

Superfluous labor, state weakness, and the contradictions of ‘political’ subjectivity in South Africa

Bernard Dubbeld

‘You think that praxis—in its emphatic sense—is not blocked today. I think differently.’

(Adorno to Marcuse, 19 July 1969, in 1999: 132)

Introduction

The attempt to conceptualize political subjectivity, and to ask what emancipation means at a time when older nationalist, state and working class imaginaries of liberation have been exhausted, has recently become a concern among several thinkers writing from South Africa (Pithouse 2006, 2009, van Heusden and Pointer 2006, Neocosmos 2010). South Africa is an especially interesting site for the articulation of this concern because of its relatively recent success following a forty-year liberation struggle. Successful, of course, in the sense that a universal franchise was achieved and three and a half centuries of legally sanctioned racism was ended. Many would argue that the government has been less successful in achieving the aspirations of many of economic equality and of greater ‘consequential’ or ‘substantive’ participation in politics.

Perhaps because of the history of Marxism in South Africa, with its influence in the liberation struggle and in the academy, and its stress on the primacy of class relations and political economy as constituting politics, the new theorists of political subjectivity tend to shy away from an analysis of capitalism. Neocosmos’s theoretical account explicitly challenges the

idea that political subjectivity can be derived from class, rejecting the ‘stress on structural constraints... at a core of a politics derived from political economy’ (Neocosmos 2010: 534-7). Rather, he takes inspiration from French philosopher Sylvain Lazarus and argues for an emancipatory politics outside ‘neoliberal political thought’ and at a distance from the state. Pithouse claims that poor as a political category (rather than the industrial working class), and insofar as he confronts capitalism, it is not as a structural category, urging that ‘*allowing* the market to determine housing patterns will result in excluding the poor’ (Pithouse 2009: 10-12, my emphasis). He argues that the struggle should increase the power of poor people’s organizations and decrease the power of elites across the ‘triad’ of state, capital and civil society. Van Heusden and Pointer (2006: 118-120) analyze three different areas in Cape Town, pointing to what they regard as the multiplication of subjectivity that may produce a solidarity neither reducible to an industrial working class nor taking coherent form between different areas. They stress the importance of local histories or affective relationships in producing ‘complex subjectivities’ resulting in ‘a complicated relationship to the resistance to neoliberalism’.

While the criticism of the priority of class is timely, not least because the ‘industrial working class’ has become much smaller in South Africa, the question remains as how the existence of increasing numbers of people rendered superfluous to the labor market should be figured in a discussion of political subjectivity. Indeed, my central concern in this paper is with superfluity might be best approached, and what its consequences are for understanding both politics and subjectivity.

In order to understand superfluity, I believe it is necessary to return to Marx, but not to traditions of Marxism dominant in South Africa and elsewhere (Nash 1999). While superfluity might be *described* in the terms of the class character of contemporary capitalism (possibly by

noting that there has been a growth in ‘lumpenproletariat’), its *analysis* demands a theory of capitalism that can both account for the ongoing production of superfluity and for the contradictory expressions of subjectivity that emerge from it (expressions that are evident in many contemporary accounts, which I will discuss later). In the first part of this paper I will outline such a theory.

Having established how superfluity can emerge from Marx, I will examine the historical trajectory of superfluity in South Africa. Such a trajectory reveals how the political power to shape the market was critical for the early Apartheid South African state, and yet that possibility – together with perspectives that privilege political agency — becomes increasingly anachronistic beginning in the late 1970s. The trajectory culminates in the contemporary moment, which I characterize politically in terms of the *weakness of the state* – by which I mean something entirely different from political scientists’ notion of ‘weak states’ – and socially as producing particular kinds of contradictions, which are articulated in emerging forms of subjectivity. Paying attention to the logic which produces such contradictions, I will suggest, is a necessary condition for any adequate theory of political subjectivity today.

Approaching Capital Today: Abstract Labor and Superfluity

How might capitalism shape subjectivity? What effects on political subjectivity might its contemporary inflections have? To answer these questions, we have to understand what capitalism is, how it is constituted and what it does. *Pace* many Marxists, who Neocosmos rightly criticizes, class is the wrong place to start, not because people’s access to work and to wealth don’t play some role in their consciousness, but rather because differences in class interest don’t alone account for shared motivations and desires across class lines. It is not, for example, that the desire of the poor for elegant clothes and suburban houses is ‘false’; indeed,

within the contours of capitalist society, it is completely understandable. Instead if our theory of capitalism is to account for more than the existence of class division and workplace antagonism — a specific kind of antagonism, we may note, that is becoming anachronistic, even as other forms of antagonism emerge — it is instructive to start where Marx himself started, that is, with the commodity. I will think here with Moishe Postone's (1993) reinterpretation of Marx, and provide the briefest of outlines of two critical elements of his understanding, which helps to show the purchase of Marx's analytic in contemporary conditions.

First, Postone argues that what is central to the commodity in Marx is the commensuration of different forms of human activity as labor in the abstract. That is, commodification is not, in the first instance, about monetary exchange (as in the 'commodification of water'), but about producing an equivalence between different forms of human activity, which becomes the condition of possibility for exchange through the universal equivalent, the money form (Marx 1976: 150-151). While concrete capitalist-worker relations in Britain factories provided rich historical examples for Marx, abstract labor as the form of domination of the commodity does not require factories or factory owners, for the terms of abstract labor are generally (re)produced in capitalist society, in any moment of the purchase of labor power or (what more of us do all the time) the products of labor power. As such, domination in capitalist society is impersonal, even if, at particular historical moments, either the 'state' or the 'market' appears to be directing capitalism.

