

WELFARE, LABOUR AND LIMINALITY:
COVID-19 AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES IN
SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

With one of the most expansive cash transfers schemes in the global South, South Africa has been hailed a trailblazer of social welfare. The existing research shows that the fear of welfare dependency and the social imaginary that labour and income must be connected remains embedded in the minds of both elites and among the citizens of South Africa. Thus, this research investigates whether the introduction of a special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant has been accompanied by a shift in the political discourse on social grants and welfare dependency that could challenge this connection. Thus, this research analyses the governmental discourses from before and after the emergence of the pandemic, based partly on existing literature and partly on a handful of presidential speeches. The research shows that the presidential speeches introducing the COVID-19 grant reflects a language of crisis and exceptionalism hinting at a potential rethinking of South Africa's economy, although it remains vague what that entails. Thus, the research concludes that while social imaginary connecting labour and income remains prevalent, there is an observable potential for change which may be studied in the future.

Keywords: cash transfers, South Africa, social imaginary, COVID-19, labour, welfare, discourse

1. Introduction

Over the past years of increased academic and political interest in cash transfers, South Africa (SA) has assumed a central position in discussions of direct redistribution of wealth. SA has the highest level of inequality in the world (Gini Index, 2019) and more than 55 percent of the population live in poverty (The World Bank, 2020). As a response to these major inequalities, SA's welfare system today consists of a wide array of cash transfer schemes targeting the most vulnerable segments of the population. Since the end of apartheid and the universalisation of previously racialised social assistance schemes in 1994, the number of South Africans covered by some sort of social grant has grown from 4 million to at least 17.8 million in 2019 (Marais, 2019, p. 361; Nilsen, 2020, p. 13). With 45 percent of all South African households receiving social assistance in 2015, these grants form a vital source of income (Marais, 2019, p. 361; Nilsen, 2020, p. 13).

Given the expansive nature of SA's social grants schemes, the country has been hailed a trailblazer of social welfare in the global South. Even so, the South African governing political party African National Congress (ANC) has after all preferred a 'workfare' over a

‘basic income’ response to the structural crisis of waged employment (Barchiesi, 2007). Meanwhile, discourses of the “idle youth” and the fear of welfare dependency remain prevalent among both policy makers and the unemployed youth themselves (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 229). These discourses seem in turn to be tied to a *social imaginary* that prescribes a moral link between ‘income’ and ‘labour’. This kind of imaginary is not unique to SA, but rather reflects a global neoliberal paradigm of productivity and labour (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 238). Still, SA’s expansive grants scheme in combination with decades of jobless growth and structural unemployment, makes it an interesting case for exploring potential cracks in this kind of social imaginary.

In particular, this chapter is concerned with the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic could be a turning point for the social imaginary of labour in SA. As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, the South African government introduced a special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, representing an interesting shift in welfare policies of the country. In this chapter, we seek to answer the following question:

How has the government’s discourse on labour and welfare dependency in South Africa changed with the implementation of the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant? Do these discourses reflect a shift in the social imaginaries of labour?

2. Case Presentation

2.1 The history of SA’s grants scheme

The first steps towards SA’s social security system were taken during the apartheid era, when the idea of a welfare state for white South Africans emerged (Armstrong and Burger, 2009, p. 1). Devereux (2007) describes how the first implementation of a social pension in SA was presented in 1928, but not extended to black South Africans up until 1944. Despite the fact that the social pension was gradually extended to other population groups, the rates remained lower than those of the white South Africans due to the “*justification being that natives should receive lower benefits because they paid lower taxes and had a lower standard of living*” (Devereux, 2007, p. 543). From the late 1980s onwards, the South African government began to increase the budget targeted social assistance, which resulted in grant programmes such as the child support grant and disability grants (Armstrong and Burger,

2009, p. 1). While the end of apartheid in 1994 was supposed to mark the end of segregation practices among the population of SA, ethnic tensions and increasing income inequalities among the South African population prevailed (Özler, 2007; Durrheim, 2011; Hudson, 2019). Today, SA's social grants scheme encompasses a wide variety of grants that are all unconditional and means-tested. At the same time, the grants are targeted, mainly at old people, disabled people, children - i.e. segments of the population who are outside of the workforce anyway (Nilsen, 2020, p. 13). What makes the COVID-19 SRD grant introduced in 2020 special is that it also targets unemployed or informally employed people who are part of the workforce.

