Old work, new work, less work?

By:

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The contemporary moment for work and labour in South Africa feels like one marked by fear and 'new', growing forms of exclusion. Significant Gross Domestic Product contraction in the second quarter of the year, is read alongside the latest data from the National Income Dynamics CRAM Wave 2 Study showing that about a third of people in South Africa who were employed lost their jobs, within only some recovery as lockdown has eased. And the dynamics of those job losses have only been to exacerbate existing inequalities: with women, Black/Africans, the young and uneducated being disproportionately impacted.

Yet, the first step toward confronting the challenge of unemployment may be seeking to understand how we have been made to value employment. This economic moment is not the random result of an unprecedented disease. The impact COVID-19 is having on the South African labour market is associated with decisions and policies that have been actively pursued. It is in fact a result of an inevitable history, and should also not be disconnected from some of the concurrent challenges we see emerging from the digital economy. In their superb piece "After Labour", Jean and John Comaroff address an essential

paradox in Capitalism: though the nature of Capitalism is to in practice undermine the actual economic value of labour, it at the same time seeks to over emphasise the social and cultural value of ‘work’ and ‘wages’. It’s like a form of meta-gaslighting.

The Comaroff’s introduce their work by noting how the modern political obsession with employment, read as waged labour, is in spite of the fact that “more people have always been wageless than waged”. This should be considered alongside the reality that in South Africa, while unemployment is a problem for inequality, so too is the fact that earnings for households in the bottom percentile from wages have not risen in real terms since Apartheid. Consider too the devastating impact ‘underemployment’ has on the lived reality of waged workers in South Africa. Wages are not an actual, magic salve to poverty and inequality here.

Yet, we have inextricably tied innate human value to our capacity to ‘work’, whilst at the same time undervaluing - both economically and figuratively- a variety of other forms of labour. We only need to think for instance of the demeaning of domestic and reproductive labour. Consider how during the COVID-19 crisis as much media time was spent describing how to work ‘better’ from home, and romanticising the Intsagrammable #wfhlife, as was spent on prioritising personal health outcomes. This has only contributed of course to the disproportionately negative impact of COVID-19 on work loss for women in South Africa, who have been left, of course, holding the baby.

The prioritisation of waged labour as a metric for both personal and broader economic success is built on the exclusion of a whole variety of other forms of labour. Sociology has long described how we form social identity through this process of exclusion, but the exclusion in turn has a very fundamental impact of bias which we struggle to shake off. What if, however, this bias does not just influence how we culturally assess people that don’t ‘work’ in the waged way we appreciate, but how we design policies to deal with work? How we value ‘waged work’ more than other work, in spite of its disconnection to actual impacts on income, matters substantially in terms of the lived reality for people. We certainly see the paradox raised by the Comaroff’s across history, and how it has served to fuel industrial growth through the exploitation of labour, yet is it still a relevant idea for the contemporary problem, or is digital

industrialisation ‘different’?

The spiral of influence that emerged from Marx and Engel’s discussions on dialectical materialism are a useful tool for understanding how Capitalism can appropriate emerging practices for its own ends. This is important for thinking about whether modern economic practices, looking particular at the share economy, require us to redefine our ideas around waged labour, or not. Comaroff gives the example of how peer-to-peer loan schemes are being facilitated by technology - its the modern digitalisation of stokvels. Yet the ability of people to turn themselves and their possessions into a ‘means of production’ in this shared economy, only removes them further from the bounds of labour protection (rather than further from exploitation).

Think too of other forms of gig work like car-services, or even domestic work, being facilitated by platforms like Uber. South Africa has a highly regulated labour sector from a legislative point of view. Yet, even with broader definitions on what constitutes a worker than many jurisdictions, platforms who profit from this labour may circumvent the definitions, leaving workers vulnerable during a crisis like COVID-19. By labelling workers as independent, the legal responsibilities of employee to employee are avoided. This is an interesting phenomenon - in a sense, Capital has sought to eradicate the gains of the labour movements and trade unions by simply undermining the meaning of ‘worker’. It actually seems an analogous response to the ‘post-truth’ political paradigm: to undermine the prioritising of truth, why not simply change the meaning of the word truth? To undermine the value of work, why not simply change the meaning of the word worker?

This old exploitation by new means follows a pattern, and is a result of the particular forces which dominate the emerging digital economy. Much of the share economy is facilitated by platforms, which are significantly monopolised by a handful of global companies chiefly emerging from the United States and China. The term ‘data colonialism’ nicely captures the notion of the data ownership dominance that co-exists with the technology dominance, leaving us with new forms of global value extraction from the continent (in terms of both revenue, tax, data and market share).

Yet how do these global, seemingly intractable, forces then link to our emphasis on certain types of labour domestically? Quite simply, South Africa cannot afford to design interventions that only prioritise the traditional forms of waged labour that have so far not equally served the people. Policy needs to prioritise labour which is not just waged labour, and that doesn't just mean expanding definitions of workers, but also creating the enabling environment needed to sustain and promote other forms of income generation for homes in a way that is responsive to the global dynamics of the digital economy. Enabling self-employment, whether informal or formal, must be a priority.

Centring better human outcomes in policy, within sustainable bounds, has been the rallying cry of human rights discourse. When we centre human outcomes in the labour context, the preoccupation with promoting specific, exclusionary forms of waged labour seems an unhelpful distraction. We need to think broadly, and across policy areas as: "Indeed, in general, the improved aggregate poverty situation [in South Africa] is due to the increased support coming from social grants and not from the labour market". Social, technological and economic policy should coordinate for better outcomes. If COVID-19 has shown as anything, it is not that we are the subjects of external, uncontrollable phenomenon - but rather that we are subject to outcomes born of the deliberate decisions of policy, law and economics.

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