

Redeeming Labor

From the Racial State to National Liberation

I worked my way up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty.

—Groucho Marx

Introduction

Until the last decade of the twentieth century, racial domination has shaped the lives and employment experiences of the vast majority of South African workers. The realm of production was indeed crucial in determining the status of blacks as second-class citizens. The National Party government, rising to power in 1948 with its program of apartheid, subjected non-whites to a particularly harsh and pervasive system of labor control at a time when most African colonial regimes opted for labor reforms and “stabilization.” Within four decades, black workers would become protagonists of popular resistance. As a response, the racial state mimicked late colonial experiments and tried to tame labor militancy by making waged work an avenue to limited social entitlements for the disenfranchised majority. The failure of that project was decisive in the collapse of apartheid and left the ANC, triumphant in the first universal suffrage elections of 1994, with the task of responding to black workers’ expectations of social redress.

This chapter discusses the contentious ways in which waged employment was woven in the imagination of the racial state, national liberation politics, and black workers’ unions. For all of them productive economic activity was a normative universal, albeit with radically contrasting implications. Even when it was most committed to enforcing rigid racial hierarchies and exclusionary citizenship, the pre-1994 state preached wage earning as a tool of social elevation for blacks and whites alike. The ANC’s discourse drew from a complex mix of themes, but as the country industrialized it ended up placing the formally waged working class in a central symbolic position,

which displaced earlier emphases on resistance to proletarianization. For the independent black labor movement resurrected in the 1970s, finally, waged work dialectically embodied a grim, devalued social existence and a necessary condition of solidarity that could ferry the oppressed to the shores of true freedom and working-class power. The fact that actors so distinct, when not overtly antagonistic, shared a vision of social redemption based on employment indicates the deep roots of imaginations that continue to bear fruits in the postapartheid state's perceptions of, and responses to, South Africa's social questions. It also highlights the contradiction between labor's abstractly universal values and the material hierarchies, social conflicts, and practical claims that shape actual experiences of work.

“Schooling Bodies to Hard Work”: Labor, Modernity, and the Policy Discourse of the Racial State

As South Africa industrialized, historian Stanley Trapido (1971: 313) noticed, it “has not incorporated the major part of its working class into its social and political institutions.” The response of local capital to the mobilization of black workers has largely resisted the allure of welfarist ideas, which influenced limited experiments with inclusive social policies in late British-ruled Africa. For the South African non-white proletariat, work and social citizenship were destined to march on entirely separate tracks.

In the period often referred to as “segregation” (1910–1948) the power of mining capital and South Africa's political unification within the British empire defined citizenship as an instrument of white supremacy. The then Union of South Africa designated, in particular, African societies as culturally distinct and unsuitable for European modernity. Imperial policies spatially confined African political belonging to rural “native reserves” designed through land expropriation. Segregation combined, nonetheless, political exclusion with the subaltern economic incorporation of blacks into waged employment. Cecil Rhodes argued in 1894 that monetary taxation would act for Africans as a “gentle stimulant” to “remove them from that life of sloth and laziness, . . . teach them the dignity of labour and make them contribute to the prosperity of the state” (cited in Van der Horst 1942: 149). Echoing colonial ideologies of the time, the virtues of work would ideally nurture conduct fit for civilization, even when denying the enjoyment of its fruits. An 1898 editorial in the *Natal Mercury* summarized the aims of colonial governance as to “overcome an inbred disposition for idleness and irresponsibility on the part of these Natives” (cited in Dhupelia 1982: 37). Official discourse made progress rest on individual attitudes to the labor market. As Bozzoli (1981: 57) argued:

Work was to the mineowner, therefore, what education and Christianity had been to the missionary—not merely a fact of self-justification, but the symbol and apex of a social order. . . . Work was depicted . . . as having purifying and dignifying aspects to it.

Africans resisted wage labor by defending independent agriculture as an alternative to capitalist production relations (Bundy 1988). In response, the state deployed a vast array of rules—limitations to blacks' land claims, pass laws constraining labor mobility, and industrial legislation preventing black unionization—which channeled Africans into low-wage jobs.

Landlessness and segregation in destitute, overcrowded reserves turned most African workers into domestic migrants while eroding independent production. As local agriculture declined, families in the reserves became increasingly dependent on the wages earned by relatives working in “white” South Africa. The migrant labor system also sanctioned gender hierarchies by identifying breadwinning with masculinity and confining African women to the unpaid work of household reproduction in the reserves. Yet, African proletarianization was, far from a linear and cumulative process, discursively and culturally mediated, and as such it was neither fully uniform nor irreversible (Bonner, Delius, and Posel 1993). Migrancy led African workers to a highly precarious existence, but for many young men it also meant an alternative way to earn *ilobolo* (bride wealth), which enabled claims to independence from household hierarchies and obligations. As migrant workers managed to keep rural support networks alive, they could use them to escape particularly oppressive jobs and defend “noncapitalist work rhythms” (Harries 1994: 41). Migrant labor even revealed unexpected opportunities to elude waged work, depending on workers' ability to enter urban self-employment rather than regimented mining jobs. African women looked for unauthorized urban occupations as a way to challenge their confinement in the patriarchal universe of the reserves. In the unwelcoming milieu of the city, they sought part-time domestic services and illegal liquor production or sex work as valuable alternatives to working for wages (Koch 1983; Bonner 1990). As proletarianization gathered steam, idioms of escape from wage labor articulated African languages of resistance much more powerfully than socially transformative class consciousness (Harries 1994: 222).

