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Redistributive politics and the temporalities of crisis: Reconfiguring social protection in a post-pandemic South Africa

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Abstract

How does crisis open-up – or foreclose – new possibilities for alternative economic futures? This article explores the possibilities afforded by crisis for reconfiguring redistribution and welfare in contexts where access to income via work is increasingly tenuous. To do so, we turn to South Africa, where we examine the unfolding political possibilities and support for more generous and universal forms of social protection and (re)distribution during and after the Covid pandemic. In particular, we analyse visions of alternative redistributory policies both from above and from below, via original empirical data on the views of low-income inner-city residents in Johannesburg; interviews with government actors and civil society activists; and a close reading of media and policy discourse around social protection between 2020 and 2023. We argue while framing Covid as a crisis forced the state to embrace less workerist approaches to social protection, the very fact that new policies were rooted in an emergency context may have blunted more radical redistributory visions. This argument is underscored by the vacillations and internal contradictions of the South African government's expansion

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of its social grant system, as well as by the delimited scope of grassroots demands for more generous or unconditional economic support during and after the pandemic. We make the case that 'crisis temporalities' – and the temporality of work and welfare more generally – is critical to understanding the lack of political will and popular demands for more radical forms of redistribution and economic security beyond work.

Keywords
Cash transfers, crisis, redistributive politics, social protection, South Africa, temporality

Introduction

Never let a crisis go to waste. This is a sentiment attributed to Winston Churchill, or perhaps Milton Friedman: a moment of crisis, be it a war or a financial recession, is an opportunity to enact long-term political change. This sentiment gained supporters during the Covid-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, with popular calls to 'build back better' and take the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink social policy, urban planning and work arrangements. Yet framing a moment as a 'crisis', with its implication of transience and exceptionalism and its assumptions about normalcy, can also delimit political and policy change. This article focuses on policy shifts and contestations sparked by the rhetoric of crisis during and directly after the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we explore possibilities for radical redistributory policies in contexts such as South Africa, where access to income via work is increasingly tenuous, and the role that the pandemic played in crystalising the already unstable relationship between labour markets and economic security.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the exclusions and injustices of relying on wage work as *the* key source of people's economic security and access to resources. The pandemic underscored the fragility of orienting what the editors of this special issue term 'the social question' around participation in labour markets, and framing employment, entrepreneurship and individual responsibility for economic security as 'the ultimate public good' (Nguyen et al., in press). Indeed, much that previously went unquestioned about the realm of wage work gained new clarity under the pressures of Covid lockdowns: the centrality and unequal distribution of care work; the critical, life-sustaining role of some of the most precarious and lowest paid workers; and the possibilities of more flexible work arrangements for some workers. But clearest of all was the need for some sort of state provision of economic security outside of labour markets, at a time when participation in the labour market became potentially deadly.

As a result, the pandemic sparked a moment of both debate and optimism around widening social protection systems and the use of direct cash transfers. Indeed, a key policy response to the economic hardship wrought around the world by the pandemic has been for governments to transfer money to citizens. Versions of the policy were used from the United States to Tuvalu, often in contexts where sending cash to the majority of citizens would have been politically unimaginable just a year earlier (Devereux, 2021; Dorlach, 2023; Gentilini et al., 2021). This was made possible by the fact that the state's usual response – workerist assistance dependent on ongoing participation in labour markets – was not feasible under conditions of contagion and lockdown. Equally, governments' declarations of a 'state of emergency' or 'state of disaster' – the labelling of the pandemic as both a health and an economic crisis – permitted increases in public spending in many places where spending had been decreasing in real terms over the previous decade (Lavinas, 2021).

In many places, particularly those where access to wage work was already insufficient to guarantee economic security before the pandemic, such policies also led to calls to make cash transfers programmes unconditional, generous and permanent – in effect, to implement a universal basic income (UBI), a regular, unconditional, individual payment sufficient for basic needs. Indeed, many basic income advocates saw the Covid pandemic as a moment of opportunity and resurgence for basic income. This article thus asks – in what ways has the Covid 'crisis' highlighted the ongoing insufficiency of labour markets in justly distributing resources, and thus created opportunities to radically refashion social protection and redistribution beyond workfare? And conversely, in what way did the rhetoric of crisis and exceptionalism around Covid undermin the possibilities for new policies that address the long-term and ongoing insufficiency of labour markets to provide economic security and a just distribution of resources?

To answer this question, we turn to the case of South Africa, a country with an extensive cash transfer system, a history of political debates around basic income, and endemically high rates of inequality and unemployment even before Covid struck. This article examines the political possibilities for radical redistribution and universal forms of social protection during and after the pandemic, both from above and from below. To do so, we use original data from a survey of low-income inner-city residents in Johannesburg, interviews with government actors and civil society activists, and a close reading of political, media and policy discourse around social protection between 2020 and 2023. In particular, we focus on the debates and activism around the South African government's halting implementation of a new cash transfer – the Covid-19 social relief of distress (SRD) grant, also known as the 'Covid grant' or 'SRD grant'. While the grant was introduced as a short-term emergency response, it has been extended many times following tireless pressure from activists and civil society organisations, and at its peak reached over 10 million beneficiaries. The Covid grant is the first time unemployed working-age adults have been included in the South African social grant system, something the post-apartheid government has resisted since 1994.

