

Declarations of dependence: labour, personhood, and welfare in southern Africa

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Dependence on others has often figured, in liberal thought, as the opposite of freedom. But the political anthropology of southern Africa has long recognized relations of social dependence as the very foundation of polities and persons alike. Reflecting on a long regional history of dependence ‘as a mode of action’ allows a new perspective on certain contemporary practices that appear to what we may call ‘the emancipatory liberal mind’ simply as lamentable manifestations of a reactionary and retrograde yearning for paternalism and inequality. Instead, this article argues that such practices are an entirely contemporary response to the historically novel emergence of a social world where people, long understood (under both pre-capitalist and early capitalist social systems) as scarce and valuable, have instead become seen as lacking value, and in surplus. Implications are drawn for contemporary politics and policy, in a world where both labour and forms of social membership based upon it are of diminishing value, and where social assistance and the various cash transfers associated with it are of increasing significance.

In the 1820s, in the midst of a period of grave political disorder and violence, a band of Nguni-speaking refugees (scattered from their original homes in what we today call the Kwa-Zulu-Natal province of South Africa) headed north, raiding their neighbours as they went.¹ They soon coalesced into an entity we know as the Ngoni state, and eventually roamed northwards as far as Zambia and Tanzania, where Ngoni communities can still be found to this day. Like the better-known Zulu state, the Ngoni state was a fearsome military machine that terrorized and preyed on its unfortunate neighbours. And as the Ngoni state moved northwards, it was in a constant state of war with whatever groups it encountered, decimating its enemies, taking captives, burning out villages, destroying or plundering scarce food, and appropriating livestock as it went.

J.D. Omer-Cooper described the Ngoni invasions as ‘a terrible disaster for the peoples of East-Central Africa’ which left ‘famine and desolation’ in their wake (1966: 83-4). And, indeed, nineteenth-century observers noted the grim consequences of the Ngonis’ brutal raiding, which resulted in (as one observer described it) ‘hundreds of skeletons lying about everywhere’ (E.D. Young, quoted in Thompson 1995: 17), and often left the surrounding countryside completely emptied out. What is more, such bloody raiding was not episodic or occasional, but a more or less continuous way of life,

giving the Ngoni, as the medical missionary W.A. Elmslie put it, 'a reputation for war and cruelty ... wherever they were known' (1899: 78). Those who managed to flee the Ngoni incursions resorted to extreme measures to escape the fearsome raiding parties and to conceal their own presence, hiding themselves in caves, or retreating in desperation into fetid and disease-ravaged swamps (Elmslie 1899: 70-90; Thompson 1995: 17; see also Wiese 1983 [1891]: 153-5).

So it is a little startling, as we read John Barnes's classic account of this extraordinarily violent and predatory polity, to hear of a number of instances in which people from neighbouring chiefdoms actually sought out the Ngoni state and voluntarily surrendered to it. Indeed, according to Barnes (1967: 27), some came of their own volition from great distances specifically with the goal of being taken captive by the Ngoni.² I shall return to this curious fact in a moment.

But let us first fast-forward to the much more recent past. A few years ago, an American acquaintance of mine was sent to Johannesburg for several months by his employer. He was not an academic or scholar, but he did have progressive political commitments, and had therefore followed with interest and sympathy the struggle against apartheid and the advent of non-racial democracy in South Africa. His experiences in Johannesburg were not what he was expecting, however, and he found them very troubling. What he found most disturbing, he told me, was the steady parade of out-of-work black South Africans offering themselves in one or another form of service to him. A regular stream of supplicants came to the door, begging to work in his kitchen or garden, calling him 'baas' (master, boss), and so on. The terms of employment were not really the issue ('Just pay me what you want!' the job-seekers would say). And leaving the house offered my friend no escape. When he went to the supermarket, a swarm of young men and boys appeared, trying to help him put the groceries into his car (in hopes of a small tip). And so on. At every turn, the message sent by poor black South Africans to this white, foreign, would-be egalitarian seemed to be: 'Let me serve you! Be my boss! Exploit me!' And *this*, my friend wondered, is 'the new South Africa'?

His reaction was typically (and perhaps parochially) American, in that it presumed a valuation of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency that is cross-culturally far from universal. But it was also founded on a perception of a real irony that is genuinely troubling (and not only, I think, to individualistic Americans): that is, the irony of what we thought was a liberated people voluntarily offering themselves (often in embarrassingly eager and abject terms) in servitude.

What these two tales have in common, I think, is that they are discomfiting to what we might call the emancipatory liberal mind. Rather than seeking autonomy and independence – which we have come to associate with dignity and freedom – we have, in both cases, the disturbing spectacle of people openly pursuing a subordinate and dependent status. Rather than striving to escape, cast off, or struggle against relations of hierarchical subordination (as the emancipatory liberal mind would expect and approve), they are putting extraordinary energies into seeking them out. What are we to make of these pursuits of subordination, these (as I will call them here) 'declarations of dependence'?

There are good historical reasons why the spectacle of people seeking out their own subjection and dependence makes us so uncomfortable. The long, noble history of anti-slavery and anti-colonial struggles makes it easy (perhaps too easy, I will suggest) for us to equate human dignity and value with autonomy and independence. A will to dependence therefore seems sad – even shameful. In this optic, dependence is a kind of

bondage, a life in chains – the very opposite of freedom. It is thus no accident that declarations of *independence* loom so large in the emancipatory liberal imagination, where such proud declarations are linked both to key Enlightenment motifs (as in the US Declaration of Independence's linking of political independence with such things as individual freedom and equality) and to twentieth-century postcolonial ideals of liberation (as in the once-obvious linking of African independence with African freedom – an association that today seems perhaps less obvious than it once did). In all these cases, progress is seen to lie in the triumphant elimination or reduction of dependence. Indeed, in the influential conception advanced by Amartya Sen (1999), development is actually defined as an increase in individual freedom, rendering dependence and bondage the very opposite of developmental progress. In such a worldview, to declare for dependence, to wish for it, to seek it, seems to be a wish for one's own devaluation, and even dehumanization.

To understand (and, in important ways, to overcome) our discomfort with dependence, I will review a regional history here. The empirical historical material I will present is well known. But I want to retell familiar facts in order to take a perhaps *too-familiar* history (of labour and capitalism in southern Africa) and narrate it a little differently. My aim in doing so is to draw some conclusions that may help us to see the historical novelty of some of our political challenges in the present (in particular in relation to questions of poverty and social assistance).

So let us start by going back to the early nineteenth century, and the Ngoni state. Why would one wish to subordinate oneself to one's enemy – and especially to such a violent and terrifying one? We can easily understand the motives of those who fled the Ngoni state. But what of those who sought it out, and even travelled hundreds of miles – not away from, but towards this mobile wrecking machine?

