Precarious employment and precarious life: youth and work in Pretoria's white working-class suburbs

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Abstract

Many Afrikaans-speaking people in Pretoria's white working-class suburbs during the apartheid era lost their jobs in the 1990s when the heavy industries in which they worked were downsized or closed down. This paper explores the livelihood strategies open to the next generation – the ex-workers' children who are confronted by wage employment opportunities very different from those open to their parents. Popular interpretations of the position of members of the apartheid-era white working class in South Africa today are contradictory. One narrative holds that their present circumstances mark the return of the "Poor Whites" of the early twentieth century, while a second contends that they continue to benefit uniformly from the "wages of whiteness." The evidence we draw from our ethnographic field research in the former white working-class suburbs suggests that both of these understandings simplify a complex situation. We show the ways in which young people endeavour to fashion livelihoods at present, and discuss how the differences between their various livelihood strategies shape their understanding of what it means to be Afrikaans and white in the post-apartheid era.

Keywords: Precarious employment; precarious life; youth and work; Pretoria; white working class; residual privilege; (de)industrialisation

Introduction

In this paper we make some preliminary observations about youth and work among residents of the former white working-class suburbs in Pretoria. These observations turn on the types of reactions we noticed to changing livelihood prospects among young people in the area. Unlike the majority of their black peers, who have been exposed to precarious wage employment for many generations (Scully 2016) and have a long history of resistance to it (Barchiesi 2011), the subjects of this paper are the children of parents who benefited from the stable industrial employment and generous benefits thrust on Pretoria's white working class by successive governments between the 1920s and the 1990s. Now that these privileges have been lost, the present generation faces a precarious labour market and a more precarious existence than the parental generation did.

The young people we observed made a range of very different responses to this precariousness, and for this reason we do not think it is particularly useful to describe them by deploying Standing's notion of a "precariat," even if one thinks of the latter as a "class in the making" (Standing 2011, 2018). A "class in the making" suggests the eventual forging of a unity of purpose and a shared identity (Schierup and Jørgensen 2016). Given South Africa's history, any outcome along these lines that involved only white youth would be unacceptable to the majority of the population. Therefore in thinking about young white South Africans who are confronted by a precariousness previous generations did not know, we need to take the differences in their responses seriously and to explore how these responses either separate them from other South Africans or lead them closer to them. We need to see precariousness as a "resource with the potential to move us toward an 'Other'" (Millar 2017, 4).

We have observed three categories of response to precarious prospects among young people from Pretoria's historically white western suburbs. The first category involves the utilisation of social connections based on kinship or friendship with people outside these suburbs to attempt to get out of the working class, or what remains of it, by becoming upwardly mobile. The second response turns on the failure to secure the kind of wage employment that is available in post-industrial Pretoria to youth without the above connections. The third category of reaction involves taking the jobs that are available even though they are experienced as frustrating and demeaning.

Judging from the cases we have encountered, attempts to become upwardly mobile involve serious reassessment of what it means to be Afrikaans, but no similar questioning of what it means to be white. Therefore this kind of response does not prompt any move towards an "Other," given that, as we show below, success in the endeavour to become upwardly mobile is a sign that the privilege that accrued to working-class white South Africans in the apartheid era has not dissipated entirely in the intervening years.

On the other hand, inability to secure even the kind of wage employment currently on offer in Pretoria's post-industrial economy means, in the instances we have come across, that precarious work and precarious life articulate so completely that our young informants become dependent on people drawn from the category of the "Other" and are obliged to reconsider what they understand by being both white and Afrikaans. The third category of response to precarious prospects is more difficult to comprehend. Accepting the kind of wage employment available now makes it difficult, if not impossible, to live up to the standards that were involved in being white and Afrikaans in the privileged past and, simultaneously, difficult to formulate other standards by which to orientate oneself in the present. As our case studies below will show, young people in this position are liable to become stuck in no man's land, investing in an image of the good life that is familiar to them (because their parents' generation lived it), but which is unlikely to materialise for them. Their belief that somehow, and someday, they may get lucky in recreating selected aspects of the past in the present and the future bears strong resemblance to what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism."

The existence of a range of responses to precariousness serves to complicate popular conceptions of the position of members of the white working class in contemporary South Africa. One narrative holds that their present circumstances mark "the return of the Poor Whites" (Carroll 2004) while a second contends that they continue to benefit uniformly from the "wages of whiteness" (Anwar 2017).[1] Our analysis suggests that each of these contradictory views is too simple.

We will look below at the different ways in which white youth from the western, working-class suburbs of Pretoria negotiate the world of work in a context of deindustrialisation, but first we provide the necessary background by way of a short history of the western suburbs.