2.2. Jobless growth and discussions of a Basic Income Grant

Since the end of apartheid, SA's economy has been growing – albeit slowly compared to other developing economies (Marais, 2019, p. 361). This growth has been jobless, and since 1999, the official unemployment rate has fluctuated between 22 percent when it was at its lowest and 33 percent at its peak (O'Neill, 2021). In the first quarter of 2020, the official unemployment rate passed 30 percent for the first time since 2002, with young people (age 15-34 years) representing 63 percent of all unemployed (StatsSA, 2020). Decades of structural unemployment and astounding levels of income inequality have served as an argument for the need to rewire our perception of the relationship between labour and income (Dawson & Fouksman 2020, p. 229; Ferguson, 2018). Given the expansive nature of SA's social grants scheme, some academics have argued that SA could pave the way for the implementation of universal basic income grant (UBIG), which is distributed unconditionally to all citizens regardless of unemployment status (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 232). This could ultimately challenge dominant perceptions of the link between labour and money. Even so, the South African government has been reluctant to go down this road.

In 2001, Taylor Committee (The Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System for South Africa) was appointed by the Cabinet to investigate and give recommendations for the fragmented social security system in South Africa. One of the measures proposed in the Taylor Committee's report was a phased introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) as a way to address "coverage gaps" in SA's social security schemes (Barchiesi, 2007, p. 573). However, as we will explore later in this chapter, due to concerns of welfare dependency, the ANC has not been keen on implementing a UBIG.

3. Analytical approach

In the context of our research question, we define discourses as any social act that can be analysed as text (Brænder et al., 2012). They are on one hand reflective of certain social structures, power dynamics and practices and on other hand they also themselves structure social practices (Brænder et al., 2012). Our analysis of the discourses on labour and welfare is relatively open-ended and we are in other words looking broadly on how employment, labour, laziness, social grants and welfare dependency is spoken of on different levels, and how those discourses relate to one another. The social imaginary is understood in this context as a “*shared collective imagination (...) that holds society together by being a representation of it*” (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499). The social imaginary is “distilled” in the systems of ideas, languages, norms, discourses, images and values that structure social practices. In this sense, discourses can on one hand be said to be embedded within and reflective of a broader social imaginary, but also play a role in shaping the social imaginary.

We approach our research question by drawing on a mix of secondary data and primary data as well as theoretical argumentation. The secondary data consists of existing literature within the field and provides us with insights on discourses on laziness, unemployment and welfare dependency up until the pandemic. The selected literature covers both the elite and grassroots levels. The secondary data equips us with a useful vocabulary, concepts and themes, that in turn guides our theoretical argument as well as our interpretation of the primary data. By triangulating our data across multiple levels of analysis as well as a broad timespan, we are able to identify recurring patterns and narratives that cut across different levels of society and periods of time. In other words, this multifaceted approach enables us to get a more comprehensive idea of the dominant social imaginaries of labour in South Africa.

The analysis is structured around three steps. First we discuss/analyse prevailing discourses on laziness, unemployment and welfare dependency in South Africa up until the COVID-19 crisis. This part of our analysis is based partly on a review of the existing literature. This review is supplemented by our own analysis of two speeches by former president Jacob Zuma and a speech by incumbent president Cyril Ramaphosa that are more recent than the data that is analysed in existing literature; but all three are from before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic (2011, 2016 & 2019). In addition to analysing data on the governmental level, we

also review literature on the discourses and perceptions of unemployment, poverty and laziness among poor people themselves. This literature stretches from 2011-2021, using data from before the outbreak of the pandemic.

The second part of our analysis comprises a theoretical discussion of why the COVID-19 crisis could be a potential turning point for these imaginaries. Throughout history, crises have been associated with “epochal transition” and disruption of a normative order (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 500). In order to understand the mechanisms of such disruption in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, we depart from Varvarousis’ conceptual framework on liminality and social imaginaries. We find the concept of a “liminal stage” useful in understanding the ambiguity and unsettledness created by COVID-19 crisis and the potential for it to disrupt the dominant social imaginary of labour. On an empirical level, this section is underpinned by a discussion of the South African government’s decision to introduce a special SRD grant in response to the economic crisis.

In the third part of our analysis, we investigate whether the governmental discourses around laziness, unemployment and welfare dependency *after* the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic reflect any shifts in the social imaginary of labour and income. We do this by analysing two speeches by president Ramaphosa; one from 2020 where he introduces the government’s response to the economic crisis and one from 2021 where he addresses the state of the nation.