Such a choice becomes less mysterious when we start to understand the social logic of the Ngoni expansion. For the Ngoni state was most fundamentally not about killing its enemies (though there was admittedly a fair amount of that), but about incorporating them. Women and children and often men as well were taken captive and thereby became members of the Ngoni social system. The process was often horrifically violent, physically and (one presumes) psychologically (as Delius [2010] has observed; cf. M. Wright 1993). But the reward was often a quite full-bodied social membership. To be sure, captives entered the social system as inferiors. But they also entered as distinct social persons, and were ascribed specific kinship roles. Captive women became wives, and captive men and children became the children, of Ngoni military leaders. New social segments were formed on a lineage model, and in a rapidly expanding system, with new members coming in with each fresh battle, new segments (and with it new opportunities for leadership) were being created at an astonishing pace. Captured men, in such a system, came in as dependants, at the bottom of the pecking order. But with new captives constantly entering the system, they could quickly end up founding new segments of their own, and acquiring social and political influence by building up large followings of quasi-descendants (including those they managed to capture in battle). Powerful men had large numbers of wives, who were divided into groups that Barnes (1967) called 'beviess'. The senior wife of each 'bevy' enjoyed authority over the segment formed by the sons and captives of all the women of the bevy.³

The result was something like a classical segmentary political system on amphetamines, which Barnes famously dubbed a 'snowball state'. As he put it:

Segmentation in a lineage system [normally] depends basically on the unalterable processes of human reproduction and maturation. Until a man's children become adults his agnatic segment cannot split. The Ngoni, by recruiting many of their members when they were already grown up, were able to increase their population at a prodigious rate and with it the degree of segmentation of the State. As the Ngoni army increased in size, so it became easier for them to capture more people, so that what we may describe as an inflationary spiral in population was set up. The Ngoni State was like a snowball which grows larger and larger as it is pushed from place to place, but still remains uniform throughout (1967: 60).

This was a highly exaggerated form of a political logic that was broadly characteristic of most precolonial southern African societies. While political contestation in Europe was largely about controlling land, in much of Africa land was abundant, and political power derived from controlling what Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977) famously called 'wealth in people' (see also Guyer 1993; Vansina 1990). In such systems, political leaders became powerful by building up their polities via bringing in followers. As Barnes put it for the Ngoni: 'The principal index of power was the number of a man's dependants. Political struggles were essentially not struggles to control wealth but to enjoy the support of followers' (1967: 30).⁴

But these same leaders were always at risk of losing their power if followers left to join their rivals, or to found their own polities. As has often been noted, this need to retain followers often acted as a check on the powers of chiefs and kings. These societies were certainly not democracies in the usual sense, but they were strikingly dynamic and open social systems, characterized by very high levels of mobility and a profusion of exit options that could swiftly penalize leaders who disregarded the needs and desires of their followers.

In such a world, dependence was not simply bondage or unfreedom (as the emancipatory liberal mind tends to assume). On the contrary, in a social system put together around competition for followers, it was actually the existence of possibilities for hierarchical affiliation that *created* the most important forms of free choice. Where many such possibilities for affiliation existed, dependants could enjoy considerable agency, and dependence itself could become (following Bayart's memorable phrase [2000: 218]) 'a mode of action'. The freedom that existed in such a social world (and it was not inconsiderable) came not from independence, but from a plurality of opportunities for dependence. (I will return to this point shortly.)

It is important to note that this was a way not only of structuring society, but also of constructing persons. In the people-centric social systems of early colonial southern Africa (as anthropologists have long recognized), persons were understood not as monadic individuals, but as nodes in systems of relationships. While modern liberal common sense often universalizes an ideologically conceived liberal individual, and sees society as composed of transactions among such individuals, anthropologists of Africa (from Radcliffe-Brown onwards) have long insisted that relational persons do not precede relations of dependence; they are, instead, constituted by those relations.⁵

The Ngoni system worked according to just such a logic, in that society was founded not on relations of exchange between liberal, transacting individuals, but on relations of dependence and respect among relational persons. Relations of hierarchy and obligation here did not diminish or fetter the attainment of full personhood, but rather constituted and enabled it. Hierarchical dependence here, as throughout the region, was not a problem or a debility – on the contrary, it was the principal mechanism for achieving social personhood. Without networks of dependence, you were nobody –

except perhaps a witch. With them, you were a person of consequence. As Barnes put it: 'Every man was a potential lord, and every lord, except the Paramount Chief ..., was a dependant of some other lord higher in the hierarchy' (1967: 10). And every woman, we might add, was the potential head of a new bevy, whose social personhood was constituted by the web of kinship and quasi-kinship dependencies in which she was enmeshed. Ngoni captives, we can now understand, were not simply subjected. They were *incorporated* – incorporated into a social system within which they had a recognized and valued social position, and within which significant opportunities existed for improving and enhancing that social position. We can now perhaps understand better why acquiring membership in such a social system might have been something worth seeking out, especially in times of widespread insecurity and hardship.

Colonial transformation – and continuity

Colonial conquest and the subsequent rise of capitalism have generally been treated as a more or less comprehensive break with the world I have described. In the familiar narrative, the old institutions either were wholly displaced, or were retained in ways that subordinated them to the new system of industrial capitalism, as social systems based on kinship and wealth in people gave way to radically new logics – the political logic of racial domination and the economic logic of capitalism, commodity production, and wage labour.⁶ Supposedly 'traditional' institutions like chiefs and cattle-keeping, for instance, might have continued, but analysis revealed that chiefs had really become colonial bureaucrats, and cattle a form of investment and savings for proletarian wage-earners.

The breaks introduced first by colonial conquest, then by capitalist industrialization, are obviously massive, and I have no wish to minimize them. But even amidst such epochal social and economic transformations, I want to emphasize a continuity that increasingly strikes me as a crucial one. It is this: even as capitalism shattered the old social systems and drew the entire subcontinent into a world of wage labour and commoditization, *people* continued to be struggled over. For the century following the discovery of mineral wealth in South Africa, as has often been observed, the entire region was characterized by a labour-scarcity economy (Seekings & Nattrass 2005; van Onselen 1986). Many of the harsher aspects of South African capitalism have been traced to this root, as state coercion was applied to break the black peasantry and force people into low-cost wage labour. But, for all its harshness and cruelty, this was a social system hungry for people. And people were brought into it by the millions. Often, it is true, they were brought in by force. But it is impossible to ignore that very significant numbers of people voluntarily travelled many hundreds of miles (from places as far away as Zambia and Malawi) in order to submit themselves to a notoriously violent and oppressive socio-economic system.