A brief history of Pretoria's western suburbs

The state-owned Iron and Steel Corporation (Iscor) opened its first steelworks in 1934 in Pretoria. The works' economic objective was import substitution, while its political goal was to address the Poor White 'problem' in South Africa's capital city. Iscor's managers were instructed to allocate many of the jobs in the plant to the city's indigent white residents, most of whom were Afrikaans-speakers who had lost access to land in the surrounding countryside on account of the South African war (1899–1902), drought and rinderpest, and the concentration of landownership as part of the rise of capitalist agriculture. They had moved to Pretoria (and nearby Johannesburg) in search of better livelihoods, but lacked many of the skills required by urban employers and were obliged to compete for the least desirable work with black work-seekers.

The Pact government, which had established Iscor several years earlier, was determined to remedy this situation. It told Iscor's managers to place Poor Whites in semi-skilled jobs and give them on-the-job training to bring them up to speed. The tasks requiring artisanal skills would have to be done by workers imported from the UK and Europe until the local whites could undergo the training required to take them over. The managers were allowed to fill the unskilled positions at the steelworks with black workers. They were also told to comply with the Pact government's "civilised labour" policy, which was based on the notion that workers who were white, and therefore ostensibly "civilised," could not be expected to accept the low standard of living the state imposed on black South Africans. Iscor's semi-skilled white workers were therefore to receive much higher pay than their unskilled black counterparts, in order to lift them to the standard of living deemed appropriate to white people – Europeans, in the language of the day – who had come to live in Africa.

The company also constructed housing near the steelworks for these workers, thereby segregating them from the black people with whom they had formerly lived in other parts of the city. The number of white people to whom Iscor's largesse was extended grew rapidly during the war-time boom in steel production and again in the 1960s, the apartheid era's "miracle" decade of economic growth. The jobs Iscor reserved for whites were supplemented by more jobs in nearby state-owned industries such as the railway construction yard as well as the numerous arms and munitions factories which flourished in the wake of the apartheid regime's military incursion into Angola in the mid-1970s and the mandatory arms embargo against South Africa. The provision of subsidised housing expanded rapidly as well, with the Pretoria City Council building a large estate (Danville) in the mid-1940s for returning (white) servicemen who were to be offered employment in local heavy industry, and Iscor adding several times thereafter to its original stock to cater for the growth in its workforce (Sharp and Van Wyk 2015; Sharp 2016).

We want to draw attention to two aspects of this emerging situation. One is that the white working class in the western suburbs of Pretoria received the full package of measures intended to create a stable and secure industrial proletariat earlier than the working class in the UK, for instance, which had to wait until after World War II for the deal between capital, the state and organised labour which brought them greater social security to take full effect. Pretoria's white workers, by contrast, received secure wage employment and subsidised

housing in the 1930s, followed rapidly by pensions, company loan facilities, free medical care, free social work and rehabilitation services, and free recreation facilities. One reason for this was that these social benefits, over and above secure wages, were provided by the companies that employed Pretoria's white workers, acting on instruction from the white-dominated state which was sole owner of the companies in question.

This points to the second significant aspect, which is that the exercise to create a secure white industrial proletariat was, in many respects, a top-down one. The state thrust its largesse on these people, and demanded a return from them. They were expected to acquire the traits the state and the Afrikaner Nationalist movement associated with the condition of being a "good white" (Teppo 2004) and a good Afrikaner. The process was both paternalistic and intrusive. For instance, prolonged absence from work resulted in supervisors sending Iscor social workers to the absentees' homes to check for signs of domestic discord or alcohol abuse, the latter potentially leading to commitment to the company's rehabilitation centre. The numerous companies that worked, under the direction of the state-owned Armscor, to manufacture weapons and munitions were less paternalistic than Iscor, because they started later, when the Poor White issue was largely a thing of the past, and were obliged by the nature of their work to have a much higher proportion of skilled workers in their labour forces. They had no need to provide their workers with housing that had been carefully designed to give indigent white people guidance about how to live in an appropriately "civilised" fashion. Instead, they provided their white employees with a housing allowance that allowed them to build or buy accommodation of their own choosing. These housing allowances led to a significant increase in the proportion of privately owned homes in the western suburbs.

There was a gendered division of labour in the early years of the project to create a stable white working class in Pretoria, because making steel was not considered to be women's work. The steelworkers' wives and daughters were largely confined to the domestic sphere (which accorded with the Afrikaner nationalists' vision of the good Afrikaner household at the time). But the idea of men as sole breadwinners began to be eroded in the 1950s by the drive to include more Afrikaans-speakers in the civil service. By the 1960s and 1970s, many women from the western suburbs were being recruited into the lower rungs of the civil service and into administrative jobs in the state-owned industries.

The advent of two-income households was correlated with increased out-migration from the western suburbs to more affluent surroundings in the north and east of the city. This ran counter to the companies' intention of keeping their labour force close at hand, but workers who had risen above the ranks of the shift system did not need to live close by and could escape the paternalistic regime in the western suburbs, in the process breaking some of their ties with those who remained, as we explore further below. Those who remained, either because of commitment to the skilled jobs they were doing, or because they were semi-skilled workers still dependent on the system of largesse, began taking up the offer to purchase their homes (at a discount) from Iscor and the city council.