In particular, this article attends to ways the temporal dimensions of 'crisis' impact state, civil society and grassroots views, demands and approaches to the Covid SRD grant. This is what we term *crisis temporalities*: as will be discussed in more detail below, these are temporalities that can be present-oriented in their focus on short-term, emergency responses, or alternatively can hold out the promise of more durable, long-term shifts. The Covid SRD grant is in many ways a departure from South Africa's workerist cash transfer system (which previously excluded anyone who was physically able to work), and the Covid 'crisis' *has* crystalised the gaps in South Africa's social protection system. However, we make the case that the temporalities of crisis play a key role in the curtailment of more radical reforms to social welfare that might decentre the role of wage labour in economic security provision, such as more unconditional and generous forms of social protection. This is demonstrated not only by the vacillations and internal contradictions of South Africa's government response to the economic effects of the pandemic and post-pandemic hardship, but also in the delimited scope of grassroots demands for direct cash transfers from the state during and after the pandemic. Our survey of residents of the inner-city neighbourhood of Jeppestown in Johannesburg in 2020 shows that even though most survey respondents supported the Covid SRD grant as well as a more permanent, more universal system of cash transfers, their policy preferences remained focused on job creation or entrepreneurial support. This underscores a key distinction within political claim-making between supporting, preferring or demanding a policy. Such a distinction between support, preference and demand is echoed by the absence of mass-based mobilisations or protests around extending (or expanding) the Covid SRD grant, despite fervent civil society campaigning.

We argue that *crisis temporalities* are critical to understanding why a broad-based movement has not coalesced around a demand for more universalist, generous and redistributory forms of social protection such as a universal basic income. While our survey respondents seemed to view cash transfers from the state as essential for short-term survival, they did not consider them as possible long-term sources of economic security or just (re)distribution of resources. This temporal aspect is also echoed in both government and civil society's framing of the Covid SRD grant as response to a humanitarian crisis. Such a response echoes a much older tendency to frame social protection as an ameliorative (rather than structural) response to widespread and persistent un(der)employment. Indeed, even civil society campaigns to turn the temporary SRD grant into a permanent universal basic income, which often underscored the potential of crisis to lead to long-term structural policy change, have repeatedly been forced to focus on the policy's utility in poverty alleviation, rather than its radical potential to (re)distribute resources and challenge the workerist orientation of contemporary welfare provision. Viewing cash transfers as a form of poverty alleviation, rather than a claim for rightful distribution, thus embeds such policies in a 'presentist' rather than durable and future-oriented temporal frame, and could forestall, rather than bolster, a popular 'politics of distribution' (Ferguson, 2015) and a broader rethinking of the role of wage labour in economic security provision.

Crisis temporalities

What do we mean by crisis? A variety of scholars have made use of and interrogated the concept. The Marxist perspective argues that crises are an undisputed fact of capitalist economies (Clarke, 1994). Stuart Hall accepted the Marxist view that capitalist economies go through periods of crisis but argued that their resolution is not a given: crisis can enable substantive change, but alternatively can also renew the current political-economic project (Hall and Massey, 2010). While building on these long-standing debates around the way crisis can maintain or disrupt the status quo, this article uses an anthropological approach to crisis, which is less concerned with the diagnosis of crisis and more with the social and political effects of *naming* a set of events 'a crisis'. In particular, our intellectual engagement with crisis builds upon the work of Janet Roitman (2013, 2022), Didier Fassin (2022) and Fassin and Honneth (2022a). In Anti-Crisis (2013), Roitman offers a critical account of the 'crisis narrative' surrounding the 2008 financial crisis in order to examine how framing a situation as a crisis opens up certain pathways for action and lines of inquiry while foreclosing others. If Rotiman's work focuses on the way people use the term crisis, and how crises are framed and interpreted, Fassin has emphasised the lived experience of crises, including how people participate in, respond to and form critiques of situations framed as 'crises' (Fassin and Honneth, 2022a).

In this article, we are interested in 'crisis temporalities': the dimensions of time that come into play in labelling a given situation a 'crisis' (Fassin and Honneth, 2022b; see also: Antentas, 2020; Knight and Stewart, 2016). The first dimension we engage with is the way crises are framed as temporary events or ruptures and thus imply a temporality that is 'unquestionably anchored in the present, with the evident risk of presentism' (Fassin and Honneth, 2022b: 3). As scholars of crisis point out, framing crises as momentary ruptures ignores the way the injustices and hardships of that moment are often less exceptional, and more ongoing, than the term implies. Crises – be they financial, political or environmental – are frequently constant and structural rather than momentary, especially for the poor or vulnerable (Gammeltoft-Hansen et al., 2022; Vigh, 2008). The second temporal dimension we attend to is the future-orientated and transformative potential of crisis. Crises can also be utilised as moments of potential change, in which the 'future is always at stake, whether it is darkened by dystopic imaginaries enlightened by bright horizons of expectation' (Fassin and Honneth, 2022b: 3). These temporal dimensions were especially evident in the Covid-19 pandemic, which was cast in many diverse contexts as 'a rare crisis-as-opportunity' (Kaur, 2022: 642) to accelerate desired changes in the political-economic landscape. The presentist urgency of crises can thus be paradoxically entwined with crises' potential to change the future. In the sections that follow, we trace the ways in which crisis temporalities were mobilised by the South African state, by civil society and by ordinary people, and the implications of this for contested visions of policy futures.

