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The moral economy of work: Demanding jobs and deserving money in South Africa

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Abstract

Why would the long-term unemployed poor continue to insist that wage labour must remain the key path to income – even in a place like South Africa, with endemic structural unemployment and spiralling inequality? This paper explores this puzzle using in-depth qualitative data from inner-city Johannesburg to unravel the ways in which people’s economic expectations are embedded in moral beliefs that equate effort and labour with deservingness and income. To make sense of such moral logics and discourses, this paper theorizes them as part of a cohesive moral economy. This shared moral economy illuminates the means through which norms of fairness, deservingness and aspiration underpin attitudes about redistribution, cash and labour, and thus influence both support and resistance to particular political agendas around radical redistributory economic reform.

Keywords: wage labour; moral economy; redistribution; post-work; universal basic income; South Africa.

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Injustice is as much moral as material fact. Observers may measure economic inequality, but cannot assume that this is mirrored in felt moral inequity. (Lonsdale, 1992, p. 351)

This paper is motivated by a puzzle recently forefronted by the anthropologist Tania Li: that poverty, inequality and precarity continue to exist alongside ever-growing ‘runaway profits, astronomical wealth and impressive technological capacity’ without eliciting extensive outrage or political mobilization (Li, 2017, p. 1247). This lack of broad-based outrage against elites is especially puzzling within a context of increasing policy discourse around both inequality and social protection, spurred both by works like Picketty’s *Capital* (2014) and the growing policy interest in cash transfers, universal basic income and other radical forms of distribution in a post-wage future (and present) (Hagenzanker *et al.*, 2016; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010; Widerquist, 2017). Yet, this resurgence of concern with inequality and universalized forms of distribution remains removed from the reality of both what is enacted in policy and demanded in popular politics. Welfare policy in both developed and developing countries remains focused on providing social protection to those physically unable to enter the labour market: children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled. Everyone else is expected to predominantly rely on waged work or entrepreneurship for livelihood, and those who do receive support from the state need to demonstrate their willingness to work. And popular politics too remain largely focused not on growing inequality of wealth or income, but rather perceived threats to *jobs*, be these immigrants, trade or lack of decent working conditions.

This paper attempts to unravel this puzzle by focusing on the views and attitudes of the people who stand to benefit most from mobilizing around the politics of distribution: the long-term unemployed or precariously-employed poor. In particular, this paper examines the categorical work-linked moral discourse of the long-term unemployed or precariously employed poor in South Africa, in Jeppestown, a section of Johannesburg’s inner-city. Despite the unavailability of wage-work (and especially of well-paid, stable wage work), my interlocutors in Jeppestown insist that wage work is a source of moral goods, and link money without labour to moral bads. This paper argues that this broad-based resistance to redistribution divorced from labour is best understood as a shared *moral economy* – a set of socially-held values and norms around the way the economy should function.

Unravelling the components of this moral economy illuminates the way deeply embedded norms of fairness, deservingness and aspiration underpin attitudes about redistribution, cash and labour – even for those outside of the needs of labour markets. These norms in turn shape the political expectations and demands of my interlocutors. This paper thus examines the way the un(der)employed link economic structures, expectations and outcomes to moral and social logics, norms and values, ones that are increasingly unfulfilled by the economic structures around them. Yet this moral economy has complex dynamics: while

insisting on the ongoing centrality of wage labour as a primary source of distribution within a context of worklessness, my interlocutors also have strong expectations of the role of the state in provisioning proper jobs, of the quality of the jobs themselves, and of the relationship between work, wealth and reward. I argue that while my interlocutors are increasingly superfluous to the labour needs of post-Fordist or neoliberal capitalism, they use a moral language linking income and labour to insist on the work-membership archetypes of an idealized twentieth century Fordist capitalism – ‘the century of working man’ (Standing, 2002 in Ferguson & Li, 2018, p. 2). This itself becomes a form of resistance to the economic reality of precarity and un(der)employment, channelling and structuring the demands and outrage of my interlocutors in particular ways: towards immigrants and the state rather than capitalist elites and market forces.

Moral economies: socially-inscribed resistance to structural economic change

This paper uses the term ‘moral economy’ in much the same way it was used by E. P. Thompson in *The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century* (1971). Thompson uses the term to describe ‘popular consensus as to what were legitimate and ... illegitimate [economic] practices ... grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations’ (p. 79). In his history of eighteenth century English bread riots, Thompson argues that when the price of grain increased beyond an affordable threshold in years of scarcity, collective action was sparked as much by outraged moral assumptions as deprivation itself. These pre-capitalist moral assumptions dictated that ‘it appeared unnatural that any man should [excessively] profit from the necessities of others’ (p. 131), especially in times of suffering and deprivation, and that while elites could rule, expropriate and control, they were also bound by the moral obligations of provision, and expected to ensure that no one was deprived of basic sustenance. There was a fair or ‘moral’ price of bread, one that did not necessarily conform to the price set by supply and demand in the marketplaces.

Thompson points out that all economic structures (including that of classical and neoclassical economics) are embedded in moral and cultural notions about how a fair economy should function (Thompson, 1991). Over the course of the industrial revolution in England, these switched from moral pressure on prices in the eighteenth century to moral pressure on wages in the nineteenth century (and from bread riots to labour revolts).¹ These values were not necessarily induced from above – often ‘the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people’ (p. 79) when people appealed to and echoed these notions. The moral economy is thus a way people insist on economic governance of a certain kind, be it setting a minimum price for bread or a minimum wage.

The idea of a moral economy was picked up by James C. Scott in *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976). Scott

argues that like the eighteenth century English ‘crowd’, Southeast Asian peasants in non-capitalist societies have a number of cultural, social and normative expectations about the ways the economy should function, hold landed elites to these expectations (in particular around providing for basic needs), and are ready to engage in collective action (including eventually rebellion) when these norms are violated in the transition to capitalist economies. While Thompson uses the moral economy idea to argue against a ‘mechanical’ explanation for collective action (the view that food riots were disorganized violence spurred by pangs of hunger), Scott uses the idea to argue against a hyper-rationalist or flat utilitarian view of peasants. In the same way, this paper will utilize the moral economy framework to understand the views of the long-term un- or under-employed outside of a hyper-rationalist or utility-maximizing framework. This is not to discount such views as irrational or incorrect, but instead to engage deeply with my interlocutors’ cultural and moral worlds. Indeed, this paper will make a case against simply dismissing views that do not accord with pure economic self-interest as nothing more than false consciousness or ideology, and rather will insist that we must take seriously the influence that norms and values have on expectations and economic and political demands.