By the end of the 1970s, the apartheid state's coffers began to run dry and it was no longer in a position to subsidise all the large state-owned enterprises that had provided security and stability to the white working class in Pretoria for the past five decades. Iscor was transformed in the early 1980s into a for-profit company in which the state was the sole shareholder, and its managers were told to follow market discipline. They made several attempts to restructure the Pretoria steelworks – the oldest and smallest of the company's

several plants by then – but none of these was successful. Each restructuring involved downsizing the Pretoria works and retrenching workers in order to save costs. After an attempt in the 1990s to switch the whole works to the production of stainless steel failed because there was an unanticipated worldwide glut in the market, the company threw in the towel and closed down the Pretoria plant, retrenching the last 1,000 workers in doing so.

Demand for the products of the weapons factories remained high for most of the 1980s, but when the war in southern Angola came to an end in 1989, it fell away dramatically. The first round of retrenchment began immediately, to be followed by further rounds after the arms embargo against South Africa was lifted, and the post-apartheid state failed to come to a firm decision about whether or not to produce weapons for the export market. The overall result was that tens of thousands of white workers were laid off over the period from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s. In addition, from the mid-1990s, after the ANC's accession to power in the state, another transformation began in the civil service, resulting in the displacement of many white women from its ranks.

The immediate post-industrial period

Many of the men who lost their secure jobs when the steelworks and arms and munitions factories were downsized went to considerable lengths to avoid looking for new wage employment, at least in the immediate aftermath of retrenchment. There were other heavy industries in Pretoria, including several factories involved in the construction of motor vehicles, but the white workers from the western suburbs believed that they had little chance of getting a foot in the door there. They told us that the motor industry in the city had employed a high proportion of black workers since the 1980s, and that the trade unions to which the black workers belonged were a powerful presence. There were some white workers on the vehicle assembly lines, but they had been there a long time, and it would not be easy to join them in the 1990s.

The ex-workers asserted that the rest of the jobs in Pretoria available to people like them were hardly worth doing. One could find a job in a small business in the service economy, but who would want to work behind the counter in a bar or a shoe shop belonging to someone else? The pay was derisory, and anyone who had spent half a career making steel or heavy calibre weapons would feel they were playing games and wasting their time. Then again, if one found a job in a small electrical or plumbing outfit one would probably know more about the work than the owner, but would be required simply to carry the tools and bite one's lip. There was also a new category of work in the offing in Pretoria by the 1990s, including call-centre jobs and telemarketing. The ex-workers had heard of such opportunities, but were deeply suspicious of this newfangled work – weren't these kinds of jobs foremost women's work?

For these reasons many of the men who had been retrenched put effort into becoming self-employed, adopting the refrain "I'm not going to work for a boss again." They started small businesses, ranging from backyard welding or repairs, done from a garage, to neighbourhood bars and small hardware shops, mostly in the western suburbs. The problem was that the ex-workers rushed into these ventures in order to keep income flowing to their households, but without any experience of how to run them successfully.

The result was a great deal of "churn" in the western suburbs in the early post-industrial era. Ex-workers tried their hand at small businesses, watched them fail, were unemployed for a spell, and were then forced into a stint of the wage employment in the service economy they

disparaged. Working for low wages encouraged them to make new plans for self-employment, banking on the idea that they could correct whatever mistakes they had made in earlier attempts to avoid working for a boss. Individuals sometimes managed to extricate themselves from this cycle by succeeding in some small business venture or finding a service job they could tolerate. Others were forced to drop out of the cycle, settling reluctantly for unsatisfactory wage employment or prolonged unemployment.

Yet the churn persisted as a pronounced feature of the western suburbs for a long time. People whose circumstances we noted at one point in the mid-2000s had often moved on to new sources of livelihood or lost their livelihoods when we followed up a short time later. They might also have moved physically, either to places outside Pretoria where they believed opportunities were better (in which case we lost track of them), or to new accommodation in the western suburbs. The accommodation was either better or worse than previously, depending largely on the state of their current search for income. The worst scenario was to lose the home in which one's household had lived while one was still an industrial worker; a more encouraging one was to be able to stop squatting in a neighbour's outside room or garage because a period of small business failure or unemployment had come to an end.

The livelihood strategies of young people

One of the questions we asked during our return to the western suburbs in the mid-2010s was whether the "next generation" – the children of workers who had been retrenched from their industrial jobs during the 1990s – had managed to escape from the cycle of likely-to-fail attempts at self-employment, unsatisfying wage employment and stints of unemployment described above. Were they still caught up in the "churn" to which their parents' generation had been subjected in the aftermath of retrenchment, had they extricated themselves from it, or had they simply dropped out of it?