Context: welfare, work and redistribution in South Africa

The centrepiece of South Africa's current system of welfare provision is its use of cash transfers, also known as social grants. South Africa's social grants are a paradox of simultaneous generosity and exclusion. On the one hand, social grants reached nearly a third of the South African population even before the Covid pandemic began. This system of cash transfers has been lauded for being one of the most extensive on the African continent – Hanlon et al. (2010) use it as an example of what they call a 'revolution from the South' of 'just giv[ing] money to the poor', and James Ferguson (2015) has described it as a possible gateway to new distributive politics. Yet despite the breadth of their reach, the grants are designed to aid only those physically unable to work: children, the disabled and the elderly. They are also means-tested, and the child support grant, which has the largest number of beneficiaries, is limited in amount: as this paper goes to press, it is 500 ZAR or 22 GBP per month, well below South Africa's national poverty line of 1417 ZAR (61 GBP). Despite the high number of grant beneficiaries, poverty in South Africa remains widespread.

The social grant system thus encapsulates a seeming contradiction: it is generously expansive in reach in terms of sheer numbers, yet it is not only insufficient to curb high rates of racialised poverty, but also remains workerist by design, excluding anyone who might be useful to the labour market. The system is an expansion of the apartheid welfare system that preceded it, but while it largely reversed racial exclusion, it has ignored ongoing structural inequities. Like the system before it, South Africa's social grants presume that the labour market can absorb and provide a livelihood for the able-bodied. This presumption has long been divorced from reality.

South Africa has had long-term high rates of structural unemployment, dating back to the 1970s. While the apartheid state in the mid-20th century, much like the colonial state before it, was concerned with coercing Black[1] populations into wage labour, by the 1970s labour surpluses rather than shortages began to be the norm. The situation has only been exacerbated in the nearly three decades since the transition to democracy (Seekings and Nattrass, 2015). Indeed, over South Africa's economic ups and downs over the past few decades, even periods of economic growth have failed to lead to any substantive reduction of unemployment. Currently, unemployment is at 33%, or 43% if discouraged job seekers are included (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This has been coupled with high and growing inequality: South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world (World Bank, 2022).

In response to the government's failure to address persistent structural unemployment, the 2002 Taylor Committee (set up to consolidate South Africa's fragmented welfare system) advocated for a small but universal basic income payment.[2] Yet the African National Congress (ANC) government rejected the proposal, despite widespread support from labour unions and civil society. This was due both to Treasury's concerns around 'fiscal sustainability', and the ANC's ideological concerns about giving 'hand outs' to those who should be gaining income through wage labour (Barchiesi, 2007). Instead of universalizing access to social grants, the government focused on expanding labour-intensive public works programmes, as well as raising the upper age limit for the child support grant (from age 7 to 18), and increasing the income threshold for those eligible for grants. In effect, the government expanded existing social grants, but only for those that are 'deserving' of support due to their physical inability to work (Patel, 2015: 15; Seekings, 2008). In so doing, the state continued to insist on employment-creation via economic growth as the primary way to overcome poverty and inequality. South Africa's pro-poor social policies and firm endorsement of the state's role in securing the social rights to health, education and social security thus lie in tension with its market-led economic policies that centre on economic growth and fiscal discipline, and ignore the realities of South Africa's stubbornly persistent high unemployment and inequality. This explains, at least in part, why despite subsequent ANC governments repeatedly emphasising their commitment to 'comprehensive social security', there remain huge gaps in the social security system – gaps the Covid pandemic magnified.