Both Scott and Thompson use moral economy to explain broad-based resistance to transitions from one form of economic system to another. But while the moral economy concept is especially useful for understanding moments of tension and rupture, it is always present: in the words of Palomera and Vetta (2016),

structural inequalities generated by particular forms of capital accumulation – mediated by particular kinds of state regulation – are always metabolized through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices. It is these fields that we call moral economies. (p. 414)

Such fields are not homogenous, they can consist of diversity and contradiction, of ambiguous logics and incommensurable values. Yet by trying to understand moral economies, we can illuminate current economic and social ‘mobilizations and silences ... continuity and change, or the mere conditions of possibility for them’ (Palomera & Vetta, 2016, p. 428).

‘Moral economy’ has become a travelling discourse, used in history, sociology, political science and anthropology in a number of diverse and sometimes divergent ways. Its meanings have shifted and stretched across disciplines: it is sometimes used to denote an economy guided by morals, separate from and in opposition to an economy guided by cash and profit maximization, or to denote a normative project to imagine an alternative economic system that is virtuous (as opposed to an *immoral* economy), or to refer to a system of morals (with the term ‘economy’ used as a stand-in for system or field) (Carrier, 2018; Fassin, 2009). Here I am *not* referring to a moral economy in these senses. Instead, this paper follows Thompson’s original use of the term in looking at the way people link economic structures, expectations and outcomes to moral and

social logics, norms and values. Just as the eighteenth century English bread riots demonstrated people's econo-moral expectations around the price of bread in particular and paternalistic economic governance in general, so I argue do widely-held values and beliefs linking income and labour point us towards the moral economy – and the political expectations and demands – of contemporary capitalism.

The moral economy concept is especially useful for this project in two ways. First, it provides a framework to define both contested and 'mutually "acceptable" elements within a system of political domination and economic appropriation' (Moodie, 1986, p. 2), elements that arise out of mutually reinforcing social, cultural and economic spheres. The moral economy framework thus serves as a useful way to understand and complicate relationships of class and economic power. It moves us away from reductionist views of hegemony and false consciousness, or 'the dichotomy of domination and confrontation', and instead illuminates the way class and authority function through 'tacit pacts and expectations' (Siméant, 2015, p. 168). Such pacts are centred on a delicate balance of legitimacy forged through obligation, contestation and deference. And contestation need not come through violence – as Scott (1976, 1990) points out, legitimacy and the ability to rule are challenged through whispers and rumours as much as rebellion. Second, the moral economy concept is particularly useful in understanding the resistance to transitions from one set of economic realities (and their accompanying norms, values and expectations) to another. Classically, this is a transition from pre-capitalist economies to various forms and manifestations of market capitalism. Looking at such transitions through the lens of moral economy allows us to understand the normative and social shifts that must happen alongside the economic and structural ones, and the way such shifts are resisted. In particular, examining moral economies underscores the way 'traditional' norms and economic expectations are 'inventively remembered' (Lonsdale, 1992) and invoked as a form of resistance.

In both of these dimensions this paper forges new ground within the parameters of the original concept. This paper does not look at rebellion or revolt against elites, or even its preconditions. Instead, it examines the tacit pacts and expectations between the powerful and the disadvantaged that are yet unbroken and unchallenged (though they may be on the brink), that are in fact keeping the current economic frameworks in place despite obvious lines of fissure. Instead of looking to moral economy to understand rebellion, this paper looks to it to understand its relative absence, to analyse the expectations and the political culture that keep people supporting employment-centred political discourse. The moral economy being examined here is oriented not towards expectations of economic elites, but rather the economic role of the state. To the same end, this paper does not look at resistance within a transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist economic structures. Rather it chooses to look at resistance to shifts away from an economy where wage employment is the key distributary mechanism. This, I argue, is the 'tradition' that is being 'inventively

remembered', not just in South Africa but beyond: that the legitimacy of state authority rests on its ability to provide not provision itself, but rather jobs.

History, context, method: looking to South Africa

Why look to urban South Africa to understand contemporary moral economies of cash and labour? While case studies are always enmeshed in the particular, the case of South Africa can also be used to understand many of the dynamics prevalent around the world, in particular inequality, underemployment and precarity, and redistributive experimentation. In all three of these dimensions, South Africa is a place of extremes. In a context of globally increasing inequality, South Africa is one of the world's most unequal countries (World Bank, 2018) – not only in income inequality, but also in wealth (Orthofer, 2016). This inequality is occurring alongside ongoing and long-term unemployment, currently at 29 per cent, with an expanded unemployment rate (which includes discouraged work seekers) of 38 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2020).² Economic growth, together with rich natural resources, a highly developed export-oriented agricultural sector and a largely post-industrial service economy, have failed to lead to any substantive reduction of unemployment.

Currently, the South African state provides cash grants aimed at the poor who are physically unable to work: children, the elderly and the disabled.³ About a third of the country's population receives such grants, and many more are dependent on the financial support of social grant recipients. The expansive nature of these grants has been celebrated as heralding universal benefits: James Ferguson (2015) has argued that these grants point towards possibilities for a new politics of distribution, one that is moving in the direction of something like a universal basic income. Yet, the grants remain pointedly unavailable to the able-bodied who are not primary child-carers – this is in a country where 54 per cent of South Africans are in danger of regular or intermittent hunger (Shisana *et al.*, 2013), and 55 per cent are below South Africa's national poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

South Africa, like much of the world, has a long history of looking to wage labour as its key distributive mechanism as well as its central social and political organizing force. In the case of South Africa, this took the form of first colonial and then apartheid capitalist accumulation underpinned by racially-justified dispossession. Both structurally-enforced employment of black men in South Africa's mines and curtailed forms of urban residence (restricted through pass-laws which tied urban residence with formal employment) placed wage work at the centre of twentieth century visions of social order and work-based social and political membership (Nattrass & Seekings, 2010; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). These racialized political, economic and social legacies continue to effect the economic attitudes and lived realities of the South African public and the views of the South African state. Indeed, despite the widespread nature of its social grants, the South African state continues to voice anxieties

about the dependency of the undeserving poor on such grants (Barchiesi, 2007). A reflection of this are the government's public funded work programmes, such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and the Community Work Programme (CWP). Yet these programmes have limited reach, are poorly paid, and there is no evidence that they lead to formal employment (Andersson & Alexander, 2016; Chinembiri & Tsedu, 2013).