For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on young people in their early twenties, and therefore still near the age at which they had started to look for post-industrial livelihoods. This means they had been born near the mid-1990s, just after or before one or both of their parents had been retrenched, and that they had no personal experience of the privileged position Pretoria's white working class had enjoyed before the downsizing and closing down of the city's heavy industries. We made contact with young people through their parents whom we had encountered earlier, and some of them introduced us to similar-aged friends and acquaintances. Our aim is not to draw statistical inferences from a small sample that was not selected randomly, but rather to show that some patterns begin to emerge from our ethnographic findings regarding the ways in which young people were attempting to fashion livelihoods. The follow-up field research was done intermittently over several years, so we will take the liberty of occasionally using the ethnographic present tense in the discussion below.

Drawing on past advantage

There are young people who are as reluctant as their fathers before them to engage in employment they consider to be meaningless. They face the challenge that their fathers have often used up the family resources – from severance payments or selling the family home – on unsuccessful small business ventures (or on keeping the household going through a long period of post-industrial unemployment). So their attempts to avoid precarious employment

can seldom be underwritten financially by their parents, and they have to look elsewhere for assistance.

We came across several instances in which these young people received help from relatives or family friends. These sponsors used to live in the western suburbs but were able to move to more affluent areas in the north and east of the city because they had risen in one or other of the state-owned companies' internal hierarchies or acquired sufficient skills and experience in that environment to be able to find alternative, often better-remunerated employment in private industry.There was, as noted above, a good deal of this upward mobility in the 1970s and early 1980s – sufficiently recent for the ties between relatives and friends who remained in the western suburbs not to have broken down entirely.

Yet the bonds between former work mates and even close family members have changed in the interim on account of their physical dispersal into parts of the city with different social standing. People who moved to the northern or eastern suburbs may retain regard for, and sympathy with, those who remained in the west, but their personal feelings are often in tension with a general discourse we have noted in the more affluent areas which holds that those who failed to make their way up and out of the working-class suburbs lacked sufficient grit and determination, and therefore have only themselves to blame for what has befallen them ("If I could make it, why couldn't they?").

Many still in the western suburbs are acutely aware of this tension, telling us that if anyone is in a tight financial corner and in need of a loan (or a gift of money) the last person to approach is the brother or uncle or former work mate who made it out of the area. If one needs a couple of hundred rand to get through the month, the people to ask are those who have remained in the western suburbs. It may be hard for them to stump up at short notice, but they are more likely to make the effort because they know they may encounter the same problem at any time. Any approach to those who have "moved up" has to be considered carefully beforehand. One must know when to refrain from asking for assistance, as well as how to ask for it when one sees an opening to do so.

While it is evident that a certain amount of skill is required to successfully approach someone who has "moved up," the existence of social ties that allow such approaches constitutes a resource that enables some white youths in the western suburbs to avoid jobs they regard as demeaning. This resource constitutes a form of residual apartheid-era privilege. Yet it is important to note that this resource is social rather than material in nature. Moreover, its successful use to attain upward mobility may prompt our informants to rethink what it means to be Afrikaans in present-day Pretoria, but has limited impact on their understanding of themselves as white.

Evidence of the issues at stake here is provided in the following cases we encountered.

The aspirant tattooist

Markus was 22 years old when we made contact with him and lived with his mother and stepfather. His mother divorced his father, who had worked for Iscor, while he was in high school. Markus said he had been very interested in drawing "ever since primary school." He explained that he had struggled to get along with his new stepfather, but had been impressed by the tattoos he wore on his arms and upper body: "I thought his tattoos were cool, and I

began drawing designs for tattoos. I found a book on tattooing and copied some of the designs. Then, when I got used to what was involved, I began to draw my own."

His stepfather saw the drawings and, hoping to improve the relationship with his new stepson, showed some of them to his older brother. He and his brother had grown up in the western suburbs in the 1970s, but whereas he had stayed on there, his brother had progressed far enough up the ladder at one of the arms companies to be able move "out and up" to the northern suburbs in the late 1990s, and was now successfully employed in private industry. Markus's stepfather asked his brother if he knew of anyone who would be able to help the young man develop his talent. As it happened, the brother had a friend at work whose wife owned a tattoo parlour in the eastern suburbs. He insisted that Markus make the effort to put together a "proper portfolio" of his drawings, saying that if he did that he would introduce him to his friend's wife.

Markus spent a three-year apprenticeship at this parlour. The instruction he underwent was entirely informal, acquired by observing the owner in action while he swept the floor and kept the parlour clean and tidy. Later he progressed to learning to maintain the equipment used, and eventually to trying his own hand at tattooing. His first client, he said proudly, was his stepfather. Markus speaks warmly of his time at this parlour, despite the fact his pay was very low and the owner could have got rid of him at any point. "There's no other way to become a tattooist in South Africa," he said, "and my apprenticeship opened the door for me."