We have chosen to focus on presidential speeches, because they are first and foremost addressed directly to the general public, and because they are designed to provide a somewhat coherent narrative about the government’s policies. While these speeches can of course not be said to be representative of the dominant social imaginary of labour, they might nonetheless give us an indication of any differences or similarities to the discourses before the outbreak of the pandemic.

This last step of the analysis is focused around governmental discourses, because we are interested in whether the shift in a concrete policy – the introduction of the covid-19 grant – has been accompanied by a shift in discourses. Any changes in the social imaginary accompanying this policy are likely to be reflected on the governmental level before it is

disseminated to the grassroots level. At the same time, we are aware that it might still be too soon for a shift in the social imaginary to have crystallised in the public discourses.

Nevertheless, it is all the more interesting if those speeches do in fact reflect such a shift.

4. Discourses of laziness and unemployment pre-COVID-19

As outlined earlier in this chapter, one of the biggest barriers to the implementation of cash transfer programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa is the concern among government elites that cash transfers could potentially disincentivise work and make recipients dependent on social assistance (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 20-21). However, existing literature on the impact of cash transfers shows that cash transfers for the most part have either no effect or a positive effect on adults working (Bastagli et al., 2016, p. 9). On the contrary, there are multiple examples of cash transfers increasing work among adults (Bastagli et al., 2016, p. 9). In more than half of the studies, adult work was not significantly impacted by cash transfers. In cases that did result in a reduction, it was the elderly and people caring for dependants who decreased work (Bastagli et al., 2016, p. 9).

Moreover, in the light of extreme unemployment rates and a growing poverty gap in South Africa, scholars like James Ferguson question labour as a measure of success for development efforts (Ferguson, 2018). Rather, he suggests an attempt to reorient the outcome goals for development and thereby put an end to the vision of the “proper job” as the presumed norm for development, because this vision of paid labour as a means for providing stable livelihoods and social inclusion “*often attained a kind of aspirational universality that it nowhere achieved in reality*” (Ferguson, 2018, p. 1). Despite the evidence on the effects of cash transfers and the jobless reality of South Africa, the government remains reluctant towards giving money to people, who are otherwise fit for work. In the following, we map out some of the discourses that this is reluctance rooted in.

4.1. Discourses within the South African elite

4.1.1. Existing literature

Barchiesi (2007) has critically studied discourses on welfare dependency and waged labour particularly among the ANC, the ruling governing party of post-apartheid SA. He notes that policy debate and documents point to an overarching neoliberal framework in which the

elite's anti-poverty approach is to encourage economic self-reliance and promote waged labour as the primary condition of social inclusion. Yet, Barchiesi also emphasises the hybrid nature of this discourse, as it co-exists with a lesser dominant discourse, on the expectations for a more radical redistribution of wealth (Barchiesi, 2007, p. 575). This hybrid nature was for example evident with the 2001 report of the Taylor Committee. While it pointed to a shift in policy discourse in post-apartheid SA, away from waged labour as the primary indicator of social inclusion for the first time in the country's history, the government still exemplified a very cautious approach to these recommendations, and the dominating discourse continued to glorify waged labour and stigmatise social grants, to convince the poor that full citizenship was inextricably tied to the avoidance of welfare dependency (Barchiesi, p. 562).

A strong discourse on the importance of waged labour and thereby individual agency is extremely powerful in that it allows for the government to shift the responsibility for structural unemployment to the poor communities (Barchiesi, 2007, p. 568). Barchiesi exemplifies this with references to President Mbeki, who in a 2003 State of the Nation address spoke of the need to reduce the number of welfare dependents. His argument was echoed by other members of government, including the ANC government spokesperson, Joel Netshitenzhe, who encouraged South Africans to "*enjoy the opportunity, the dignity and the rewards of work*" (Barchiesi, 2007, p. 574).

4.1.2. Analysis of presidential speeches

Barchiesi's observations (2007) serve as a point of departure for this research to look into the political speeches of former South African president Jacob Zuma and the current president in office, Cyril Ramaphosa from before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his state of the nation address from 2011, former president Jacob Zuma stressed that "*Since we [the government] are building a developmental and not a welfare state, the social grants will be linked to economic activity and community development*" (Appendix A, p. 3). Linking social grant support directly to economic activity may showcase the arguments made by scholars advocating for the occurrence of the strong discourse on waged labour as the main denominator in social grant schemes. Thus, social grants are portrayed to serve mainly as means to return an individual to the job market. The 2011 speech appeals to the public through phrases such as "*we all have a responsibility to work hard*" or "*we have declared 2011 a year of job creation through meaningful economic transformation and inclusive*