Views of crisis, from above

On 27 March 2020, when only a handful of Covid cases had been reported, South Africa declared a National State of Disaster and quickly implemented a strict national lockdown. The regulations were severe: people were not allowed out of their homes except to buy essential provisions. Millions of South Africans lost their incomes, livelihoods and support systems overnight (Spaull et al., 2020a). Hunger levels spiked, with nearly half of households reporting running out of money to buy food in the month of April 2020 (Spaull et al., 2020b). In response a strident campaign from civil society groups demanded emergency relief to avert a humanitarian crisis, and the government decided to substantially bolster South Africa's social security net (Baskaran et al., 2020). This included temporary 'top-ups' to existing grants, and the expansion of social insurance for workers. Perhaps the biggest change was the introduction of a new, temporary cash transfer – the Covid-19 SRD grant. The Covid SRD grant is a small grant of 350 ZAR (17 GBP) per month, targeted at poor, unemployed, working-age adults who otherwise receive no social assistance from the state.[3] This was the first time millions of working-age adults received a cash transfer from the state. The new grant was initially introduced for a period of 6 months under the Disaster Management Act, but has been extended repeatedly, in large part due to fervent civil society campaigning.[4] In the following section, we will argue that the rhetoric and the actions of both the South African state and civil society activist groups around the implementation, extension and expansion of the Covid SRD grant demonstrate the ways in which the Covid crisis produced a sense of urgency that simultaneously opened up new avenues for public spending and more expansive welfare provision, but at the same time was a key factor in curtailing opportunities for structural policy shifts. The SRD grant was an already existing (but little used) pre-pandemic short-term cash transfer aimed at people in unforeseen and critical situations where they are unable to provide for themselves or their dependents. The very name of this grant, with the emphasis on both relief and distress, tellingly underscores that this is a *temporary* intervention (indeed, naming social policies to emphasise what function they should play is a strategy that can be found world-wide – take, for instance, the US's *Temporary* Assistance to Needy Families, also named to underscore its short-term nature). The government's repurposing of this welfare category for the Covid-induced economic crisis (rather than creating a new grant) underscores the intended delimited nature of this grant. Days after the president announced the emergency economic relief measures, then-Finance Minister Tito Mboweni emphasised to the media that the new cash transfer was a short-term measure, meant only to relieve the momentary distress caused by the pandemic. His concern that people would expect the Covid SRD grant to remain in place after the pandemic – and that they will become 'agitated' when the grants are taken away – was palpable. Mboweni's concern demonstrates the ways in which state actors use the short-term, presentist temporality of crisis to reduce 'complex configurations necessitating structural responses to simple situations calling for emergency reactions' (Fassin and Honneth, 2022b: 3).

This is also reflected in the stop-start nature of the grant: originally only put in place for 3 months, it has been repeatedly extended, but often at the last minute (or even after its termination), and always on a temporary basis. These extensions were a response to intense pressure from a vocal civil society campaign, which grew in parallel to the introduction of these grants. This campaign continues to fight to make sure these grants are continued, paid and reach their intended beneficiaries. The campaign has insistently and publicly argued that economic distress in South Africa is neither new nor temporary, and that the SRD grant must be expanded into a more generous, permanent basic income. Yet much of its advocacy has been forced to focus on reactive actions to protect the existing SRD grant from being terminated or delimited further, taking energy and attention away from future-oriented campaigns to transform the grant into more generous and universal forms of social protection and redistribution.

This campaign has been led by a group of activists and civil society groups, including the Black Sash, #PaytheGrants, the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ), Social Policy Initiative (SPI), and the grassroots organisation Cry of the Xcluded, who formed a lose Basic Income Grant Coalition mirroring the coalition of civil society groups, trade unions, activists and churches calling for a basic income in South Africa in the early 2000s. This coalition has linked their repeated demands for the emergency Covid SRD grant to be extended and expanded to the introduction of a permanent form of income support for those previously excluded from South Africa's social grant system. At the start of the pandemic the Black Sash, a long-standing socio-economic rights advocacy non-governmental organisation (NGO), released a media statement titled 'Why South Africa needs basic income support now' (Maart, 2020). Lynette Maart, then-national director of the Black Sash, argued that what South Africa's poor, unemployed and insecurely employed need is not a temporary grant for 6 months but a permanent form of 'basic income support'. By late 2020, after the first extension of the grant, many in civil society felt optimistic around the prospect of more structural policy reform that might usher in 'universalism through the back door'.

The political landscape seemed to be tilting in that direction: in November 2020 the ANC's National Executive Committee and the Department of Social Development (DSD) both published discussion papers espousing more expansive and permanent forms of income support for the unemployed. In January 2021, mere days before the Covid grant was set to expire yet again, President Ramaposa affirmed a second 3-month extension of what he (tellingly) termed 'basic income relief'. Ramaposa's language underscored his eagerness to simultaneously speak to both supporters and critics of expansive social protection: while 'basic income' seemed to point to a more transformative and long-term future for the SRD grant, the addition of the term 'relief' seemed to simultaneously indicate that this was neither a universal nor a permanent policy. Yet the idea of a permanent basic income grant remained fiercely contested in the government. In the same week in 2020 that the Minister of Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu, welcomed the reinstatement of the SRD grant and publicly re-affirmed her departments' commitment to a basic income, then-Finance Minister Mboweni warned of a sovereign debt crisis if expenditure was not urgently cut. Our own conversations with government officials and civil society actors suggest that while DSD seems to support a 'graduated' approach to an eventual basic income guarantee, officials within National Treasury seem to be divided – some favouring an employment-linked grant, and others against any expansion of the social grant system. These contrasting views are underpinned by competing ideologies not only about the purpose of cash transfers as short-term versus permanent interventions, but also their effectiveness in responding to South Africa's enduring and structural crises of unemployment and inequality.

The optimism of civil society was crushed in April 2021 when the Covid SRD grant was terminated, despite a vocal civil society warning that this would intensify inequality, slow growth and result in social and economic instability. These warnings proved prescient: South Africa was shaken in July 2021 by 6 days of economic sabotage, looting and unrest, which targeted warehouses and shopping malls and left more than 300 people dead. While the motivations for the unrest are complex, many commentators (including civil society and government officials) acknowledged that poverty and unemployment were an important factor (Majavu, 2021; Ngwane, 2021). In the wake of this violence, the government reinstated the Covid grant. As before, the Covid SRD grant was extended as an intervention in response to a 'crisis', this time of political turmoil.

