradoxically* (by reinforcing the value of 'investing' in education, jobs and a belief in meritocracy, while at the same time expressing a forceful impatience and challenge to this very belief). The discourse of laziness is thus doing far more than merely helping the state condition a certain kind of social or moral behaviour: the governmentality of 'laziness' is also inhabited, appropriated, manipulated and contested in ways that are described throughout this article, and are not straightforward. As such, we would propose that 'laziness' not only enables but simultaneously disrupts domination.

Many of our informants are indeed demanding a new politics of distribution (Ferguson 2015), and *do* feel entitled to a share of state wealth. But many of them believe that such entitlements should enable and enforce (rather than undermine) a reciprocal relationship between labour and wealth. While it is imperative to take such political intuitions seriously, we are *not* making the case here that these views must directly guide social policy about distribution and welfare. We are in strong agreement with the increasing body of scholarship that argues that wage labour is no longer a possible or desirable way for all to access resources and livelihoods, at least not without deep reform of labour markets, such as mandating shorter working hours and partially decommodifying work through universal, unconditional access to resources (Gorz 1999; Standing 2009; Weeks 2011). In

an age of increasing automation, precarity, labour surpluses, wage stagnation and spiralling inequality, coupled with clear ecological limits to increasing production, we believe that the standard answers – economic growth, government work programmes and the like – are no longer viable (Fouksman 2017a; 2017b). But neither are top-down technocratic policy interventions that lack the support and understanding of the people they aim to help.

In order to move away from defaulting to wage labour as our ‘presumed norm or telos’ (Ferguson and Li 2018: 18), we must engage in the long-term intellectual, social and political work of challenging the way in which all of us understand ourselves in relation to employment and work. The moral logic around income and labour depicted in this article is powerful, and we need to begin creating a new social imaginary beyond wage labour before we can start to dismantle such everyday norms. To do so, we must engage with precisely the logics demonstrated here, using the analysis of such logics as a first step towards new ways of imagining work, money and personal and social worth.

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Abstract

A wealth of new writing has emerged around the future of labour, focusing on thinking beyond employment in imagining the futures of 'surplus populations' no longer needed by labour markets. These new imaginaries include radically expanded forms of redistribution, such as unconditional cash transfers or universal basic income. But what are the views of the 'surplus populations' themselves? This article uses ethnographic research in an informal settlement in South Africa to understand why the unemployed or precariously employed poor are themselves often reluctant to delink labour and income. In particular, we focus on the discursive use of 'laziness' by urban unemployed young men. The varied (and often contradictory) ways in which these men employ the laziness discourse sheds light on the logics linking waged work and money in our informants' social imaginaries. It illuminates the underlying contradictions and complexities of such logics, including those of gender, relational obligations, expectations of citizenship, and the inevitable tensions between aspirational hopes and economic realities. To begin thinking 'beyond the proper job', to use Ferguson and Li's phrase, we must unravel and understand such nuanced logics that continue to bind together hard work, deservingness and cash – even for those left out of labour markets.

Résumé

L'avenir du travail fait l'objet de nombreux nouveaux écrits portant sur une réflexion qui sort du cadre de l'emploi pour imaginer les futurs de « populations excédentaires » dont les marchés du travail n'ont plus besoin. Ces nouveaux imaginaires incluent des formes de redistribution radicalement étendues comme le transfert monétaire inconditionnel ou le revenu universel de base. Mais qu'en pensent ces « populations excédentaires » ? Cet article s'appuie sur des études ethnographiques menées en Afrique du Sud dans un peuplement informel pour comprendre pourquoi les sans-travail ou les travailleurs précaires pauvres sont souvent eux-mêmes réticents à découpler le travail du revenu. Les auteurs s'intéressent en particulier à l'utilisation discursive de la « paresse » par des jeunes urbains sans emploi. Les manières diverses (et souvent contradictoires) dont ces jeunes utilisent

le discours de la paresse apportent un éclairage sur la logique liant le travail salarié et l'argent dans les imaginaires sociaux des informateurs. L'article met en lumière les contradictions et les complexités sous-jacentes de cette logique, y compris celles de genre, d'obligations relationnelles et d'attentes de citoyenneté, et les tensions inévitables entre espoirs aspirationnels et réalités économiques. Pour commencer à réfléchir « au-delà du vrai travail », en utilisant la phrase de Ferguson et Li, il faut élucider et comprendre cette logique nuancée qui continue à associer le travail, le mérite et l'argent, même pour ceux que les marchés du travail ont mis à l'écart.