



International  
Labour  
Organization

**100**  
1919-2019

# General Labour History of Africa



**Workers, Employers and Governments**  
**20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries**

---

Edited by Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert

# GENERAL LABOUR HISTORY OF AFRICA



# GENERAL LABOUR HISTORY OF AFRICA

Workers, Employers and Governments,  
20th–21st Centuries

Edited by  
Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert

 JAMES CURREY

In association with the ILO Regional Office for Africa, IISH, and re:work



**international institute  
of social history**





© International Labour Organization 2019  
First published 2019

Published by  
James Currey  
an imprint of  
Boydell & Brewer Ltd  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge  
Suffolk IP12 3DF (GB)  
[www.jamescurrey.com](http://www.jamescurrey.com)

and of  
Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt Hope Avenue  
Rochester, NY 14620–2731 (US)  
[www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com)

in association with  
ILO Regional Office for Africa  
Avenue Jean Paul II  
Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)  
[www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review

The designations employed in ILO publications, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the International Labour Office concerning the legal status of any country, area or territory or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers.

The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles, studies and other contributions rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office of the opinions expressed in them.

Reference to names of firms and commercial products and processes does not imply their endorsement by the International Labour Office, and any failure to mention a particular firm, commercial product or process is not a sign of disapproval.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84701-218-0 (James Currey cloth)  
ISBN 978-1-84701-210-4 (paperback edition)

ISBN 978-92-2-133111-7 (ILO paperback edition)

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

# CONTENTS

*List of Maps and Figures* viii

*List of Tables* ix

*Notes on Contributors* x

*Foreword by Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon, ILO Assistant Director-General  
and Regional Director for Africa* xv

*Acknowledgements* xviii

*The ‘Labour Question’ in Africanist Historiography* 1  
*Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert*

## Part I: Free and Unfree Labour

1 Wage Labour 17

*Andreas Eckert*

2 Precarious and Informal Labour 45

*Franco Barchiesi*

3 Forced Labour 77

*Babacar Fall and Richard L. Roberts*

## Part II: Key Sectors

4 Agriculture 119

*Julia Tischler*

5 Mining 151

*Carolyn A. Brown*

6 Industry and Manufacturing 177

*Patrick Neveling*

- 7 Transport 195  
*Stefano Bellucci*

### Part III: International Dimensions and Mobility

- 8 The International Labour Organization 223  
*Daniel Roger Maul, Luca Puddu and Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani*
- 9 Labour Migration 265  
*Helena Pérez Niño*

### Part IV: Varieties of Work

- 10 Domestic Work 301  
*Deborah Fahy Bryceson*
- 11 Military and Police 333  
*Joël Glasman and Michelle R. Moyd*
- 12 Crime and Illegal Work 361  
*Laurent Fourchard*
- 13 White-Collar Workers 379  
*Dmitri van den Bersselaar*
- 14 Sport, Tourism and Entertainment 405  
*Samuel Andreas Admasie*

### Part V: Entrepreneurs and Self-Employment

- 15 Capitalists and Labour in Africa 425  
*Gareth Austin*
- 16 Entrepreneurial Labour 457  
*Sara S. Berry*
- 17 Professionals and Executives 475  
*Rory Pilosof*

## Part VI: The State, Unions and Welfare

- 18 Labour and the State 495  
*Akua O. Britwum and Leyla Dakbli*
- 19 Trade Unions 523  
*Bill Freund*
- 20 Social Welfare 553  
*Ben Scully and Rana Jawad*
- 21 Mutualism and Cooperative Work 585  
*Samuel A. Nyanchoga*

## Part VII: Conclusions

- 22 The 'Labour Question' in Africa and the World 617  
*Frederick Cooper*

*Select Bibliography* 637

*Index* 718

## MAPS AND FIGURES

### Maps

5.1	Africa's main natural resources	157
9.1	Major migration routes to South African gold mines, 1940–70	276
10.1	Available data on estimates of domestic workers and percentages of female domestic workers in total employment in Africa	332

### Figures

9.1	Internal and outward migratory movements by region, 2005–10	296
10.1	Hexagon of domestic labour relations	306
10.2	Total fertility rates by region, 1950–2012	312
20.1	Active flagship social assistance programmes in middle- and low-income countries, by region and year	578

The editors, contributors and publisher are grateful to all the institutions and persons listed for permission to reproduce the materials in which they hold copyright. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders; apologies are offered for any omission, and the publisher will be pleased to add any necessary acknowledgement in subsequent editions.

