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Reconfiguring labour and welfare in the Global South: How the social question is framed as market participation

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Abstract

This special issue explores the intertwining reconfigurations of labour and welfare in the Global South by bringing together eight empirical studies of different national and transnational contexts and three commentaries. It asks how Global South people and states alike have come to prioritize market logics as guiding principles for welfare systems, moving away from collective risk-pooling towards individual responsibility, and how this reorientation is connected to the restructuring of labour. In this introduction to the special issue, we discuss the genealogies of the social question and review the growing academic discussion on the changing landscape of welfare in the Global South. We then underscore how the contemporary social question is predominantly framed in the terms of people's capacity for market participation in the specific empirical contexts discussed by our authors. The framing of the social question as such, and the accompanying solutions to it, we argue, disregards politics, political economy and social justice at the cost of the more urgent social question that confronts the increasingly asymmetrical power relations between labour and capital.

Keywords

Global South, labour, marketization, the social question, welfare

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The Global South social question

The notion of the social question refers to a societal reckoning regarding the implications of dominant political, social and economic arrangements for the wellbeing of the many (Case, 2016; Castel, 2003; Howerth, 1906). It is an articulation that captures urgent social challenges faced by a society and the need to address socio-economic inequalities and insecurities through institutionalized long-term solutions (Breman et al., 2019). The increased incorporation of Global South countries into the expanding and highly competitive world market has given rise to large-scale economic restructuring and reconfigurations of labour while also (re)shaping welfare institutions. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, these intertwining reconfigurations of labour and welfare are unfolding in ways that solidify the dominance of market rationalities and justify social inequalities. Such tendencies, we argue, can be traced back to the framing of the social question in the Global South. Based on eight empirical analyses of labour and welfare in diverse southern contexts and three commentaries by Deborah James, Sohini Kar and Ruth Prince, this special issue teases out cross-cutting dynamics that indicate how market participation has come to predominate both social policy making and ordinary people's strategies for livelihoods and wellbeing. Together with the commentaries, the articles suggest how Global South government responses to this framing of the social question – through providing thin layers of universal social protection to facilitate market participation – have subjected ordinary lives to greater market risk and uncertainty.

Socio-economic and political developments of different eras give rise to specific ways of framing the social question. In the 19th century, industrializing and colonizing Europe were concerned with conflicts between the labour force and owners of production, which compelled the state to assume a mediating role to reduce the risk and opportunities for ruthless exploitation of labour and even provide social security support for workers during unemployment (Faist, 2019). What was originally the labour question later developed into a broader question about dignified work, security, welfare, and the good life, paving the way for the eventual sharpening and building of the welfare state in post-war Europe (Kaufmann et al., 2012). For several decades following the Second World War, these welfare states offered various degrees of social security and support to the populations (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The further development of the northern welfare state has taken shape thanks to social democratic movements with which the labour union has been closely associated to ensure social protection for workers and all citizens more generally. These movements in turn unleashed new concerns that called for regulation of the labour market and the inclusion of socio-economically less privileged groups (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Marshall, 1950).

Over the past decades, neoliberal economic policies have become integrated as the modus operandi of the northwestern European welfare state, undermining the quality and depth of provisioning that had been achieved earlier. In the meantime, the expansion of global capital into the Global South has been creating new frontiers of accumulation and new forms of value extraction from labour, generating ever-widening inequalities in terms of global distribution of wealth, opportunities and social recognition (Breman et al., 2019; Faist, 2019, Leisering, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the magnitude of how a specific crisis ruptured the global systems of production and social reproduction

(Gammeltoft-Hansen et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023; Walby, 2022). Recently emerging schemes of social protection in the Global South hardly shield ordinary people from the risks embedded in precarious work, market insecurities, and ecological instabilities, which could quickly morph into breakdowns and sufferings (Leisering, 2021; Rydstrom, 2022; see also Fouksman and Dawson, 2023), undermining livelihoods and social protection (Plomien et al., 2022). No longer limited to the nation state (Castel, 2003; Kaufmann et al., 2012; Leisering, 2020), these issues are both global in scope (Breman et al., 2019), and transnational, with the crisscrossing of different trajectories of labour mobility (Faist, 2019).