growth” (Appendix A, p. 5 & 17). This focus on waged labour in the speech supports the conclusions outlined in existing literature about the promotion of economic self-reliance as a condition for both social inclusion and growth. This is also evident in the later speech made by Zuma in 2016 in the occasion of the 104th Anniversary of the ANC where he noted that *“the land shall belong to those who work it”* and *“it is vitally important that, as South Africans, we feed ourselves and therefore, we must be self-sufficient in food production”* (Appendix B, p. 8). When Zuma says that *“the land belongs to those who work it,”* he implies that those who do not work the land, do not belong there. These observations align well with Marais’ (2019) argument that waged work is closely tied to the idea of social citizenship. Labour in this sense becomes a central criteria for inclusion and is in other words *“used to assign worth and value to people”* (Marais, 2019, p. 368).

The 2019 state of the nation address by incumbent president Cyril Ramaphosa is characterised by a slightly different style although the emphasis on the labour remains prevalent (Appendix C). Ramaphosa continues in his speech to stress that *“we [the government] are focusing our attention, our policies and our programmes on the key parts of the economy that are labour intensive”* (Appendix C, p. 10). Furthermore, Ramaphosa is observed to talk more about social grant schemes than his predecessor. However this is mostly done in a connection to the labour market. He states that *“[the government] improved unemployment benefits, improved social assistance coverage, and active labour market policies for citizens between 18 and 59 years”* (Appendix C, p. 19). Ramaphosa mentions that *“We have worked together – as government, labour, business, civil society and communities”* (Appendix C, p. 3). It is interesting to note who is included in this “we”. Ramaphosa uses multiple labels on the general public like *“labour”*, *“civil society”* or *“communities”* which indicates a segmentation of the population. Here too, labour appears as one of the criteria for being included in the imagined community, that the “we” connotes (Anderson, 1996).

The above outlined observations indicate that the conclusions made by Barchiesi in 2007 to at least to some extent remain applicable and relevant in the years up until 2019. Ramaphosa is less explicit about “responsibility to work” than Zuma, and he puts more emphasis on the social grant schemes than his predecessor Zuma. Even so, the social grants are connected to the labour market when addressed and labour still appears to hold a central position as a marker for social citizenship.

4.2. Discourses at the grassroots level

The idea of work as a precondition for social citizenship is not confined within the political elite – it extends throughout all levels of society. On a grassroots level, it is expressed through discourses of laziness and dignity as well as the stigma surrounding recipients of social grants. Based on ethnographic research among unemployed young men in the informal settlement of Zandspruit outside of Johannesburg, Dawson and Fouksman (2020) seek to understand the dominant work imaginaries among the ‘surplus population’ themselves. They identify three aspects of the laziness discourse prevalent among their research participants embodied by the figures of the lazy grant recipient, the exploited migrant, and the lazy bureaucrat (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 230). Common for the three examples is an underlying moral principle that work and cash must be connected, and that this connection must be reciprocal.

4.2.1. Individual responsibility or structural problems?

Existing literature indicates that the unemployed themselves appear to some extent to be aware of this structural nature of unemployment in SA (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020; Hochfeld & Plageron, 2011). Dawson & Fouksman argue that their research participants are aware that getting a job with a reasonable pay “*takes more than working hard or having skills*” (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 235). The unemployed seem to be aware that existing work programmes, traineeships and subsidised forms of employment are inefficient. In a similar vein, the informants Hochfeld & Plageron explain the causes of poverty by pointing to external structural factors: the lack of jobs (Hochfeld & Plageron, 2011, p. 58).

Despite this recognition of external structural causes for unemployment, both studies identify among the informants an emphasis on individual responsibility. The women participating in Hochfeld & Plageron’s study likewise stressed the importance of individual efforts to escape poverty (Hochfeld & Plageron, 2011, p. 57). In this latter case, research participants furthermore seemed to fluctuate between the structuralist and individualist explanation based on who they were talking about. When talking about their own experience, they tended to refer to external variables, whereas when they talk about other poor people a greater emphasis is put on individual character traits such as laziness (Hochfeld & Plageron, 2011, p. 57).

In Dawson & Fouksman's research, the research participants on one hand express a belief in the meritocratic promise of social inclusion and wealth if only one works hard enough. On the other hand, they are also aware of the structural nature of unemployment in South Africa and the social context of racial and class inequalities (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 244). Dawson & Fouksman conclude that "*laziness is used by our informants as an explanation for economic marginality and exclusion, and to underscore their belief in meritocracy*" (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 244). Laziness, in other words, is a way of placing responsibility for unemployment with the individual.