This paper draws on fieldwork in 2016–2017 which included over 60 semi-structured ethnographic interviews. While the fieldwork was spread across three sites in urban and rural South Africa and Namibia, this paper focuses exclusively on interviews in my primary site: Jeppestown, an inner-city neighbourhood in Johannesburg, South Africa. Here I conducted 44 interviews. With a few exceptions, my interlocutors in Jeppe are in their 20s or 30s and describe themselves as unemployed. All are South African nationals and have migrated to Johannesburg from the South African province of KwaZulu Natal. I used a local resident as my translator during the interviews, though some interviews were conducted in English. The interviews loosely followed evolving scripts of core questions, which focused on people's opinions about expanding South Africa's social grants system to include more of the unemployed, as well as views of government work programmes, time use, unemployment, automation and working life. The interviews were structured as rich conversations, with frequent additions, improvisations and opportunities for questions from respondents (Heyl, 2001), and often included miniature 'work histories' of the people I spoke with. Several of my interlocutors I spoke with multiple times.

Jeppestown is an evocative place to talk to people about work. A formerly industrial inner-city neighbourhood in Johannesburg, the majority of Jeppe's factories are now closed down, though many of the all-male 'hostels' which once housed workers during apartheid are still occupied. Many of its residents live in informally constructed small plywood rooms in abandoned factories and warehouses, a domestic setting that must hold nostalgic power for a population trying to find steady work in a labour-surplus economy. These rooms are usually furnished with a bed, a small electric hot plate, pots and pans, a bare bulb (there are typically no windows), and very occasionally a television, run on electricity provided through an illegal connection (sometimes for a small fee, sometimes included in the rent or free). Residents share one or two toilets and a tap for running water. Often the buildings include a small shop run by a resident, and occasionally an informal crèche. Many of the inhabitants are not squatters – they pay rent for these rooms to whomever has laid claim to (or in popular parlance, 'hijacked') these buildings, though some buildings are occupied by residents who built their own rooms and do not pay rent.

Many people I interviewed had children that lived either with them, or with the children's grandparents in rural KwaZulu Natal. They thus indirectly benefit from South African social assistance through a child support grant for their children, and/or an older person's grant that allowed the children's grandparents to support them. Finally, Jeppestown is not only interesting as a site of high informality, work-oriented migration and unemployment – it was also a key

node for waves of xenophobic violence against migrants from other African nations in 2008, 2015 and 2019, which included the burning and looting of cars and shops owned by foreign nationals (Monson, 2012). As discussed below, anti-immigrant sentiment itself can play a crucial role in illuminating people's moral economies of work and distribution.

The moral economy of working for money: deservingness, stagnation, hope

My conversations in Jeppestown typically started with a discussion about possible state policies to help its residents, and I would often ask about possible expansions of South Africa's existing social grants system. Implementing a more universal redistributory system – such as an unconditional grant for the unemployed – was contentious. About half of the people I spoke with insisted that giving more cash or grants was 'a bad idea', and half dissented, saying it would be a positive intervention (and a number changed their minds in either direction over the course of our conversation). But this was the least illuminating part of our conversations. Far more telling is that nearly everyone I spoke with, including people that supported the idea of more direct redistribution, would go on to tell me that if they could choose one government policy or intervention to support or demand, they would choose a work programme or job guarantee.

The bulk of my conversations revolved around expanding on the thinking behind this choice. My interlocutors invoked practical explanations around political realism, financial sustainability and trust in the state, psychological explanations around what makes people subjectively happy and the role that labour plays in status, respect, gender and personal identity formation, and social explanations around community involvement and the ways social ties are built through labour. I explore the full gamut of people's responses and the multiple ways that people explain their preferences in some of my other work. In this paper, the goal is to focus on one particular thread that emerged in nearly every conversation: a deeply held moral or norms-based discourse around jobs, labour and money. By moral- or norms-based, I refer to a broad category of responses that evoked concepts such as good and bad, right and wrong, fairness, justice and deservingness.

This moral or norms-based reasoning can itself be broadly divided into several sub-threads. One of these is a direct moral categorization of certain actions and policies, tied to an equally overt discourse around the labelling of certain forms of income or money as themselves moral or immoral, or leading to moral or immoral behaviour. Another is a discourse of fairness and deservingness, of just deserts. This thread is interwoven with attitudes towards foreigners and immigrants. It is also intimately tied to discourses of identity, control, hope and expected futures. All these threads are linked to expectations of the state's interventions in economic markets, and normative visions of how

the economic and moral spheres are intertwined and are expected to function. These threads are expressed in different ways by my interlocutors, often in tangled and complicated ways, and all lie embedded in the broader histories and situations of the people I spoke with: their struggles to find work, their experiences with the state social grants and public work systems, their paths through the education system, their relationships with their neighbours and with the institutions around them. To illuminate these threads, I begin with an ethnographic portrait of one of the people I spoke with, and use this portrait as a point of departure into the themes most frequently heard in my interviews – and the varied and complex ways in which they are expressed.