This insight presents one aspect of Postone's departure from what he calls 'Traditional Marxism' (Postone 1993:7-15). He argues that Marx understood capitalism not as a system of political economy, but as a society in which political economy was the dominant form of value and the structuring principle of social life. From this standpoint, Marx is interested not

in generalizing political economy to all forms of life – since that is precisely what capitalism itself does — but in asking about the character and the limits of political economy in modern society. Similarly, this interpretation does not advocate the generalization of labor, since capital itself does this abstractly, but the possibility of the overcoming of labor in the abstract. Thus, *pace* many Marxists, Marx’s mature theory should not be applied across all time and space, as polemical statements from the Manifesto, such as ‘All history is the history of class struggle’, have been read. Instead, Marx’s theory of capitalism itself, and the categories that make up the theory, are historically circumscribed and have validity only in the historical epoch from which they arise and which they seek to explain. The implication is that theory is temporally bound and reflexively a product of the present society. There is no Archimedean point outside society from which to stand: for theory to be adequate it has to explain society through the historically specific categories animating that society. The implication is also that, rather than Marx be cast as a ‘materialist’ against ‘idealists’, Marx’s theory is about a form of social life that produces ideology and practice simultaneously as value. The logic of capital, as a specific form of social existence, can be seen in factories, shopping malls, bohemian lifestyles, and literature. It is at once a matter of economics *and* epistemology.

Yet, that a theory of capital such as Marx’s can arise at all in these conditions points to the second contribution of Postone’s interpretation. In his reading of Marx, capitalism both provides the framework for human practice (ie a form of mediation) and is reconstituted by that practice. But this form of mediation is temporal: it commensurates different forms of human labor by reference to standardized time, a standard abstracted from any concrete specificity (abstracted to the point that, from within capitalist society, our notion of time appears to be universally and transhistorically valid). Inasmuch as time is standardized in capitalist

society, time does not remain static: the continuous reconstitution of social life in the terms of abstract labor involves a dynamic where the time taken to produce any particular commodity becomes less. This dynamic emerges from the labor process itself: increasing productivity results in short-term increases in value (the temporary achievement of surplus value), which disappear (qua increases in value) once they become socially general. Capital thus produces ever increasingly numbers of commodities, and simultaneously demands that people produce things in less time. Overall, a socially general trajectory follows a course: 1) capital converts more things or forms of human activity into commodities 2) the necessary time for production is reduced, increasing the surplus time and 3) the 'variable' element of the production process of any given commodity becomes 'constant', that is, machines come to do the work of humans, and human become extraneous to the labor process.

In an illuminating fragment of 'The Chapter on Capital' in the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that the determinate dynamic of capitalism is not a circular temporality, but instead points beyond itself, towards its own overcoming: 'Capital thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production' (Marx 1973: 700). What he means is that the trajectory of capitalism is towards a situation where the productive capacity of machines, who in the capitalist social form always replace living labor, become sufficiently extended and socially general as to render concrete human work itself anachronistic. What becomes available, at least in principle, is a society where labor can be minimized and abolished, and crucially with it, the value form of capitalist society, generative at once of massive productive capacities and generalized alienation. Living under these conditions compels people into a 'treadmill' (Postone 1993: 289-91), where they have to work harder to remain where they are, while growing numbers of people are simply unable to find or keep regular work at all. At the same time, ever greater numbers

of commodities are produced more efficiently and capitalism creates the conditions of seeing beyond it, and thus of a critical vision such as Marx's that aspires to time in which capitalism, and Marx's theory itself, become anachronistic themselves.

Yet, while Marx suggests that capitalism provides the conditions of possibility for its own overcoming—and the idea that capitalism cannot be overcome in any other manner, through state planning or indeterminate 'resistance', for example—he recognizes that the conditions appear as contradictions, contradictions that are unlikely to be felt without considerable social difficulty. He argues that 'Capital itself is a moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth', that is, while the creation of wealth can be made independent of human labor, capitalist society still uses labor time (or abstract labor) as the 'measuring rod' for value (Marx 1973: 706). In his and Horkheimer's 'Towards a New Manifesto?', Adorno captures this contradiction:

[The abstract necessity of labor in capitalism] has a positive and a negative side. The positive side lies in the teleology that work potentially makes work superfluous; the negative side is that we succumb to the mechanism of reification. (Adorno [1956] 2010: 35)

What Adorno refers to here as the 'mechanism of reification' is the production of abstract labor as the 'measuring rod' of value independent of social changes, and its consequences are tremendous. Even if that the character of labor today has changed fundamentally, with workers becoming flexible, outsourced, and ultimately unemployed, their superfluous character to the operation of capital is but one side of their story. The other side is that because capitalism continues, their existence remains structured by abstract labor. Even if significant numbers of people are underemployed or unemployed and may be receiving forms of social security, they

are not ‘outside’ capital understood as a historically specific form of abstract domination: they may experience the domination of abstract labor more severely, since their labor power is worth almost nothing, but they are not ‘outside’ the mediation of exchange-value.

This condition of superfluity, the contradiction of having life structured by the demand to do increasingly unavailable work is, I would contend, the necessary starting point from which to attempt to grasp political subjectivity in South Africa today. By superfluity, I mean the specific condition that people increasingly find themselves in as result of the telos of capitalism (a telos that, while we might desire to overcome it, cannot simply be wished away as those suspicious of all ‘teleologies’ attempt to do). While sympathetic to Achille Mbembe’s (2004) discussion of how superfluous objects in South Africa are commodified and consumed as elements of fantasies long connected to racial oppression—most recently in the construction of Montecasino and Melrose Arch as ‘resistances’ to urban racial integration— my focus on superfluity is different. In this interpretation of Marx ‘superfluous’ objects can always in principle be commodified and made ‘necessary’, while people who were once ‘necessary’ to the labor process become increasingly superfluous. While those rendered superfluous might have found other jobs in the past, the post-1973 moment globally has meant that the reintegration of people in the labor market has become increasingly unlikely. Hence, superfluity here comes to stand for the contradictory condition of contemporary capitalism, that of being at once structurally compelled to find work to ensure daily reproduction, and being structurally unable to find work. Examining the historical trajectory of capitalism in South Africa will allow me to reflect on the development of superfluity, and the contradictions produced in both politics and subjectivity.