At the time we encountered him, Markus had recently moved to another parlour, this time outside Pretoria and owned by a husband-and-wife team. His conversation teemed with plans for the future, not all of them compatible. He aimed, he said, to go into partnership with the owners – well, maybe not exactly partnership, because he didn't have money, but perhaps they would let him run his own studio in their parlour or another branch of the business. Where would he like to open the branch if his new employers agreed to it – somewhere on his home turf in Pretoria's western suburbs? His response to this was direct: "Bloody hell, no! They know nothing about today's tattooing there. All you've got is a bunch of old *omies* (uncles) with ugly tattoos under their shirtsleeves – you know, a heart and the name of a girl they probably didn't even marry in the end. I call my business 'body art,' and they're so backward they wouldn't know the first thing about it." At another point he said, he might leave South Africa with his girlfriend and go to Germany to work with some German tattooists he had met when they visited his place of work.

The interesting thing about Markus is not whether one or other of his plans will be realised, but that he is in a position to make plans for his future. This option is not open to many young people of his generation in the western suburbs of Pretoria. The fact that he may be able to escape their fate turned on his stepfather's ability to make an approach, in the appropriate form, to his older brother, who is one of those able to make use of the state's efforts, over much of the twentieth century, to sustain a secure white working class in Pretoria in order to move up the socio-economic ladder. Markus is fortunate that his stepfather's brother knows someone who was able to open up a network of contacts in the niche market in which he has a particular interest. He may, of course, achieve neither of his current goals of becoming a partner in a tattoo parlour in Johannesburg nor of migrating to a tattoo art-friendly foreign country. But there is an even chance that, having broken into this network of contacts, he will be able to find a reasonable future in the field.

The second-hand car salesman

Johan was 24 when we met him in 2017. Johan grew up in Wespark in the western suburbs. His father had been retrenched from Iscor's Pretoria steelworks in the mid-1990s. Having been a semi-skilled operative engaged in producing steel for his whole career before being laid off, he struggled to escape the post-retrenchment cycle described above. He had tried to make garden furniture in his backyard, but was unable to find sufficient customers. He found several jobs in the formal service economy, but none of these lasted long. For a lot of Johan's childhood, his father's sole income came from "piece work" jobs he found in Wespark, and he was obliged to sell the home he had bought from Iscor in the late 1980s and move his household into an unused garage on a former workmate's nearby property. Johan told us that growing up alongside his parents and two older siblings in such cramped quarters contributed to the fact that he never did well at school and abandoned his studies a year early. This limited his employment options, and he spent a little over a year doing odd jobs with his father after leaving school.

At this point Johan's father had a chance encounter with another former workmate who had managed to combine his job at Iscor with buying and selling second-hand cars out of his backyard in Wespark. He had done this until he had accumulated enough capital to strike out on his own. He left the Iscor job in the late 1980s, of his own accord, and moved to the north of Pretoria where he had started a second-hand car lot. The former workmates exchanged news about what they had been doing since leaving Iscor, and upon hearing about Johan's father's spell of bad luck and the fact that Johan had no proper job, the old workmate offered to try him out at his used car lot.

When we spoke to him, Johan had been working as a car salesman for three years. His impression was that he had now reached the point where his boss – his father's former workmate – was not going to terminate his job summarily. He was therefore starting to allow himself to think about the longer term. He had hopes that, if he continued to perform satisfactorily over the next few years, his boss might trust him enough to invest in setting him up in another used car lot. Maybe he could manage this lot for his boss or own it as his own business. In either case, Johan emphasised to us, the boss would not be making a goodwill gesture, but would expect a proper return on investment.

Embracing precariousness

Members of another category of young white people from the western suburbs find that they are unable to secure even the kinds of wage employment ex-workers of their parents' generation disparaged as scarcely worth having. Those in this category not only lack the social connections that allow Markus and Johan to avoid such jobs. The households in which they grew up have dropped completely out of the livelihood cycle described above, and these jobs are simply beyond their reach.

These young people try to fashion livelihoods by "hustling" (see Dawson 2021). They use this term themselves although the activities in which they engage show considerable overlap with what ex-workers in the previous generation called "piece jobs." "Hustling" is the label they have appropriated from black people with whom they are in close contact, particularly the young black people with whom they cooperate in order to try to make a living in this way. As success in these ventures often depends on good relationships with their black peers, they place themselves on the same level as their black neighbours with regards to rights and

entitlements. Moreover, this mutual dependence facilitates a "move toward an 'Other'" (Millar 2017, 4) that requires a complete reconceptualisation of personal subjectivity. Yet important questions remain about the long-term viability of hustling as a livelihood strategy. The issues in question are illustrated in the following case.

The white hustler

Wouter's father had been a fitter-and-turner at the steelworks in Pretoria until he was retrenched in 1996. After retrenchment the father took to drinking heavily, which made it difficult to find another job and eventually undermined his health. He died in 2008, when Wouter was thirteen. Wouter's mother embarked on a relationship with a new partner in 2011, and the partner's contribution to household income made it possible for Wouter and his mother to stay on in the house they rented in Danville, one of the western suburbs.