Phumzile: optimism and cynicism

‘The government should get me a job’. This is how my first conversation with Phumzile starts, before I even manage to ask a question. Phumzile is an energetic 40-year old woman who describes herself as unemployed. We sit in her shack in a Jeppestown warehouse, Phumzile and my translator Sindi (who is also Phumzile’s neighbour and friend) on the bed, me on a low plastic stool, our knees nearly touching. Phumzile makes ends meet by receiving a child support grant for her teenage daughter, selling cigarettes and cell phone airtime in a spaza shop owned by someone else (a gig that ended shortly before our conversation due to a violent dispute with the man who also sells in the same shop), reselling sweets and snacks on the street, and occasional modest support from her married boyfriend. (‘I am suffering’, she tells me, ‘because I am in love with a married man. He cannot support me properly’.) She once ran her own spaza shop in an occupied building nearby, but the shop was robbed at gun point, and shortly afterwards the building burned down (rumours swirl that the government burned it down on purpose, to evict the residents). She still has a long scar on her finger where the bullet hit her during the robbery, and she tells me it means she cannot keep her hand in cold water for too long, which rules out many cleaning jobs. Otherwise, a job cleaning offices would be her ideal. She wonders if the injury might get her a disability grant, and asks for my opinion on the matter, and for advice on how to find out or apply for the grant (advice I am unable to offer). Phumzile is a poet, published in a few local magazines (though that has never brought in any money, she tells me) – she tracks me down the day after our conversation with her notebook of poems, so she can read me a poem and ask for my help in finding a publisher. The poem is about losing her job seven years ago as a taxi-cab dispatcher, and longing for the sisterhood she felt with her co-workers. She was not fired, but had no choice in quitting – the company moved their offices to a different location, and the commute was expensive enough to outweigh the salary.

Much of Phumzile’s life history, and her current political views, revolve around her ability and desire to work. Having her own business would be

even better than having a job, she tells me, because ‘I know how to work hard. I’ve learned how to make money, I’ve done hard work’. Phumzile can do many things, she can bake, roast or cook; in her view a start-up loan and a space to operate out of would be enough – she would be able to break even in one year. Phumzile tells me that her daughter is just like her, ‘a hard worker and clever too’, she loves school just as much as Phumzile did, and often Phumzile helps her with her schoolwork. She wants her daughter to be an accountant and her son to be a doctor, but does not think that paying university tuition would be possible. (When I mention NSFAS, the government-funded student loan scheme, she shakes her head incredulously – ‘I don’t know how these things work. And they are just full of fraud’.) In any case, she wants her children to earn enough to take her ‘out from this shack’.

In Phumzile’s view, if the government were to do anything for Jeppestown, ‘they should employ us – we need money’. When I propose just giving the money directly, she agrees that this could be a good idea. She even dismisses the concern with laziness of most of my other Jeppestown respondents, telling me that people would not be lazy, or if they were, these would be just the uneducated, and that ‘educating people’ would end their laziness. But, Phumzile insists, something like a government run community work programme would still be preferable to a cash grant. It does not matter what sort of work it would be – it could be cleaning the local park, or sweeping trash from the roads. ‘It’s better to work than to get something for nothing. It’s just better to get money for something you’ve done’. If she only knew how, she tells me, she would join the Jeppestown Community Work Programme this instant.⁴ Choosing work over grants would also be a signal to the government. ‘It would prove to the government that we’re *really* suffering’.

For Phumzile, money should ideally come from work, but this is a two-way relationship. Work must lead to *sufficient* money. Like many of the South Africans I spoke with in Jeppe, she scorns immigrants who break apart the relationship between hard work and a decent wage. In a separate conversation about a national minimum wage (which at the time of this conversation was being hotly debated but not implemented in South Africa), Phumzile was dismissive of such a policy making any difference because of immigrants. She told me that Malawians and Zimbabweans will always undercut wages by being willing to work hard for close to nothing. This is because they come ‘from too much poverty’, and because low wages are worth more as remittances. In Phumzile’s words, ‘as long as [the immigrants] get something to eat, they don’t care about salary’. They are willing to ‘buy cheap Chinese clothes’, and live in crowded conditions, ‘with eight families to one room’. South Africans ‘can’t do that, [we] must respect each other’s space’.

Phumzile’s is a story of hope and betrayal in the labour market. She believes in education as a path out of poverty, even though her own cleverness and hard work in school did not lead to economic success or stability. Like many of my interlocutors, she deeply believes in the possibilities of entrepreneurship, and she puts this rhetoric into practice constantly: she is perpetually hustling

(even during our conversation), selling, taking risks. But her risks are rewarded with violence, conflict and failure. She was able to get a long-term steady job, a rare feat in Jeppestown, but even that did not deliver on its promise: it was unsustainable and inherently *unsteady* in its low pay. Yet, despite these repeated lived betrayals of the links between hard work and success, the dream of a job or successful business remains central to Phumzile. It remains a sphere of hope and possibility, though both education, steady employment and entrepreneurship have thus far failed her. It is through education and white-collar employment that she hopes her children will help her escape her shack – even as she acknowledged that that education might be unattainable. And even though Phumzile is less readily dismissive of broader redistributive systems than many of the other people I spoke with in Jeppestown, working for money is still intrinsically *better* than receiving money through direct redistributory mechanisms.

The immorality of money for nothing

I heard this preference for work over direct redistribution frequently in my interviews. Often it was framed in one of two ways, both concerned with (im)morality – either through a discourse of waste, laziness or stagnation created by grants, or through the danger of misusing the grant money itself. Phakamani, a 29-year-old unemployed man, told me that he was against a more wide-spread social grant system because ‘working is better than staying at home, waiting for money that you don’t work for – work *makes* you better. If you get a grant, you’ll always be on the bed, sleeping’. Sloth, then, becomes the dangerous outcome of cash-based redistribution. A 60-year-old woman named Thandi also evoked laziness as a moral failing to be avoided by choosing jobs over cash. Unlike Phakamani, Thandi thought a universal grant was a good idea, especially as it might help decrease crime. But a work programme is still better than a grant, she told me, in order ‘to finish this laziness. Because if we get a grant without working – we won’t work anymore’. Also, she added, it is simply ‘nicer to get money that you work for’.

Zanele, a 23-year-old woman who too was unemployed, said a grant for everyone who needed one would be alright as long as the amount was not too big – otherwise she would worry that people (including herself) would stop looking for work. But she too would prefer a government work programme over a grant because ‘I want both work and money, with just money I wouldn’t be as happy’. When I asked why, she told me that work was a worthier activity – that if she was not working, she would be doing something inferior, like ‘gossiping with friends’. Work as a prevention of social ills – gossip, gambling, violence, drinking and the ubiquitous worry over laziness – was a frequent theme in my interviews. Zama, a 27-year-old woman with an IT certificate who until recently had a cleaning job in a rich suburb, told me that while she would support more widely disbursed grants, she would prefer the government to run

a work programme or give people jobs, because ‘you don’t want money you don’t work for, because you will get spoiled, not want to work, and become lazy. You have to work for money’. Just as E. P. Thompson (1971, 1991) points to the medieval moral prohibition of usury (lending with interest) or the eighteenth century insistence that bread must be affordable for the poor as a part of the moral values and norms that shaped the economy in pre-capitalist England, so here a view that cash without labour is inferior – both inherently and in its moral effects – forms the expectations of Jeppestown residents around the way the economy should ideally work.