This was a different kind of snowball state – drawing people in (from within South African territory, and far beyond), and hierarchically incorporating them (now as labourers rather than as political followers) into a larger whole. Race exclusion meant that those drawn in no longer had the opportunities for mobility that systems like the Ngoni state provided (no longer was 'every man a potential lord' – far from it). But colonial racial capitalism in South Africa, whatever else it was, was unquestionably a voracious consumer of wealth in people (now in the form of labour). And, as in the case of the Ngoni, we scratch our heads (and perhaps squirm a bit) when we read of people who travelled great distances in order to subject themselves voluntarily to such a brutal system.

The continuing competition over people had some important implications for indigenous conceptions of personhood. Wage labour (as a rich ethnographic literature has shown) came in the twentieth century to be an important foundation of male personhood. Relations between senior and junior men were radically transformed by young men's access to wage labour (and the full social personhood it bestowed). The claims to social status that came from education were similarly transformative, as Zolani Ngwane (2004) has pointed out. Marriage came to be intimately linked with wage-earning capacity (through the transformed institution of bridewealth), and the subordination of women acquired new mechanisms and justifications. A crucial distinction also emerged between rural and urban social membership, and urban membership (or at least the stunted version of it that was available to blacks) became tightly linked to wage labour.

But a logic in which personhood was achieved through relations of dependence often continued to apply. In many domains, in colonial and apartheid southern Africa, *being* someone continued to imply *belonging* to someone. The importance of ideologies and practices of paternalism has often been remarked, of course, for rural farm life in the twentieth century (even if, as Charles van Onselen [1992: 130] has noted, it always remained in a racially truncated, stunted form), and Blair Rutherford (2008) has convincingly argued that a system of what he calls 'domestic government' established both social hierarchies and highly valued forms of incorporation that explain much about contemporary land struggles in the region (see also van Onselen 1996). But such personalistic relations of dependence were also central to workers' identities in urban and industrial settings. The culture of work on the mines, for instance (as convincingly described by such authors as Donald Donham [2011] and Dunbar Moodie [Moodie with Ndatshe 1994]), was hardly less paternalistic and personalistic than on the farm.⁷ And it is important to note that this is not only a matter of hypocritical white rationalizations (as in the notoriously self-serving formula 'we treat our blacks like family'). For it is clear that (in spite of the often appallingly abusive conditions of work) African workers themselves often understood managerial authority in familistic and quasi-kinship terms.⁸

Again, there has been a tendency to tell a transition story here, where these supposedly 'pre-modern' forms of socially bound, kinship-idiomed labour were gradually displaced by the purely commoditized purchase of labour power that idealized models of capitalism imply. Yet we now know that twentieth-century South African capitalism, through a century of more or less constant 'modernization', did *not* do away with personalistic and dependent relations between employer and employee. Andries du Toit has shown that even on Cape fruit and wine farms (generally reckoned the most 'modern' and fully capitalist agricultural sector in the country), capitalist agriculture continued to depend on paternalistic relations of authority with deep continuities with the past (1993: 315). In a more recent article, du Toit shows that paternalistic values continue to be central even in the latest rounds of 'modernization' of labour relations, and even on what are termed the most 'progressive' farms (du Toit & Ewert 2002: 91-2). Mining labour tells a similar story, where Donald Donham (2011) has shown that supposedly premodern paternalistic relations of authority continued to be central to the management of labour right up through the 1990s on some mines.

Capitalists, farmers, and supervisors seeking to capture human wealth in the twentieth century, then, used some of the same devices (of personalistic and quasi-kinship-based social inclusion) that kings and chiefs seeking the same had used in the centuries

before. And, as in the old social systems, sought-after persons (even those recruited by force) retained some measure of recourse via exit. Employers' competition over labour, like chiefs' competition over followers, provided ordinary people at least some room for manoeuvre, and thereby set some limits to domination. There were, of course, notoriously brutal coercive attempts to limit such options. But the extraordinary resilience and mobility of workers meant that such attempts never met with more than partial success. As in precolonial times, exit and moving on provided crucial limits on the most despotic abuses of power, and vital lines of potential relief for the most disadvantaged. To the extent that such exit options existed, I emphasize, they were largely premised on a generalized situation of labour scarcity.

Having suggested that the phenomenon of labour scarcity created some continuities (alongside the more often noted breaks) between precolonial and colonial era social systems, let me now briefly consider how social membership was constituted in colonial and apartheid-era South Africa and, in closely related (if sometimes less extreme) ways, the other settler colonies of southern Africa.

One system of membership from this period is, of course, the most discussed and analysed: that is, race membership. The colonial colour bar separating settlers from 'natives' was in South Africa famously elaborated into a baroque and fetishized categorical system of ranked memberships that increasingly scandalized international liberal opinion as the twentieth century wore on. And, of course, race membership was always complicated and to some extent cross-cut by class membership, leading to such familiar phenomena as the so-called 'poor white problem' and the increasingly important differentiation between more and less educated black urbanites.

Alongside these more familiar systems of membership, though, was another, which we might call *work membership*. Urban society, in particular, was structured not only by the privileges and penalties of race and class, but also by a legal and social distinction between urban 'belongers' with recognized waged employment and 'hangers on' who lacked it. The linking of a kind of urban membership with work left women (legally and culturally barred from many forms of wage labour) in a precarious position. But the same was true of many men, who lived in the city, but without the formal waged employment that would have given them the truncated but significant set of legal and social rights enjoyed by the recognized 'worker'. As in contemporary China, the urban masses were divided by a legal mechanism that created different sorts of membership rights to the city based on membership in officially recognized work groups (Zhang 2002). Through the notorious pass laws (but also through housing policy and other means), those lacking this crucial form of urban membership were systematically disadvantaged, but never effectively removed from the urban environment.

While analytically separable, both the race system and (what I am calling) the work system of membership came to be called into fundamental question at more or less the same historical time. For during the same time that South Africa's notorious apartheid race laws (which legally separated white from black) were being dismantled, so were such things as pass laws and housing restrictions (which fundamentally acted to separate black from black – i.e. those possessing work membership from those who lacked it). This coincidence (for that is what it is) has meant that the decline of the system of work membership has tended to be obscured by the more visible (and upbeat) story of the overthrow of official race membership. Yet the breakdown of the old system of work membership, I want to suggest, has profound consequences for understanding the current impasses in southern African politics and social policy alike.

The era of labour surplus – an era of in-dependence?