At the turn of the 21st century, the challenges facing the Global South are not just greater in scale than ever, but also deepened by the unfolding of the triple crises of work, social reproduction, and ecology (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022; Fraser, 2014; Walby, 2022). These crises are taking a toll on working lives (Breman et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2023), calling for an encompassing social question aimed at addressing the multiple contradictions of late capitalism through collective solutions. Yet, the framing of the social question in the Global South, as the empirical analyses in this special issue demonstrates, remains, or becomes even more dominated by the logics of individualized market participation. As precarious labour has become, in Gramscian terms, 'common sense', so has the notion that market inclusion is the best way to deal with market-induced social problems (Arnold, in press). What explains poverty, inadequate social protection, and destabilized livelihoods system is simply 'too little market' (Arnold, in press). As we shall see, this narrow framing is not just propagated by international institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, but also by governments across the Global South, including countries that continue to identify as socialist, such as China and Vietnam, and to varying extent accepted by ordinary people.

In a global order of uneven development, low wages combined with thin social protection are solutions of southern governments having to respond to 'external pressures' for cheap labour from global capital and global norms of socialized care promoted by international organizations (Lin et al., 2023). The goal of social policy in the south is 'to serve an economic purpose, since the primary focus is on competition to integrate into and advance in global capitalism' (Lin et al., 2023: 8). The expansion of what international organizations such as the World Bank refer to as 'basic social protection floor' in the Global South is meant to incorporate southern labour into global circuits of accumulation, either in industrial productive, digital, financial, service or informal economies. Global South governments, caught up between the imperatives to ensure national competitiveness in an unequal global playing field and to protect citizen livelihoods from market uncertainties, often end up facilitating the commodification of labour. Governmental efforts to reduce workers' dependency on the market for livelihoods, which Esping-Andersen (1990) refers to as decommodification, for example, through universal health insurance, tend to be subjected to recommodification through increasing privatization of public goods and services (Lin and Nguyen, 2021; Prince, 2024). As wages secured from the exchange of labour no longer can fully cover the costs of reproducing that labour, Global South workers are increasingly compelled to make up for the gaps through financialized debts (Lapavitsas, 2011; see also Blau and Arnold, 2024; Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima, 2024). Taking place beyond the wage labour relations, such financialized forms of value extraction submit the workers to greater level of risk assumption at the same time with entrenching their dependence on precarious work.

Large numbers of working people, who find themselves in increasingly casualized and atomized labour markets and their lives embroiled in impending crises of work and debt (Lin et al., 2023; see also Blau and Arnold, 2024), are hard-pressed not to concern with individual competition and self-realization in the market. With the transnationalization of neoliberalized forms of governance through both state and non-state actors (Derks and Nguyen, 2020; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002), wellbeing and social protection come to be defined as a matter of people's will to improve, their entrepreneurial potential, and their individual responsibility (Elyachar, 2005; Kar, 2018; Makovicky, 2014; Nguyen, 2018). As the state in Global South countries increasingly 'sees like a corporation' (Bear, 2017), ordinary people are made to act as an enterprise of themselves (Makovicky, 2014; Nguyen, 2023). Individual market participation thereby comes to represent the ultimate public goal to be strived for, while failure to do so defined as social problems to be targeted by policy interventions. Such framing of the Global South social question as a matter of individuals lacking human capitals and 'the will to improve' (Li, 2007) in order to compete in the market is thus not only shaped by the policies and agendas of international and national institutions. It is also the result of Global South people having few alternatives other than to adopt market-based solutions for individual and household needs satisfaction, care, and wellbeing (James and Zaloom, 2023; Nguyen, 2021), as they navigate the gradual encroachment of capitalist relations in economic and social life (Li, 2014). Market participation thereby comes to be the means and the ends of social protection policies and ordinary people's strategies alike.