This was frequently underscored by a view that money earned through work would be more virtuously spent than cash that came in the form of a grant. Londani, a 22-year-old unemployed man, told me that worries that a grant would be used up on alcohol were ‘100% true’. Sindi, my 30-year-old translator, who got by on occasional ‘piece work’ (very short term, casual gigs, for instance a one-off opportunity to be a waitress for a wedding or at a holiday party), had an evidence-based explanation for such beliefs. Sindi supported more expanded systems of social grants, though she too thought that a work programme would be preferable. She disagreed with many of my other interlocutors by maintaining that misspending, and in particular using grant money for alcohol, should not be a reason to withhold grants. In her view, it would be unfair to not give out grants on the basis of some people’s misuse. She was one of only two people I spoke with who said this. Yet, she thought it likely that there *would* be misuse. She told me that in Jeppestown when people play dice (i.e. gamble) and win, they use the winnings to buy alcohol. This was because ‘they didn’t work for the money, so they [feel they] can spend it on alcohol. Maybe it would be the same with a grant’.⁵

This is an astute observation that has in fact been a focus of research for behavioural economists, economic anthropologists and economic sociologists. Money is not neutral or fully fungible, we assign it value and meaning based on its origin and history.⁶ For instance, bonuses or lottery winnings are spent differently than an unexpected salary raise. In the words of Zelizer, people ‘mark moral boundaries among categories of money: consider the variable meanings of “dirty” money, “easy” money, or “blood” money’ (2010, p. 90). This is reflected in the way money from different sources is understood by my interlocutors, and their concern with misspending of money from grants rather than wages. This concern was widespread, despite the fact that most of my interlocutors benefited from South Africa’s child support grant, and emphatically defended it when I brought up the wide-spread perception that the child support grant is often misspent by caretakers on frivolous expenses (such as make-up or hair styling), or that women have children in order to access the grant (Richter, 2009). But though my respondents broadly supported the child support grant and defended it from accusations of misuse, they worried about a more widely available cash grant from the state. Noli, a 23-year-old unemployed woman who survives through occasional short-term jobs (her latest was cleaning up after the renovation of a flat), thought that both child

support grants and old age pensions were good policies, but a more wide-spread grant was not. 'People must earn money', she said. Besides that, a government work programme is preferable because 'money that I work for I would budget well, but a grant I don't budget well'. Noli thus attaches moral value to both the source of money, its use, and the connection between the two. Mthokozisi, a 19-year-old man who had just started a job as a packer loading up trucks with goods, working on a 5-month contract through a labour broker (i.e. an outsourcing company) who takes a 50 per cent cut of Mthokozisi's pay, had a similar worry. Giving people money directly is 'not a good idea', because 'you must work for money'. When I asked him to elaborate on why one must work for money, he told me that 'if you give people a grant they will waste it. They will just sit'. 'Just sitting' echoes Phakamani's earlier quoted worries about grant recipients always being on the bed, sleeping. Inactivity caused by grants is thus not only a sign of moral decay into sloth or laziness, but also a misuse of the money itself. Here misspending is broader than buying the wrong things (such as alcohol) or bad budgeting – it becomes any non-productive use.⁷

Work must lead to wealth: xenophobia, hope, agency

The counterpart to such views are attitudes towards immigrants. Phumzile is not alone in decrying the fact that immigrants undermine what most of my interlocutors see as the bidirectional link between labour and money: money should ideally come through labour, but labour must lead to decent money, and eventually wealth, or at least the end of poverty. A 47-year-old man named Nicholas, who got by on short-term gigs and currently had a stint working as a security guard, thought a grant for all who needed one was a good idea, because 'there are no jobs in South Africa'. Part of the problem, he believed, is that the government was hiring Zimbabweans, because they are willing to work for any wage. If that was the case, the government better give money to South Africans. Nicholas circled back to his resentment of immigrants' low wages repeatedly – he told me that what the government needed to do was 'chase away all the foreigners' and give job opportunities to South Africans. Nontobeko, the 36-year-old unemployed woman quoted earlier, held similar resentment. The government 'lets foreigners open companies – they must open them for us too – they must sponsor us with jobs and [government] houses'. 'The government only cares about foreigners', she told me later. 'They sell them [government] houses, they helped them during the xenophobic violence ... the government does nothing for us'.

This idea that the government somehow helps immigrants was one I heard repeated in Jeppestown as part of a broader disaffection with the state. Twenty-five-year-old Lundi, a woman who has been unemployed for the past five years, told me that 'the government must hire locals, not foreigners'. She added that foreigners are hired because they are willing to work for 30 rand per day. Lundi insisted that she would never work for so little – she

would work only for 30 rand per *hour*. It is not true that South Africans are lazy, she explained. The problem is that foreigners are willing to work for so little. Bonni, a 39-year-old unemployed woman, echoed the same sentiment. When I asked her to explain the xenophobic violence that broke out in Jeppeshtown in 2015, she told me that all the immigrants work for too little, that they can afford to do so because the rand goes further in their home countries. Thus immigrants are blamed, reviled and even killed because they visibly break apart the insistence on the norm that just as money should come through work, work must lead to *sufficient* money. Underpinning this insistence seems to be a logic of fairness, of just deserts. Money should go to the deserving workers though wages or business profits (rather than as grants to the spoiled, or the lazy, or the drinkers, or those susceptible to becoming such) – but this means in turn that the hard working deserve a decent wage.

Linked to this is a view that work should and must, eventually, lead to wealth, or at least the escape of poverty. In her interview, Phumzile repeatedly emphasized that she knew how to work hard, and this hard work must lead to success and wealth, if only the pre-conditions were right – if the state helped her open a business, or just gave her a job, and if the immigrants from Malawi and Zimbabwe did not keep on undercutting wages. In this way, my interlocutors long for economic stability and upward mobility in exchange for the ‘personal investment and sacrifice’ of hard work (Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012, p. 328). Their moral economy reflects what Muehlebach and Shoshan term a ‘post-Fordist affect’, not as an actively lived past (the Fordist promise of stability, mobility, middle-classness and full-employment were never available to non-white South Africans), but rather as ‘an aspirational form suffused with desires of the present’ (2012, p. 323).