On the face of it, the 'July riots' marked a turning point for the Covid SRD grant. Until then, the government had refused to extend the grant for longer than 3 months at a time. After the 'riots' not only was the grant reinstated, but it began to be extended for 12 months period. Yet while these longer extensions might suggest a shift in temporality away from presentism to the long term, the government remains riven with internal disagreement about the expansion of social grants into more universal, permanent, or generous provision. A close look at the grant's regulatory details shows that it remains both temporary and highly exclusionary. For instance, 2022 and 2023 amendments added stringent criteria that require beneficiaries to verify their income on a monthly basis and reapply for the grant every 3 months. The regulations assert again and again that the grants are a '*temporary*' intervention (Department of Social Development, 2022: 11). They also include a work conditionality clause (currently unenforceable) that states that a person only qualifies for the Covid SRD grant if they do not 'unreasonably refuse to accept employment or educational opportunities' (DSD, 2022: 6). These stringent exclusion criteria resulted in a major drop-off in the number of beneficiaries, from a peak of 10.4 million in January 2022 to 7.4 million by January 2023, far less than the 18.3 million people who live below the food poverty line in South Africa (Institute for Economic Justice, 2023). This drop in beneficiaries (and subsequent drop in applications) has served as way to implement a shrinking budget for the grant.

In the face of an ever-threated SRD grant, civil society organisations have had to focus on defending the existing provisions. Members of the Basic Income Coalition have repeatedly demanded government to address the narrowing of eligibility criteria and other administrative hurdles that unfairly exclude up to a third of applicants (Institute for Economic Justice, 2023), and have also launched litigation against the government to challenge stringent exclusion criteria and other unjust aspects of the regulations (Institute for Economic Justice and Socio-Economic Rights Institute, 2022). In large part this activism has been led by formal, long-standing NGOs such as the Black Sash and IEJ, rather than grassroots movements – a lack of widespread demand-making that will be explored further in the next section. This is a continuation of a long-standing trend that has characterised basic income activism in South Africa (Seekings, 2020) and beyond (Fouksman, 2021). While continuing to campaign for the transformation of the grant into basic income, these civil society organisations have thus been forced to focus much of their attention and energies on protecting the existing SRD Covid grant and contesting its regulations and details within a temporality of presentist urgency. And even when civil society could shift focus from protecting the existing Covid grant to demanding a permanent basic income, these demands have remained focused on the urgency of poverty and humanitarian hardship, rather than the structures of inequality or distributory justice.

In short, while Covid's emergency context and crisis framing authorised and expedited increases in public spending and the expansion of cash transfers to those previously expect to rely solely on labour markets, this expansion has not been able to dislodge a long-standing policy paradigm that saw cash transfers as short-term, stop-gap measures rather than long-term redistributory interventions. This affirms Gronbach and Seekings (2021) argument that the Covid-19 pandemic did not constitute a 'critical juncture' in social protection policy. And while this same emergency context revived a Basic Income Coalition made up of activists and civil society, it too got caught in the temporality of crisis that demands emergency reactions rather than structural reforms. By often framing even a more universal basic income as a solution to the 'crises' of hunger and poverty, civil society campaigns also affirmed rather than disrupted (albeit unintentionally) a long-standing tendency to see welfare provisions as offering immediate alleviation of suffering rather than challenging the entrenched relationship between welfare, distributory justice and labour. This framing, as will be discussed in the section below, might itself be delimiting the scope of grassroots demands that challenge workfare.

Views of crisis, from below

It is not only the South African state that expresses ambivalence and contradictory attitudes towards a more permanent shift in social protection provision, but also the very people who would stand to benefit most from such a shift. In October 2020, in between South Africa's first and second waves of Covid cases and lockdowns, we conducted a survey in Johannesburg's inner-city neighbourhood of Jeppestown. Jeppestown was once part of Johannesburg's industrial core, but the majority of Jeppe's factories and warehouses are now shut, though many of the all-male 'hostels' which once housed workers during apartheid are still occupied. Many Jeppe residents live in informally constructed small brick rooms in abandoned factories and warehouses, sharing a tap and a toilet with their neighbours. While this housing is informal, most residents nonetheless pay rent to someone who has laid claim to (or, in local terms, 'hijacked') the building. Jeppestown is also the site of numerous conflicts. Besides being wary of crime, residents also frequently experience evictions ordered by the state and carried out by private security firms. Jeppe has also been a key site of xenophobic violence against migrants from other African nations: 2008, 2015 and 2019 saw the burning and looting of cars and shops owned by foreign nationals (Monson, 2012). Other research has demonstrated the ways in which this violence against migrants is linked to demands and longings for economic mobility and security (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Fouksman, 2020; Misago and Landau, 2022).