Concrete Labor, Housing, and Welfare in South Africa: From the Past to the Present

I Work, Space, and State before 1994

If a major difficulty for the development of capitalism in South Africa in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was finding adequate numbers of workers, i.e. the *supply* of laborers, revisionist historiography of the 1970s argued that the capitalist social form in South Africa was achieved by rural dispossession, forcing Africans into selling their labor power as means to supplement their reproduction. A migrant labor system developed, giving Africans one foot in an urban workplace and the other in the countryside, a splitting of residence that in the early twentieth century was sometimes coercively enforced and at other times ‘chosen’, allowing capitalists to pay African workers less because the costs of reproduction were not borne by the workplace entirely.

This analytic powerfully showed how capitalism was structurally connected to racial exploitation as function of spatial difference. That Africans ostensibly did not live in urban areas allowed capitalists to pay them lower wages, and African urbanization became a threat to this form of capitalist (extra)exploitation. Harold Wolpe ([1972] 1995: 67-68) is particularly important for showing how the extent of deterioration of conditions in rural areas where Africans lived meant that, by the onset of Apartheid in 1948, cheap labor power provided by migrants could only be sustained through massive coercion. This is, sharing the burden of reproduction between urban workplace and rural household became economically impossible, and between 1950s and 1970s capitalism in South Africa depended upon state oppression. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, rural homelands (or Bantustans) became ‘dumping grounds’ for the Apartheid government, overcrowded with people removed from urban areas and white commercial farms, and played no role in economic reproduction (Cooper 2002: 97-99).

Wolpe also noted that, to mitigate the fact that workers were being paid less than the

costs of reproduction, both workers and capitalists would find ways to move closer to one another, even in contravention of official legislation. In particular, he predicted that 'rural slums' were likely to emerge as alternatives to urban-rural migrant labor. Indeed, the proliferation of new settlements outside the city limits of white towns and around border industries in the 1980s led Colin Murray (1987) to call these settlements precisely that, 'rural slums'. On one hand, by the late 1980s in homelands,

Households survive by structuring exports of labour power to metropolitan areas, to... farms and anywhere else, which in a circular pattern, provides opportunities to generate income, not necessarily to work, but to look for work, or to trade in the informal sector (Mabin 1991: 44)

On the other hand, settlements outside towns also transformed the patterns of movement for work from long term cycles to daily movements. Soni and Maharaj (1991) noted at the time how a massive class of African commuters emerged who averaged more than two and half hours on transport from where they lived to areas where they hoped to obtain work.

As powerful as Wolpe's analytic is on the question of reproduction, it assumes a constant demand for cheap labor. From the late 1970s onwards, the demand for labor at workplaces changed, challenging this assumption. Local workplace restructuring retrenched thousands and hired relatively few highly skilled workers (Dubbeld nd, Bolsmann 2010). People living in Bantustans found ways of leaving and entering urban townships at the same time as the possibility of acquiring permanent urban work diminished. Townships appeared as sites of political protest in the 1980s at the same time as the Apartheid government lost the ability to effectively police both townships and over influx control during this period (Eidelberg 1997). The changes in spatial composition of townships and Bantustans and the weakness of the

Apartheid state cannot be understood with reference to political protest alone, however. These transformations should be understood as structural products of the changed demand for labor that constrained late Apartheid and post-Apartheid state alike. But while the government has attempted to deal with the spatial legacies of Apartheid, it has been difficult for them to deal with these adequately without recognizing how labor was connected to these spaces, and more importantly, what happened to labor and this reconfigures geographies of movement and settlement from the late 1970s.

II The attempt to address displacement: Post-Apartheid Housing Policy

Almost a century of well-documented legally sanctioned racial segregation and forced removal makes it understandable why Post-Apartheid policy focused upon spatial transformation. After assuming office in 1994, the racial housing policy of apartheid was replaced with an income based housing capital subsidy targeting the poor (Pottie 2004: 607), and three important government documents, the White Paper on Housing Policy and Strategy (1994), The Development Facilitation Act (1995), and the White Paper on Local Governance (1998), testify to attempts by the government to transform past spatial inequities.

Read together, these documents produced in the early years of post-Apartheid government have four broad aims. First, to provide people with a ‘permanent residential structure with secure tenure, aimed at ensuring privacy, providing protection against the elements, and ensuring that water, electricity, and waste disposal are adequate... in living spaces’. Second, they aim to link home and work more effectively by providing services to areas in which people already live, rather than relocating them further. Third, they identify local municipal government (as opposed to provincial or national) as the place from which

historically produced spatial inequalities will be overcome. This involves re-crafting what local government is in terms of function (to work for 'socially transformative' goals) to the extent that municipalities are supposed to ensure that 'the inhabitants of its area of jurisdiction have access to adequate housing on a progressive basis', and bear additional responsibility for other components of housing development (Pottie 2004: 612). The spatial jurisdiction of local government is also recast, linking economically related areas that were kept apart in the past, including connecting former white areas with former black areas under the same local administration. To achieve this, the government established 'municipal demarcation boards' as vehicles of rezoning. The number of local municipalities was reduced from eight hundred and forty three to two hundred and eighty four, aiding the challenge to older boundaries by facilitating more equitable distribution of services (Freund 2005: 307).

The final, and perhaps most difficult, aim of these policies is to overcome the shortage in housing, which the government identifies in 1995 as covering 'forty-five percent of the population'. The government set a target, in 1995, of building one million houses in the first five years of office, that it believed would significantly reduce the need for housing among the poor and most disadvantaged by Apartheid. The collapse of Apartheid racialized controls over movement and housing had seen, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, significant amounts of what was understood as 'urbanization' (that is, a linear and unidirectional movement from the country to the city). Identifying the need for people to move as a legacy of Apartheid, the state believed itself to be transforming the landscape by building houses in places where people lived.