4.2.2. The grant as a right or as a gift

The question of whether the responsibility for unemployment should be placed with the individual or the structures appears to be connected to the question of whether the grant is perceived as a right or as a gift. As Dawson & Fouksman point out, Ferguson has argued that the expansive nature of the South African social grant, signifies an increasing sense of entitlement to a share of the nation's wealth (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 232).

In an attempt to nuance this claim, Dawson & Fouksman argue that while the South African unemployed might to an increasing extent feel entitled to a share of the nation's wealth, they ultimately reject the idea of *direct* redistribution of wealth calling instead for the government to ensure stable employment (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 238-243). A similar argument is made by the informants of Hochfeld & Plageron's research who explicitly refer to the grant as a 'gift' meant as a temporary fix rather than a right and long term source of financial security (Hochfeld & Plageron, 2011, p. 56).

But not all grantees perceive the social grants as a gift. In her research on the perceptions of the social grant among South Africans of color, Torkelson (2021) argues that the construction of South Africans of color as fraudulent and incompetent financial actors, has historically and till this day justified the dispossession and expropriation of them. Her research also shows how the grantees draw on these transgenerational experiences of dispossession and expropriation to claim a position as *creditors* to the nation rather than debtors (Torkelson, 2021, p. 80). Thus, in contrast to the conclusions of Dawson & Fouksman and Hochfeld & Plageron, the research participants of Torkelson's research perceive the social grants as a right rather than a gift.

Furthermore, her conclusions bring out important aspects of the racialised history of South African social grants schemes. While the moral link between labour and income might be a product of global neoliberal ideas, and thus not necessarily unique to South Africa, discourses around the recipients of social grants are inevitably also influenced by racialised power structures specific to South Africa's long and complex history of racial segregation.

In sum, we have established so far that the discourse of laziness, the fear of welfare dependency, the stigma around social grants and individual responsibility for unemployment are all in some ways connected to a fundamental idea of labour as a central criteria for social citizenship. This idea remains prevalent on both a governmental level and a grassroots level at least up until 2019.

5. Liminality, social imaginaries and COVID-19

In the following, we outline the theoretical argument for why the COVID-19 crisis could potentially challenge the dominant work imaginaries in SA. In this context, Varvarousis (2019) provides us with two central theoretical contributions to our discussion. Firstly, he proposes a conceptualisation of the "social imaginary," that will prove useful for distilling the findings of our analysis. Secondly, his use of the concept of *liminality* helps us understand the role that a crisis, like a pandemic, can play in disrupting dominant social imaginaries (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 494).

This section serves as a theoretical intermezzo that on one hand provides us with a framework for interpreting our findings in the above analysis and on the other guides us toward our analysis of presidential speeches after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.1. The social imaginary of labour

Building on Castoriadis' concept of imaginary (2010), Varvarousis defines the social imaginary as "*the shared collective imagination distilled in specific institutions, which operates as the "glue" that holds a society together by being a representation of it.*" (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499).

The social imaginary in this sense, can be understood as a broader system of norms, discourses, ideas and images, that structure society, by determining what is "*real, worthy,*

possible, acceptable or desirable” (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499). This concept is a useful framework for interpreting the findings of the above analysis. On a governmental level, we observed that there has long been a focus on economic self-reliance and waged labour as a criteria for social citizenship. This in turn is reflected in the prioritisation of workfare over welfare and the narrow targeting of social grants at people outside the workforce. On the grassroots level, social grants are associated with stigma and shame, and the responsibility for unemployment is largely placed with the individual – at least when talking about ‘the others’. Dawson & Fouksman (2020) traced the notion of the lazy welfare recipient to a deeply ingrained “moral logic,” prescribing a link between work and income (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020). While Dawson & Fouksman also touch upon the concept of social imaginary, they do not elaborate it further.

This moral link between work and income, reflects a social imaginary of labour that functions as “*the “glue” that holds society together*” (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499). Even though unemployment in SA is structural in nature, employment is considered both desirable and possible on multiple levels, and labour remains a central determinant of personal and social worth. The image of the lazy welfare recipient, the discourse on self-sufficiency, the neoliberal idea of how to spur productivity, and the stigma surrounding social grants are in other words all components of a social imaginary of labour that dictates a connection between work and income.

5.2. Disrupting the social imaginary

On one hand, Varvarousis describes the social imaginary as a solid structure, a form of “*invisible cement,*” that holds society together (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499). On the other hand, the word “imaginary” is in this context derived from the word “*imaginare,*” to imagine. It is in other words a product of human creative capacity, and like “*magma,*” it is therefore fluid and subject to continuous change and disruptions (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 500).