## TABLES

1.1	Numbers of wage earners in the main branches of economic activity	38
1.2	Wage and salaried workers in sub-Saharan Africa, 2000–10	42
7.1	Transport and other economic indicators: percentage of distribution of world totals, 1961	205
7.2	Percentage of public transport journeys	207
9.1	Flows of over 100,000 migrants over the 2005–10 period from countries in Africa	278
15.1	Real wages of unskilled workers in the capitals of four British non-settler colonies, 1900–50	437

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Gareth Austin** is Professor of Economic History at the University of Cambridge, specializing in African and comparative economic development. A former editor of the *Journal of African History*, his publications include *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005) and, as co-editor, *Economic Development and Environmental History in the Anthropocene: Perspectives on Asia and Africa* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

**Franco Barchiesi** is an Associate Professor in the Department of African American and African Studies and the Department of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, and a senior editor of *International Labor and Working Class History*. He is the author of *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011).

**Stefano Bellucci** is Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; he is also Lecturer at the Institute for History of Leiden University. He co-edited ‘African Labor Histories’, in *International Labor and Working-Class History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and ‘Labour in Transport: Histories from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), c.1750 to 1950’, *International Review of Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

**Sara S. Berry** is Professor Emerita in the History Department at Johns Hopkins University. Her major publications include *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub Saharan Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) and *Chiefs Know their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power and the Past* (Portsmouth: NH: Heinemann, 2001).

**Akua O. Britwum** is an Associate Professor of Gender and Labour Studies in the Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Her publications include, as co-editor, *Crossing the Divide: Precarious Work and the Future of Labour* (Durban: KZN Press, 2017).

**Carolyn A. Brown** is Professor of History at Rutgers University. Her book, *We Are All Slaves: African Miners, Culture, and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery, Nigeria, 1914–1950* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003) was voted ‘Best Book of 2003’ by the International Labor History Association. She is co-editor of *Africa and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

**Deborah Bryceson** is Honorary Fellow and Professor in the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh, and Senior Research Associate in the International Gender Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. Her publications include *How Africa Works: Occupational Change, Identity and Morality in Africa* (Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 2010) and *Farewell to Farms: De-Agrarianization and Employment in Africa* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1997).

**Frederick Cooper** is Professor of History at New York University. His recent publications include *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014) and *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

**Leyla Dakhli** is a Researcher in the French Center for National Research (CNRS) at the Marc Bloch Centre, Berlin. Her publications include *Histoire du Proche-Orient contemporain* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015) and *Le Moyen-Orient (fin XIXe–XXe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016).

**Andreas Eckert** is Professor of African History at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. Since 2009 he has also been director of the International Research Center for Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History. A former editor of the *Journal of African History*, his works include editing *Global Histories of Work* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016), and he is a regular contributor to the German newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*.

**Babacar Fall** is Professor of History and Education at Université Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar Senegal. As a former Fellow, he is also affiliated to the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. He is the founding director of the Institute of Advanced Study in Saint-Louis, Senegal. His publications include *Le travail forcé en Afrique Occidentale Française: 1900–1945* (Paris: Karthala, 1993) and *Social History in French West Africa: Forced Labor, Labor Market, Women and Politics* (Amsterdam: SEPHIS-CSSSC, 2002).



**Laurent Fourchard** is Research Professor at Sciences Po Paris in the Centre for International Relations (CERI). His publications include *Trier, exclure et policer. Vies urbaines en Afrique du Sud et au Nigeria* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2018), and he is co-editor of *Governing Cities in Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013).

**Bill Freund** is Professor Emeritus of Economic History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. His books include *The African Worker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (3rd edn, Basingstoke/Boulder, CO: Palgrave Macmillan/Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016).

**Joël Glasman** is a Professor of African History at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. His publications include *Les Corps Habillés au Togo* (Paris: Karthala, 2015).

**Rana Jawad** is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Bath. She is founder and convenor of the Middle East and North Africa Social Policy Network and has extensive research and consultancy experience of social policy issues in this region.

**Daniel Roger Maul** is Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Oslo, Norway. His publications include *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization – The International Labour Organization 1940–1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012) and *The ILO: 100 years of Global Social Policy* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019).

**Michelle R. Moyd** is Associate Professor of History at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her publications include *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

**Patrick Neveling** is Senior Researcher in the Historical Institute at the University of Bern, and Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Bergen. He is the co-editor of 'The Making of Neoliberal India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Journals, 2014) and 'Capitalism and global anthropology: Marxism resurgent', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn, 2018).

**Samuel A. Nyanchoga** is a Professor of History and the current Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa; coordinator of security studies at the Tangaza University College; a

Senior Research Fellow at the Nantes Institute of Advanced Studies, France; Fulbright Scholar at Boston College; and Research and Academic Associate at the University of Birmingham and Bath Spa University. His publications include *Consequences of Slavery Heritage at the Kenya Coast* (Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2014) and *Contemporary Issues in Kenyan History and Challenges of Nationhood* (Nairobi: Kolbe Press, 2016).