But disaster struck out of the blue in 2012, when the police arrived at the Danville house to arrest his mother's partner for an armed robbery he had apparently committed before moving in with them the year before. The partner was found guilty and sentenced to jail, leaving Wouter's mother unable to keep up the rent on the Danville house. She had no one to turn to, since she had lost touch with her own parents, fallen out with her deceased husband's family over his drinking, and never known the jailed partner's relatives who were not in Pretoria. A friend at the hairdressing salon where she worked part-time told her about an informal settlement on the western outskirts of Pretoria where people were living rent-free.

Wouter and his mother moved to the West Fort informal settlement, situated in the grounds of the city's old, abandoned leper hospital, early in 2013. They found accommodation in one of a row of small rooms that had been used to house patients still able to look after themselves, and his mother turned to hairdressing in the settlement as a way to earn money. She was obliged to adapt her skills quickly because virtually all the other residents of the settlement – her prospective clients – were black, and she had hitherto cut and styled the hair of white customers. Wouter was in his first year out of school at that point, and he struggled to find work. He could not afford repeated trips to the city to look for jobs, and when he tried to catch the eye of the employers who came to West Fort's main gate most mornings to offer "day jobs" to work-seekers, they always contrived to ignore him.

Eventually he asked the young black men waiting for haircuts outside his mother's room what he was doing wrong. They told him his problem was that he was white, and those offering jobs at the gate believed either that the work they had to offer was not suitable for him or that he would be "too soft" to do it as well as a black person. Wouter spent a couple of months getting to know these young men, and eventually one of them invited him to join him and his partners in their income-generating activities. Wouter told us he was convinced that this invitation stemmed from the way his mother treated her customers – she had learnt their favourite hairstyles carefully, and allowed those who were short of cash to pay by fetching her wood and water (because electricity and running water to the illegal West Fort settlement had been cut off).

Wouter became a member of a group of six or seven young men of similar age who made an informal living in various ways, notably by "waste picking" – selling recyclables collected from suburban rubbish bins to intermediaries who sold them on to recycling companies. As the only partner who was white, he sometimes played a useful part in calming white homeowners when they protested that the group was scattering rubbish on the pavements. But

in all other respects, he said, his acceptance by the others turned on his willingness to fit in entirely and share his partners' ups and downs. Yet the problem remained that the group's income from hustling in this way was extremely modest, not enough to improve their circumstances in any way or even to keep them from frequent hunger.

Cruel optimism?

A third category among the young people we encountered comprised those who settled for the kind of wage employment that Markus and Johan managed to avoid, and Wouter and others in his position were unable to access. As indicated above, most of the jobs involved were in the service economy – some in small businesses in and around the western suburbs, others in what the parental generation had regarded as "newfangled" fields which, in some instances, required those holding them to work from home or away from any office. As an example of the latter, Uber driving had appeared on the scene by the mid-2010s, but the young people doing this were driving vehicles belonging to people living elsewhere in Pretoria – they were paid a modest commission per fare by bosses who weren't employed by Uber.

In the cases we came across, including the two detailed below, there was a real question about the prospects of the young adults involved. Were they in the kind of dead-end jobs they had for the long haul, or was there any chance that these jobs might turn into, or give rise to, worthwhile careers? All of the young people in this category were asking themselves this question at the time we met them, and they changed their minds about the answer regularly. Would they get lucky one day, or was any optimism along these lines simply cruel (Berlant 2011)?

Part of the problem they faced lay in the fact that, in settling for wage employment, they became engaged in imagining a "good life" similar to the one previous generations in the western suburbs had enjoyed. But the jobs available to them were unlikely to deliver anything approaching the same existence.

Riding the merry-go-round

Pieter's father had worked at Iscor for 17 years and had purchased his house in Wespark from the company in the 1980s. His father had resisted the temptation to experiment with self-employment after being retrenched, and had settled for the jobs many of his fellows had despised. At one point he had been employed as a glorified janitor, looking after upkeep, repairs and security at a private, Afrikaans-medium school in the city, but had found that his wage did not match the long hours and night-shifts the job demanded. After this, he had become a behind-the-counter assistant in a pawn shop on the main road through the western suburbs. The shop was owned by an old man who gave him the job when he had been going from door-to-door looking for vacancies. The old man had said that, as a fellow Afrikaner, he had sympathy for the workers who had been retrenched from the heavy industries, and was happy to be able to help one of them. As Pieter's father said, however, a lone individual trying to assist one fellow Afrikaner was not the same as a state-owned company getting behind a whole community. His experience was that the individual could easily exploit his fellow Afrikaner while proclaiming how much he felt sorry for him. The father's pay was so low that he was obliged to sell the family house, and move his wife and two sons into a small two-bedroom apartment in the suburb of Pretoria West.