The formation of an African industrial proletariat was slow and uneven and did not replicate Fordist mass production. Racially segmented consumption constrained domestic demand, so that large-scale mechanization had to wait until the manufacturing boom of World War II (Alexander 2000). In the end, however, the growing dependence of white-owned industries on black workers and perceived threats of labor radicalism shaped social policies in a racially hierarchical direction that belied the normative universalism of the

“dignity of work.” A nascent social legislation catered primarily to the needs of “poor whites,” mostly Afrikaners moving into low-skill occupations. Public programs and housing schemes boosted white working-class respectability as a political response to the dangers of white pauperism and indigence, which the state regarded as social diseases opening the way for undesirable mixtures of European and “native” poor (Lange 2003). Against the threat of cross-racial class solidarities, the state fostered the convergence of white labor and white capital around a “populist sense of common interest” (Martinot 2003: 86). Racialized social policies were, in the words of liberal critic Margaret Ballinger, “the formative force in standardizing relationships of black and white in this country” (cited in Giliomee 1992: 630). Social legislation was in the end decisive in constituting whiteness as an intersubjective category defining “how a white person by virtue of being white *ought* to live in comparison to non-whites” (Giliomee 1992: 630, emphasis in original).

But ensuring the respectability of white workers was also the upper limit of social policies, which eschewed redistribution and universal welfarist provisions and endorsed from the beginning free-market neoclassical economics and budgetary austerity. By the 1920s, local relief schemes for poor whites had lost ground—as, in the words of a contemporary observer, they led to “demand relief as a right” so that “it becomes a habit for the poor to expect help in every difficulty” (Jensen 1928: 36)—to public works programs (Bozzoli 1981: 79). Following the model of the 1918 Factories Act, contributory social insurance was strictly tied to employment status, while until 1946 retirement benefits consisted almost entirely of industry- and employer-based plans. Under the control of craft unions, they covered a minority even of white workers (Duncan 1995: 74). The 1919 Public Health Act, in force until 1977, endorsed private company-based medical insurance, rejected fiscally funded national healthcare, and limited the role of the government to emergency care (Union of SA 1936). Whites were, for sure, the intended beneficiaries, but mostly on condition of being employed (Verhoef 2006). The 1920 Housing Act provided state subsidies for whites-only municipal housing to claimants with jobs, rather than generically addressing poor whites (Lange 2003: 96).

The dominance of market ideology as a discourse of white social advancement became possible once white workers were politically protected from black competition (Chanock 2001). Racialized social programs encouraged the industriousness of the white proletariat, especially Afrikaner lower classes with a background in farming or urban self-employment recalcitrant to wage labor (Swart 2000). State intervention prioritized the recruitment of whites in government jobs and their access to superior education, better training, higher wages, and career paths, rather than social provisions across the board (Terreblanche 2002: 270–75). The labor market was, in the words

of the 1908 Transvaal Indigency Commission, the battleground “for the ultimate struggle for economic superiority over the native” (cited in Van der Horst 1942: 179). Work-centered social policies structured white workers’ vocabularies of social justice away from state handouts and toward better occupational opportunities as the exclusivist reward of whiteness (Roos 2005). The unequal citizenship established in the workplace extended to urban planning the attendant distinction between respectable white workers and culturally alien “native” laborers. The 1922 Transvaal Local Government (Stallard) Commission recommended that Africans be defined as “temporary sojourners” in white cities, with residence conditional on their contract of employment. Following on Stallard’s footsteps, the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act envisaged a systematic urban racial segregation to support governmental plans to upgrade white working-class neighborhoods into middle-class suburbs and enforce “slum clearance” by deporting Africans from low-income mixed communities to peri-urban “native locations.” To the Africans the policy defined the city as a place of institutionalized social precariousness, as temporary residence rights and meager economic opportunities relied on highly insecure, poorly remunerated jobs. The aim was to make sure that urbanization did not enable expectations for equal citizenship rights.¹

The rise to power in 1924 of the “Pact” government, a coalition between the Afrikaner-dominated National Party and the English-speaking Labour Party, heralded a renewed governmental commitment to job creation for whites through support for domestic industries and large state-owned corporations, like steel producer ISCOR and the electricity company ESKOM. A policy of “civilized labor” perfected the superior employment status of white and, to a much more limited extent, “colored” workers, made white labor unions dependent on state protections, and further entrenched the role of employment as the guarantor of racially unequal citizenship. The Pact marked the political ascent of “South Africanism” (Bozzoli 1981; Dubow 2006) as a form of white colonial nationalism centered on domestic manufacturing and commerce, in alternative to the Afrikaner nationalism of agrarian origins and the previously dominant, mining-based British imperialism. South Africanism remained committed to racial segregation to protect its white wage-earning constituencies, but also saw regularly employed Africans as a crucial market for national industries. If African workers had to be partially incorporated as consumers, they could no longer be only “cheap labor”; as a manufacturers’ journal argued: “If Henry Ford can pay a man five dollars a day for screwing nuts onto bolts, surely native labourers can be paid up to 10s a day for working jackhammers” (cited in Bozzoli 1981: 196). Besides, consumerism and upgraded social standards could respond to demands for meaningful social rights by nascent African workers’ organizations, chiefly the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), launched in 1919.