Emerging from such views of work are discourses of agency, independence and identity. Though less obviously a ‘moral’ discourse, they too link economic structures and expectations with social values and norms. Part of the appeal of rewarding the virtue of hard work with money is that it enables a sense of agency and control. Despite her lived experience of poverty traps, violence and crisis, Phumzile remained emphatic that as long as she works hard wealth must at some point follow – so wealth remains an agentic choice, an outcome of the actions one decides to pursue.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the role labour can play in hopes and expectations of wealth and a sense of possibility and agency was my conversation with Thandaza, a 32-year-old woman who works as a security guard in Woolworths, a South African luxury supermarket and department store chain. We had a long conversation about the various ways her job was exploitative: she is outsourced and on a short contract, she is forced to work overtime, she is not paid to work overtime, her supervisor threatened to fire her if she complains, or if she joins a union, and she cannot join the union anyways because she is not on a permanent contract. At its close, I asked Thandaza if she feels angry or resentful spending every day watching the upper classes of South Africa shop for organic goat cheese and expensive wines while she is paid so

little, and faces so much precarity. 'Yes', she told me, 'I have a little anger. But I am patient – maybe the people who shop there also came from poverty and worked their way up. Maybe one day I will also have such money. I don't know their background'. Despite the limited social mobility and the stubborn persistence of poverty, inequality and unemployment in South Africa, and the lived experience of being trapped in poverty across generations, my interlocutors are still 'patient', still hopeful and willing to believe that work could lead to wealth.

Work and through it a sense of agency and control in turn creates identity. Noli, the 23-year-old unemployed woman quoted above, told me that 'a grant is good for old people, but us young people we need work, not grants'. Later she added again that 'as a young person I must work', and that grants are good only for the disabled or old. Sindi echoed the sentiment, telling me that she would prefer a work programme over a grant, since 'a grant is for the old'. So did Nontobeko, a 36-year-old woman who has been unemployed for the last three years, and gets by on child support grants for her three children and an occasional once-off cleaning job. While arguing that it is the responsibility of the government to 'give job opportunities', she told me that 'only children should get a grant, and others need to work'. Nontobeko believes this despite also seeing that 'the key problem in Jeppestown is unemployment'. Having a job thus serves as an important marker of personhood for my interlocutors. Receiving cash through redistribution becomes a hallmark of the old or of childhood, and working for money the mark of youth and possibility. This is the case even though most jobs available to Jeppe residents (and even the jobs they brought up when I asked for their ideal employment scenarios) are generally low paid, low status labour.⁸

Labour as a form of agency and choice is also labour as a source of independence. A 29-year-old unemployed man named Mikhail told me that a start-up loan for a business from the government would be better than a grant, because it is better to 'stand on your own'. John Lonsdale has written about the ways identity (of ethnicity, gender, status and age) created the moral economy of Kenya's Kikuyu in the first half of the twentieth century, and the ways in which landownership was a hallmark of male adulthood. It was in part the disruption of access to land (and adulthood through land) in the mid-twentieth century that caused a crisis of identity among young Kikuyu men, and played a role in the anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising (Lonsdale, 1992). In the same way, gaining money through effort – through jobs or a successful business – is what it means to be neither a child nor an old person for the people I spoke with in Jeppestown. Alcinda Honwana (2012) describes the young and unemployed in Africa as being in a state of 'waithood' between childhood and adulthood, held back from becoming full adults by a lack of financial independence. But for Noli and some of my other interlocutors, it seems to be the preference for work over grants, the independence from direct cash redistribution, that they seek in order to define themselves as neither elderly nor children.

This complicates the argument of James Ferguson, who has characterized employment as a form of dependence (on a boss or company), and individual autonomy and self-sufficiency as inimical to offering oneself up for the ‘hierarchical subordination’ of employment (Ferguson, 2013, p. 224). Ferguson argues that such dependence is welcomed as a form of social membership (what he calls ‘work membership’) – particularly in a world where people are increasingly ‘surplus’ (Li, 2010, 2013), no longer in demand by labour markets seeking workers or rulers seeking followers. Of course, the people I spoke with in Jeppe are part of cherished networks of dependence – perhaps more accurately, *inter-dependence*. These sought-after social networks of family members, potential and current employers and patrons, and the state itself are often paternalistic or hierarchical. Yet, the people I spoke with seem to be invoking specifically the *access of cash through labour* as a declaration of *independence*, or at least of greater independence from the cash-disbursing charity of the state than of the very old and young – those unable to work. Indeed, while much of the theoretical literature on universal basic income lauds its emancipatory potential (the seminal example being Van Parijs’ *Real freedom for all* (1995)), my interlocutors see as one of its drawbacks an echo of the forced cash-grant dependence of old age or childhood.

Protests and demands on the state: a post-Fordist moral economy

Yet the state still has an active distributory role to play in the visions of my interlocutors. It is important to note that they are *not* decrying state paternalism – in fact, quite the opposite. As Phumzile argued, the state is not simply responsible for creating an economic structure within which employment is possible. The state must in fact be the *employer* itself. The state is directly responsible for providing jobs, for hiring. Phumzile believed this even though she saw the state as mired in impenetrable bureaucracy (she saw that it was hopelessly complicated, or simply not possible, to apply for a disability grant, get a spot in Jeppetown’s Community Work Programme or get a government loan for her children’s university tuition) and in corruption (as witnessed by her view of NSFAS, or the rumour that her old building was torched by the government as an eviction strategy). She wanted to be dependent on the state – but for a job, not a grant.

The idea that the government needs to be a provider of jobs was one I heard incessantly in Jeppetown. Here there was no disagreement in my interviews: direct or indirect job provision as government policy came up repeatedly (along with the demand that the government provide housing). A 33-year-old woman named Philisiwe told me that ‘the government shouldn’t give us a grant. Grants are just for kids, others should work. The government must hire us, and pay us that way’. Sazo, a 24-year-old man currently unemployed (whose only stint with formal work was a 6-month job in construction in 2014) had a more detailed plan: while he thought giving grants to all was a good idea, his preferred intervention was that the government should ‘open

up job opportunities' by directly hiring a quota of people from each building in Jeppestown and giving them jobs in construction, security, police or transit.