Pieter and his brother had started contributing to household income before leaving school. His first post-school job was as a waiter, a continuation of a job he had done part-time while at school. But, as he told us, it was one thing to be a part-time waiter and another to do it full-time as a primary source of income. In the restaurants in which he had worked, basic pay was low and tips uncertain, and he found that the long hours left him with no social life. He went on to telemarketing for a year, hoping to earn more money while working fixed hours, but soon discovered that selling insurance over the telephone was more difficult than it appeared and his earnings from commission were small. He then found a job as a plumber's assistant, but told us he "had done all the dirty work," and had not got along with the plumber. His current job as a clerk behind the till in a convenience store in the western suburbs was marginally better, he said, but he could not see how it would lead to career advancement. "It covers the basics and helps pay the rent, so I'll probably keep doing it until something better comes along."

In the meantime, he said, he was fast becoming tired of living in his parents' small apartment and sharing a bedroom with his brother "as if we are still little kids." "We both have girlfriends," he added, "but we can't bring them here easily, except for Saturday night dinner when my father insists on saying a long grace. Then we have to take them home early so that Mom and Dad can go to bed and get up on Sunday morning for church. It's all too embarrassing."

Sticking it out

Rachel's father and mother had grown up in the same western suburb, attended Sunday school together and become teenage sweethearts. Her father had taken a job at one of the local state-owned arms manufacturers directly after finishing high school in the early 1980s. He received on-the-job training and was soon able to get a permanent position as a precision machine operator. Rachel's mother found administrative work in the lower reaches of the civil service. A stable dual income allowed her parents to get married at a young age, invest in a home in the western suburbs, and start a family.

The family's circumstances began to go awry in the 1990s when her father and then her mother lost their jobs in quick succession. Her father discovered that the skills he had acquired before retrenchment were not easily transferred to work outside an arms factory, and her mother had to take over the main burden of supporting the household. After a period of unemployment, she managed to find a part-time job as a typist in a small law firm in the city, leaving her time to give the attention she felt was necessary to Rachel's younger siblings.

When we encountered the family in 2016, Rachel's parents were just managing to hang on to the home they had purchased twenty years earlier. Constructed in the 1950s as part of the effort to provide affordable housing to the white working class, it bore close resemblance to the other houses in the street. Previous owners had added a garage to the property and Rachel's father had built a swimming pool and a *lapa* (an outside entertainment area) shortly after buying the house, but it was evident that he had fallen well behind on maintenance.

Rachel told us that she had hoped to study to become a teacher at one of Pretoria's universities upon completion of her schooling, but that her plans had not come to fruition owing to a lack of funds. She therefore took a job as a teaching assistant at a pre-primary school in a neighbouring suburb. All schools of this kind in South Africa are privately owned and run, and Rachel's pre-primary was owned by an elderly woman who lived on the

premises. Since the school had places for only a few young children, Rachel's salary was meagre and the job offered nothing by way of pension or benefits. It allowed her to walk to work, however, to gain some experience in pre-primary teaching and, crucially, to try to save a little money with which she intended to purchase a scooter. "I have to keep working at the pre-primary," she told us, because "I have to arrange transport for myself."

Buying a scooter would grant her the independence from her parents she craved and would also allow her to search for a similar job beyond the western suburbs. She believed that there is "more money in the east of Pretoria" and that jobs similar to hers in that part of the city pay much better salaries. She further convinced herself that she will be able to enrol for a teaching degree at university if she succeeds in getting a scooter and manages to secure a job in a preschool in the eastern suburbs. In the meantime, she resigned herself to dependence on her parents and to abiding by their rules while living under their roof. When we met her, she had been at the pre-primary round the corner for six years and her frustration was mounting. She admitted that she was beginning to doubt whether her dream would ever become a reality. While she was still willing to put marriage and starting a family of her own on hold, she was beginning to fear that "time is running out."

Conclusion

The cases we sketched above show that the young people in Pretoria's former white working-class suburbs are involved in several different livelihood strategies, reflecting the fact that the popular narratives about their fate in the wake of their parents' loss of secure wage employment simplify a complex set of experiences. The young people we encountered had not all survived the changes in the western suburbs unscathed on account of the privileges bestowed on earlier generations. Nor had all of them had been thrust back into the circumstances of Pretoria's Poor Whites in the early twentieth century.

We showed that some young adults in the western suburbs were able to make use of a residual privilege that was not based on their parents having the resources to get them started (given that the parents' severance pay and even funds from selling family homes had often been sunk into small businesses that failed). On the contrary, their good fortune stemmed from the fact that the privileges Pretoria's white workers had enjoyed in the past had made it possible for some of them to become upwardly mobile – to join the city's white middle class and move to more affluent parts of the city. But the young people's ability to make use of this potential resource turned on their capacity to approach relatives, their fathers' former workmates or family friends in the appropriate way. "Don't ask for a hand-out," was the watchword that several of our young informants endorsed. Markus's stepfather, who guided the approach to his brother, helped us to understand the issues at stake in such situations. He told us that although his brother had grown up in the western suburbs, among working-class people, his outlook on life had changed significantly when he "moved up."