**Helena Pérez Niño** is Lecturer in Political Economy of Development in the Centre of Development Studies at the University of Cambridge. She has conducted research on migrant labour, export logistics, natural resources and foreign aid especially in Southern Africa.

**Rory Pilossof** is a Senior Lecturer in the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. He is also a visiting Research Fellow in the School of History at the University of Kent and the Principal Investigator on a British Academy/Newton Advanced Fellowship exploring labour relations in southern Africa. He is the author of *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers' Voices from Zimbabwe* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2012).

**Luca Puddu** is a Lecturer in African History and Institutions at Sapienza University of Rome and a researcher at the Department of History, Cultures and Civilizations at the University of Bologna.

**Richard L. Roberts** is the Frances and Charles Field Professor of History at Stanford University. He is the author of eleven books and volumes on the social and economic history of Africa including *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005) and most recently editor, with Annie Bunting and Benjamin N. Lawrance, of *Marriage by Force? Contestation over Consent and Coercion in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).

**Samuel Andreas Admasie** is Regional Representative of the International Institute of Social History in Africa and a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Hargeisa.

**Ben Scully** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. His research focuses on labour, social welfare and economic development in Africa.

**Julia Tischler** is Assistant Professor of African History at Basel University, Switzerland. Her publications include *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation:*

*The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013) investigated late colonial developmentalism.

**Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani** is a Professor of History at the National Open University of Nigeria. A Distinguished Asante Research Award recipient at the University of Georgia, Athens, he is the author of *Britain, Leftist Nationalists and the Transfer of Power in Nigeria, 1945–1965* (London: Routledge, 2006) and *Union Education in Nigeria: Labor, Empire and Decolonization since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012). He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a Member of the Nigeria Academy of Letters.

**Dmitri van den Bersselaar** is Professor of African History at the University of Leipzig. His research interests include the impact of multinational business on local African cultures of work and labour. His works include *The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

## FOREWORD

The *General Labour History of Africa* tells the story of African labour. It is an exposition of how African labour has evolved in different phases of contemporary history. At the time of the Treaty of Versailles, which spurred the creation of the International Labour Organization in 1919, the general motivation of a number of players was the stern belief that 'Universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if it is based on social justice.' Since 1919 the ILO has continued to work to promote social justice, and has improved working conditions, workers' rights and employment creation.

The journey has been turbulent at times. The twentieth century witnessed not only the wrath of two world wars, but also the Great Depression and its associated soaring unemployment and impoverished work conditions. But the complete history of labour needs to be told. While attempts have been made to create a truly global history of labour, the African component has largely been missed. This volume is an immense contribution to filling this gap. It surveys the historical development of African labour, giving the relevant timelines and charting the salient themes. It could not have come at a better time, for the ILO celebrates its centenary in 2019. The volume is a unique contribution to this celebration from an African perspective, as it presents the continent's history and gives it a significantly African voice. This is the first such volume to bring together critical inputs from world-renowned historians and labour experts discussing the evolution of African labour in a focused approach that analyses the issues in a simple but assertive manner.

The volume comes at a crucial time indeed. More than ever before, the significance of labour dynamics has been highlighted and labour issues recognized as the glue of development policy. African economic growth, which has recently been largely jobless, has sparked ever more thoughtful discourse on the social fabric, which is necessary to cushion the effects of growth that does not trickle down to the masses. This is also the time when, led by the United Nations, the world is devoting its resources to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The lessons learned in labour history can spur the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. But it is also a time when Africa has expressed aspirations for its people through the African Union Agenda 2063 and

other frameworks. As Africa looks forward to what needs to be done, we need thorough reflection on where we are coming from. This volume supports this forward-looking process. It looks at various types of labour, and the challenges faced, as they evolved in the period covered.

The ongoing discourse on the future of work, at the ILO and elsewhere, provides even more of a platform to understand our labour history. Africa has and continues to engage with all the future-of-work themes, including work and society, decent jobs for all, the organization of work and production, and the governance of work. The dynamics of labour and how different forces affect labour outcomes are crucial to providing information on how to engage better as the world becomes more technological and more urbanized, and the labour force continues to grow.

As is to be expected, the critical issues that underlie African labour are discussed in this book. The starting point is wage labour, including the precarious and informal labour that characterized Africa in the past and still defines the continent today. With informality a norm rather than an exception in Africa, the informal economy contributes hugely to its GDP and forms a significant source of employment. Informality, unfortunately, is synonymous with decent work deficits.

The volume also traces the evolution of African labour in key economic sectors in African development: agriculture, mining, industry and transport. Agriculture is still Africa's largest employer, but without the development of the other sectors, agriculture will remain static. The volume exposes the need to understand each of the sectoral labour histories, not in isolation but in parallel, to appreciate the linked historical developments in all the economic sectors. It provides an important benchmark of what was possible in the sectors and provides the necessary background for future development and what we should do better going forward.