Work remained the foundation of social hierarchies, which were no longer, however, only intended as racialized cultural distinctions but also as socio-spatial categories dividing Africans between a permanently urbanized minority and a majority of rural dwellers and temporary visitors to white cities. The state imagined that for the former wage labor could be a path of promotion from “native” to “worker,” with lifestyles approaching European standards, but still without equal citizenship and political rights. The shop floor was, on the other hand, one of the few places where blacks could access very limited social provisions. The 1914 Workmen’s Compensation Act, for example, covered African workers. For rural Africans, instead, the 1927 Native Administration Act systematized the “native reserves” as spaces to separately reproduce a workforce deemed superfluous for the urban economy except on a temporary basis. South Africanism developed the normativity of work from earlier moral emphases on “dignity” to a new paradigm of socioeconomic progress for blacks and whites alike. The state presented wage labor as a modern alternative to “dependency,” on state-funded programs for whites and on unwaged subsistence activities for blacks. Noncontributory social assistance of a decommodified type—or not linked to employment status—appeared late, was highly racialized, and targeted only specifically vulnerable subjects. Old age pensions were introduced in 1928, following the recommendations of the Pienaar commission: they were means-tested rather than universal, and covered only whites and “coloreds” defined as “deserving poor,” or with no other means of subsistence (Meth and Piper 1984; Seekings 2007).² Confirming the ideological boundaries of South Africanism, lawmakers rejected the proposal in the third report of the Pienaar commission for a national insurance scheme covering short-term unemployment and including urban African workers (Union of SA 1929: 24–25). The commission was nonetheless adamant that no benefit could be extended to the rural African, supposedly “content with the bare necessities of life” (Union of SA 1929: 24).

South Africanism fine-tuned the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion into flexible social hierarchies, where blunt racial and cultural scaffolding did not entirely disavow the myth of social mobility through work. As a mode of colonial governmentality it combined racially discriminatory legislation with assumptions on the nature and conduct of abstractly defined humans (Lentin 2004). In the end, South Africanist discourse heightened the contradiction between the universalism of employment values and the material inequalities they preside over. The 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act denied trade union and collective bargaining rights to Africans by excluding them from the definition of “employees.” The 1925 Wage Act allowed the government to set minimum wages to prevent the hiring of cheap black labor in industries with a white demand for low-skill jobs. The 1926 Mines and Works Amendment Act allowed for color bars in skilled mining occupations.

The image of work as the force capable to turn natives into civilized individuals did not depart from colonial paternalism and white stewardship, albeit it infused them with claims to socio-scientific truth. Governmental commissions of inquiry increasingly resorted to expert advice blaming poverty on cultural and mental factors—the “stagnation” of African societies, the lack of acquisitiveness in traditional farming—that could be vanquished by a modern *Homo economicus* equipped with work discipline, individual ambition, and the mastery of scientific rationality (Wylie 2001). The 1932 report of the Native Economic (Holloway) Commission specifically deplored African refusal of waged work as a barrier to progress and modernity:

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

In the end, the narrative of labor as a universal path to self-improvement justified the enduring subjugation of Africans by postulating their continuously unaccomplished transition to the colonizer’s image of Man (Young 2004: 160–62).

Apart from its penchant for social engineering, however, the South Africanist ideology of work also resonated in diversifying modes of African discourse. Responding to industrialization, black trade unions, middle classes, and community leaders articulated their own expectations of working-class respectability (Goodhew 2000). The demands of the colonized interrogated the universalist values of the colonizer and tried to take advantage of their contradictions. For relatively affluent and educated African elites, the discipline of work was a moral device to control unruly youth by depicting aversion to employment as a symptom of low self-respect leading to crime, alcoholism, gambling, and marital infidelity. In the 1920s and 1930s the ANC was politically moderate and led by middle-class notables who saw racial discrimination as a betrayal of the modernizing promise of the Empire. Opposition to segregation by trade unions like the ICU focused not only on class antagonism but also on the claim that modernized, enterprising Africans could socially advance to their rightful place as equals in the colonial order. The ICU’s positions reflected a Victorian social evolutionism where economic activity, for example through the organization of cooperatives, was a condition for self-reliance and access to rights as imperial citizens (Champion 1927).

Work-centered social policies provided therefore the state, African elites, labor unions, and political organizations with a terrain of negotiation and mutual recognition underpinned by assumptions on a morally sound social

order and hostility toward resistance to proletarianization (Cobley 1997). Thus, for example, government officials and ANC leaders like Abner Mtinkulu shared the view that urban recreational and welfare associations were needed to divert working-class leisure from vice to preparedness for work.³ But the emphasis on wage labor's respectability was not limited to elites, middle classes, and organizations: it also surfaced in the contested moral arguments of precarious workers themselves. An African casual worker and member of Johannesburg's Basotho MaRashea (the "Russians") gang, recounted in an interview the contempt held in the organized underworld for the *boTsotsi*, young free-ranging criminals "whose work is not to work" (cited in Guy and Thabane 1987: 440). In many cases the ANC and law enforcement officers were equally alarmed by the *tsotsi* as an element disruptive of urbane political interactions and refractory to the social norms of production and patriarchal authority (Mager and Minkley 1993). The nascent African nationalism mediated between aspirations of popular emancipation and ideas of entrepreneurialism and self-help, which were not merely the reflex of middle-class values, but also objects of opportunistic appropriation with which the colonized disputed the colonizer's civilizational narrative (La Hausse 1993). An equally powerful impulse came from independent African churches, especially the Zionist movement, which celebrated hard work and self-sacrifice as tools of salvation for the poor (Kiernan 1977). Such early contiguities in the idealization of work by otherwise conflicting political actors would reverberate in the imagination of resistance politics and postapartheid democracy.

The Hopes and Disappointments of an Inclusive South Africanism

The collapse of the Pact and the rise to power in 1934 of the United Party (under the leadership of Jan Smuts from 1939) marked the triumph of the South Africanist paradigm of white patriotism and modernization (Dubow 2006: 221–27). Delivery for poor whites while forestalling blacks' claims to equality remained the government's priority. Policymakers recognized, nonetheless, the existence of stably urbanized African workers, apart from the rural temporary visitors they had previously envisaged. Official agendas, therefore, shifted toward experiments with the "stabilization" of urban working classes, which echoed broader continental colonial debates. The United Party's version of South Africanism incorporated to some extent a liberal criticism of segregation and "civilized labor" policies, not so much in the name of equal rights, but because racial privileges for white workers allegedly undermined the work ethic of urban, "civilized" Africans. Their legitimate aspirations to European standards were, in this view, unduly frustrated by blanket bureaucratic intrusions (Brookes 1927; Van der Horst 1942).