Many Global South countries, for example, South Afrika, Brazil, China, India and Vietnam, have recently introduced new forms of universal welfare such as social cash transfers, universal health insurance, and basic pension (Leisering, 2019; Prince and Neumark, 2022), or public goods provision (Trémon, 2022). Some scholars have linked the expansion of basic welfare in the Global South to the global circulation of ideas about social citizenship (Leisering, 2019; Tillin and Duckett, 2017). In another vein, Prince and Neumark (2022) note what they call 'curious utopia', the sense that these new universal programmes, despite their occupation with logics of efficiency and market competition, 'offers new visions of justice, engendering and re-activating a politics of hope' (p. 2). Similarly, Ferguson (2015) sees in the rise of social cash transfers the beginning of a new politics of distribution uncoupled from the primacy of waged labour. Others, meanwhile, view the welfare expansion as an instrument for the state to strengthen political legitimacy, with the pervasive discourse of the caring state, especially in authoritarian contexts (Nguyen et al., 2017). While calling attention to important dynamics, these analyses have not fully recognized how such programmes of universal welfare and public goods provision in the Global South are driven by investment strategies of debtor states balancing between the expectations of the citizenry and those of the financial markets (Ansari, 2022; Bear, 2017). These programmes are neither alternatives to austerity nor simply a matter of state actions. According to Bear (Bear, 2017), financialized infrastructural development, which is being rolled out across the Global South, often backed by World Bank loans, enables global capital's triple predation of public infrastructure – from the ruins of austerity, the sale of public assets, and the guarantees from taxpayers' revenues. The roll-out of universal welfare programmes such as health insurance likewise has occurred alongside the growing privatization of social protection systems that had sought to redistribute (or

protect working people from) market risks through state-sponsored risk-pooling (Brooks, 2009; Prince, this issue) or state provision, also in formally socialist systems such as China and Vietnam (Nguyen and Chen, 2017). Although market exchange and social protection have always been mutually sustaining (Brooks, 2009), market logics now take centre stage in the design of welfare systems across the Global South.

What is at stake by such framing is the 'hollowing out' of political reasoning within public institutions (Bear, 2017) and the political will to address the precaritization of labour (Prentice and Sumon, 2023) induced by new dynamics of value extraction and intertwining crises (Fraser, 2014; Rydstrom, 2022; Lin et al, 2023). Above all, such framing contributes to the failure to recognize the need to collectively manage future uncertainties (Esposito, 2011), which has led to repeated financial crises that destabilize the very social foundations of livelihoods and wellbeing, with severe repercussion on labour, often in gendered ways (Walby, 2015). As indicated by South Africa, India, or Brazil, for example, the expansion of minimal social protection coincides with increasing household indebtedness, the withering away of properly remunerated and socially protected forms of employment (Ansari, 2022; Sirohi, 2019). The introduction of commodity markets, the commodification of land and labour, and the industrialization of the agricultural sector (Li, 2014; Marx and Fowkes, 1990) have turned large rural populations of the Global South into labour migrants. For them, waged and non-waged work under precarious conditions in the factories or in the informal economy of the sprawling industrial and urban centres or in the cross-border labour market are among the few options available (Shah and Lerche, 2020; Tappe and Nguyen, 2019). In many places, the precarity shaping this labour mobility is augmented by increasing levels of indebtedness (Blau and Arnold 2024; Natarajan and Brickell, 2022), as the migrant workers can no longer rely on rural land as a source of security because of enclosure or environmental destruction. The precaritization of labour thus has as much to do with the emergence of a debt economy resulting from global processes of financialization as it does with the capitalist extraction of surplus value from labour (Lapavitsas, 2011; see also Blau and Arnold, 2024).

These transformations in the Global South are intimately entangled with those in the Global North. The reduction in northern welfare state provision does not just coincide with the increasing breath of population coverage in the South; both trends are the result of the global restructuring of production and reproduction (Harvey, 1989; Lin et al., 2023). Rather than distinct geographical locations, the terms Global South and Global North here refer to historically and politically constituted categories in a global order with former colonized areas clustered in the category Global South. Indeed, the North and the South mutually contain each other, not just through the connectivity, interdependency and entanglement between them, but also in the co-existence of differing population groups whose realities and mobilities starkly contrast with each other in both locations. As Faist (2019) writes,

> the South is also an intrinsic part of the North in that it includes the marginalized, invisible and often excluded parts of the population in the latter. In turn, the South also includes (trans) national elites and ascending and aspiring groups who dominate the politics of the global South. (p. 25)

Although much of what is the Global South is located in the southern hemisphere, North–South power relations are also identifiable in the relationship between post-socialist East European and West European countries, such as in the context of transnational migration between Ukraine, Poland, Germany and the United Kingdom. Despite its limitation, this conceptual distinction between Global South and Global North remains important for mapping out the implications of global power hierarchies for the framing of the social question in contexts in which most of the world's workers are found.