In order to theorise how such disruptions can happen, Varvarousis draws on the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’. Within anthropological literature “*the liminal stage*” was originally used to describe the middle phase of a rite of passage (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 501). The liminal stage is situated “*in between a present yet to pass and a future still to come*” (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011, p. 14 in Varvarousis, 2019, p. 495). It has since come

to be used to describe all sorts of individual as well as societal transitions. The liminal stage is characterised by “*the unsettledness, the anxiety, the hope and the contradictions that each transitory period involves*” (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 502).

The concept of liminality serves as a theoretical framework for understanding how crises can bring about a “stage of suspension” that opens up space for experimenting with new practices and ideas that destabilise the previous social imaginaries (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 501).

The question is whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis could have created a similar stage of suspension and whether this liminal stage creates space for experimentation with new practices that destabilise the dominant social imaginary.

The COVID-19 crisis has posed the biggest shock to the global economy since the 2008 financial crisis. SA is among the countries in the world that have imposed the most stringent set of measures, essentially shutting down the whole informal economy (Bassier et al, 2021, p. 5). In April 2020, employment fell by 18 percent compared to February, and 47 percent of respondents in a national COVID-19 survey reported that they had run out of money to buy food (Bhorat et al., 2021, p. 64). People who are unemployed or employed in the informal economy are particularly vulnerable to the negative economic consequences of the pandemic (Bassier et al., 2021, p. 1).

In response to the downward spiral, the South African government introduced a major social and economic relief plan amounting to 10 percent of the country’s GDP in order to “*stabilise the economy*” (Appendix D). As part of this plan, a number of the existing social grants were expanded. At the same time, the government also introduced a special COVID-19 SRD grant. Another SRD grant already existed prior to the pandemic offering temporary assistance to persons in “dire material need” due to external shocks like a disaster or a death of the breadwinner of the family (SASSA, n.d.). While this has been the only type of grant that targets members of the workforce, it is often distributed in-kind (depending on the province), rather than as cash, and it is only granted for three months (Government of South Africa, 2021). However, the COVID-19 SRD grant appears to be much more expansive, providing a cash transfer of R350 for up to six months. In this sense, the COVID-19 SRD grant marks an interesting shift towards an even more comprehensive, unconditional income grant for people who are otherwise fit for work.

In this context the implementation of a special COVID-19 SRD grant could be perceived as a form of experimentation with new practices. The question is whether the introduction of this grant has been accompanied by a change of discourse that reflects a disruption of a social imaginary of labour. In the last part of our analysis, we turn towards speeches held after the introduction of the special grant in order to see if the governmental discourses have changed.

6. Discourse analysis of speeches after COVID-19

Two speeches by President Ramaphosa are analysed. The first speech introduces the COVID-19 SRD grant described above, and the second speech announces its extension. The speeches are chosen due to their timing, and to see if discourses characterising the very initial response to the crisis in 2020 are also evident one year later.

6.1 Introducing the COVID-19 rescue package

After 25 days of national lockdown, president Ramaphosa addresses the South African people on 21 april, 2020 to introduce the R500 bn COVID-19 rescue package, including the special COVID-19 SRD grant (Appendix D).

The speech clearly reflects the disruption, which the “*unprecedented crisis*” has caused, not just in terms of health interventions needed to deal with the spread of the virus, but just as much the disruption in the economy, which is calling for radical changes (Appendix D, p. 2). The scale of the emergency relief programme is thus labeled “*historic*”, but Ramaphosa also ensures that “*the day will come when these measures are no longer needed*” (Appendix D, p. 7).

Yet, he acknowledges the impossibility of going back to the way things were and devotes the last part of the speech to elaborate on the need for a “*new economy*”, in which an economic transformation must be forged to offer new opportunities for the South African people (Appendix D, p. 6-8). His choice of words and the emphasis on creating a space for experimenting with new practices marks the liminal stage, which SA finds itself in.

While Ramaphosa acknowledges the ambiguity and unsettledness, which accompany a national lockdown and a pandemic, he actually approaches his speech with a strong sense of certainty and confidence: “*we dare not allow our vigilance to waver*” (Appendix D, p. 8). There is a tone of comfort and hopefulness throughout the entire speech. This makes sense given the timing of the speech and the need for a leader of the nation to calm, encourage and bring hope (Appendix D).