Facing rising African workers' mobilization in a context of wartime manufacturing boom and labor shortage, the UP combined traditional colonial paternalism with state interventions aimed, with the help of the social sciences, to stabilize and control urban waged employment, a task to which traditional *laissez-faire* appeared inadequate. The state's discourse prefigured an evolution from "native" to African worker verging on the recognition of limited social citizenship rights on a nonracial basis (Ashforth 1990: 127), which were nonetheless contested within the white establishment. For Afrikaner nationalists and most Smuts's collaborators, the mix of social proximity and cultural difference between Africans and Europeans made the extension of citizenship to the "natives" a scary prospect, heralding unpredictable claims and conflicts. Critical voices saw, conversely, the "citizen" as a step logically following "native" and "employee" in the evolutionary trajectory the colonial state and the labor market charted for the modernized African minority.

Conservative opinions dominated the massive work of the Carnegie Commission of Investigation into the Poor White Problem. Its final report in 1932 merged philanthropic arguments with the American-style social science progressivism in which the commission's leading intellectual voice, Ernst G. Malherbe, was schooled. The report rejected, therefore, welfarist redistribution and extolled labor market participation, education, and training as safeguards for the "self-preservation and prestige of the white people" (cited in Giliomee 1992: 642). Far from advocating deracialized social provisions, the Carnegie commission exhorted whites, and to a smaller extent "coloreds," to seek training for productive occupations as the best way to forge their temperament as active individuals. It also warned of the degenerative effects of expectations for social rights, which it saw as the prelude to civilizational descent to the level of the "natives" (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 145, 296; Seekings 2008).⁴ Subsequent social programs expanded redistribution, but remained strictly means tested, focused on vulnerable recipients outside the labor market, and continued to exclude Africans and Indians. Programs for blindness, child maintenance, and disability introduced in the second half of the 1930s covered only whites and "coloreds," apart from some minuscule financial assistance for indigent Indians and blind Africans (Union of SA 1944a: 6, 13). In 1937 a Department of Social Welfare was inaugurated by spinning out of the Department of Labour the social work functions of unemployed rehabilitation, but the new bureaucracy was not responsible for redistributive programs like the old-age pensions. The new department's mission, imbued with conservative Afrikaner morality and Calvinist religious prescriptions, was, in the words of prominent sociologist J. L. Gray, to instill "the Puritan exaltation of work" and the "virtues of self-help" (cited in Seekings 2008: 533) in maladjusted, jobless whites always tempted by idleness.

During the 1920s and 1930s the state's opposition to social assistance programs for the working-age, able-bodied unemployed resulted in a typically bifurcated social citizenship paradigm that continues to this day. On one hand, social insurance—in the form of retirement, unemployment, and medical benefits—pertained to employer-funded schemes or other contributory programs based on waged work. As such, it benefited permanent over temporary workers. In 1937, a new Unemployment Benefits Act introduced a state-funded unemployment insurance program that ended up providing short-term benefits to only 88,000 employees, a tiny fraction of which were high-income Africans (Meth and Piper 1984). On the other hand, noncontributory, decommodified public social assistance was never intended as an alternative to wage labor as it did not cover employable workers unable to find occupations. Strict means tests, small budgets, and the definition of target populations as economically inactive but deserving poor attached a heavy stigma on noncontributory grants, which reinforced the symbolic association of employment with virtuous citizenship.

Government policies mostly helped white workers out of the economic depression of the 1930s. In 1943, only 4 percent of all public expenditure in social assistance was directed to Africans (Van der Berg 1997: 487). Soaring wartime manufacturing production, however, absorbed growing contingents of black workers, including low-skill Africans. The African working class enjoyed, as a result, rising wages and bargaining power. The government of Jan Smuts, purportedly a Keynesian sympathizer, became amenable to the idea that a “living wage” for long-term African employees could facilitate the stabilization of non-white urban labor and counter the threat of militant unionization. It was not a radical turn toward the welfare state, but rather an approach dictated by expediency and hostility to black workers' organizations; in no way did it question institutionalized racial segregation (Nattrass 2005). Smuts's ideas departed, nonetheless, from Stallard's “natives” as temporary urban sojourners, and placed the question of African access to housing and social provisions at the core of the political contestation between the ruling UP and the mostly Afrikaner National Party (NP) as they neared the national elections of 1948. A government-appointed Social Security Committee issued in September 1943 a report—strongly influenced by Lord Beveridge's ideas and the nascent British welfare state experiment—that clearly departed from the conservative approach of the Carnegie commission. The report endorsed a social security system based on redistribution and decommodification to cover “non-productive periods of life” (Union of SA 1944a: 6), including unemployment in working age, to “last as long as the need lasts” (Union of SA 1944a: 23). It went as far as to recommend elements of nonracial universal benefits: it proposed to extend noncontributory old age and disability pensions to urban Africans and advocated new contributory national programs for the

elderly, the disabled, the unemployed, and family allowances. Africans were expected to constitute one-quarter of all recipients (Union of SA 1944a: 36–47). Such proposals still excluded residents of the reserves, reflecting the conventional view that “[they] have shelter and can eke out an existence so that they do not need the elaborate cash benefits indispensable for a civilized community” (Union of SA 1944a: 6). The amount of benefits would have, moreover, discriminated by race since official stereotypes considered the average African as a person with essentially frugal needs. Only “civilized” Africans, defined by income, were supposed to claim the same benefits as Europeans (Seekings 2005: 46–47). Despite such a persistently hierarchical imagination, the 1943 report on social security represented an important departure from the hegemonic, work-centered view of social citizenship. Its universalist overtones, moreover, tried to legitimize waged work among the Africans not just in terms of an abstractly defined dignity, but on the concrete terrain of rights. At the same time, the caveats that limited citizenship to a stabilized, civilized urban condition served to align African aspirations and desires with waged employment.