Mthokozisi, the 19-year-old man quoted earlier who had just started a job as a packer, disagreed about grants, but echoed the same idea about the role of the state. It is not grants that the state should hand out. 'The government must give you work, must give jobs'. Mthokozisi had a number of suggestions for how this could be done. For instance, the government could give more jobs in teaching, social work, police and medicine, and these must be well paid jobs. The government should also run more community work programmes to fix or build infrastructure, but these too must be proper jobs. In Mthokozisi's opinion, the current government work programmes do not pay enough: they must pay 'proper salaries'. This echoes the previously discussed bidirectional link between work and sufficient money, links broken not only by immigrants but also by the low-paying work programmes set up by the state. But Mthokozisi's view is also a strong positive demand on the state.

Much of the literature on moral economies, starting with Thompson, investigates the way economic values and norm are expressed as expectations on authorities – expectations that elites are often forced to fulfil to maintain legitimacy. In eighteenth century England, these were expectations that authorities paternalistically ensure affordable grain for the poor. In early twenty first century Jeppestown, it is the expectation, despite increasing disaffection and disillusionment with government services and bureaucracy, that the state should provide jobs – the jobs needed to morally and fairly access money, personhood, and eventually wealth. The moral economy of Jeppestown residents echoes a yearning for a Fordist 'strong, loving state' (Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012, p. 329) that will not simply provide jobs, but ensure the link between work and financial rewards.

Moral economies are frequently understood via collective action such as protests, rebellions or riots against elites – or at least, as is the case with Scott (1976), the necessary pre-conditions for such action. In Jeppestown and South Africa more broadly, there is much collective action, some of it violent. The most common are the service delivery protests in South Africa's townships, which demand sanitation, running water, housing and other essential government services, along with jobs and the end of state corruption, and can often involve violence and the destruction of property. They are in many ways protests about social inclusion, and demand the social and public goods due to all citizens in a new democratic South Africa.⁹ Service-delivery protests echo the structure of the demands described above by focusing not on economic elites and the private sector, but rather the state. Xenophobic violence, which includes the burning and looting of foreign-owned shops, and the often brutal killing of foreigners themselves, sometimes takes the form of 'mob violence', as it did in Jeppestown in 2015, and in the widespread pogroms of 2008 and 2019. While these protests are focused on access to public goods, services and jobs themselves, what is absent are protests for more widespread direct redistribution of wealth or income away from the wealthy, such as the expansion of social

grants. Protests focused on redistribution away from economic elites are largely either rallies around land redistribution and state ownership of natural resources, often led by the far-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party as part of their political canvassing, or are protests by unionized, ‘proper’ workers for higher wages, such as those that led to the Marikana massacre.¹⁰ To demand *direct* redistribution of wealth away from capitalist elites, then, one must do so through the mechanisms of either natural resource distribution (more on this in the conclusion below), or a wage and a job.

These points of collective action underscore what people expect and demand, what people are willing to take action for – and are not. What the people I spoke with in Jeppestown demand is not exactly ‘a new politics of distribution’ focused on new forms of livelihood and income provision divorced from the wage (Ferguson, 2015). At the very least, this is not a new politics of *direct* redistribution, but rather new forms of twentieth century politics of state-provided welfare and public goods.¹¹ While unemployed South Africans gather to demand land, houses, government services, and the removal of immigrants, they do not gather to demand more taxes on the wealthy, or an expanded social grant system. If it is the bread riots of the eighteenth century that held the key to the English working-class moral economy, then perhaps it is the very *lack* of wealth, inequality or unemployment grants riots in Jeppestown that holds the key to a contemporary moral economy. This moral economy insists not on social protection floors, basic income grants or the decommmodification of labour, but rather that the moral way to deserve, receive and use money is through labour, and in turn that labour must lead to enough money. The responsibility of the state, then, is to substantiate this link, to make it work – by keeping out immigrants, by distributing public goods such as housing and education, and by directly providing the employment people seek.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the various and complex ways in which the moral economy of Jeppestown revolves around virtue-based relationships between labour, cash and wealth. Such a moral economy underpins what Ferguson and Li have termed ‘a powerful vision implicit in the idea of an emerging “developed” world in which paid labour might provide the basis both of a stable livelihood and of a kind of social membership or incorporation for all’ (2018, p. 1). In trying to make this ‘implicit’ vision explicit, the aim of this paper is not to advocate for the ongoing centrality of wage labour in distributory or welfare policies, any more than E. P. Thompson was advocating for a return to feudal paternalistic economic governance. Just like the poor of eighteenth century England, or the peasants of mid-twentieth century Burma, or the young Kikuyu men of 1940s and 1950s Kenya, we all are shaped by idealized visions of the near-past, in this case a past of work-membership and labour scarcity (Standing, 2009). In the words of Ferguson,

we are so used to seeing industrialization and the rise of capitalism as the macro-historical rupture that we have perhaps not allowed ourselves to see that the shift from a people-scarce system to a people-surplus one is in some ways just as radical. (2013, p. 230)

In insisting on labour in a work-scarce economy, my interlocutors invoke imaginatively remembered norms around the social and moral roles of both employment and the state, demand jobs and through them, mobility and the escape from poverty. Such invocations allow them to feel hopeful and agentic, forge identity as empowered adults, place blame on outsiders, and make demands on the state. Yet, it is worth noting that while Jeppestown residents I spoke with believe that the state should give them employment, none of them were involved in Jeppestown's Community Work Programme, or South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme. There are myriad good reasons for this, bureaucratic hurdles and the programmes' low pay being two salient ones. But even more important is that on the whole, the CWP and other programmes like it, including the youth wage subsidy, a South African programme that encourages companies to hire young people by subsidizing their wages, do not fulfil the dreams of Jeppestown residents. In fact, both public work programmes and the youth wage subsidies in South Africa do not usually lead to further employment in the formal labour market, nor have they impacted unemployment as a whole (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2017; Lannoy *et al.*, 2018). Beyond government programmes, my respondents are well aware that the jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities that are available to them and the people around them do not match their visions or expectations – these options are short term, scarce, unstable and rarely seem to lead to the escape of poverty. For many, they do not count as 'jobs' at all. But if not through jobs, how can the residents of Jeppestown – and elsewhere – cultivate virtues, control their economic destiny and build personhood and identity?