Additionally, the volume presents the international dimension and mobility of labour as well as the critical attributes of African labour history. A focus is on the development of the ILO and how Africa was embedded into the organization over the years in the midst of such vices as colonialism. The dynamics regarding the formation of the first-ever ILO office in Africa are spelled out, as is the contribution of African discourse to the ILO's agenda. Issues of migrant labour are at the core in the book.

Authors also analyse the varieties of work in African labour history. There is vital elucidation of not only domestic labour, but also military labour, illicit labour, white-collar labour and entertainment labour. The relevance of these types of work cannot be overemphasized. The importance of domestic work has been demonstrated by the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers' Convention, 2011 (No. 189), which

offers specific protection to domestic workers and lays down basic rights and principles requiring member states to take measures favourable to supporting decent work for domestic workers. The histories of the various types of work herein, taken together, form an account of a continuous series of measures undertaken to achieve decent work.

An important category that is also relevant today and has been given space in the book is entrepreneurial labour. In fact, policies to support entrepreneurship, particularly for youth, tend to dominate government objectives and direct industrial policy. The book offers a vital treatise regarding capitalists, entrepreneurship and professional labour.

Furthermore, the role of the state and welfare, presented in the framework of labour and the state, forms a critical part of the book. Discussion revolves around trade unions, social welfare, and mutualistic and cooperative labour. Even today, these institutions play vital roles in the promotion of decent work, which is a collective effort to support social and economic development.

This work, the first of its kind, successfully underscores the importance of African labour. It has collected historical information that was otherwise scattered into one volume, giving significant content for possible future use. The volume shows Africa's resolve to be part of the global initiative to improve its labour, to act decisively and take destiny into its hands.

CYNTHIA SAMUEL-OLONJUWON

ILO Assistant Director-General and Regional Director for Africa

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was possible thanks to a generous grant provided by the ILO Regional Office for Africa. Further support was provided by the International Research Center Work and the Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work) of Humboldt-Universität of Berlin and by the International Institute of Social History of Amsterdam. The ILO Regional Office for Africa made many significant contributions to this publication. Regional Director Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwan enthusiastically embraced the project from the beginning and provided vital support throughout the process. Senior Economist Ken Chamuva Shawa reviewed the manuscript and coordinated the peer review process. Deputy Director Peter Van Rooij played a key role in finalizing the volume. Guebray Berhane Guebray, Joseph Jean Marie Momo and Mary Mugambi provided key communications and administrative support. Chris Edgar and Alison Irvine of ILO Publishing in Geneva also made important contributions at different stages. Beate Andrees, Samuel Asfaha, Mohammed Mwamadzingo and Simon Steyne of ILO Geneva and Sophie de Coninck of ILO Abidjan provided comments on the draft manuscript. Regina Monticone, formerly of ILO Geneva, was pivotal at the very beginning of this project as she helped develop the idea as part of the ILO Century Project. Kidest Getahun of the ILO Office in Addis Ababa offered invaluable administrative support. Many more ILO local staff participated in the organisation of two authors' conferences, on 11–12 December 2013 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and on 10–11 December 2015 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. We are very grateful to them.

The publisher, James Currey (Boydell & Brewer), was crucial in bringing the project into fruition. In particular, we would like to thank Jaqueline Mitchell, James Currey's Commissioning Editor, but also Head of Pre-Press Rohais Landon. Manfred Boemeke has been a brilliant, professional and efficient language editor, who did much more than just standardizing and ameliorating the text. At its start, in 2013, the project benefitted enormously from the support of Anshu Padayachee, then Chief Executive Officer of South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), Firmin Matoko, then Director of the UNESCO Liaison Office with the African Union and the United Nations Economic

Commission for Africa (UNECA), Muna Abdalla then Director of International IDEA Liaison Office to the African Union, and Andreas Eshetè, former President of Addis Ababa University. Above all, our thanks go to Hanan Sabea of the American University in Cairo and G. Ugo Nwokeji of the University of California, Berkeley. Hanan's and Ugo's editorial work was invaluable during the first steps of the project; their companionship is and will always be very important to us. Several other people in different institutions have contributed directly and indirectly to the development of the book. At the African Studies Centre Leiden, Jan-Bart Gewald, now the Director, has been not only a supporter and promoter of the project since its start but enabled the organisation of the 'International workshop on wage labour, capital and precarity in African and global history' on 13–14 March 2015 in Leiden. At re:work, Felicitas Hentschke made sure that things went smoothly. Many colleagues discussed and suggested improvements to the content as well as the structure of the project. Marcel van der Linden, the towering figure in global labour history, gave valuable insights. In this respect, we are grateful also to Leo Lucassen, Marien van der Heijden, and especially Ineke Kelly of the International Institute of Social History of Amsterdam. At Leiden University, Mirjam de Bruijn and Meike de Goede provided support with comments and suggestions. Of the many other colleagues who gave feedback, we would particularly like to mention Pierluigi Valsecchi of the University of Pavia, Mahua Sarkar of the University of Binghamton, Mohamed Salih of the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Mark McQuinn of SOAS University of London, and Peter Waterman with whom the project was discussed just before he very sadly passed away.