The 1944 Pensions Laws Amendment Act extended old-age pensions to African men and women, but otherwise the government quickly jettisoned the most far-reaching recommendations of the social security report, which faced strong opposition inside the Smuts cabinet itself. Large British companies, the Afrikaner middle class, white workers, and farmers regarded social provisions for blacks as an unsustainable fiscal burden and a magnet for further African migration from mining and agriculture to the cities (Meth and Piper 1984: 8). The 1945 white paper on social security retained the proposal of expanding unemployment insurance for African workers, but curtailed projected funding to the point of eroding much of what Africans gained from inclusion in the old-age pension program (Duncan 1995: 79). The deracialization of state pensions for the elderly was, in the end, minimal: in 1948, only about 200,000 Africans could claim them (Ilfie 1987: 141). Legislation passed in 1946 established the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) as a program to cover short-term unemployment with contributions from employees, employers, and the state. It covered black and white employees, but only in permanent jobs, and excluded mineworkers and farmworkers (Duncan 1995: 79). The NP of Daniel F. Malan, supported by Afrikaner workers and middle classes, opposed UIF benefits for Africans. Couched in traditional antidependency, work ethic, and individual responsibility arguments, the NP’s campaign impacted on the government’s decision to suspend the implementation of the UIF a year after its introduction. For the UP, the move was an attempt to defuse touchy controversies on deracialized social programs in view of hotly contested elections. No better fate awaited the far-reaching recommendations in the 1945 report of the Gluckman commission, which proposed a national

health insurance system to rein in escalating private medical costs and defined healthcare as a fiscally funded universal social right (Union of SA 1944b). The ANC, black trade unions, and even some white workers' organizations had strongly mobilized in support of a public healthcare system. Smuts, however, chose to shelve the Gluckman report, worried of the possible "differences and divisions" (cited in Pillay 1995: 77) with doctors, businesses, and NP voters, all strongly opposed to redistributive solutions.

Far from laying the foundation of a "unique" and "exceptionally generous" system of social citizenship, as Jeremy Seekings (2005: 50) wants his readers to believe, Smuts's reformism was soon aborted by his own government, which ultimately preferred time-honored violent methods to social legislation as a means to deal with black working-class militancy. The ferocious police repression of the 1946 African mineworkers' strike showed how little the segregationist state was prepared to risk with piecemeal social measures designed to deflect, not accommodate, the claims of the disenfranchised.

Despite the limits and contradictions of governmental action, liberal-leaning politicians like Margaret Ballinger and Smuts's minister Jan H. Hofmeyr thought that the official discourse of social advancement for modern Africans could be a possibility for a more inclusive South Africanism (Dubow 2005). White liberalism also deferred, however, to white fears of, in Hofmeyr's words, "the black man's numerical superiority" and the "menace presented by the black man's lower standards of living." Equal citizenship, he continued, was ultimately synonymous with the "mixture of the races," a "revolting" prospect (Hofmeyr 1936: 30). Better was for him a "restrained liberalism" pursuing "realistic" goals and "content to hasten slowly" along paths knowledgeable experts indicated (Hofmeyr 1936: 30). One of these was what Hofmeyr termed "constructive segregation," combining the recognition of the sociocultural chasm separating Africans and Europeans with policies to make sure that native reserves were economically "adequate," but not autonomous enough to deny "labour for the white man as a necessary element in the economic structure of Bantu life" (Hofmeyr 1936: 33).

Their ambiguities notwithstanding, liberal views of an inclusive South Africanism clearly resonated in African nationalist opposition to segregation. Equal social rights and the deracialization of social programs were as integral as universal political citizenship to the ANC's expectations for postwar democratization.⁵ The party's 1943 *African Claims* explicitly framed black demands for healthcare, education, welfare, and landownership in the moderately progressive language of the Atlantic Charter adopted two years before (Van Niekerk 2003: 363–64). The ANC's elites cultivated their own South Africanism, which seemed nonetheless to echo the ideas of the government and white liberals in its conviction that "African urban labour must be stabilized."⁶ By stabilization the ANC surely meant something drastically different from

its opponents, namely the abolition of the migrant labor system and African access to economic opportunities. Yet, well into the 1940s African nationalist leaders were still regarding workers' rights not as the object of social conflict, but as a goal to be shared with white reformists for the sake of ending "racial bitterness and antagonisms which are undermining all the ideals of South Africa, namely—Democracy, Christianity, and human decency."⁷

The UP's wartime agenda of labor stabilization faced the dilemma, common to social reforms in other colonial governments, of balancing universalism and difference, inclusion and stratification, the recognition of rights and the disciplining of claims. Even before the rise of apartheid, however, it was clear that the white-ruled state would not relinquish its segregationist outlook or its framing of domination over African societies in terms of tutelage and trusteeship. The 1948 report of the government's Fagan commission declared that the "natives" were not to become citizens even as it explained that urban Africans on their way to stabilization were no longer "natives," but workers entitled to appropriate benefits and living standards (Ashforth 1990: 132–39). Once again, the state's discourse of waged work alluded to universal citizenship rights while materially restricting rights to a selected few in a society where employment inequalities cut through hierarchies of race, gender, residence, and occupation. Compared to the ambiguities and uncertainties of the Smuts administration, the NP's program of apartheid ("separateness") was an all-out offensive against proposals to relax racial segregation in jobs, social provisions, and residential rights. The NP waved in front of its low- and middle-income constituencies the threat of *oorstroming* (inundation) of white South Africa caused by black access to citizenship rights and welfare benefits. To Smuts's elusive stabilization, Afrikaner nationalism opposed the appeal of whiteness as a condition facing an existential threat that only rigid racial segregation could repel.