For several decades now, southern Africa has ceased to be a labour-scarcity economy. Raw manual labour, for so long competed over by employers, now goes begging in the marketplace. Mass unemployment (in economic theory and economic history) tends to be associated with economic decline. But South Africa shows that even what economists call ‘healthy’ economies in these times often end up pushing people out of the labour market, not drawing them into it. As Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2005) have shown, in both the late apartheid period and the years since then, economic growth in South Africa has coexisted with rising numbers of unemployed, many of whom are now locked out of the labour market not temporarily, but more or less permanently. This is not economic decline, but a perverse sort of ascent. The picture that emerges is of what we might call a ‘snowball state in reverse’ – rolling along nicely, but throwing people off (rather than picking them up) as it goes along.

This expulsion of whole sectors of the population from the workforce is not unique to southern Africa, as Tania Li (2010) has recently pointed out in her important treatment of ‘surplus populations’ in South and Southeast Asia. Nor is it a terribly recent turn of events – it has been going on for several decades at least. Indeed, apartheid’s Bantustan experiment has been analysed as a way of dealing with what officials saw as ‘surplus people’ (Platzky & Walker 1985), while Seekings and Nattrass convincingly argue that mass unemployment was already unquestionably in evidence by the mid-1970s (2005: 166–77). It is, none the less, a huge transformation, one that has exploded into its fully visible and unmistakable form only in the last twenty years. After centuries in which people across the region were scarce and sought-after (first as wealth in people, then as labour), the last few decades have introduced a fundamental break. 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.

What does this shift mean for social personhood? Rather suddenly, unclaimed men (formerly fought over, valued, and eagerly claimed – first as chiefly subjects, later as scarce wage labourers) have become at the same time without commodity value, and truly independent – a terrifying predicament, given the importance, as I have argued, of relationality for personhood. Women and children often bear the brunt of the male rage that this predicament provokes. At the same time, women’s old vital role as social and biological reproducers of the work-force is hugely devalued when the wider economic system no longer needs an expanded work-force. But women may also sometimes manage to retain a sense of personhood based on relations of dependence that men often lack. I have in mind here not just familial roles such as mother and grandmother, but also the social role (for that is what it is) of grant-recipient – most of all, of the widely distributed child support grants. I will return to the question of social grants shortly.

Analysts of southern Africa’s migrant labour system used to decry the way that a system of racial capitalism pulled apart black families (which they tended to regard as naturally cohesive entities), sacrificing family unity on the altar of cheap wage labour. What we see today, however, is that the ‘freeing’ of a whole generation of young men from the demands of wage labour seems to be fragmenting (rather than uniting) families – and even making the conventional notion of the male-headed household

obsolete – in ways that leave many men (and some women) ironically nostalgic for the bad old days of apartheid migrant labour (as Hylton White [2004], for instance, has shown). The freeing of young men from the ‘dependence’ of wage labour has led to a radical decline in the institution of marriage (Kumchulesi 2010), while women and children have been swept up into a new system of dependence centred on old age pensions and child support grants that is giving new prominence to ‘matri-focal’ (or even ‘granny-focal’) forms of domestic structure.

The grim consequences of the severing of the ties that once bound people to the ‘snowball’ of southern African industrial capitalism are perhaps most vividly illustrated by the extent to which the disadvantaged today (as in the troubled and insecure days of the old Ngoni state) in fact aspire to dependence – as in my reference at the start to the visiting foreigner’s shock at encountering citizens of the new, free South Africa who called him ‘*baas*’ and begged to serve him. The perilously insecure and unattached will accept (now, as then) subordination in exchange for membership (see also Rutherford 2008). Their problem today is *not* that they are being subordinated and subjected – it is worse. The real problem is that they have become not *worth* subjecting, cast off from the societal snowball. For those thus abjected, *subjection* can only appear as a step up.

Those rendered ‘independent’ of the wage labour system, then, do not remain happily independent, but rather seek (with more or less success) to build up new dependencies. This, of course, was what my American acquaintance was observing. But the manifestations visible to this sort of middle-class observer (people coming to the door, begging in the street, or hoping for coins at the supermarket) are only the tip of the iceberg. For most claims and requests for assistance are made by poor people, on other poor people. As recent surveys of giving behaviours in South Africa show, ‘giving is more common among the poor than the rich’; not only is poverty not a deterrent to giving, ‘giving within poor communities is crucial to their very survival’ (Habib & Maharaj 2008: 26, 38). More generally, ethnography reveals the key role of distribution in poor communities. Indeed, I argue elsewhere (Ferguson forthcoming) that much of what goes on in the (misleadingly named) ‘informal economy’ is less about producing goods and services than it is about finding opportunities for what I have termed ‘distributive labour’. Such activities facilitate a kind of day-to-day survival on the part of the unemployed, but they are left in a very precarious position – hanging (as the literal meaning of ‘depend’ suggests) by a thread (or perhaps, in the better case, by a frail network of threads).

Such dependence, though, is not the worst of outcomes. To be dependent on someone is to be able to make at least some limited claims on him or her. A poor person who is enmeshed in networks of dependence with other poor people thus has at least some people on whom he or she can make such claims. And the desirable alternative to such claim-making is normally not independence or autonomy (indeed, that would be possible only under truly exceptional conditions). Rather, the realistic alternative to dependence on other poor people is more often an ability to become a dependant of (and thus to be able to make claims on) an actor with a greater capacity to provide and protect (whether this is an individual, a firm, an NGO, or indeed a political party or the state).

This is a major theme in recent ethnographic work on local politics in South Africa, much of which seems to show that liberal emancipatory models of mobilization are often less successful than non-liberal ways of binding people together via hierarchical

dependencies. Steven Robins, for instance, has done a fascinating study of the Homeless People's Movement, and found that while the cosmopolitan NGOs that funded this organization advanced democratic and anti-hierarchical ideals of citizenship, the rank-and-file federation members, as well as the organization's leadership, were 'not always as committed' to this agenda (2003: 262). Whereas funders and left intellectuals promoted horizontal and egalitarian relations of trust and empowerment, the 'grassroots' Homeless People's Federation (HPF) 'seemed more concerned with housing delivery and the consolidation of vertical relations of patronage and dependency' (2003: 263). Indeed, the HPF slogan, 'We don't collect money, we collect people' (2003: 245), could refer (as the metropolitan leadership may have interpreted it) to a process of conscientization and emancipation; but such an expression might even better describe the snowball-like accumulation of followers by political patrons able to disburse such favours as housing allocations.