Commodification, financial inclusion and market-oriented notion of the good

This special issue traces the framing of the social question in the Global South by bringing together eight empirical analyses of the shifting relationship between labour and welfare in national and transnational contexts with distinct political economic issues and processes. These include the massive rural–urban labour mobility into centres of global manufacturing (China, Vietnam), the immobilization of the workforce through mass unemployment (South Africa), the high degree of informality (India), transnational labour mobility (Cambodia, Poland, and Ukraine), and the growing financialization of social protection (Brazil and South Africa). Below, we discuss the articles along the lines of cross-cutting themes that emerge from juxtaposing the different contributions.

Poverty, deservingness, and the commodification of labour

Lammer's (2023) account of the Chinese rural *dibao* (a cash transfer programme aimed at guaranteeing minimum living standard), and Luong and Nguyen (2023)'s analysis of the Vietnamese national assembly debate around overtime work in factories explore the dynamics of social and labour protection policy making and implementation. At first glance, these cases have little in common. Yet, a closer reading reveals how individual market participation is similarly considered the ultimate goal of social policy and labour law in two countries that, while pursuing marketization, remain under the rule of a Communist party state. In both countries, the moralization occurring though the varying logics of deservingness evaluates individuals in terms of their market potentials as a foundation for distributing welfare and labour protection.

In Lammer's analysis, street-level bureaucrats assess the legibility of poor households for the *dibao* programme with new standardized guidelines aiming to reduce the complications of local interpretation that had plagued implementation since its introduction to rural areas in 2007. Despite the standardization, the process ends up with the same messy contestations around eligible households found earlier. Yet, the new focus on the procedures of the programme, that is, determining what individual characteristics count as deserving support instead of which groups should benefit, diverts attention from the declining coverage and state spending. This shift coincides with the transformation of *dibao* from a programme originally meant to provide social protection for urban people becoming unemployed through the restructuring of socialist enterprises and later for peasants losing land to rural development projects into a programme focusing on extreme poverty (Solinger, 2017). With it, the earlier framing of the social question around the

land and labour issues arising from post-reform commodification, which had unleashed massive popular protests, has morphed into mere concerns with individual capacity for participation in the labour market. Deservingness for state support, evidenced by the recipient's readiness to take on community tasks, is no longer a matter of citizenship. Such turn aligns the reconceptualization of the category of 'the people', venerated by the party state at the height of socialism, into that of 'the population' now comprising self-managing subjects operating individually in the market economy (Cho, 2013).

The emphasis on deservingness on the basis of market participation is also demonstrated by Luong and Nguyen's analysis of the labour law-making process in Vietnam. The National Assembly debate over the regulation of overtime work was pitched as one between the defenders of workers' rights and wellbeing, that is, pro-worker policy makers, trade union officers, and labour rights activists, and the pro-business camp, that is, representatives of the employers and other policy makers. The former argued for putting a cap on the number of overtime hours on account of the workers' privations and sufferings, whereas the latter pushed for lifting it for the sake of productivity and national competitiveness. As some delegates implied in the debate, longer work hours would compensate for the low productivity of Vietnamese workers. These positions appeared to be oppositional, with the pro-worker camp eventually winning the debate – a cap at 300 overtime hours a year was indeed introduced in the amended labour code. Yet, the pro-worker camp's call for the public's compassion with the workers' suffering as ground for introducing the cap is at heart an argument of deservingness, and the flipside of the pro-business argument that workers should work longer on account of their low productivity. The focus on deservingness from both sides, either on account of suffering or productivity, the authors argue, 'relegates them to an abject space of deficient citizen subjects' and thus 'helps to depoliticize the social question at a time when the conflicts between labour and capital are quietly deepening' (Luong and Nguyen, 2023). What is more, the pro-worker camp underlines the workers' self-responsibility for their family's wellbeing and self-governance, a position that aligns with that of the employers. In short, underlying arguments from both sides is a shared conviction in the superiority of market-based ethos of efficiency and self-responsibility and the dismissal/avoidance of deeper societal problems posed by the commodification of labour.