The survey aimed to use the Covid SRD grant to elicit people's broader views around the role of the state and social security provision in ensuring both income security and more equitable forms of resource distribution. As noted above, the grant is a significant departure from the South African government's insistence that only those who are physically unable to work (the young, the old and the disabled) should receive cash from the state. Many of the people we surveyed were eligible to receive cash from the state for the very first time in their adult lives, and we sought to capture the complexities and contradictions of their policy expectations and preferences.

With the help of three local residents who worked with us as research assistants, we were able to gather 117 responses to the survey. Our respondents are all Black,[5] and split fairly evenly by gender (44% women, 56% men). 74% of our respondents lived in informal housing (which we used as a proxy for socio-economic status), and 81% had not had any paid work since the beginning of the pandemic. Everyone who answered the survey had heard of the (then relatively new) Covid SRD grant, about half (51%) of those we spoke with had applied for the grant, and about a third (31%) of all of the respondents had received the grant. This meant that about 60% of those who had applied for the grant had been successful and received it.

A key finding of the survey was that our respondents overwhelmingly supported not only the introduction of the Covid grant, but also an expansion of the grant to a more generous amount, and the extension of this grant into a longer term cash transfer that was available to more of the unemployed. Most of the people we spoke with (84%) stated that they supported the introduction of the Covid grant, and 82% thought that the grant amount (350 ZAR) was too small. We also asked if 9 months would be a long enough period for the new grant (at the time of the survey, it was planned as a 6-month intervention), and 78% of respondents said no. When we followed up with a question asking how long the new grant should be implemented for, 45% of our respondents said permanently. We then asked if the South African government should implement a permanent grant that would go to all unemployed people: 74% of respondents said yes. And when asked about the size of this hypothetical permanent grant (where respondents could select from several options), the most frequently selected number (selected by about a third of respondents) was 1860 ZAR – the same amount at the time as the old-age grant, the most generous of South Africa's existing cash transfers.

These responses seem to show a preference and support for an expansive, permanent and more universal form of social security provision via cash transfers – indeed, a preference that seems to directly contradict some of our own earlier, pre-Covid qualitative work with similar populations in Johannesburg, which found a high level of hesitancy around universal, unconditional cash transfers or basic income (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Fouksman, 2020). These findings also echo the University of Johannesburg (UJ)/Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) COVID-19 Democracy Survey, which showed fairly strong (though not unequivocal) support for both the Covid SRD grant (69%) and the idea of introducing a permanent, universal basic income (61%) (Pienaar et al., 2021).

And yet – in looking at other survey questions together with the above findings, contradictions and nuances begin to emerge. In particular, the most surprising finding of the survey came from one of the last questions we asked. After shifting away from the Covid SRD grant to a series of demographic questions, the survey returned to its key theme from a different angle: at the end of the survey, we asked respondents to select the one policy they would like the government to implement in response to the pandemic. Choices included food aid, unemployment grants, a government work programme, free job or business training or business funding. Despite the strong support voiced for cash transfers and more permanent unemployment grants earlier in the survey, unemployment grants (along with food parcels) were an extremely unpopular choice: only 7% of our respondents picked unemployment grants as their intervention of choice (and 5% picked food parcels). Government work programmes were the most popular intervention, with 34% of our respondents favouring those, closely followed by business funding (28%), and free job or business training (24%).

The clear preference for 'productivist' interventions (ones that involve getting people into work or business) over direct cash transfers lies in seeming contradiction with the high levels of support expressed earlier in the survey both for the Covid SRD grant and the idea of a more expansive, permanent unemployment grant reflected both in our survey and in the UJ/HSRC survey. We argue that this paradox points to important nuances in people's views of state policy. Particularly central is a delineation between policies that people are willing to support, those they prefer, and those they demand. The people we surveyed in Jeppe largely supported the idea of a more universal cash transfer. Yet they did not *prefer* it over more productivist interventions, a finding echoed in some of our own and others' previous qualitative work (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Fouksman, 2020; Megannon, 2022: 22). If a policy is supported but not preferred, then it is unsurprising that it is not demanded. This distinction between support and preference is also, as we will argue in more detail below, linked to people's temporal understandings of different policy interventions, with productivist policies seen as engendering long-term transformation and grants understood as necessary measures for the hardships of the present, but not something that can transform, sustain or be counted on in the long term (Dubbeld, 2021; Fouksman, 2020). The differing temporal dimensions of different policies – some good for the immediate present, others for the long-term future – thus play into important differences between the political demands people make on the state, and thus have a key role in the ways demands 'from below' shape policy decisions 'from above'. They also reflect the ways in which civil society has focused on applying pressure on the state through the media, through legal avenues, and through direct negotiation, rather than on grassroots movement building.