Similarly, Kea Gorden's recent Ph.D. research (2008) showed that well-intentioned projects to build norms of democratic citizenship in KwaZulu-Natal ran afoul of entrenched local expectations about hierarchical leadership, and a stubborn (and, to the emancipatory liberal mind, scandalous) attachment to the personalistic and decidedly undemocratic authority of chiefs (see also James 2007: chap. 8). Again, it is the apparent preference for, and active seeking out of, relations of dependence and hierarchy that is so striking here. It seems that for poor South Africans (as for a great many other people in the contemporary world) it is not dependence but its absence that is really terrifying – the severing of the thread, and the fall into the social void.⁹

Does this mean dependence is actually a good thing? Such a claim makes us uneasy. The fear is that valorizing or even acknowledging dependence may authorize or legitimate inequality. But this fear may be misplaced. Whether we approve of it or not, inequality must be confronted – it is unavoidable, as a matter of both practical politics and (as Amartya Sen [1997] has demonstrated) theoretical necessity. To be sure, it is vitally important to strive to reduce the massive inequalities that are so striking a feature of South African society (notably those of income, wealth, education, and land-holding). But at the same time, perhaps we progressive scholars would do well to do more of what our informants do, which is to deal pragmatically with (rather than just deploring) the social world we've got. And for the near-to-medium term (at the very least) that social world is one of massive and extreme inequality. Dealing with (rather than just denouncing) this reality means going beyond pious wishing for equality to ask how *inequalities* are socially institutionalized, and whether some such modes of institutionalization are politically or ethically preferable to others.

The phrase 'social inequality' perhaps rolls off our lips too easily – as if 'social inequality' is simply a synonym for 'inequality'. But what is specifically 'social' about it? The term 'social inequality' implies a common membership within a 'society', and relations of inequality among those members. But today we are seeing, all around the world, a shift towards what we might call 'asocial inequality', where huge inequalities of life conditions and life chances are increasingly severed from those embarrassing experiential social relationships of inequality.

By 'asocial', I mean here something quite specific. There are, of course, still identifiable and important links between the worlds of rich and poor, and if we insist (as social scientists tend to do) that every human relation is by definition a social one, then, of course, the sort of inequality I have in mind plainly *is* 'social'. But if we ask

another question, namely whether inequalities are lived and experienced within the imaginary horizon of that nineteenth-century invention 'society' – whether inequality, that is, is conceived as a relation among the members of a morally binding membership group – then the answer, increasingly, is 'no' (cf. Ferguson forthcoming; Rose 1999: 101).

Increasingly, then, those suffering from what I call *asocial* inequality actually seek out *social* inequality. A great deal of poor people's labour, in fact, goes into trying to turn asocial inequality into the social kind. And this becomes especially visible (at least to relatively privileged people like my friend in Johannesburg) when we encounter poor people trying to strike up – or assert, or reassert – a social and personal relationship (even a highly dependent one) with those better off than themselves.

Asocial assistance?

Having discussed labour and personhood, let us now turn to the third term in this essay's title: welfare. What is the future of social assistance where inequality is increasingly 'asocial', and where labour no longer provides the sort of foundation it once did for the domain we call 'the social'?

The intellectual and political challenge here is a formidable one. Traditional twentieth-century conceptions of social welfare took for granted an economic world within which waged labour was socially generalized, and the domain we have come to know as 'the social' was constructed on the foundation of the able-bodied male worker. Indeed, the list of those requiring 'social' intervention (the elderly, the infirm, the child, the disabled, the dependent reproductive woman) traces a kind of photographic negative of the figure of the wage-earning man. Persistent and socially normal mass male unemployment is therefore a huge challenge to the social democratic worldview.

In this context, the recent southern African campaigns for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) – especially in South Africa and Namibia – provide a fascinating example of new thinking about an old subject. I will not have space to discuss this in any detail, but the main idea is for the state to deal with a crisis of persistent poverty by providing a small unconditional minimum monthly payment to *all* citizens (see Standing & Samson 2003 for an overview). In contrast to older forms of 'welfare' assistance, the claim is that such grants rely on poor people's own ability to solve their own problems, without imposing the policing, paternalism, and surveillance of the traditional welfare state. The 'social' of the social welfare state is largely discarded in this scheme. Assistance is decoupled from familistic assumptions and insurance rationality alike, while the state is imagined as both universally engaged (as a kind of direct provider for each and every citizen) and maximally disengaged (taking no real interest in shaping the conduct of those under its care, who are seen as knowing their own needs better than the state does).

Most attempts to enhance state social assistance these days have a backward-looking and even nostalgic feel about them, 'defending' and 'preserving' benefits won long ago, but lately threatened by neoliberal pruning. And they remain wedded to the social-democratic view of the world, in which labour is the foundation of the social order, and social support is needed only to provide insurance against predictable sorts of individual and systemic risk (ranging from workplace injuries to dips in the business cycle).

The BIG campaign has been unusual in basing its arguments for social support on very different grounds. Facing squarely some uncomfortable economic truths, BIG

proponents recognize that mass unemployment is not going to disappear anytime soon, and that wage labour can therefore no longer serve as the main basis of social membership. Instead of the nostalgic workerism that one encounters in many other progressive quarters, BIG advocates take seriously the challenge of dealing with the fact that a substantial part of the working-age population, even under the most optimistic of scenarios, will not be absorbed into the formal-sector work-force in the foreseeable future. As Charles Meth bluntly put it: 'There is little hope that economic growth can rescue the poor – except among propagandists, there seems no doubt that the economy simply cannot grow fast enough' (2004: 9). Indeed, the South African state committee (the Taylor Committee) that originally proposed the BIG went so far as to speculate that a world of full employment, in the usual sense of the term, may *never* come to countries like South Africa: 'In developing countries, where stable full-time waged formal sector labour was never the norm, it is increasingly unlikely that it will become the norm' (Department of Social Development 2002: 38).

What is more, BIG proponents boldly dispense with the usual fetishizing and moralizing of wage labour and the exaggerated fear of so-called 'handouts' and 'dependency'.¹⁰ Would the BIG promote 'dependency'? Meth suggests this is the wrong question. With or without state transfers, he argues, the poor are dependent. And the only real alternative (even for those with decent incomes) is inter-dependence (not independence). It is not a question, then, of introducing the snake of dependency into a garden that had been innocent of it. Dependence is rather, Meth insists, 'an empirical matter', and debates around social policy must accept that the real questions are not about whether people are or should be dependent, but rather about which forms of dependence are to be promoted and which discouraged (2004: 23).

The BIG campaign also has had the great virtue of identifying the need for new forms of socio-economic membership. Recognizing the demise of 'work membership', BIG promoters see a pressing need to give both social recognition and economic support in a way that would not be tied to labour. Significantly, they see the BIG not just as a 'grant', but as a 'citizen's income' that acknowledges a kind of nation-wide membership and solidarity that would go beyond such (often empty) political rituals as voting, to include rights to subsistence and consumption.