In practice, the debate on the overtime limit was irrelevant to the life of workers, who are often interested in working as many overtime hours as possible. Many see the possibility to work overtime as a way of generating income and securing welfare, yet not for the reasons that the pro-business camp cited; neither is it the case made by the pro-worker side that they self-exploit without thinking about long-term wellbeing. Given low wages and the burdens of providing for their rurally based households in the context of ever-increasing costs of household reproduction and inadequate welfare, overtime work is often the only way to make wages more liveable. The workers' preference for overtime work reflects their own contradictory interests. These are rooted in the unequal power relations between labour and capital in a socialist country where socialist ideas of work as integral to social citizenship are lost on even those thought to be their defenders. These contradictions and power relations, the authors show, are hardly the concerns in the making and implementation of policies and laws that are made with the goal of national competitiveness as a global location for foreign direct investment (FDI) in manufacturing.

Informality, indebtedness and the costs of being included

Despite the growth of industrial wage work due to North–South industrial relocation and outsourcing in recent decades, a majority of Global South population remains employed in the informal sector. As stated earlier, informal workers' livelihoods and wellbeing are increasingly caught up in cycles of indebtedness and dependence as their labour is absorbed into translocal and transnational labour markets and their limited resources into financial systems. This is best characterized by Blau and Arnold (2024)'s account of how Cambodian villagers accumulate debts from microfinance loans mortgaged on their land that can only be repaid with incomes from cross-border migrant work in Thailand. Cross-border informal employment subjects them to the arbitrary benevolence of Thai employers who use personal debts and their sponsorship for immigration papers as instruments of labour control. Thus, the migrants often accumulate further debts in Thailand, both for the sake of acquiring legal documentation there and servicing the debts at home. They end up in a cycle of perpetual indebtedness that destabilizes not only their livelihoods but also their future wellbeing, with the social welfare function of their land coming under threat (see also Natarajan and Brickell 2022 for similar issues related to internal migrant workers in Cambodia). Here, the reach of global finance into the everyday life in places hitherto considered outliners in the global economy (Kar, 2018; Schuster and Kar, 2021) induces the commodification of rural labour for the sake of the cross-border labour market, which profits from its very precarity and lack of social protection (see Nguyen, 2021 for similar dynamic in rural Vietnam). In this context, neither the patchy and weaker Cambodian welfare system nor the much-lauded Thai universal welfare system is of much help to relieve them from the burden of indebtedness and the threat of losing their land. On the contrary, as the authors show, the efforts to obtain immigration documents in Thailand for the sake of accessing health care there often worsens the indebtedness.

The new universal forms of social protection for the vast group of informal workers in the Global South are introduced by welfare systems designed in ways that often erode redistributive and solidary arrangements that had been achieved earlier. India, most of whose working population are employed in the informal sector, makes a good example. The Indian post-colonial state had been legitimated by egalitarian notions of social and economic justice arisen out of many years of struggles for freedom (Sirohi, 2019). This 'egalitarian bent' has gotten lost since the 1980s with market liberalization through which 'the success of the new regime of accumulation was contingent on an all-out "repression" of labour and a close alliance between the state and propertied classes' (Sirohi, 2019: 216). Poverty, which had been viewed as structurally induced, came to be reconceptualized as a matter of individual responsibility to be addressed by 'fiscally responsible' and narrowly targeted forms of social policy (Sirohi, 2019). The focus on social inequality is shifted to a concern with empowerment and forms of social protection that are supposed to activate their market potentials. As in the other contexts that our authors discuss, the work of government in India became occupied with efficiency and profitability, an occupation that culminated in the recent introduction of Aadhaar, a universal identification system based on biometric data. Among others, the system is meant to improve access to existing welfare programmes and facilitate financial inclusion with organic links to banks and insurance providers (Kar, 2017, 2024; Rao, 2019). There are

major problems with accessibility, from registration to the lack of portability between migrant workers' home and workplaces[1] as well as technical exclusion of labourers whose biometric features change through the labour process (Khera, 2017; Rao, 2019). While there is a plethora of welfare programmes targeting informal workers in India, including minimum rural employment guarantee, food price subsidies, hospital costs subsidies, disability benefits, old-age pension, benefits are tagged to defined income levels and enterprise size in the formal sector.