Yet, even as they achieved the goal of building a million houses only slightly behind schedule, in 2000 (Pottie 2004: 609), it became clear that the demand for housing was unresolved, indeed it was growing, hydra-like: the demand of housing had—after building a

million houses—*increased* (also see Murray 2008: 97). There were other problems too: the zeal to ‘deliver’ houses quickly meant houses were often sloppily built, and private construction companies hired largely failed to account for poor construction work meant for public inhabitation. Even more seriously for project of transformation, the actual building of low income houses ended up—contrary to the stated intention of policy—reproducing the social patterns of segregation inherited from Apartheid: even if people were being governed across race and class lines in much larger municipalities, the majority of the black poor who did receive new houses ended up living in urban peripheries far from either potential places for piecework or relatives (Khan 2002: 5). For many of the poor, to borrow Martin Murray’s phrase (2008: 123), life has become a ‘permanent condition of nomadic being’, and at least from my own fieldwork, people do not ‘urbanize’ so much as move between multiple rural locations and different parts of urban periphery.

Some recognition of these problems led to policy changes in the mid-2000s. In 2004, cabinet approved a new strategy on Housing entitled *Breaking New Ground: A comprehensive plan for the development of Sustainable human settlements*. A Housing Amendment Bill followed in 2006. Read together, they show significant shifts in direction. These newer policies stress ‘integration’ between communities who live in new houses, builders, planners, and elected officials, with a view to both better establish how people want to live and to render builders accountable (Menguete, Khan, and Vawda 2008: 180). There is also a greater commitment to approaching housing as part of a governance strategy over the area at large. Through the standardization of reporting requirements for local municipalities (through a five year Spatial Development Framework and a yearly Integrated Development Plan) this moment in Housing Policy is more concerned with ‘implementation’ and projects slower transformation and more

modest futures. Standing in clear relation to the increasingly difficulty of finding regular work, these documents stress that it may be possible for the government to help improve housing *in situ* (rather than build completely new houses), and also offer a commitment to purchasing land for housing that might be strategic for future job prospects.

These changes in policy reveal more serious difficulties for the state in transforming housing. One of the most obvious of these is the explicit rendering of a government provided or subsidized house as a ‘commodity’. Previously, housing provided by the state was offered to people on the assumption that people would have no desire to vacate or especially to sell their recently acquired homes. Indeed, 1990s Housing policies made it extremely difficult to sell a state-provided house, requiring a long waiting period, detailed justification, and specific approval by the Minister of Housing. In the 2006 Amendment Bill, many of the requirements are dispensed with — including Ministerial approval — and the period for selling a state house is considerably shortened. Indeed, *Breaking New Ground* explicitly claims that buying and selling property can be a site of wealth creation.

Breaking New Ground refers to earlier policies as too ambitious, and no longer emphasizes spatial inequalities between people living different areas, but instead suggests that the way to ‘combat’ poverty is through a careful attention to resolving problems in the area itself. Indeed, this strategy document suggests that the construction companies building houses could source workers from the communities where they are building, and therefore that the building of houses could help with unemployment in the country at large.

Most obviously, these changes in policy reflect the magnitude of the difficulties in housing that the Post-Apartheid government faces. One interpretation of the changes in policy would see them as evidence of the ‘neoliberalization’ of government. I will interpret them

instead as signs of weakness of the state more generally; not the demise of a progressive government agenda but the extreme difficulties facing any progressive government today.¹ However, before reaching that assessment, we need to bring labor in Post-Apartheid South Africa back into the picture.

III Welfare and the limits of the progressive state project

Since the early 1990s, more than a half of million non-agricultural jobs were lost. Two hundred thousand more jobs were shed in agriculture. By 1999, five years after the first democratic election, ‘the narrow unemployment rate was 23%, but once unemployed people - - [those] who had not sought work for a month – were included unemployment topped 37% (up from 32% in 1994)’ (Marais 2011: 118-119, 204). The consequence was that in the first five years of democratic government (ie 1994-1999), black South Africans actually became poorer. More recently, almost half of Black South African households earned less than R1670 (US\$ 210) per month in 2005/6. In urban workplaces, three factors drove this increase in unemployment: labor-saving technologies, increased outsourcing, and a determined shift towards casual and contract labor, while mechanized intensified in agriculture. But as noted earlier, these changes stretch back to the late 1970s, were widespread in 1980s and are in contained in the trajectory of

¹ I view the Courts in general, and the Constitutional Court in particular, as an arm of the State, and as part of the broader government project to produce and enforce transformative legislation. Thus three landmark cases (*Grootboom* (Housing), *Khosa* (social assistance for non-citizens) and *Mazibuko* (‘Phiri’, about Water), are not so much examples of victories against government as examples of the enforcement of progressive government. (for social and legal context on the cases, see Liebenberg 2010) Yet what is striking is not so much what activists point to, that is, government neglect of the poor, or so-called ‘commodification’ of services, but precisely that the government will or, in its failure, can be compelled, to provide assistance to the poor. This is part of what marks the state for me as progressive: such a possibility would simply not be available in many other societies. Instead, the critical question is not the neo-liberal disposition of government, but what conditions of superfluity have done and will do to the attempts to provide housing, social assistance and free services. At what point will it be simply impossible for the government to enforce, structurally, its progressive promise of housing, social assistance, and services for all who live in the country?? And then, will the ‘left’ realize that this incapacity has got little to do with the bad faith of particular members of government (of which there might well be some in certain cases), and with the much more onerous problem of understanding and engaging capital itself (as well as the possibilities its contradictions may generate)?

capital in South Africa.

Although government has, since the early 2000s, made job creation central to its agenda—it was explicitly a subject of the 2010 and 2011 State of the National Address— in 2000, the then Finance Minister Trevor Manuel frankly admitted, ‘Government, labour and business can... collectively lament the absence of jobs, but they aren’t capable of creating jobs’ (cited in Marais 2011: 119). The effects are tremendous, with Marais calling it a ‘stinging irony’ that ‘the more rationed and precarious work is becoming, the more reliant individuals and households are on it’ (Marais 2011: 184).