The friendship and solidarity expressed by African unionists was very precious indeed and encouraged us to continue throughout the years of bringing this book to completion; especially the two main regional workers' organisations, the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and their respective Secretary Generals, Kwasi Adu-Amankwah and Mezhoud Arezki. Other unionists who contributed with reviews and comments at different stages of the project were Hilma Mote and Rhoda Boateng, who are both researchers and unionists. Craig Phelan of the Solidarity Centre (AFL-CIO) in Abuja has always been a friend to count on for discussions and support.

Finally, we are grateful to the many authors who participated in this project and who patiently bore with us through the project's seven long years. They not only provided excellent chapters but also served as peer reviewers for each other's contributions during the internal cross-peer-reviewing process. We are grateful for the thorough and serious approach they took



to this task, which resulted in sometimes painful decisions. Amongst the authors, we owe particular thanks to Frederick Cooper who wrote the postscript to the book and commented on all the chapters.

Above all, we wish to thank Jacqueline Rutte at the International Institute of Social History: without Jacqueline's excellent managerial skills and personal qualities on many fronts, from the organisation of conferences to communications, this book would not have been possible.

STEFANO BELLUCCI AND ANDREAS ECKERT  
Amsterdam and Berlin, January 2019

# The 'Labour Question' in Africanist Historiography

STEFANO BELLUCCI AND ANDREAS ECKERT

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the International Labour Organization (ILO).<sup>1</sup> The *General Labour History of Africa (GLHA)* is the result of cooperation between the ILO and a group of Africanist labour historians who came together to write a history of African workers and work in Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The *GLHA* is intended, first, to contribute to a substantial understanding of labour in Africa throughout history and, secondly, to advance African labour studies by incorporating insights from the emerging field of global history and its variant, global labour history.<sup>3</sup> Following the insights of global history, the *GLHA* is not the history of the making of the working class in Africa, but rather the history of the complex world of labouring people, which includes the industrial working class as well as many other categories. Indeed, the *GLHA* is the history of all working people, including affluent entrepreneurs, household labourers, careworkers, 'informal' workers and unfree workers.

<sup>1</sup> More information is available at: <https://www.ilo.org/100>

<sup>2</sup> Two GLHA authors' workshops were organized by the editors of this volume, with the collaboration and generous support of the ILO Regional Office for Africa (then based in Addis Ababa); they took place in Addis Ababa on 11–12 December 2013 and in Dar es Salaam on 10–12 December 2015. These gatherings served as fora for discussion and exchange among authors, editors and the ILO itself.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Andreas Eckert, ed., *Global Histories of Work* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden, eds, *Handbook Global History of Work* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

In this introduction, we will provide a brief reflection and survey on African labour historiography in the last century.<sup>4</sup> Our intention is to sketch the wider academic background to this volume, its main concerns, and its place within current intellectual debates. A comprehensive discussion of African labour history in relation to the *GLHA* project, based on the individual chapters, is provided in the conclusions to this volume by Frederick Cooper.

## LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHIES

In the first decades of the twentieth century, scholarly production on labour in Africa was closely linked to the agenda of colonial administrations. Studies on labour were preoccupied with the understanding of African social patterns and movements of people, and they were conducted under the auspices of colonial interests eager to control the African labour force. African labour was scarce and very much in demand for the *mise en valeur* and development of the colonies. It must be emphasized, however, that, until the 1930s, colonial officials and scholars alike conceptualized Africans usually as ‘natural peasants’ and were uncertain about whether Africans, even after decades of the ‘civilizing mission’, would work without direct coercion. Thus, hardly any effort was made to consider labour as a social issue. Typically, in the British colonial administrative apparatus, a ‘labour department’ did not exist, labour problems being usually handled by Native Affairs Departments. This situation remained substantially unchanged until the Second World War, which marked the beginning of decolonization.