Part of the conception, too, involves a move to create economic rights that can be accessed by even the poorest citizens, without the obstacles of bureaucracy or the potential corruption and abuse of a patronage-based system of distribution. Proponents place great hope in technical devices that might shorten the route between state coffers and poor people's needs. In some versions, for instance, the BIG might be accessed by any citizen at any automatic cash dispenser; biometric markers could make sure that funds are transparently dispersed to all the right people and none of the wrong ones. Like most anthropologists, I am sceptical of attempts to solve political and social problems with technological fixes. But I must say that the prospect of social assistance being dispensed with the ease and efficiency of a routine withdrawal from a cash machine does sound appealing to me – especially after years of watching desperate pensioners try (and often fail) to collect their retirement money from Zambia's corrupt and mismanaged National Provident Fund.

Yet as thoughtful and compelling as the BIG campaign has in many ways been, there is no avoiding that fact that it has, after an initial flurry of interest, stalled politically (especially in South Africa; the Namibian case is a bit more mixed). Why, with all that's so attractive and forward-thinking about the BIG, hasn't it managed to get more

political traction? It cannot be due to any general hostility to social grants – the South African state currently spends fully 3.5 per cent of GDP on grants, which are now paid to fully 30 per cent of all South Africans (notably via old age pensions and child support grants). Yet neither ruling officials nor impoverished masses seem to have rallied to the BIG cause. No doubt there are many reasons (for a recent analysis of the South African case, see Seekings & Matisonn 2010). But one wonders if an underlying weakness of the campaign may not be that while social payments address quite directly (if minimally) the *material* needs of impoverished citizens, they offer far less by way of dealing with their social and moral needs. In a world where social position has for so long depended on a kind of exchange of labour for membership, an unconditional ‘transfer’ of cash may seem dangerously empty – a way of preventing the worst, in material terms, but without the granting of any sort of meaningful personhood or social belonging.

This is especially the case for men, for whom social membership and adult masculinity alike have long been linked to a highly valorized capacity for wage labour. Unlike the BIG (which remains only a proposal), grants for women, children, and disabled people have been long established in South Africa and Namibia. These grants are widely accepted, and generally popular, but they are specifically targeted at social categories conventionally recognized as legitimately ‘dependent’, and for whom the state can be imagined as taking on the metaphorical role of husband/father. For able-bodied adult men in the prime of life, however, the receipt of a grant may seem inappropriate, and it is still the promise of jobs that beckons (even if that promise remains, for many, illusory).

Is this, then, a matter of men refusing the humiliation of dependence, and instead insisting on an autonomous independence? Hardly: as I have noted, the sort of employment for black men in South Africa that is nowadays nostalgically longed for was hardly ever a vehicle for independence. On the contrary, it constituted precisely a form of dependence, albeit a highly valued kind of dependence that brought with it a kind of unequal incorporation that I have termed ‘work membership’. Men’s desire for employment of this kind cannot be figured as a yearning for autonomy; it is on the contrary precisely a desire for attachment – for incorporation, even under highly unequal and often dangerous and humiliating terms, into a social body.

If this is the case, then it may be that the real problem with the BIG is *not* that it would (as neoliberal critics tend to assert) ‘create dependency’. If anything, the danger may be that it can provide only a shallow and impersonal sort of dependence, instead of a richly social one. For a mere grant, at least as presently conceptualized, cannot provide the sort of full social position that comes with employment or other forms of socially ‘thick’ incorporation. In place of the social personhood and membership long associated with a job, a BIG offers only a notional national membership, and a cold and impersonal relation with a technocratic state.

Social membership implies what political theorists call ‘recognition’. But recognition can come in many different forms. Here, we might usefully contrast two sorts of recognition that figure in contemporary South Africa. First, consider the sort of recognition that occurs when a person is approved for receipt of a social service by being ‘recognized’ by a local traditional authority. Here the technical task of recognition (making sure it’s the right person) is combined with the political *act* of recognition (a chief recognizes his subject as such, and vice versa), together with the social familiarity that comes from long acquaintance, entangled family histories, and so on. Contrast the

visit to the automatic cash dispenser envisaged by the BIG advocates. Here there is also a form of ‘recognition’ at work: the machine scans the grant recipient’s iris and fingerprints, ‘recognizes’ him or her as the rightful recipient, and dispenses the money. But this is recognition only in the most technical and socially minimal sense. In this technocratic utopia, functional ‘recognition’ is stripped free of the person-to-person social relationships that have historically accompanied it.

The attraction of doing this is evident: BIG advocates aim to avoid the patronage and potential corruption associated with old-style handouts, and to allow poor people to receive what’s due them without having to kow-tow to local bureaucrats and minor despots. But one wonders if, for some, these technical advantages might not be offset by the ‘social’ attractions of a more familiar sort of claim-making, where the socially ‘thick’ recognition that comes from being looked after by the local party-state is after all preferable (for many) to the frighteningly ‘thin’ recognition of the iris scan – if only because it implies a humanly social (rather than technocratically asocial) bond between state and citizen.

This suggests the need to revisit the fraught issue of ‘paternalism’ – a bogey of contemporary social assistance discourse, and more generally a kind of spectre haunting the liberal imagination across postcolonial southern Africa. The dangers and dysfunctions of states based on kinship-idiomed patronage politics are well known from studies of African states that lie to the north (see, e.g., Bayart 2000; Berman 1998), and worries about the potential for such dynamics to erode state capacities and democratic norms (in southern Africa or anywhere else) can hardly be dismissed as unwarranted. But if, as I have suggested, claims of belonging via personalistic dependence are taking on new urgency in a world where ‘work membership’ is simply no longer available to much of the population, then simply ruling such claims out of bounds in the name of a liberal teleology of progressive emancipation may, in fact, turn out not to be very ‘progressive’ at all.

A few years ago, a major political opinion survey provoked consternation among liberal political scientists and other right-thinking people when it revealed that an embarrassing majority of South Africans agreed with the statement: ‘People are like children, the government should take care of them like a parent’ (Afrobarometer 2009: 4).¹¹ For those seeking to build a culture of rights, this apparent yearning for parental authority could only appear a dangerous reversion to the logic of the bad old days of colonialism and apartheid. South Africans, in this view, ought to be equal citizens proudly claiming rights, not child-like dependants seeking the protection of a parent. But in styling the people as ‘like children’, the statement can also be read as making a very strong assertion not just of inequality, but of a social obligation linking state and citizen. In that sense, indeed, sentiments of this kind can provide a basis for powerful political claims based on an obligation so fundamental that it precedes any right (Englund 2008). After all, southern Africans (from the days of the Ngoni, and long before) have always known that kinship relations such as descent are precisely *political* relations, just as anthropologists have always known that such relations are central to structures of distribution in every society.