In 1997, the government began to revamp the old Apartheid welfare system, which had previously provided tremendously racially skewed pensions and disability grants. Initially dubbed ‘developmental social welfare’, the idea was that it would contribute towards overcoming racialized inequality by targeting not only the old and disabled, but also mothers who had little other income (Marais 2011: 242). The three main types of social payments came to be the Old Age Pension, the Disability Grant, and the Child Support Grant (two other grants are the Foster Child Grant and Care dependency grant). The contraction in the labor market and the elaboration of the pension system together meant that even in the late 1990s, pensions came to eclipse migrant remittances, long a major source of rural income, both in terms of quantity and in terms of reliability. The Child Support Grant, initially targeting children up to the age of six, was extended in the early 2000s to make mothers of children up to fourteen years old eligible. More recently, cabinet extended this grant to parents of children up to the age of eighteen. By 2010, it is estimated that thirty percent of South African households receive at least one child support grant, and approximately 1.4 million people, or (or about 2.5% of the population) receive the disability grant.

This system of government social assistance has practically served as instrument to mitigate the effects of changes in the labor market. There were approximately 12.7 million recipients of some kind of grant in 2008, and 14 million recipients in 2010, with it estimated that a little over forty percent of South African households receive at least one state grant (Sunderer 2010: 204, Marais 2011: 241). In 2009/10, expenditure on social assistance amounted to 3.5% of the GDP (up from 2% in 2000). These quantities are striking, and as Manuel noted in a frank interview in 2007, South Africa spends more on social assistance than self-declared socialist countries such as Venezuela or Bolivia (Manuel 2007).

Impressive as the social assistance system has become in aiding increasing numbers of people who simply have no other income, the government explicitly refuses to accept that they have become a welfare state. Indeed, as Jeremy Seekings (2008: 30-32) argues, social assistance does not target people according to economic need, but in privileging pensions, child and foster care grants, and grants for the disabled, support is divided between those physically capable of working and those that are not. The government thus operates on the assumption that work is available, for instance, for a majority of children who turn eighteen to find work (see Barchiesi 2011). While Manuel (op. cit) emphasizes economic sobriety and careful management as being able to 'ensure measureable returns on the lives of people', Marais notes:

Government speaks... of the poor 'graduating' from dependence on social grants to employments and hails public-works participation as a bridge into the blessed world of formal employment. Received wisdom therefore touts skills enhancement as an important remedy for the jobs crisis. Once workers are well educated, trained, and skilled, they would be able to enter the charmed circle of full-time, relatively well-paid employment, it is claimed. But the structural trend runs in the opposite direction: towards the reducing of that core of workers (Marais 2011: 183).

The limits of the progressive governance: state weakness as structural condition

Certainly, the South African government has not ceded what may now be an anachronistic attempt to politically solve a problem produced by capitalism. Recent policy discussions, supported by the Communist Party, have involved developing a new strategy over the next ten years, to create 350 000 jobs in manufacturing, another 225 000 jobs in tourism, 300 000 in the 'green economy', and 250 000 through infrastructure development, including expanding the public sector by ten per cent. (*Mail & Guardian*, 21 January 2011). This new policy, TEAR (Transformation, then Employment, and through that Redistribution), is contentious among Unionists for not addressing the issue of the quality of employment, but the ANC secretary general, Mantashe, considered a leftist, asserted that 'there is nothing as undignified as being unemployed'.

The idea that a capitalist economy can be managed by the state has a long history, and there were moments in the twentieth century where such intervention in the economy was not only plausible but had real influence in regulating goods and labor. Drawing directly on Germany in the 1930s, but undoubtedly aware of developments in the rest of Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and in Roosevelt's United States, Frederick Pollock wrote in 1941 that 'the genuine problem of a planned society does not lie in the economic sphere but in the political one' (1941: 99), reporting that the state concretely regulates prices, production, and employment, and arguing that a supersession of the market by the state had occurred. Pollock warned that this was not necessarily an affirmative development, however, because it meant government administration of many aspects of life, and could easily become a totalitarian form of planning

rather than a democratic one. Moreover, even democratically planned society would struggle to maintain full employment especially if industries associated with war were to be curtailed (Pollock 1941:112).

Pollock's recognition of the primacy of the political and the eclipse of the market points to a time when state did direct the market. However, as Postone (2004) notes, Pollock misidentifies capitalism *as* the market, and therefore fails to see this development as one moment within a broader trajectory. This moment, which was at least partially a product of the development of particularly labor-absorptive industries, such as automobile production and manufacturing, resulted for decades in a high demand for labor, started to unravel in 1973, and with its unraveling came the loss of capacity of state to regulate the market.

Remembering that, following this reading of Marx, it is legitimate to seek clues to the character of social formation in statistics and is in academic writing, it is possible to identify evidence of this unraveling in Claus Offe's texts, penned in the mid 1970s (Offe 1984 [1980 & 82 in English]). Writing about the European welfare state, Offe notes that while, since the Second World War, the welfare state was a force of economic and political stabilization, recent developments meant that the welfare state came into contradiction with capital itself, pithily expressed as 'Capitalism cannot properly co-exist with the welfare state, but it also cannot exist without it' (1984 [1980]: 153). Calling capitalism as a 'fragile old man who requires protection and support', Offe explains this contradiction as revealing a moment in capitalism where unable to produce the conditions of its own reproduction, conditions secured by the welfare state. He goes on to describes a fundamental shift of labor in capitalism,

A...plausible scenario is...the emergence of a bifurcated society organized around a shrinking capitalist core and an expanding periphery of non-market institutional

arrangements and conditions of life. Within the productive capitalist core, workers will be relatively privileged. Fewer and fewer workers will get higher and higher wages. Within the peripheries, by contrast, the old and the young, women, foreigners and mentally or physically handicapped people will become increasingly marginalized and... accommodated by institutions other than labor markets... This bifurcation process is... not random or accidental. It is a process strategically promoted by the logic of the development of capital—by its drive to produce new products, increase exports [and] improve labor productivity. (Offe 1984 [1982]: 285-286)

This understanding of capitalism as *necessarily* driving people out of work is extremely felicitous in the late 1970s. Offe has faith in the welfare state to look after those rendered superfluous, and in the powers of trade union and civil society organizations to politically ensure that this occurs. What Offe did not see, of course, was how the contradiction he perceived would not be resolved politically, by the welfare state looking after those rendered superfluous. Rather the welfare state in Europe would itself be undermined.