Decolonization marked a historical passage in the study of African labour as well. Scholarly production on African labour activism and trade unionism, often starting from the very few workplaces where workers’ organizations were allowed, slowly increased after 1945. In some instances, trade unions played an important role in supporting the struggle for independence of African colonies, and it is not by coincidence that they were the main research

<sup>4</sup> For some recent reflections, see Frederick Cooper, ‘From Enslavement to Precarity? The Labour Question in African History’, in *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins*, ed. Wale Adebani (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017), 135–56; Bill Freund, ‘Sub-saharan Africa’, in *Handbook Global History of Work*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 63–81; Stephen Rockel, ‘New Labor History in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial Enslavement and Forced Labor’, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 86.2 (2014), 159–72.

topic of African labour studies during that period.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, trade unions' claims against foreign capitalists fit well into the anti-colonial agenda. The post-independence reality, though, was one in which nationalist and labour interests were not always congruent, despite the fact that the political elites of young independent African nations often grew out of the labour movement.<sup>6</sup>

Largely influenced by Marxist theories, studies now also emerged on proletarianization.<sup>7</sup> There was a widespread idea that African workers employed in modern sectors such as mining, transport, industry or building could eventually form an African working class. Trade unions were sometimes identified as the uncontested representatives of the African proletariat.<sup>8</sup> This view of history proved to be for a good part teleological. In fact, while the twentieth century did indeed see the making of a working class in Africa, trade unions only represented a tiny proportion of it. At times, different unions and professional associations worked together, for example

<sup>5</sup> Cf. W. S. Mare, *African Trade Unions* (London: Longmans Green, 1949); Walter Bowen, *Colonial Trade Unions* (London: Fabian Society, 1954); W. A. Warmington, *A West African Trade Union: A Case Study of the Cameroons Development Corporation Workers' Union and its Relations with the Employers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); R. W. Williams, 'Trade Unions in Africa', *African Affairs*, 54.217 (1955), 267–79; G. Fischer, 'Syndicats et décolonisation', *Présence Africaine*, 34/35 (1960/61), 17–60.

<sup>6</sup> Sekou Touré from Guinee-Conakry is one example for this connection. See Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. David Webster, 'From Peasant to Proletarian: The Development/Underdevelopment Debate in South Africa', *Africa Perspective*, 13 (1980) 1–15; Walter Elkan, *Migrants and Proletarians: Urban Labour in the Economic Development of Uganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Richard Sandbrook, *Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenyan Case, 1960–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Charles van Onselen, 'Worker Consciousness in Black Miners: Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1920', *Journal of African History*, 14.2 (1973), 237–55; A. G. Hopkins, 'The Lagos Strike of 1897: An Exploration in Nigerian Labor History', in *Peasants and Proletarians: The Struggles of Third World Workers*, ed. R. Cohen, P. C. W. Gutkind and P. Brazier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 87–106.

<sup>8</sup> This happened especially in the case of South Africa; see Gay W. Seidman, 'From Trade Union to Working-Class Mobilization: The Politicization of South Africa's Non-Racial Labor Unions', in *Breaking the Links: Development Theory and Practice in Southern Africa*, ed. Robert E. Mazur (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 223–55; Rob Lambert, 'Political Unionism and Working Class Hegemony: Perspectives on the South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955–1965', *Labour, Capital and Society*, 18.2 (1985), 244–77; Anthony W. Marx, 'South African Black Trade Unions as an Emerging Working-class Movement', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 27.3 (1989), 383–400.

in fighting against European colonialism; at other times, these organizations clashed with one another.

Differences between political and workers' organizations widened after independence. Political leaders of independent countries, former trade unionists among them, were acutely aware that they lacked the resources to ensure that the demands of a citizenry would be met. Many of them built up relations of patronage with power brokers inside the nation, but also clientelistic networks with former colonizers. By this, they undermined democratic processes and the kind of social movements, such as labour movements, that had helped them get into power.<sup>9</sup> Desperate as they were to modernize and industrialize, most African governments sacrificed the needs and interests of rural people.<sup>10</sup>

African labour studies, during the postcolonial years in the 1960s and 1970s, were deeply entwined with the debates on labour and economic policies taking place at the time in newly independent African nations. Labour research was also very much influenced by the then contemporary political debate.<sup>11</sup> A major effect of labour scholars' activism was that academic production remained somehow static or ahistorical. Although of high quality, labour studies were very much confined to national experiences; they were somehow 'Thompsonian', that is, centred on the analysis of the making of *national* working classes.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, these studies represent a respectable literature which informed the following wave of labour studies