The NP's anti-welfare ideology of work was not a universalist device but rather boosted white South Africa's imagined last stand, which involved crude stereotypes of blacks' allegedly inbred dependence on state handouts. It also, however, exalted the virtues of employment across the racial spectrum, presenting waged work as beneficial and civilizing, and social programs as detrimental and dehumanizing, for whites and blacks alike. In 1946, J. G. Strijdom, a future prime minister, wondered:

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

With the NP's victory in the 1948 elections, governmental practices shifted from South Africanist pseudo-civilizational discourse to Afrikaner nationalist views of essentialized racial, ethnic, and cultural distinctions. Continuities as well as differences, however, underlie such a symbolic turning point. The NP government inherited from its predecessor a work-centered imagination of social relations. Its translation into practices of citizenship, however, would bring traumatic ruptures for the disenfranchised majority.

Apartheid Social Engineering and the Coercive Enforcement of Wage Labor Discipline

To address the expectations of its working-class constituencies, the NP government did not primarily resort to redistributive programs, which became increasingly residual and underfunded. Like previous administrations, it rather relied on whites-only jobs, union rights, training and education, and designed a new system of "Bantu education" to form Africans into low-wage employees (Seekings and Natrass 2005: 128–41). Import substitution industrialization also deepened state protection for domestic industries. By 1970, the contribution of manufacturing to the gross domestic product exceeded 30 percent, more than mining and agriculture combined (Feinstein 2005: 144, 180–84).

Economic interventionism complemented fiscal thrift and a revived *laissez-faire* in social policy. The apartheid regime presided over a racialized welfare system where—as whites moved upward into protected high-wage jobs, middle-class incomes, and private benefits—dwindling social spending provided meager programs for blacks, which mostly advantaged "coloreds" and Indians, leaving very little to Africans. The stigma attached to government grants reinforced the racially defined second-class citizenship of many black recipients. Occasionally, programs ceased altogether: in 1949 the government excluded, without opposition from the UP, low-income Africans from the UIF—presented as a cause of idleness and higher unemployment—with the result that the number of African recipients plunged from 140,000 to 1,500 (Meth and Piper 1984: 17). Only in 1967 did average African wages reach the UIF's eligibility threshold (Natrass and Seekings 2000: 15). Since less whites needed by then unemployment insurance, the state also stopped contributing to the UIF, leading to a dramatic decline in payable benefits. In general, while white workers had access to meaningful protection from risk and retirement income, wage labor did not have the same function for Africans, but rather amplified their uncertainty: the 1956 Pensions Act excluded low-skill, migrant, contract, hourly and weekly paid employees, meaning the vast majority of black workers, from employer-based retirement coverage. By the mid-1980s, total retirement benefits for whites were, as a share of national income, three times the size of all public provisions paid to three times

more numerous black recipients (Kruger 1992: 30). Similar patterns were observable in private medical insurance. In 1962 the government confirmed its rejection of national public healthcare and, since private plans mostly admitted high-income whites, by 1989 Africans were less than 4 percent of recipients of employer-based medical coverage (Price and Tshazibane 1989). Black workers, instead, crowded poorly equipped public facilities limited to primary and emergency care.

The core principle of apartheid was “separate development,” enshrined in the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959: citizenship for the “natives,” now redefined as “Bantu,” was superseded by belonging to culturally defined and bureaucratically sanctioned tribes. African residential rights in “white” cities were concomitantly restricted. If the UP government had imagined that wage labor could uplift natives to the full status of workers, the apartheid project reversed the process and turned the “Bantu” into migrants—not only Stallard’s “temporary sojourners,” but actual noncitizens and foreign visitors. Native reserves were therefore reorganized into Bantu “homelands,” run by allegedly traditional African chiefs under the supervision of a state apparatus separate from the ordinary bureaucracy. Prime minister Verwoerd compared white South Africa to a workplace where African workers had no rights to claim. For him the country outside the “homelands” was “European-owned property” where “natives” were allowed to stay “just like labourers on a farm” (cited in Legassick 1974b: 20). The majority of South Africans were destined to experience work and citizenship as disconnected and mutually excluding spatial entities. Social spending for Africans was overwhelmingly directed to the “homelands.” Apartheid social policies thus deepened the commitment of the former government to the “betterment” of African cheap labor reservoirs (Union of SA 1944c). Conversely nonracial redistributive programs, which Smuts had already abandoned in his final years in power, became utterly marginal in the NP’s agenda until the late 1970s. The new regime particularly disliked noncontributory grants covering Africans, like old-age pensions. In the apartheid fantasy of replacing Africans’ formal citizenship with tribalized identities, the state aimed to downsize what was left of nonracial provisions for the elderly and, in the words of an official in 1955, “to evolve a system whereby we reinstate the natural obligations of Bantu authorities and Bantu culture in regard to their old people” (cited in Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 133). By the end of the 1960s, the highest amount of African old age pensions was only 13 percent of average white ones (for Indians and “coloreds” it was 41 and 47 percent, respectively). By 1958 Africans were 58 percent of all recipients, but cashed only 19 percent of the benefits (Van der Berg 1997: 486).