This digression into understandings of capitalism at different moments in the twentieth century relates the capacity of government politics to capitalism's trajectory. It begs the question of the ability of the state today to lead or direct the social implications of capitalist transformation. Different ideas of the 'neoliberal state' have emerged recently. Loic Wacquant (2009: 288-290) points to how the poor in the United States are punished by a single governmental logic with two dimensions 'miser[able] American welfare and grand American prisonfare'. Brazil represents an alternative, with *Bolsa Familia* and other social programs championed by a leftist government placating the poor by helping to reverse some of worst economic and social pathologies associated with poverty but, crucially, not moving towards equality or challenging the rule of capital (Anderson 2011). At one level, the difference between

these alternatives is extremely significant, but they have to be understood as variations of common phase of the development of capitalism (Postone 1993: 391-2), with the Brazilian case pointing to the limits of leftist political intervention (rather than either a leftist success or leftists having ‘sold out’ in government).

What becomes clear in the contemporary moment is that we need to talk about the *weakness of the state*, as a condition of particular moment of capitalist transformation. This is substantially different from the idea of ‘weak states’, common in political science discourse in Africa (for example, Reno 1998), because weakness is not understood as a product of institutional arrangements, political authority, broadcast power or patronage networks. Instead state weakness emerges from the incapacity, structurally, of the state to confront abstract labor as the source of domination in our society, and its powerlessness to prevent a growing gap between a dwindling population who works and an entire population judged by this measure of value in which they are increasingly marginal. What it would take to confront this is less clear, but no attempt to affirm agency or a politics that brackets capital, understood as the domination by abstract labor, can succeed in overcoming it.²

The contradictions of subjectivity in Neoliberal times

The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness, but dialectical in the critical sense that it produces consciousness. This means that consciousness... cannot simply reflect it as dream, but

² Barchiesi (2011) is correct to criticize the left – both in government and in the academy— for believing that seriously fractured working conditions could be the basis of emancipatory consciousness (206), and more generally to question the importance of work and the concept of the working class as an emancipatory political category. However, his belief that the social precariousness of work—what I have called superfluity—is determined by ‘employment changes as much as by normative governmental assumptions that make work central to a citizen’s conduct’ (165), reveals that his understanding of capital is as a passive economic system that may be directed, as if different concrete policy choices would resolve the contradictions generated by precarious work.

responds to it equally with desire and fear. (Adorno [1935] 2002: 54).

This passage, from a letter Adorno wrote to Benjamin about a section of *Arcades Project*, chides Benjamin for seeing the commodity transparently reflected in everyday consciousness. Instead, the commodity mediates social life in capitalism, providing both sides of what appear to be alternatives [that is, capitalism mediates both our dreams and our nightmares]. Indeed, as Adorno writes later in *Minima Moralia* '[t]he utopia of the qualitative – the things which through their difference and uniqueness cannot be absorbed in the prevalent exchange relationships—take refuge under capitalism in the traits of fetishism' (Adorno [1944] 2005: 120). The very activities that appear to be contrary to capitalism (ie 'authentic alternatives') are, for Adorno, already contained within capital.

This insight is critical for a theory of 'subjectivity', for an imaginary of a politics that aspires to emancipation, because it demands an understanding of how that subjectivity might relate to options provided by capital. This becomes even more acute when we consider the specificity of capital in our time, where work is less available than ever, and people's experiences remain structured by the commodity, by the need both to work to prevent starvation and to frame desires in the terms of exchange-value. In these times, the specificities of South Africa also mediate this 'subjectivity', turning the double-sided, contradictory subjectivity in a particular direction.

It is unsurprising, though no less tragic, to see one of Sunderer et. al's informants succinctly capture the nightmare of the present;

'There are no jobs. You can have R200 in hand, you go up and down using it for

transport looking for work until the money's finished. Still no job. You sacrifice buying even food in the house, save the R200 to look for work. There are no jobs, no domestic work, no factory work'. (Female, CSG, Mdantsane) (Surender et. al 2010: 209).

Of course, implicit in her nightmare is also the 'dream', the other side of the commodity, where actually having a job becomes a kind of utopia. In identifying the appearance of two figures in rural South Africa — the immigrant and the zombie — Jean and John Comaroff (2002: 792) have also ethnographically grounded the double sided effects of this moment of capital on subjectivity, which they understand as at once about the growing absence of work and the 'constantly reiterated suspicion that it is only by magical means, by consuming others, that people may enrich themselves in these perplexing times'.

Rosalind Morris (2008) renders this particularly poignantly in her study of the speculations over life and death among South African youths. She suggests the emergence of a double-sided discourse, at once a fatalism of the inevitability of imminent death and simultaneously a speculation on a financial return on death, on other's and one's own.

To be sure, there is a pathos to this irreducibly tragic discourse — which recognizes that being exploited by capital is, at this point in history, better than not being exploited by capital. This freedom can be achieved only in the ironic situation, the double bind to which Marx pointed with his insistence on the possibility and the burden of the wage economy — of being freed by being alienated from one's own labor as value. One feels that such pathos verges on desperation. (Morris: 2008: 206)

And yet, even those who are not working—not directly exploited—still find their experience structured by capital. In addition, much of this double-sided discourse is directed at the Post-Apartheid state, a discourse that repeats a past when the Apartheid government did direct capitalism, in a certain manner, to underpay certain people and coerce them into working

far from where they were allowed to live. In Van Heusden and Pointer's (2006: 105, 113) ethnography, people claim that the government has 'broken its promise' or sit and wait for the state to fix things. In my own fieldwork in area with some four hundred RDP houses built in the early 2000s some forty kilometers from Stanger in KwaZulu-Natal, my informants made the point of speaking about government regularly. Many complained about the councilor, and others about the poor quality of their houses. Several demanded that the government be more present in the area, including the thirty-two year old informant who said:

It's just if there could be a person [from government] who will go around checking homes if there are people who have problems, or a place where people can know that if I have a problem I can go there. (January 12, 2010).