Citizenship has often been imagined as a domain of equality and rights, to be contrasted with the Ngoni-like hierarchical and clientelistic relations of rural ‘traditional authority’ – thus ‘citizen’ versus ‘subject’, as Mamdani (1996) would have it. But where social assistance looms so large in the state-citizen relationship, the state may well appear to the citizen not principally as a protector of equal rights, but as a

material benefactor or even patron, while the positive content of citizenship itself may increasingly come to rest precisely on being a rightful and deserving dependant of the state. For such a relationship, a parent-child metaphor can be both politically and analytically powerful. In place of the temptation to see such thinking as proof of a stunted or undeveloped culture of democratic citizenship, we might better see it as an indication both of the real limits of the formal equalities of citizenship under substantive conditions of extreme inequality, and of the real likelihood that demands for social inclusion and protection may be, under present circumstances, more relevant to many people's circumstances than any abstract equality of individual rights. Perhaps, that is, instead of waiting for some evolutionary logic to make people give up their 'backward' ideas, we should begin taking these ideas seriously, and recognizing that they address the very contemporary needs for care, moral connection, and responsible obligation in ways that emancipatory liberal rights talk often does not (cf. Englund 2006; 2008).

Conclusion

Declarations of dependence are a challenge to liberal common sense. Like the forms of Islamic piety analysed by Saba Mahmood in Egypt (2005), they present us with the theoretical and political challenge of a form of agency that seeks its own submission. Their very existence poses a challenge to liberal ideals of freedom, autonomy, and dignity. But however uncomfortable it may make us, an ethnographically informed approach to the political challenges of the present will need to take such forms of agency seriously. The aspiration to dependence is not just an embarrassing holdover from the bad old days of colonial paternalism. On the contrary, it speaks eloquently and urgently to the radical specificity of the present. Declarations of dependence can tell us much (if we will listen) about what the real needs of poor southern Africans are today, and how they might be better met in the years to come.

For more than a century in southern African, labour provided the most powerful foundation for subaltern social membership (especially in domains marked as urban and modern). Today, with work decentred and underemployment a durable and widespread reality, we must rethink both the grounds for social membership and the meaning of work.

With respect to social membership, we must come to terms with the declining significance of both work membership and race membership. But it would be well not to be too quick to embrace the obvious alternatives unconditionally. In particular, a recent history of xenophobic violence across the continent should remind us of the dangers of relying on national citizenship as an unproblematic alternative to the exclusions of past systems of membership. One wonders how proposals for a 'citizens' income', for instance, can deal with the problem of the impoverished non-citizen.

With respect to the culture of work, the need is to follow the BIG campaigners in challenging the moralizing attitudes that stigmatize those excluded from the labour market. Wage labour is not the only way of contributing to the society, and various forms of dependence (including care-giving and care-receiving) must be recognized as necessary building blocks of a healthy society.

Social policy, in particular, should not treat 'dependency' as a disease – the task is not to eliminate dependence but to construct desirable forms of it. We still don't know what those are. But the goal should be not an end to dependence, but a plurality of opportunities for beneficial forms of it. Seeking such a goal may be obstructed by an

exaggerated fear of 'patronage' (and the racialized fear of an 'Africanization' of the South African state that is often associated with it). The dangers of patronage-based state forms (with their associated corruption, inefficiency, and all the rest) are real enough, and ought not be taken lightly. But forms of political mobilizations that 'don't collect money' but 'collect people' instead may offer badly needed new forms of belonging, attachment, and care. In a context where material inequalities are staggering and social obligations binding the haves to the have-nots being rapidly shed, we may be wrong to worry so much that those with resources will extend patronage to those who lack them. The greater danger may be that they will not.

A social policy, and a politics, that takes maximizing independence and autonomy (and minimizing dependence and patronage) as its ultimate goal may not be able to address the crisis of personhood that, I have argued, is at the heart of southern Africa's contemporary predicament. New thinking now emerging in the domain of social policy, though, offers some hope that we may learn how to approach the question of dependence in a more productive way, a way that would be able to credit and respect the vernacular aspirations to social relationality that are so puzzling to an emancipatory liberalism. We still have a great deal of work to do if we are to develop intellectual tools and political strategies adequate to these difficult times. But if we are willing to keep our ears to the ground, and take seriously what we hear there, we may yet learn to think, and act, differently. If we can do so, it is perhaps not too optimistic to hope that we just may, one day, manage to find ways to restore value in people (and not just their labour), and to build a new dispensation within which people could truly count, once again, as the most precious form of wealth.

NOTES

¹ A lively debate has focused on the question of how this period should be named and understood. Older accounts tended to identify the period as 'the mfecane', and understood it as a violent regional eruption that followed the founding of a highly militarized, centralized state by the Zulu kings Dingiswayo and Shaka (Omer-Cooper 1966). A controversial 1988 article by Julian Cobbing attacked the 'mfecane mythology' and argued that the conflicts of the period were due instead to the European slave trade. Later research has mostly rejected Cobbing's specific arguments (especially regarding the role of the Delagoa Bay slave trade), but has also turned away from the idea of a singular eruption of violence, instead situating the period in a longer (and less Zulu-centric) history of state-making, within which warfare, raiding, and migration were fundamental features (see Etherington 2001; Hamilton 1995; J. Wright 1995). Peter Delius (2010) has recently reviewed the entire literature with an eye to the central importance of the incorporation of captives, a theme not much developed in the 'mfecane debate', but absolutely central to the argument I make below. I am grateful to Austin Zeiderman for his superb assistance in helping me to research these and related issues.

² Such voluntary submission to the fearsome Ngoni is also documented by Carl Wiese (1983 [1891]: 58), who noted 'entire settlements' fleeing to present themselves to the Ngoni, even though the latter 'are known for their savagery', and described 'thousands of wretched people' fleeing to the Ngoni chief Mpezeni to escape the taxation and violence meted out by a Portuguese-appointed chief, 'preferring serfdom under a savage to the slavery of the ostensibly civilized African' (1983 [1891]: 239).

³ Barnes's account is in some respects dated, but more recent scholarship has confirmed the fundamental dynamic of incorporation that he described. David Gordon (2009: 929), for instance, has noted that Ngoni captives and their children were incorporated into lineages and could even become chiefs; Kings Phiri (1988: 21) notes the social mobility and full social participation that captives enjoyed. The contemporary observer Carl Wiese (1983 [1891]: 155) described the Ngoni as terrifyingly cruel in battle, but noted that once captives were brought back to the village they were treated 'with humanity', and mentioned specifically that he knew many former captives who had risen to positions of influence and wealth. See Delius (2010) for an excellent regional overview of the theme of incorporation of captives during the period, together with a thoughtful reflection on the reasons for the relative neglect of the topic in the scholarly literature.