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Paul Nugent, *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Some regimes, however, very much emphasized the crucial role of rural labour and rural workers, both in theory and practice. The most notable (and highly ambivalent) case has arguably been Tanzania. See, for example, Leander Schneider, *Government of Development: Peasants and Politicians in Postcolonial Tanzania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sheila T. van der Horst, *African Workers in Town: A Study of Labour in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1964); Willard A. Beling, *Modernization and African Labor: A Tunisian Case Study* (New York: Praeger, 1965); Willard A. Beling and Michael F. Lofchie, *The Role of Labor in African Nation Building* (New York: Praeger, 1968); Peter Harries-Jones, *Freedom and Labour: Mobilization and Political Control on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Francis Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines 1911–1969* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Anthony Clayton and Donald Cockfield Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895–1963* (London: Cass, 1975); Robin Cohen, *Labour and Politics in Nigeria, 1945–71* (London: Heinemann, 1974); Elena L. Berger, *Labour, Race, and Colonial Rule: The Copperbelt from 1924 to Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

in the 1980s, but they somehow overemphasized the proletarianization thesis: that the rise in numbers of wage workers is directly linked to a process of alienation and proletarianization, which includes the beginning of the development of class consciousness in Africa.<sup>13</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, and on the eve of what is now called the neoliberal era, it became increasingly evident that the African working classes did not evolve into a revolutionary proletariat. In the 1980s and 1990s labour studies suffered a decline<sup>14</sup> – with perhaps the notable exception of South Africa, where numerous books and articles continued to be published on that topic.<sup>15</sup> Scholars turned their attention to political issues such as democratization, good governance, civil society, or socio-economic issues such as development, growth, gender, environment, childhood and so on. Labour, although crucial to understanding the political and socio-economic advancement of a society, almost disappeared from the academic research agenda. Social phenomena were increasingly explained through regression analyses and other statistical or economic models. Social sciences came to suffer an inferiority complex vis-à-vis economics and econometrics. For economists, what matters is for African economies to attract foreign direct investment. In this context, labour came to be a cost to be reduced and an ordinary variable for market analysis at best.<sup>16</sup>

The exception that, as it were, proved the rule in this trend towards a *baisse* of labour studies in Africa was Frederick Cooper's monograph *Decolonization and African Society*, published in 1996. With such a dearth of scholarship on the question of labour of Africa, this book provided much-needed intellectual nourishment and soon became one of the most cited studies in African history (and beyond). Interestingly enough, Cooper's work

<sup>13</sup> On this literature, see Bill Freund, 'Labor and Labor History in Africa: A Review of the Literature', *African Studies Review*, 27.2 (1984), 1–58.

<sup>14</sup> On this 'eclipse', see, for example, Jean Copans, 'Pourquoi travail et travailleurs africains ne sont plus à la mode en 2014 dans les sciences sociales. Retour sur l'actualité d'une problématique du XXe siècle', *Politique Africaine*, 133 (2014), 25–44.

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of the often very parochial feature of this literature, see Philip Bonner, Jonathan Hyslop and Lucien Van Der Walt, 'Rethinking Worlds of Labour: Southern African Labour History in International Context', *African Studies*, 66.2–3 (2007), 137–57.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, David Canning, Sangeeta Raja and Abdo S. Yazbeck, *Africa's Demographic Transition: Dividend or Disaster?* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015); for the North African case, see Merih Celasun, *State-owned Enterprises in the Middle East and North Africa: Privatization, Performance and Reform* (London: Routledge, 2001); for the South African case, see J. D. Lewis, 'Promoting Growth and Employment in South Africa', *South African Journal of Economics*, 70.4 (2002), 725–76.

was not read so much as a contribution to labour history but as an argument about decolonization and the complex interplay between the European metropolises, international organizations, the local colonial administrations and African activists that shaped this period.

In the past two or three decades, so-called neoliberal reforms have meant the establishing of representative democracy and privatization in one African country after another. This process has brought an increase in both multi-party elections in Africa and, generally, economic growth. The problem is that growth and democracy went hand in hand with a dramatic increase in social and economic inequalities. Many scholars, especially Keynesians, attribute the increase of inequality to a weakening of the state as the arbiter in economic and social affairs. Others see the surge of inequalities as the result of a generalized neglect of the labour question in politics, academia and the media. Democratic transformations – of course, a positive development – seem not to have positively contributed to the improvement of the living and labour conditions of African workers, who largely remain ‘working poor’.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, at the turn of the millennium, the labour question appears slowly to have re-emerged from the limbo in which academic research had contributed to putting it.<sup>18</sup> This is not only true for Africa but applies to most regions of the world and is closely linked to new approaches that emphasize the importance of international and global perspectives.

## INTERNATIONAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Within the small circles of labour historians, some scholars came to develop, in the 1980s, the so-called new international labour studies (NILS) approach. Methodologically, the NILS was seen to stand in opposition to previously established approaches to labour studies in Africa, which Robin Cohen, for example, called ‘technicist’.<sup>19</sup> The NILS approach has international unionism and industrial relations at its core, and although it could be seen as a precursor of global labour history, at the centre of the NILS labour predicament there are national working classes. Gay Seidman, for example,

<sup>17</sup> The notion of ‘working poor’ was initially elaborated by Sabyasachi Bhattachariya in *The Labouring Poor and their Notion of Poverty: Late 19th and Early 20th Century Bengal* (Noida: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, 1998). For a thorough discussion, developed from the example of India, see Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see the final part of this introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Robin Cohen, *Contested Domains: Debates in International Labour Studies* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

compared labour politics in Brazil and South Africa within the paradigm of the NILS, and he took an important step by moving away from the study of North–South interactions and focusing instead on a South–South comparison.<sup>20</sup> However, by the mid-1990s interest in the NILS as a field of research had declined, in tandem with the end of the socialist experiment.