Others believed that the government should give them work, or build a mall in the area.

By contrast to this demand for more active government work in the area that they believed might ameliorate their conditions, others, especially those over forty, believed the Post-Apartheid government responsible for social unrest and more decay. In particular, these folks blamed state social grants for producing a decline in marriages. One informant captured what many others told me:

I think its criminal behavior; you should not take someone's child and cohabit with her when you have not paid lobola. Our children *now* go out with a girl and then take her to their homes, and she agrees. In the end there are fights and she has children and *he doesn't want to pay anymore, because we [women] are paid* [receive a child grant]. So those are homes with no foundation, but because it's the life now, we no longer say much. (Women 80, December 10, 2009)

These brief excerpts suggest that the unhappiness felt in a contemporary 'poor' community in South Africa orients itself towards the state, admitting either a desire for more government, as if

the post-apartheid state has not done enough yet, or a belief that the government's programs are the cause of a moral corruption. Neither side of this claim that the state has been too present or too absent can be read as a refusal of state domination in the classical liberal sense. Indeed the complexity of these forms of subjectivity lie in the fact to be that they are at once expressions of both sides of the commodity and expressions of South Africa's past and present, where the state becomes a placeholder for a more abstract form of domination, and where it, rather than the commodity or labor, is regarded as the site of dream and the nightmare of contemporary existence.

Coda

Hein Marais' 2011 book *South Africa pushed to the limit: the political economy of change* offers extensive evidence for the severe economic constraints that the South African government faces, seventeen years after Apartheid. Yet in conceptualizing how these constraints were produced, Marais focuses on the *agency* of actors in the State and the African National Congress: *abandoning* a socialist project before 1994, *failing* to create a more robust framework to allow government to intervene in the market, *conceding* to a neoliberal economic orthodoxy, and *allowing* the flight of South African business after 1994. Conceiving of neoliberal capitalism as 'a contemporary form of capitalist accumulation... involv[ing] the systematic rule of state power to recompose the rule of capital in economic and social life' and noting that 'the state could adjust the economy' (Marais 2011: 134, 197), Marais operates from a theory of capitalism that ultimately depends on the decisions made by the government, even if these decisions set processes in motion that become difficult to control.

It should be clear that the theory of capitalism that I have presented here differs

substantially from Marais' interpretation, insofar as I understand capitalism to be, most simply, an abstract system of domination that mediates social life, shaping the terms of contemporary existence. In this understanding, while there may have been a moment, roughly prior to 1973, when the state could play a role in the market, the state cannot 'adjust' capital and, as such, there is no solely political way to achieve a postcapitalist form of life. If anything, events over the past three decades in countries that once claimed to have overcome capitalism reveal precisely that capitalism had not been overcome. The possibility of a postcapitalist social form 'could arise only as a historically determinate possibility generated by the internal tensions of capitalism, not as a 'tiger's leap' out of history ' (Postone 2006: 95).

In this reading, capitalism is a system in motion, a dynamic of fragmentation and reconstitution which points towards ever larger contradictions in its own system of value, contradictions that might reveal the possibility of its overcoming. In this paper, I have discussed superfluity, which I understand as a moment of this dynamic in which people are largely unemployed, without concrete labor and superfluous to production and yet at the same time structured by that system of value. This extremely difficult social condition not only demands a consideration of how conceptions of progressive democracy might rely on an assumption of full employment, it also, more basically, dispenses with the idea that class relationships dominant in nineteenth century Europe can be transposed onto the very different social relations generated by capitalism in the twenty first century. Marais seems to recognize this difficulty with a class analytic and yet inserts class back into his analysis when he blames the class character of the state for unemployment (2011: 134).

By recognizing the limits of class analysis, the theorists of political subjectivity in South

Africa make an important advance on theories of politics that depended on a static conception of class. In addition, their refusal to accept the state form as the place for emancipation is timely and a critical intervention. Yet by bracketing a theory of capitalism, they struggle to account for the contradictions in the Post-Apartheid government, and their focus on technocratic practice and police violence as what the state has become (Pithouse 2006, 2009), fails to capture how the state, like individual subjects themselves, live in contradictions that are ultimately expressions of a contradictory social system, rather than bad faith. Admitting the contradictions of both politics and subjectivity in the contemporary moment seems to be the starting point for a better understanding of both, and the condition of a theory concerned with achieving emancipation in the present.

References

- Adorno, T.([1936] 2002) 'Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the Essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century"' in Eiland and Jennings (ed). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol 3. Harvard: Belknap.
- Adorno, T. [(1944] 2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a damaged life*. London: Verso.
- Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M. [(1965] 2010) 'Towards a New Manifesto?' in *New Left Review*. 65: 33-61
- Adorno, T and Marcuse, H.([1969]1999) Correspondence on the German Student Movement. *New Left Review*. 1, 233: 123-136.
- Anderson, P. (2011) 'Lulas's Brazil'. *London Review of Books*. 33 (7): 3-12. Accessed on 1 April, 2011 at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n07/perry-anderson/lulas-brazil>

Barchiesi, F. (2011). *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. New York and Scottsville: SUNY and UKZN.