It remains less certain what the “new economy” actually entails other than “new horizons” and “innovative solutions”. Still, a few phrases, which hint toward what future economic distributive policies look like, can be highlighted. Ramaphosa repetitively talks of a new social compact. In this speech, the prioritisation of workfare over welfare has arguably switched in favour of welfare. This is further cemented by the decision to broaden the social grants to also include people within the workforce and those part of the “informal” economy. This could imply a change in the pre-COVID-19 social imaginary, which emphasises labour as a necessary prerequisite for social inclusion.

Also similar to pre-COVID-19 discourses, there is still an explicit discourse on the need to ensure that the vulnerable; the youth, women and disabled people outside the workforce receive particular attention and support (Appendix D, p. 7). There is also an explicit discourse that people who are fit for work and eligible for the special COVID-19 SRD grant should not view this support as more than a temporary solution. There is still an emphasis on the “protection and creation of jobs” as the overarching goal, and employment as the way out of the crisis (Appendix D, p. 5). To a great extent, this discourse echoes pre-COVID-19 discourses. At the very introduction of this new type of social grant, there is thus not convincing evidence that the liminal stage, which SA finds itself in, means a change in the social imaginary, in which labour and income are inextricably linked.

There is, however, less emphasis on the responsibility of the individual, and more emphasis on the need for inclusive, collective efforts and coming together as a social compact to overcome the grave economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. In itself, this change in emphasis could mark a shift in the South African government’s discourse on how to tackle economic challenges. In relation hereto, it is however important to mention that this intensified focus on the importance of the community is also one of the characteristics of

Ramaphosa which distinguishes him from his predecessor Zuma. At this stage, it is therefore difficult to draw final, and certain conclusions on the reasons for shifts in discourses.

6.2 Extending the COVID-19 SRD grant

Almost a year later, in February 2021, Ramaphosa presented his latest State of the Nation Address speech, which was centered around the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (Appendix E). One of the vital questions prior to this speech was whether the government would extend the COVID-19 SRD grant. Ramaphosa announces in the end of his speech that the COVID-19 SRD grant will be extended by further three months using the argument that *“this [COVID-19 grant] has proven to be an effective and efficient short-term measure to reduce the immediate impact on the livelihoods of poor South Africans”* (Appendix E, p. 20). His choice of words with regard to ‘short-term’ and ‘immediate impact’ interestingly underlines the temporary nature of the grant scheme, which is described in the above analysis. Despite being extended, the COVID-19 SRD grant has not come to stay and merely functions as a relief aid in place until labour and job growth again can take over as a more permanent solution. Thus, it seems questionable that the COVID-19 SRD grant actually holds a potential for challenging prominent discourses and the social imaginary among South Africans. Nonetheless, and similar to the previous speech, his words reveal that SA still finds itself in the liminal stage, which opens up for alternative changes throughout the landscape: *“this crisis [COVID-19] is an opportunity to build a different, better South Africa”* (Appendix E, p. 20).

Throughout the speech, Ramaphosa continues the discourse on the importance of community and togetherness to deal with the crisis, which also characterised his speech in 2020.

Whenever he addresses SA’s response to COVID-19, he makes sure to include the South African population using expressions such as: *“[we as] a nation has stood together to confront COVID-19 in ways not seen since the early days of our democracy”* and *“this crisis have revealed the true character of our remarkable nation”* (Appendix E, p. 3). Whenever Rampahosa uses words such as ‘we’, ‘together’, ‘our’ and ‘nation’ he provokes some kind of imagined community (Anderson, 1996) across SA, which he uses when arguing for different agendas through his speech.

Another theme during the speech is about the current job situation in SA, which is affected by high unemployment rates. A lot of different networks and agencies are established in order to create job opportunities and support the young unemployed people across the country. However, taken the high unemployment rates in SA into account, there are simply no jobs to all these unemployed young people, still Ramaphosa wants to “*encourage every young South African to join the more than 1,2 million people who are already in a network, and take their next steps to a better future*” (Appendix E, p. 12). Despite the discourse on the imagined community and shared efforts, it is argued that that responsibility for a good future is still placed heavily on the individual. This is further exemplified by Ramaphosa’s claim that “*it requires that all South African take responsibility and play their part*” (Appendix E, p. 21). When he links a network – focusing on job creation – with a better future, it signifies how prominent the social imaginary about labour is within the South African elite. Put differently, in order to secure a better future for oneself, you will need to join the workforce. Ramaphosa emphasises his own argument further when he refers to SA as a nation of heroes, which are characterised as “*heroes that walk among us, who work hard every day to put food on the table, to keep the company running [...]*” (Appendix E, p. 21). This glorification of people in the workforce is much closer related to pre-COVID-19 discourses, where employment is a prerequisite for social inclusion.