The disconnection between the high-tech governance of welfare and the lives in precarity of the majority of the Indian working population in the informal sector is captured by Raphael (2024)'s analysis of the working lives of the pheriwale, that is, low-caste, low-income used-clothes traders, in Delhi. The pheriwale, Raphael shows, not only have difficulties with accessing the existing welfare programmes, but also public services such as childcare and schooling, not least on account of their caste and low-status employment. Thus, they keep their small children with them and organize their trade and daily work around the care of their young children. They take for granted the unreliability of the social protection benefits, regular access to which is shaped by gender, class and caste and focus their energy on working, saving and building social alliances through which they acquire social and economic support. Despite hardships and uncertainties, the pheriwale prefer their work to those they could obtain in the formal sector, in which they see increasing precaritization, little autonomy and a high degree of temporal and bodily control. Citing Millar's (2014) notion of 'relational autonomy', Raphael suggests that the pheriwale exercise a certain degree of control over their social relations and life projects in the face of precarity and the difficulty of accessing state provisions.

In the same discussion by Millar (2014), the notion of politics of detachment among waste workers in Brazil aptly characterizes the societal consequences of the turn towards individual market participation and individual responsibility. The politics of detachment indicates the tendency of workers in precarious informal jobs to distance from formal waged work due to perception of the latter's alienation and lack of autonomy. What is more, it articulates a disconnection between social and labour politics from the realities of people's lives that turns them away from civic participation. Despite the state's claims of care through the expansion of minimal social protection (Nguyen and Chen, 2017), this disconnection chips away at the ability and the willingness of governments to build welfare systems and labour legislation that genuinely reduce the subordination of needs satisfaction and wellbeing to how well individuals function in the market (Luong and Nguyen, 2023).

Social cash transfers, financial inclusion, and the relationship between labour and capital

The same hypermobile global capital that induces the increasing commodification of labour in some locations leaves in its trail deindustrialization and mass unemployment in others, as it continually seeks a 'spatial fix' for optimizing returns (Harvey, 1989). In his influential analysis of cash transfer programmes in South Africa, where there is massive structural unemployment, Ferguson (2015) makes the case for new forms of distributions that are decoupled from wage labour and the productivist notion that social policy is

about remedying exceptional disruptions to people's labour market participation. Thereby, he strikes a rather celebratory note regarding cash transfers as a solution to ensuring the livelihoods of those whose labour power and life have seemingly become irrelevant to capital.

As Fouksman and Dawson show in their analysis of the COVID-19-related cash transfers in South Africa, however, the South African people they studied saw the grants as a temporary intervention. They did not think highly of turning it into a longer term programme of universal basic income, as advocated by certain civic groups. While supporting the grant and its extension to the unemployed during the crisis, their respondents expressed clear preference for employment generation programmes and an aversion to dependence on the government in the long run. Purposively framed as an emergency measure in a crisis, the grants hardly challenge the centrality of waged employment for both policy making and people's own understanding of the relationship between welfare and labour.

Social cash transfers are not really inducive for new politics of distribution beyond waged labour, as predicted by Ferguson (2015), because they fail to address the political economic underpinnings of structurally induced unemployment. The debate on whether social cash transfers, especially a universal basic income, is a suitable public policy measure for contexts of structural unemployment and informality tends to take structural employment as an objective condition. But it is the result of an increasing power asymmetry between capital and labour that perpetuates precarity for capital's sake (Nilsen, 2021), which is entrenched by the state's debt relations with global capital (Ansari, 2022; Bear, 2017). In South Africa, the financialization of the state has allowed the interests of global finance, which holds much of the national debt, to take priority over those of productive investments that could have generated employment (Ansari, 2022). As Fouksman and Dawson's analysis suggests, there is unresolvable contradiction between the South African state's framing of social policy according to the terms of full employment and its economic programme that responds to the demands for global financial investors. In turn, the incorporation of citizens into the circuits of finance, for example, through the predatory lending or insurance sale that use cash transfers as collateral (Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima, 2024, see also Lavinas, 2018 [2017]), according to Ansari (2022), 'allowed the post-apartheid state to abdicate its responsibilities for employment-generating industrialization' (p. 553).