These are vital concerns. In highlighting the ongoing moral centrality of wage labour in a context of worklessness, this paper in no way implies that the residents of Jeppestown are somehow wrong or misguided in their views. Indeed, one of the benefits of the moral economy framework is that this allows us to take seriously the normative, value-based underpinnings of economic demands and expectations, rather than simply dismissing them as ideology or false consciousness. Nor is the aim here to discount the important material and social benefits, outlined above, of having a 'proper job' within our current socio-economic context. Yet at the same time, this paper does not take for granted what Kathi Weeks terms 'the ideological foundation of contemporary capitalism' (2011, p. 109) – the exaltation of wage labour as inherent to human nature and wellbeing. Rather, its aim is to understand the various logics behind widely held views that 'jobs ought to be the primary means through which to claim resources, dignity, moral worth and full citizenship' (Lawhon *et al.*, 2018, p. 1115).

Such views go far beyond Jeppestown, and underpin the ‘nostalgic workarism’ (Ferguson, 2013, p. 234) that is reflected in many of the policy proposals put forward by both progressives and conservatives. These are proposals that ‘prioritize labor market participation and the individual responsibility of the poor as alternatives to redistributive interventions regarded as conducive to welfare “dependency”’ (Barchiesi, 2007, p. 39). They foreclose the possibility that the decreasing need for human labour in a world of plenty could be a source of liberation: liberation from time-poverty, liberation from dangerous or tedious work, liberation to engage in activities (such as care work, or artistic production) not sufficiently rewarded by labour markets. Many societies, both before capitalism and outside of it, found ways of creating social relationships, personhood and moral systems without valorizing work (see for instance Comaroff & Comaroff, 1987). Yet to transition to the new politics of distribution that are necessary to decommodify labour, we must engage with the question of what structures, occupations, values and norms would underpin such a new moral economy.

One example of how to do so is to look at the way reframing redistribution changes people’s expectations and beliefs. In the words of Zelizer (2010),

a reciprocal relationship exists between the form of payment and the relationship at hand: the treatment of a payment as compensation already defines the relationship as different from one where a gift is appropriate, and different relations demand different forms of payment. (p. 92)

My respondents have particular views of their relationship with the state – they want to make claims on what is due to them, but these dues are of jobs and houses, not cash. Towards the end of my field work, I started closing my interviews by reframing a potential expanded social grant system as instead a dividend of South Africa’s natural resource wealth, a dividend that would take the form of a monthly cash payment to all citizens. Suddenly, even those previously adamantly against more universal cash transfers changed their minds. Take for instance Mthokozisi, the 19-year-old packer who argued that a basic income grant was a bad idea because people would ‘just sit around [and] waste it’. When I reframed the idea of a basic income grant as instead a share of South Africa’s natural resource wealth that could be given out to every citizen, he enthusiastically supported the idea. When I asked him the difference between receiving such a share and a grant, he told me that ‘we must benefit from our economy ... a social grant comes from the government, not the [gold or platinum] mine – that’s the difference’. When I brought up his concerns with laziness and misuse, he expressed the inverse of his earlier statements about grants. It is people’s money, they can do what they like with it, he told me. Money holds different meanings and values if it is a charitable gift, a wage, or a ‘rightful share’ (Ferguson, 2015) – something that you understand to already belong to you. The point here is that moral economies are not static. They are ever shifting, though they might evoke old norms and resist new ones.

Nor are they inevitable: they are human creations. All of us co-create the moral economy of work and virtue in which Jeppestown residents – along with the rest of us – are so deeply embedded. All of us can participate in co-creating new social and political imaginaries that could carry us beyond the tight binds between work, deservingness and wealth.

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Notes

1 Thompson argues that part of this switch was facilitated by a shift in the response of state authorities. The bread riots were initially tolerated and even supported by the authorities, but they began to be violently repressed by the late eighteenth century by a state increasingly committed to the logic of the new free-market economy.

2 These metrics include the informal sector. If only considering formal employment, the unemployment rate would be far higher.

3 Currently, the child support grant is 420 rand (about US \$30) per month, and both the disability and the older person's grant is 1,780 rand (about US \$120) per month (South African Government, 2019).

4 South Africa's Community Work Programme is a government-funded and civil-society run public work scheme, which prioritizes socially valuable work selected by communities themselves (such as caring for the sick and elderly, providing meals for children, or cleaning streets and planting trees). Participants are able to work two days per week and are paid ZAR 81 (US\$5.5) per day. Programme participants are largely women, due to the low pay and the emphasis on care work (Philip, 2013).

5 Sindi had subtle and at times conflicting views of the issue – she also told me that people drink to relieve the stress of unemployment, so perhaps with a grant and less financial worries some might drink less.

6 For a discussion of this from behavioural economics see for instance Akerlof (2007), Arkes *et al.* (1994), Soman and Ahn (2010) and Thaler (1990); from economic

anthropology see Parry and Bloch (1989); and from economic sociology see Zelizer (1989, 1997, 2010).

7 This correlates with the insistence of elites who *do* support more universal social protection systems that cash transfers do not decrease employment, implying that decreasing working hours is an inherent bad. This is precisely why so many cash transfer and basic income experiments focus on measuring economic participation and employment as a key outcome of the studies, and triumphantly extol results that show that labour force participation increased (Fouksman & Klein, 2019).

8 When I asked people in Jeppe about their ‘ideal jobs’, most people said cleaning or security, with good pay, reasonable hours and a permanent contract. Sometimes people added that they would very much like to run their own business as an alternative to having a wage job, such as running a restaurant, tavern or bakery.

9 There is a rich literature around service delivery protests, and protests more broadly in South Africa, to which this paper cannot do justice. See for instance Alexander (2010), Dawson (2014), von Holdt *et al.* (2011).

10 The Marikana massacre was a 2012 wildcat strike by South African miners demanding higher wages. The strike turned violent, with police shooting protestors, and 34 people killed and 78 injured.

11 This reflects that fact that in South Africa the state – rather than the private sector – has been the primary mechanism of wealth accumulation for the black middle class in the post-apartheid era (Southall, 2016).

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