To turn white South Africa into a precarious place of employment for African workers, “influx control” legislation regulated black urbanization and discouraged defections from brutally exploitative conditions in the mines and

the farms. Section 10 of the 1952 Native Laws Amendment Act established that Africans could permanently live in an urban area only by birth or through continuous residence or employment. So-called Section 10 rights, therefore, excluded migrant workers, subject to renewing their employment contracts in their respective “homelands.” Permanent urban residents could instead aspire to relatively stable prospects, as the regime initially devised an “urban labor preference” policy aimed at prioritizing African township residents for recruitment into local jobs. New urban African townships were established following the Group Areas Act of 1950, which required municipalities to segregate neighborhoods according to the four official, racially defined “population groups.” The government forcibly deported Africans still living in “mixed” neighborhoods to new “model townships,” as their planners styled them. Publicly funded housing projects in the townships were also intended to replace old “native locations,” which, despite their poverty and squalor, had often been vibrant places of labor and political activism.

An important aim of the “urban labor preference” was to ensure the supply of contract migrant workers for mining and agriculture. The Bantu Labour Act of 1964 organized a dedicated infrastructure to hire African migrants by establishing “labor bureaus” in the “homelands” to act as intermediaries between local governments and households providing labor, and white employers requesting it. Individual “reference books,” or *dompas*, certified the employment and residential status of Africans, subjecting violators to arrest and deportation to their putative “homelands.” The Bantu Labour Act and subsequent government circulars, however, also threatened with deportation African permanent urban residents refusing waged employment (Terreblanche 2002: 322). The act was, finally, a cornerstone in the gendered geography of apartheid as it curtailed the ability of African women to gain permanent urban residence, even when trying to join male relatives. It was another attempt to confine women to reproduction in the “homelands” or specific urban jobs like nursing or domestic service. In 1970, only 3.6 percent of employed women had manufacturing jobs (Berger 1992: 227, 252). By 1981, less than 15 percent of all manufacturing employees were black females, which mostly worked in historically highly feminized sectors, as in the case of “colored” women in the Cape’s clothing and textile companies (Berger 1992: 254).

Deborah Posel (2005) has described apartheid social policies as a “racial modernist” project replacing, in Foucauldian terms, the “biopolitics of the self” of the Smuts era, centered on individual work discipline, with a “biopolitics of the population” concerned with the spatial control and planning of aggregates and flows. Despite its accentuation of racial divides, the NP regime did not repudiate the idea of work as a force of progress and respectability for modern African individuals. The “model township”

was a laboratory where public amenities, healthcare facilities, infrastructures, schools, and social workers ideally allowed the reproduction of a disciplined African working class in place of the unruly, unhealthy, potentially subversive *lumpenproletariat* of the old locations. To be a permanent township resident meant having a regular job and a family, while fixed-term migrant workers lived in separate, tightly policed, ethnically segregated, single-sex “hostels.” The township was therefore, Posel continues, a point where work and urban family norms intersected and mutually reinforced as imagined institutions of social stability. If the average African male was no longer deemed to be a full-fledged worker, let alone a citizen, urban Africans were nonetheless expected to behave as responsible employees and heads of families to match their residential status. The state’s focus on the family responsibilities of African workers conveniently sidetracked claims for welfare “handouts.” It also gained, however, the support of African community leaders and elders concerned with controlling loose women and anarchic youth.

Apartheid policy discourse fantasized that boundaries drawn through socio-spatial planning could flawlessly translate into objectively defined human collectivities and scientifically predictable individual conduct. Classic scholarly critiques have, paradoxically, reinforced such a functionalist understanding of the system. Structural Marxist authors looked at the apartheid labor regime mainly as a device to compress African workers’ wages and claims by offloading part of their costs of reproduction onto what was left of the subsistence economies of the “homelands” (Wolpe 1972; Legassick 1974a). Subsequent reassessments argued that the collapse of the homelands made them unsuitable for reproduction, and saw “influx control” legislation as a mechanism to channel labor flows into different economic sectors, limit African urbanization, and stabilize skilled black workers in the cities (Hindson 1987). More recent studies have, however, deemphasized the state’s capacity to plan and harness social dynamics, and rather saw apartheid’s institutional interventions as reactions, often incomplete and contradictory, to ordinary people’s strategies and subjectivities. For Yann Moulier-Boutang (1998: 640–44) influx control was a response to African workers’ attempts to refuse work in the mines and the farms and flee toward better living conditions in the cities. Such observations resonate in the poignant verses of “worker poet” Alfred T. Qabula (1984: 49), evoking his escape from Carleton mine, a “place of suffering, with its compounds, its violence, its homosexuality, a place crawling with the spirits of unappeased dead miners and workers. The place of gold, *dagga* [marijuana], drink and oppression.” Spatial segregation, Moulier-Boutang continues, translated therefore the hierarchical social ordering of work into the juridical categories of waged urban employment, semi-servile mining and agricultural labor, and “homeland” subsistence economy. The wages of black urban employees were precarious not because complementary

income was available from the “homelands,” but because black workers in the mines and the farms were even more insecure, unprotected, and unfree, and regarded competition for low-wage urban jobs as a prospect of uplift. The aim of influx control was not to “stabilize” permanent urban workers, but to pitch different exploited groups against each other and generalize black precariousness across the occupational spectrum.