Indeed, this lack of demand for more accessible, generous, redistributory and universal cash transfers is directly reflected in the puzzling lack of popular protests or even individual disputes or appeals during the gaps, exclusions and delays in payment or threatened termination of the Covid SRD grant described in the previous section. As noted above, South Africa has a long history of demand-making on the state through protests (Alexander, 2010; Dawson, 2014; Paret, 2021). As discussed earlier in the article, 2021 was a year of particularly fervent mass protest, with the 6 days of widespread and often violent public unrest in July 2021. And yet not only were these protests not explicitly aimed at inequality, redistribution and social protection, but other moments when the Covid SRD grant seemed to be on the brink of termination did not result in mass protests. Nor did the fact that the government failed to pay grants for the months of April and May 2022 following the transition of the Covid SRD grant to a new administrative system, despite the vocal and very public campaign around this from civil society (Institute for Economic Justice, 2022). As discussed earlier, most of the overt activism and pressure that has kept the South African government reinstating the Covid grant despite its obvious reluctance has been driven by professional NGOs and civil society groups rather than by a mass of popular support or demands from below. The lack of popular protests around the frequent pauses, terminations and exclusions of the SRD grant – in other words, the lack of pressure from below – feeds into policy visions from above, giving the South African state leeway to cut or curtail the grant at will.

South African protests often target key sites of state provision or infrastructure, such as municipal offices, schools, libraries, and municipal officials' houses, as well as the blocking of roads. The SRD grant was initially disbursed by the South African Post Office, and it is striking that no protests occurred at post offices during pauses in disbursement. Equally telling is the fact that while millions of potential beneficiaries continue to be excluded from the SRD grant due to administrative or clerical errors (Megannon, 2022; Senona et al., 2021), and millions more were excluded due to the narrowing of eligibility criteria in March 2022, yet again these exclusions did not lead to street protests or other forms of demand-making on the state. In more recent (2022 and 2023) follow-up interviews that we conducted in Jeppestown with SRD grant recipients, some of our interlocutors described the on-again, off-again experience of receiving the grant some months and not others as not only unpredictable but even random, but dismissed as pointless the suggestion of using either collective action or official channels to dispute or complain against incorrect exclusions. This continues a longer pattern of a lack of collective grassroots action in the face of administrative, technological and legal errors, ineptitude or corruption around grant distribution through the 2010s, described in Torkelson (2022).

No doubt, as Webb and Vanqa-Mgijima (in press) argue in this special issue, the 'complex web of text messages, online platforms, and call centres' around the grant's delivery plays a role in discouraging contestation around the grant, and fosters an 'individualized relationship with the state, foreclosing possibilities for a more collective politics'. But so does a broader lack of grassroots political expectations for direct redistribution via cash. James Ferguson (2015) has made the case that the frequent grumbling of social grant recipients while waiting in line to receive their payments (about the length of the line, the size of the grants, etc) indicates that they view these cash payments as something they can expect as a right, as opposed to a form of charity or beneficence for which they should be grateful. Yet other work complicates this argument, demonstrating the way grant recipient can simultaneously critique the grants and yet also express gratitude for them (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Fouksman, 2020; Hochfeld and Plagerson, 2011).

The contradictions expressed within our survey between policy support and policy demands seem to indicate a wide cognitive space between gratitude on the one hand and rights-based claim-making on the other. This space could encompass a range of views, affects and understandings, extending from hope to expectation, from preference to entitlement. We would argue that underpinning this simultaneous support for more expansive cash transfers and preference for productivist state interventions is a temporal dimension, one in which our respondents view cash transfers as something necessary in the present, but not necessarily worth demanding for the future. This was highlighted by the responses to the open-form follow-up question in our survey, which asked people to explain their choice of preferred government intervention. The reasons people gave show a very clear preference pattern tied to a set of binaries and dualities, in which jobs and entrepreneurship were closely tied to ideas of future independence; social mobility; and security, permanence and stability. Unemployment grants and food parcels on the other hand were associated with dependence, temporariness and short-term survival. Responses included statements such as 'people need opportunities so they can support themselves instead of being dependent on the government'; 'we want to be self-sustaining and make our own money'; and that jobs have a better chance at 'killing poverty'.

Interestingly, the aversion to dependence on the government seemed to apply to receiving spending money and food, but not to being dependent on the state for work or business funding, though that too could in theory be seen as a form of cash transfers and reliance on the state. One of our interlocutors directly said ‘we need *money* [from the government] to establish and further grow our own businesses more than anything else, so that we will stop depending on the government’ (our emphasis). This distinction between different forms of money from the state based on differentiation in use demonstrates not only an implied moral preference for productivist or workerist interventions, but also ones that can provide long-term solutions to both personal and societal problems. Indeed, the moral and the temporal seem to be bound up in these responses, with long-term, future-oriented visions carrying a moral inflection. For instance, another respondent told us that ‘if we can manage to grow our businesses stronger we can be able to hire people and help solve the unemployment problem’, echoing the frequent refrain that the entrepreneurial drive is best not only for personal advancement but also for helping the broader community through job creation. This echoes other qualitative findings which show the way the unemployed in South Africa see grants as a pragmatic short-term solution, while job creation is associated with future flourishing (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Dubbeld, 2013, 2021).

This temporal labelling of cash as good for surviving in the moment, in what Lauren Berlant (2007) terms ‘survival time’, and productivist interventions as being good for more long-term and permanent transformation demonstrates why our respondents can both support the former and prefer and demand the latter. This dual focus reflects the arguments of Jane Guyer around the ways the precarity and insecurity of neoliberal capitalism create a dual temporality that emphasises both the immediate present of survival and the idealised, transformed far-future, while hollowing the near-future (Guyer, 2007). But they also echo the temporal logic of the South African state, which as discussed earlier has gone out of its way to frame the Covid SRD grant as a short-term response to a crisis, be it the crisis of Covid or more recently the ‘crisis’ of unemployment, which in the logic of the state only economic growth and job creation can solve in the long-term future.