⁴ Some recent reinterpretations of 'the mfecane' have suggested that a key dynamic motivating the accumulation of such 'wealth in people' was an interest in the onward sale of captives as slaves (e.g. Cobbing 1988). Certainly, captives were sometimes sold, and the Ngoni did have dealings with Arab slavers. But Harry Langworthy (in his editorial comments in Wiese 1983 [1891]: 155) insists that while Europeans often assumed that the endless Ngoni appetite for fresh captives must have been directed to supplying external slave markets, in fact 'relatively few captives were sold' and 'most captives remained within the Ngoni state'. Wiese himself noted that 'Mpezeni [the principal Ngoni chief] buys people but never sells them' (1983 [1891]: 191). As Delius (2010: 11) has pointed out, the astonishingly rapid expansion of the raiding states' populations alone points to the massive role of social incorporation of captives (and not their simple export). In the Ndebele case, he notes, it is estimated that Mzilikazi left northern Natal with a party of some 300; within a decade his followers numbered at least 20,000 (and perhaps many more). Barnes (1967: 61) reckons that the Ngoni started in the early 1820s as a founding group of some 1,000; only three generations later there were perhaps half a million 'Ngoni', almost all of whom could trace quasi-agnatic descent back to the chief (Zwangendaba) who led the original migration north.

⁵ See, for example, Comaroff & Comaroff (2001); Englund (1996); Fortes (1987); LaFontaine (1985); Piot (1991); Radcliffe-Brown (1965).

⁶ The literature I refer to is broadly Marxist in its inspiration, but it is hardly monolithic, either at the level of theoretical models or at that of empirical findings. Indeed, there has been a stimulating multiplicity of different ways of telling the story of the rise of industrial capitalism in the region, and an impressive range of positions regarding both how the transformation is to be understood (an industrial revolution? a case of internal colonialism? racial capitalism? the articulation of modes of production? uneven development?) and how, in historical terms, it proceeded (from the tidy periodizations of an orthodox Marxism to the messy, variegated landscape sketched by the social historians). It is a remarkably rich and nuanced literature far too vast to be reviewed here. All I want to say in this very crude overview is that, as different as these stories have been, they have all been stories *about* the same thing: the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist social order, and the associated emergence of a proletariat. There is no doubt that such a transition is indeed a crucial feature of southern African history, and debates about different ways to narrate it have rightly been central to the best scholarship in the region for many decades now. My point is not that this focus has been mistaken, but only that the understandable dominance of (different versions of) what we might call the industrial capitalism story has made it harder to see both certain continuities across 'eras' (notably what I describe as a social dynamic of competition over people) and breaks that would require a different periodization (notably what I term a shift from a people-scarce social order to a people-surplus one).

⁷ To be sure, paternalistic and clientelistic attachments took significantly different forms in different industries, just as different kinds of social relationships often implied quite different idioms and practices of patron-client alliance (thus a white farmer might be a patron-protector to a landless labourer in a very different way than a black foreman to a fellow mineworker). My intent here is not to deny such differences, but instead to identify, across a surprising range of social and institutional sites, an underlying commonality: a pervasive socio-political logic of social attachment via dependence.

⁸ Donham, for instance, relates stories told by black mineworkers that described white mine officials making sacrifices to a mystical snake, in ways that 'analogically transferred' to the officials the role of a kinsman making sacrifices to the ancestors (2011: 70-1). By the 1990s, with paternalistic solidarities being dishonoured and discarded, Donham notes (following Niehaus) that the sacrificial scenario was being inverted to transform management 'from a benevolent father figure who sacrifices to the ancestors into a horrible bloodsucker' (2011: 72).

⁹ It is not a point that I am able to develop here (lacking as I do both the space and the scholarly expertise to treat it properly), but it may also be worth considering whether this sort of dynamic might not shed light on the very strong contemporary appeal of evangelical Christian churches, across southern Africa, and indeed much of the rest of the world as well. Like the NGO referenced above, these expanding collectivities 'collect people' – and ascribe value to them not for their labour, but for themselves. And like the old Ngoni state, the Kingdom of Heaven has the potential to incorporate anyone or everyone, offering a robust membership even to the lowest. Via a simple act of submission to a Lord, one may acquire a form of social belonging, and a rightful place in something significant. In this sense, indeed, subordinating one's self to God might be considered the ultimate 'declaration of dependence'. It would not be wise, of course, to seek to reduce religious experience here to some sort of social 'function' or symptom, but it would be well worth exploring (even if it is not my purpose here) how the apparently surging appeal of certain forms of Christian belonging might be understood as a response to the historical shedding of social

relations of dependence that I have traced here. The issue is complex, however, since Christianity itself offers not only a form of belonging, but sometimes also ways of refusing or escaping other ties of belonging and mutual obligation (such as those of kinship), as was pointed out nearly half a century ago by Norman Long (1968).

¹⁰ For a stimulating genealogy of the 'dependency' concept, with special reference to its ideological uses in the context of US welfare politics, see Fraser & Gordon (1994).

¹¹ Respondents chose this sentiment over an alternative that read: 'Government is like an employee; the people should be the bosses who control the government'.

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Déclarations de dépendance : main-d'œuvre, statut de la personne et aide sociale en Afrique australe

Résumé

Dans la pensée libérale, la dépendance vis-à-vis d'autrui est souvent considérée comme l'opposé de la liberté. Pourtant, en Afrique australe, l'anthropologie politique reconnaît depuis longtemps les relations de dépendance sociale comme la base même de la cité comme de la personne. La réflexion sur cette longue histoire régionale de la dépendance comme « mode d'action » ouvre une perspective nouvelle sur certaines pratiques contemporaines que la « pensée libérale émancipatrice », comme nous pourrions l'appeler, fait apparaître comme de pitoyables manifestations d'une nostalgie du paternalisme et de l'inégalité. Loin de cela, l'article fait valoir que ces pratiques constituent une réponse tout à fait contemporaine à la récente émergence d'un univers social dans lequel les gens, longtemps considérés (dans les systèmes sociaux précapitalistes et les premiers temps du capitalisme) comme rares et précieux, ont perdu leur valeur et sont considérés comme surnuméraires. L'auteur en pointe les implications pour la politique et l'action publique contemporaine, dans un monde où la main-d'œuvre et les formes d'appartenance sociale qui lui sont liées se dévaluent et où l'assistance sociale et la circulation d'argent associée sont de plus en plus importantes.

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