Refusal of work was not, however, limited to mining and agriculture, but was widespread in the black townships as well. Posel (1991: 82–90, 158–64) powerfully showed how the avoidance of factory jobs by township youth doomed the state’s “urban labor preference” to collapse within the first decade of apartheid. In 1962, the report of the government’s Botha commission raised the alarm that young labor market entrants were refusing waged occupations and preferred what the horrified writers described as idleness, parasitism, crime, and vice aided by unwaged support networks. Echoing the expert knowledge of the time, the report made social maladjustment and moral pathology two sides of the same coin: “By the time they reach working age, they have either developed into a ‘type’ that refuses to work, or by virtue of their instability and untrustworthiness, have become unemployable” (cited in Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 170).⁸ A few years earlier, the manager of an urban “compound” for migrant workers had similarly complained:

The detribalized group has today become a problem. He (*sic*) is the young, semi-educated, arrogant, demanding and won’t-work type. He is difficult to handle because he is very prone to disobedience and has, invariably, no inclination to work unless forced to do so. (Cited in Posel 1993: 420)

“Section 10” rights, Posel (1993: 420) concludes, were intended to create a subservient and disciplined urban African workforce, but they ironically ended up being used as a weapon to resist exploitative labor. The provisions based on the 1964 Bantu Labour Act allowing for deportation from the city to punish work avoidance had little effect and could not save the “urban labor preference.” In the end, urban employers increasingly resorted to recruiting migrants, reputedly more compliant as they depended on the employment contract for permission to reside in the township. Migrant labor, therefore, was not just a tool of the state to make black workers cheap, but came to occupy a central place in the urban landscape of apartheid due to African grassroots subversion of wage labor discipline. The unionization of migrant workers in the 1970s would bring such unintended consequences to haunt apartheid dreams of social stability.

In response to the apartheid state’s radical attempt to decouple work and citizenship in African lives, opposition movements elaborated a narrative that

placed waged work at the core of resistance and social redemption. By the late 1940s the ANC was no longer led by moderate elites but had become a mass organization advocating popular mobilization and civil disobedience for equal rights, deracialized citizenship, universal social provisions, resource redistribution, and the nationalization of strategic assets. Yet, the ANC did not abandon its long-standing emphasis on self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, and independent economic initiative. Rather than preaching resistance to proletarianization, it imagined wage labor, once juridically free and unfettered by racial domination, as a condition of individual empowerment, even without a social transition beyond capitalism (Cobley 1990: 170–72). The party's 1949 landmark Programme of Action combined claims to social inclusion and political representation with a powerful emphasis on "economic rights." Establishing national industries and enterprises were there on par with the struggle for workers' protections.⁹

ANC activists were also increasingly involved in labor organizing. The ANC-allied South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), established in 1955, was as active in workplace battles over wages and working conditions as in campaigning for the ANC's program of political change. For the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) the black labor movement was, moreover, a channel to influence the analyses and strategies of the ANC. The alliance between the two organizations was for the CPSA the outcome of an ideological trajectory started in the mid-1930s with the adoption of the Third International's line of the "popular fronts." The CPSA saw the trade unions as vehicles to build a nonracial alliance of black and white workers, turning wage labor from a reality of racial division into a horizon of popular unity. Communists, however, did not only praise wage labor as a potential outlet of revolutionary politics, but also described it as a pedagogical and moral force in terms that reflected the utterances of social reformers or bourgeois nationalist elites. Official statements of the CPSA praised working-class organizations as barriers to "the increase of delinquency amongst the youth, especially the non-European youth," whose instincts could be more productively directed toward "the struggle for work."¹⁰ The CPSA was banned in 1950, and had to briefly dissolve in a climate of heightened repression. Communist activists, however, kept working in the ANC, ANC-aligned organizations, and the labor movement, and they greatly influenced the spirit and the wording of the 1955 Freedom Charter, the historic program of the ANC-led Congress of the People (Lodge 1983: 69–74). The charter's demands for "work and security" included universal social provisions such as unemployment insurance, sick leaves, maternity leaves, and a national minimum wage to reward the "right and duty of all to work." Eventually, as Cobley (1990: 200–01) suggests, even if the CPSA conveyed progressive and redistributive ideas to the middle-class leadership of the ANC, this latter's values and intellectual orientations

continued to extol individual opportunities and economic activity, to which the CPSA provided solace through its Stalinist glorification of hard work.

The violent repression of the antiapartheid opposition, especially after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, drove the ANC into the underground and in exile and marked the virtual collapse of black trade unionism for a decade. The rebirth of an independent black labor movement, discussed in the next section, responded to and amplified the socioeconomic crisis of apartheid and the contradictions of its labor regime. In time, resurgent black workers' organizations would produce their own redemptive narrative of waged work, creatively connecting to the legacies of older movements.

Black Workers' Struggles and the Redemption of Wage Labor, 1973–1994

The 1970s were for the apartheid regime years of economic, social, and political instability. Growing international isolation, the decolonization of Southern Africa, and the global energy crisis externally impacted on a withering mode of accumulation reliant on foreign commodity markets, imported capital goods, and a domestic demand mostly buoyed by a small white minority (Fine and Rustomjee 1996). Black cheap labor had for long boosted the profits of white companies, but decades of inferior education and training and low wages enforced through state repression had also suffocated the contribution of non-white South Africans to capitalist growth both as consumers and as much needed skilled workers.

Blacks, of course, suffered the most from economic crisis, as rising inflation and collapsing living standards deepened poverty levels in urban townships and rural “homelands.” In 1973, a strike wave propagating from factories in the Durban area began the resurgence of independent black trade unionism after a decade of repression. The Durban strikes were not politically motivated and early unionization mostly addressed, even when surviving antiapartheid activist networks were involved, bread-and-butter concerns. Workers did not see the decision to join a union as an ideological statement, but as a response to a constant degradation of employment that, even before 1973, had become intolerable. In 1977 the government appointed the Riekert commission to investigate problems with “manpower utilization” and labor control. The commission heard employers' complaints that young African township residents refused to work in the factories and used their “Section 10” protections to be more “choosy” and “work-shy” (RSA 1979: 169) than migrants. The commission's report commented that a permanent urban resident who did not face the risk of deportation “would rather remain without work than fill a vacancy not to his [*sic*] liking” (RSA 1979: 169).