Conclusion

As this article goes to print, Covid recedes into the background as other crises (inflation, climate, war) loom large. The rhetoric and the hope for ‘building back better’ has been shed along with masks and social distancing. In many places, shifts of the welfare state away from its workfare orientation have proven momentary: the United States ended expanded forms of unemployment support and the expanded Child Tax Credit; the United Kingdom scrapped the slight monetary expansion of Universal Credit. In other places, hopes for this shift continue to linger: Spain, for instance, has not only continued its Covid-era Minimum Living Income (*Ingreso Mínimo* Vital) but pegged it to inflation (El Economista, 2022). In South Africa, civil society continues to fight to make the Covid SRD grant more generous, more accessible and more reliable – and perhaps to expand it into a universal basic income – while the state delimits the scope of the grant in a variety of ways. As noted above, by mid-2023, the South African state extended the grant through March 2024, yet limited the number of recipients due to the imperatives of budgetary concerns rather than social need.

Covid brought into focus long-standing problems with the workfare state, and more generally with the assumption that work can be the main source of income security and a just distribution of resources. The need for more expansive forms of welfare and social protection predated the pandemic, particularly in contexts of extreme unemployment and inequality such as South Africa. There the Covid moment forced an opening up of the welfare system, with working-aged adults receiving cash from the state for the first time. It also revived a campaign around a universal basic income, or at least a broadening of the social grant system to include the unemployed. And yet both the views and actions of the South African state and the residents of Jeppestown that we surveyed reveal a *temporal* logic that sees cash transfers as an interim response to economic hardship, and jobs as the long-term route to economic security, despite the stickiness of South Africa's high unemployment rate. The introduction of the Covid SRD grant has emphasised this temporal commitment to cash as a short-term solution for an acute but bounded state of 'crisis' or 'distress'. And even civil society's committed to longer term visions of an expansion and transformation of South Africa's social grants into a universal basic income have been repeatedly deflected into responding to more short-term emergencies caused by the stop-start, temporary and exclusionary nature of the SRD grant.

In the past century, there have been other historical moments that too have spurred a sense of crisis alongside hopes that the crisis could lead to profound social and economic change. The financial recession of 2008 was also a moment of profound hope for the Left – a hope that the 2008 crisis signalled the death knell of neoliberal capitalism. These hopes proved premature. And yet other moments *have* led to long-term structural change. Moments like the Great Depression of the 1930s and the threat of communist expansion during the Cold War in the 1950s and 60s underpinned the hegemony of mid-20th century Keynesianism and Fordism. But even these crises foreclosed other radical possibilities for refashioning welfare and labour, for instance, via redistributory and labour market interventions that could have decentred the economic and social role of wage work. In parallel, while Covid opened up new policy possibilities, the temporality of crisis has played a role in foreclosing more radical structural reforms that could challenge the entrenched relationship between labour, welfare and distributory justice.

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Notes

1. There is much debate about capitalising the word 'Black' when referring to the racial group. Southern African scholars have historically *not* capitalised 'Black' in opposition to the apartheid capitalisation of 'Native', 'Bantu' and then 'Black'. Black Consciousness movements on the other hand capitalised 'Black', but used it to mean a shared condition of oppression and not a racial identity. While acknowledge that this is an ongoing scholarly debate, we have chosen to capitalise 'Black' to signal that racial identities are not natural categories but are socially and historically produced (Pierre, 2012), as well as to emphasise the endurance of race as an important register for identity and lived experience in South Africa.
2. The Taylor Committee's proposal was for a 100 ZAR (then around 9 GBP) universal monthly payment, to be recouped from the middle class and wealthy via taxes.
3. Those eligible for the Covid SRD grant when it was first introduced needed to be above the age of 18; have no income; not be receiving a grant or any other government support; not receiving or qualifying for unemployment benefits; and not reside in a government funded or subsidised institution (SASSA, 2020). The grant's eligibility originally excluded caregivers who receive the Child Support Grant (CSG) on behalf of children. The criteria were broadened to include caregivers in July 2021 when the grant was reinstated after a 3-month pause.
4. The Covid grant was announced on 21 April 2020 for an initial 6 months. It was extended for a further 3 months in October 2020 (until January 2021), and again for 3 months until end of April 2021. The grant was terminated in April 2021 but reinstated on 25 July 2021 (after a 3-month pause) for a further 8 months (through March 2022). A further 12-month extension was announced in February 2022 (from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023), and again in February 2023 (from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024).
5. While Jeppestown is a predominantly Black low-income neighbourhood, it is home to a diverse (migrant) population from both within South Africa and beyond. We did not ask our survey respondents about their nationality due to the sensitivity of this question in a neighbourhood where xenophobia and xenophobic-based violence is widespread. This is an important limitation as most immigrants were not eligible for the Covid grant.

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