He kept asking me why I didn't follow him (into a supervisory position in private industry and a suburb in the north of the city), and I could see he didn't like my answer that I prefer working with my hands, and want people around me who aren't stuck up. We agreed to disagree about this for a long time, which helped me to figure out how Markus and I should seek his assistance. I told Markus to highlight his talent and the effort he had already put into developing it – he isn't just another 'useless idiot' who refuses to make anything of himself.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the assistance Markus and Johan received from people who had “moved up” will produce the outcomes they want in the long run. But, to judge from the way both talked to us, they have already had a crash course of socialisation into a middle-class view of the world. This is evident in Markus’ disparaging comments about the “backward old *omies*” in the western suburbs who know only how to make steel and watch rugby, as well as in Johan’s scathing observations about how his father’s “sheltered employment” (his phrase) had left him unprepared to find new ways of making a living after the heavy industries were downsized. Johan draws a sharp contrast between his father and himself – he is the one with the drive to make a strong business case to his employer that will secure his future as an entrepreneur in his own right.

Young people such as Pieter and Rachel, who signed up for the kind of wage employment now available, are much less critical of the way of life in the western suburbs. As both cases we sketched above make clear, they express frustration over the circumstances in which they are obliged to live and the previous generation’s conservative morality. But they have also had to invest in these circumstances and this morality, seeing them as having some potentially redeeming features in the present because they so obviously worked in the past. In a sense, of course, they are right – the way in which Markus and Johan subject the working-class world they hope to leave behind to unalloyed ridicule is superficial. Pieter and Rachel, by contrast, are prepared to acknowledge that there are some aspects of the old life in the western suburbs that remain significant, such as accepting the people around one for what they are, and not – as Markus’s stepfather put it – being “stuck up.” But they are frustrated at the same time, because there is no longer any certainty about whether the rules of the old game, in which previous generations were expected to become “good whites” and “good Afrikaners” in return for the privileges given them, still hold any sway. Now that they depend on chance to deliver a job with career prospects, rather than deliberate state intervention on their behalf, will the game ever end in their favour?

For young people like Wouter, whose parents have fallen furthest in material terms and who have lost all connection to networks of aid in the western suburbs, the possible livelihood strategies are severely limited. Living with his mother in an informal settlement on the outskirts of the city without access to piped water, sanitation, electricity or cheap and easy transport to Pretoria’s economic hub, Wouter has little chance of securing the kind of jobs Pieter and Rachel have reluctantly taken on and Johan and Markus would not even consider. Wouter has therefore taken to “hustling” along with some his young black neighbours who have accepted him into their group and shown him the ropes. His fate is completely tied to theirs. Yet waste picking is not a reliable livelihood strategy in their case, and Wouter and his friends struggle to make ends meet.

The three strategies outlined above have implications for the ways in which the young people who pursue them attach meaning to being Afrikaans. Pieter and Rachel remain closest to what it meant to previous generations, partly because they continue to reside at home in the western suburbs with their parents. But we should not simplify their parents’ take on being Afrikaans. The parents were expected to learn *ordentlikheid* (respectability) in return for the privileges they were given, and were unable to escape the “instruction” they received entirely, because the expectations of respectability were inscribed in the rhythms their employment imposed on their lives and the architecture of their homes and segregated suburbs, as well as in more obvious forms such as the teaching they received from school, pulpit and political platform. They therefore had to negotiate their way round these injunctions without necessarily buying into them entirely. Their children like Rachel and

Pieter are doing the same, perhaps a little more critically, since they cannot have the same confidence that conforming to the lessons will bring the same result.

Young people like Markus and Johan distance themselves from the narrative around being Afrikaans that was evident in the western suburbs in past generations. They certainly do not think it is worth following the old teachings of the Afrikaner nationalist elite, which they regard as stifling (see also Chipkin 2012), but they also dismiss the ways in which their working-class parents resisted the instruction from on high. They are picking up on a middle-class view of the world that is post-Afrikaner nationalist in that it accepts that there is no uniform entity called the *volk*, that Afrikaners are divided along class lines, and that some of them cannot be "rescued" from their current plight ("we tried for a long time, but they just didn't respond").

Wouter finds himself in a position where he and his mother can attach any meaning they choose to the fact of being Afrikaans, as long as they do so behind a closed door. The people around them, including his fellow hustlers, do not know what Wouter thinks on this score and have no interest whatever in finding out. The much more pressing question for them is how to survive without plumbing, electricity or jobs. As long as Wouter shares this predicament with them, and does not expect favours for being white or an Afrikaner, he is in the clear. He is fully aware of this, so his precarious situation brings him closer to the "Other."

Meanwhile, Rachel and Pieter are as confused about this question as about everything else. They are not going to go back to the racial antipathy that previous generations were taught was a key element of being a "proper" Afrikaner. But they are not under the same compulsion to treat the black people around them as equals in every respect as Wouter is. Markus and Johan are even further removed from this compulsion, and may well come to treat the black people they encounter simply as customers – equals for as long as they have the money to pay for the used cars or the tattoos they intend to sell.

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Notes

[1]. For a nuanced discussion of these issues, see Haffajee (2015).

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