Bolsmann, C. (2010)“Contesting Labor Internationalism: The “Old” Trapped in the “New” in Volkswagen’s South African Plant” in *Labor Studies Journal*. 35, 4: 520–539

Cooper, F. (2002). *Africa since 1940: The past of the present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Comaroff, J and Comaroff J (2002). “Alien-nation: Zombies, Immigrants and Milennial Capitalism”in *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 101: 4, 779-805

Dubbeld, B. (nd) ‘The limits of changing the world: ‘Radical’ Political Unionism and the creation of contingent labor in the Port of Durban, 1977-1986’. Unpublished paper.

Eidelberg, P. (1997) ‘South African Apartheid: The Homeland-Township Nexus, 1948-1986’ in *South African Historical Journal*. 36, 1: 88-112.

Freund, B. (2005) The State of South Africa’s cities” in Sakhela Buhlungu, John Daniel, Roger Southall, Jessica Lutchman (eds.) *The State of the Nation: South Africa 2005-6*. Pretoria: HSRC Press. 303-332

Government of the Republic of South Africa.(1994)*White Paper: Housing Policy and Strategy for South Africa*. Ministry of Housing. Accessed at: <http://www.info.gov.za/whitepapers/1994/housing.htm>, 30 October, 2010.

Government of the Republic of South Africa(1995)*Development Facilitation Act*. Office of the President of the Republic of South Africa. Accessed at: <http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70986>, 25 March 2011.

Government of the Republic of South Africa.(1998)*White Paper on Local Governance*. Minister for Provincial Affairs and Constitutional Development. Accessed at: <http://>

mfma.treasury.gov.za/MFMA/Guidelines/whitepaper.pdf, 25 March 2011.

Government of the Republic of South Africa. (2004) *Breaking New Ground: A comprehensive plan for the development of Sustainable human settlements*. Accessed at: http://abahlali.org/.../Breaking%20new%20ground%20New_Housing_Plan_Cabinet_approved_version.pdf, 30 October 2010

Government of the Republic of South Africa.(2006) *Housing Amendment Bill*. National Department of Human Settlements. Accessed at <http://www.dhs.gov.za/Content/Documents/Legislation,%20Policies%20and%20Frameworks%20guide.htm>, 25 March 2011.

Khan, F.(2002) “Continuities, Ambiguities, and Contradictions: The past, present, and (possible) future of Housing Policy and Practice in South Africa” in F Khan and P. Thring (eds). *Housing Policy and Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Sandown, Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Letsoalo, M and Rossouw, M. (2011) “From Gear to Tear”. *Mail & Guardian*, 21 January.

Liebenberg, S (2010). *Socio-Economic Rights: Adjudication under a Transformative Constitution*. Juta Books.

Mabin, A.(1991) “The Impact of Apartheid on Rural Areas in South Africa” in *Antipode*. 23 (1): 33-46.

Manuel, T.(2007) “Not in my Father’s House: A Polokwane Briefing” *Mail & Guardian*, 13 December.

Marais, H.(2011)*South Africa pushed to the Limit: The political economy of change*. London: Zed.

Marx, K. [1858-9] (1973) *Grundrisse*. Translation and foreword by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin.

Marx, K. [1867] (1976) *Capital: A critique of political economy. Vol. 1*. Introduced by Ernest

- Mandel. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.
- Mbembe, A. (2004) 'The Aesthetics of Superfluity'. *Public Culture*. 16, 3: 373-405.
- Morris, R. (2008) 'Rush/Panic/Rush: Speculations on the Value of Life and Death in South Africa's Age of AIDS' in *Public Culture*. 20, 2: 199-231.
- Murray, C.(1987) 'Displaced Urbanization: South Africa's Rural Slums'. *African Affairs* (Oxford University Press) 86 (344): 311–329
- Murray, Martin (2008) "Disposable People at the Peri-Urban Fringe" in *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg After Apartheid*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Nash, A. (1999) 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. XIX, 1: 67-81.
- Neocosmos, M.(2010) 'Analysing Political Subjectivity: Naming the Post-development State today' in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 45, 5: 534-553.
- Offe, C.(1984) 'Some Contradictions of the Welfare State [1980]' and 'Reflections on the Welfare State and the Future of Socialism [1982]' in *Contradictions of the Welfare State*. MIT Press. 147-161, 252-300.
- Pithouse, R.(2006) 'Coffin for the Councilor: A report on the emergence of the Shack Dweller's Movement in Durban, South Africa' in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 41:171-184.
- Pithouse, R.(2009) 'A progressive policy without progressive politics: Lessons from failure to implement "Breaking New Ground"' in *Town Planning Review* (54). 1-14
- Pollock, F. [1941] (1989) 'State Capitalism: Its Limitations and Possibilities' in Bronner and Kellner (eds). *Critical Theory and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Postone, M.(1993)*Time, Labor and Social Domination: A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Postone, M.(2004) 'Critique, State, Economy' in Fred Rush (ed) *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Postone, M.(2006) 'History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of AntiCapitalism'. *Public Culture* 18 (1): 93-110.
- Pottie, D. (2004) 'Local government and housing in South Africa: managing demand and enabling markets', *Development in Practice*, 14, 5: 606 — 618.
- Reno, W. (1998) *Warlord Politics and African States*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Seekings, J.(2008) 'Deserving Individuals and Groups: the Shape of South Africa's system of social assistance' in *Transformation* 68: 28-51
- Soni, D and Maharaj, B. (1991) 'Emerging urban forms in rural South Africa' in *Antipode*. 23, 1:47-67.
- Surender, R., Noble, M., Wright, G. & Ntshongwana, P. (2010) Social assistance and dependency in South Africa: an analysis of attitudes to paid work and social grants. *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(2):203-221.
- Van Heusden, P and Pointer, R.(2006) 'Subjectivity, Politics, and Neoliberalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town' in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 41-95-121.
- Wacquant, L (2009). 'Theoretical Coda: A sketch of the neoliberal state' in *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press. 287-314.
- Wolpe, H ([1972] 1995). 'Capitalism and Cheap Labor Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid' in Beinart, W and Dubow S (ed). *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth century South Africa*. London: Routledge.