The dominance of financial actors in the shaping of welfare provision is also demonstrated by Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima's analysis of how the fintech-philanthropy-development complex (Gabor and Brooks, 2017) is at work in defining the infrastructural conditions of grant distribution in South Africa. Resonating with existing literature on the ramifications of finance in social protection (Elyachar, 2005; Kar, 2017; Lavinas, 2018 [2017]; Nguyen, 2021), they show how social cash transfers provide the very conditions for finance to reach into the everyday lives of working people, thereby feeding on their social protection needs as new frontiers of accumulation. Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima contrast the earlier distribution through a fintech company with the grant distribution through the public post-office. In the first scenario, the social grants are paid into an account that also functions as the basis for provision of microloans and private insurance, whose interests and premiums are deducted automatically. Multiple problems emerged

as people were signed up for things they knew little about, for example, insurance policies, or being overcharged with 'service fees' for microloans they had to take out to cover daily needs, and ending up in indebtedness. This created backlashes that caused the shift of the grant distribution from the fintech company to the national post-office. In the hands of the national post-office, however, there have been delays and exclusion errors due to bureaucratic rigidity. In this context, the fintech sector is actively pushing the argument that with some modifications, the greater inclusiveness of fintech options would make it a better alternative to the post-office's service. Given the sector's power in public policy processes, it would not be surprising if there will be a return to the privatized infrastructural provision of fintech companies instead of public investment in improving the quality of the post office's services. As Kar (2024) cogently points out in her commentary, the intimate connection of financial technologies to the provision of public goods not only destabilizes the significance of public services, but it also accrues social value to global finance, even turning it in to a social good.

Aspirations and the market-oriented notion of the good

The framing of the social question as market participation has caught on among people of the Global South also because it resonates with the broader fear of being left behind (Castel, 2003; Ehrenreich, 1989; Yan, 2020 [2013]) in a world increasingly dominated by a vision of the good life premised on private consumption and individual achievements. In this world, one must not only work hard and take good care of oneself and one's family but must also aspire to continuous improvements in one's human capital and living standards. The prevalence of this vision of the good life results from state-sponsored pro-growth discourses and the emergence of a global happiness industry (Davies, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2024). They act as a major driver in people's life projects and their aspirations for consumption, self-improvement, and self-realization in the market, either by the means of entrepreneurship or migration. The resulting depoliticization of labour thereby takes place at the same time that welfare systems restructure social protection according to the dictates of self-responsibility and recast social entitlements and rights as consumer choice in many global South contexts.

Plomien and Schwartz's account of transnational labour mobility between Ukraine, Poland, Germany and the United Kingdom considers the reconfiguration of the labour-welfare-mobility nexus by engaging the idea of 'welfare as flourishing social reproduction'. The authors show that transnational migrant workers from the periphery and semi-periphery of Europe are simultaneously subjected to a labour market differentiated by citizenship and nationally bounded systems of welfare provision in the core whose access is denied or limited to them. Even as they are aware of their contributions to the host societies, these migrants tend to adopt a cynical distance or accept the differentiation and exclusion in ways that resemble how Raphael's Indian pheriwale view formal employment and state welfare institutions. Similar to the pheriwale, the transnational migrant workers in Plomien and Schwartz's study focus on their individual life projects, such as building their own family house, financially supporting their children and grandchildren, acquiring transnational experiences to deploy in the labour market at home. According to the authors, these life projects 'reflect a subjective narrowing of focus on

self-reliance through wages and family support' while 'any improvements that transnational mobility affords is one of patchy (not flourishing) social reproduction of the worker and their family'. In pursuing these individual projects, according to Plomien and Schwartz (2023), the migrant workers shy away from collective action and voice that could turn them into political subjects demanding a welfare system oriented towards human flourishing within and across borders.