To sum up, parts of both speeches hint towards changes in the social imaginary and the need for an exploration of economic alternatives to the way things used to be. Although, arguably due to SA still being mid-crisis, there is less focus on the fear of welfare dependency, and the immediate, intuitive government response to COVID-19 reflects a dominant social welfare discourse over a neoliberal one. Still, labour and the reliance on employment to ensure a good future for South Africans remains a central point in both speeches. Instead, particularly in the second speech, individuals who work are praised, and those who do not are encouraged to do so as if employment remains an individual choice and responsibility.

7. Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we aimed to investigate how the government’s discourses on labour and welfare dependency in South Africa have changed with the implementation of the COVID-19

Social Relief of Distress grant and whether these discourses reflect a shift in the social imaginaries of labour.

With one of the most expansive social grants schemes in the global south, SA has been hailed a trailblazer of social welfare. Even so, our analysis shows that the dominant social imaginary up until the COVID-19 crisis, continues to prescribe a moral link between labour and income. This imaginary is reflected both on a governmental and grassroots level. Thus it appears that the neoliberal idea of labour as a core feature of and requirement for social citizenship remains deeply ingrained in the minds of South Africans.

We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, bears the potential to create a liminal stage of ambiguity and unsettledness, and that this could make way for the introduction of alternative social practices that challenge the dominant work imaginary. The introduction of a new type of SRD grant in 2020 targeting unemployed people who are otherwise fit for work marks an interesting shift in the social welfare policies of SA.

By analysing two presidential speeches following the introduction of the COVID-19 grant, we investigated whether this policy shift was accompanied by a shift in the discourse that reflected a new social imaginary of labour. Overall, the discourses around labour and welfare in these two speeches do not differ significantly from the pre-covid discourses in the above analysis. The COVID-19 grant might be historical, but it is introduced as a temporary emergency measure, while the long-term solution is still centered around job creation. While Ramaphosa to a larger extent calls for collective solutions and an imagined "we," he still highlights the responsibility of the individual to find employment. Furthermore, his praise of the working "heroes" of SA indicates that labour remains a central factor for assigning social and personal worth.

As such, these two speeches do not significantly challenge the dominant social imaginary of labour; the moral link between work and income prevails, and employment is still a central factor for social citizenship.

On one hand the lack of a shift could be explained by the stubbornness of the existing social imaginary. Could it be that the moral link between labour and income is simply so strong that

even a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic cannot disrupt it? On the other hand, both speeches frame the COVID-19 crisis as a potential turning point for SA and an opportunity to “forge a new economy” (Appendix D, p. 8). It remains vague exactly how the president intends to do this and whether this new economy will fundamentally challenge the dominant work imaginaries. Still, the crisis can nonetheless be conceived of as positioning SA in a liminal stage “*in between a present yet to pass and a future still to come*” (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011, p. 14 in Varvarousis, 2019, p. 495). It can however be argued that it is still too soon to draw any conclusions on whether or how this liminal stage will bring about any significant shifts in the social imaginary of labour.

Even though Ramaphosa introduces the COVID-19 grant as a temporary fix, aiming to relieve the most vulnerable until the effect of the other “labour-intensive” measures kick in, some would argue that the prospects of SA suddenly doing away with massive structural unemployment are rather bleak. In terms of rallying political support, rolling back a social grant could be a much more difficult move than introducing it in the first place, and so what started as an emergency measure might in time become ‘the new normal’. From this perspective, the COVID-19 grant could bring SA one step closer to introducing a UBIG “*through the back door,*” and thus fundamentally challenge traditional imaginaries of labour and income (Ferguson, 2015, p. 205 as cited in Dawson & Fouksman, 2020, p. 232). If this turns out to be the case, we can expect that any changes to the social imaginary would happen from the bottom up rather than top-down, as recipients gradually get used to receiving the grant.

In any case, our analysis shows that the COVID-19 crisis has created some sort of stage of suspension. Regardless of which trajectory SA follows from here, our analysis highlights the importance of understanding the social imaginary of labour across societal levels. Any kind of radical transformation of SA’s economy can be expected to develop in tandem with the social imaginary of labour, and – echoing Dawson's & Fouksman’s conclusions – any future discussion of the implementation of a UBIG in SA must be accompanied by an understanding of the social imaginaries of labour on multiple levels. Our analysis serves a preliminary point of departure for further research on this matter.

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