The gradual depoliticization of labour leading to a changing notion of the good is also demonstrated by Georges' analysis of the emergence of what she calls a social policy market through institutionalized subcontracting by government agencies responsible for social policy implementation in Brazil. The history of the implementation of the well-known *Bolsa família* programme, a program of cash transfers to low-income families, according to her, indicates the transformation of social policies into political commodities to be traded by political parties and actors. At the same time, the emphasis on financial inclusion, similar to the dynamics in South Afrika analysed by Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima (2024), turns the cash transfers people receive into fodders for financialised household debts. The incorporation of these market logics in the design and implementation of social policy has enabled what Lavinas (2018 [2017]) terms the 'collateralization of social policy' in Brazil. These developments lead Georges to an important observation that welfare restructuring in recent decades has redefined citizenship as a matter of social and political rights into citizens' right to access consumption and financial options to address needs through the market. Such transformations in citizenship seems an inevitable outcome of the combination of neoliberal economic policies with the expansion of thin universal social protection also found in the contexts discussed by our authors. They generate the very tendencies among working people to become detached from public institutions (Raphael 2024) and turn towards individualised life projects (Plomien and Schwartz 2023) discussed earlier.

Market participation as the social question

The framing of Global South social question today is less concerned with matters of exclusion and discrimination while making light of the labour-capital conflict that is raging in new forms. After all, if large numbers of the Global South population have the possibility to be included in public programmes for welfare or social protection, however thin and inadequate they are, exclusion or discrimination are difficult to mobilize against. Indeed, such inclusion makes it even more difficult to identify who is dispossed and who does the stealing (Kar 2024). In the meantime, working people of the Global South are now incorporated in the global economy in multiple ways, even those who do not engage with wage labour – as workers of global factories, producers of raw materials, consumers of global commodities and entertainment forms, recyclers of waste, users of digital platforms and financial services, producers of Internet content, and increasingly, as producers of personal data for today's 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2020). With little of people's life untouched by the global circuits of capital and dominant ideas of the good life, the new kinds of universal welfare programmes end up ensuring that the population participates in the most optimal ways in a market economy. Hence, social support from the state to citizens such as poverty allowance or income grants, even in the context of high

level of structural unemployment such as South Africa, are often met with discourses about the recipients' reduced willingness to work or to enterprise, adding to the stigmatization of those who are unable to find work (Lammer 2023; Luong and Nguyen 2023).

Our authors show how the framing of today's Global South social question is shaped by the extent to which people and societies have come into the thrall of the capitalist market, having to fit into the globalized economy and meeting the demands of powerful institutions dominated by the North. This is not to deny that people's active engagements with the market, especially as households and kin groups, to ensure livelihoods and well-being have helped to reconfigure the global economy (James, this issue; James and Zaloom, 2023; Nguyen, 2021). But precisely because of people's deeper engagement with the market and its uncertainties that a social question understood in a more comprehensive and encompassing sense is necessary to counter the precaritization of labour in the Global South, the location of mass production.

Writing about a broad sense of limbo in Chinese social life captured by the Chinese concept of 'suspension', Xiang (2021) suggests that people striving to be competitive in response to market imperatives tend to overinvest in their market participation in highly atomized ways. Removed from a public-oriented notion of the good, atomized participation pre-empts possibilities for transformative social and political movements of the kind that can lead to functioning welfare systems that genuinely decommodify labour (Breman et al., 2019; Esping-Andersen, 1990). This in turn works to the advantage of states pursuing economic growth while evading responsibilities for actually addressing the social consequences induced by marketization. It is thus no wonder that the new universal welfare programmes have been so rapidly introduced in contexts with high degree of social inequalities as a result of highly neoliberalized economic policies such as China, India or South Africa.

The thin universalism underlying emerging public welfare programmes does not seek to ensure proper social protection for working people in the Global South. Rather, they are often intended to activate their readiness for participating in the market, if not with their labour power, where the significance of wage labour declines, then their entrepreneurial efforts, their consuming and borrowing potential, or their participation in the digital economy. These programmes, primarily aimed at facilitating market participation, hardly account for the past, present and future exploitation and dispossession of working people. They often contradict the stated goals of redistribution, recognition and representation, even in systems that are supposed to introduce welfare measures as part of extending social citizenship. The framing of the social question around market participation, and the accompanying solutions to it, thus disregards politics, political economy and social justice at the cost of the more urgent and encompassing social question that confronts the increasingly asymmetrical power relations between labour and capital.

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Note

1. https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Brief_SocialSecurity_InformalWorkers_21Nov2020.pdf

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