While the NILS represented a valid initiative towards a transnational and transcontinental study of labour relations and workers' movements, it failed to live up to expectations. In particular, the NILS followed the fate of labour internationalism. The prediction that the 'objective' development of transnational capitalism (through multinational corporations) would create the conditions for 'subjective' transnational labour solidarity (transnational class consciousness) did not materialize.

As appropriately noted by Schler, Bethlehem and Sabar, since the 1990s postcolonial critiques have gained prominence, and labour studies have also come to 'incorporate a conscious rejection of essentialist categories'.<sup>21</sup> Studies of labourers have shifted from their former rigorously materialist orientation to reflect a growing preoccupation with representation, imagery and ideology as the means through which the African working classes negotiate their place in global markets.<sup>22</sup> Concerned with the ethereal spread of postmodernist ideas to labour studies, Frederick Cooper rightly warned against an overemphasis on representations and called for a stronger focus on 'the nitty-gritty of labour'.<sup>23</sup> Many chapters of the *GLHA* take up this approach and attempt to take into considerations the practices of work.

At the forefront of recent developments in history as a discipline is the idea of global history – an approach that has been transforming the study of history over the past few decades.<sup>24</sup> Within this broader context, global labour history has served to open history up to wider reflections that are not limited to the 'traditional' analysis of the industrial working classes, defined

<sup>20</sup> Gay W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970–1985* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Schler, Louise Bethlehem and Galia Sabar, 'Rethinking Labour in Africa, Past and Present', *African Identities*, 7.3 (2009), 288.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 288–9.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'Back to Work: Categories, Boundaries and Connections in the Study of Labour,' in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA, and Africa*, ed. P. Alexander and R. Halpern (London: Macmillan, 2000), 213.

<sup>24</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).



by reference to national borders.<sup>25</sup> By going beyond an analysis of the industrial working class and trade unions, the global labour history approach helps us to see the bigger picture of labour and to identify patterns and trends of labour transformations in Africa over an extended period. In fact, the history of labour in Africa cannot limit itself to the study of industrial sectors or trade unions but must take into consideration labour outside this realm – for example labour in the family, rural worlds, kinship, the informal sector and so on.

One of the main insights of global labour history has been that the male proletarian does not represent the quintessential worker but is rather one among a number of categories of workers whose histories are connected.<sup>26</sup> Analysing work beyond free wage labour and proletarianism became increasingly important, as it allowed for marginalized groups and their activities to form part of labour history. This approach also re-evaluated African labour history, which – as a result of the rather small number of wage workers in all phases of African history – seemed for a long time to be a sideshow, a clear instance of a region that simply does not fit the patterns familiar to a dominant North Atlantic framework.

Global labour history emphasized interaction and entanglements between different world regions, while taking for granted that the growing circulation of goods, people and ideas not only produced common ground, but also disassociations, differences and the search for particularities.<sup>27</sup> There is a certain general tendency within global history of ‘doing history backwards’ and to limit research to identifying the flows and nodal points of globalization.<sup>28</sup> In labour history, this trend finds its expression in the focus on seamen and other mobile sectors of the African labour force, which contributed to the emergence of global commodity and labour markets. While there is nothing wrong with this, it is crucial not to overlook other parts of the workforce – non-plantation rural labour, for instance – as the globalization of labour not only means unbounded mobility, but spatial

<sup>25</sup> For a recent overview, see Andreas Eckert and Marcel van der Linden, ‘New Perspectives on Workers and the History of Work: Global Labor History’, in *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World*, ed. Sven Beckert and Dominik Sachsenmaier (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 145–61.

<sup>26</sup> This is one of the major points made by Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*.

<sup>27</sup> See as an example the special issue ‘Labour in Transport: Histories from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), c.1750 to 1950’, *International Review of Social History*, 59.22 (2014), ed. Stefano Bellucci, Larissa Rosa Corrêa, Jan-Georg Deutsch and Chitra Joshi.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), ch. 4.

immobility as well, and we need to see the contradictions and unevenness of global processes of incorporation.

Moreover, one could cast doubt on the perception of 'the global' manifesting itself in Africa in the form of connections, and instead emphasize disconnection, segmentation and segregation. In general, Africanist labour scholars specifically criticize the idea of workers' 'teleconnections' in global commodity chains put forward by van der Linden.<sup>29</sup> As Franco Barchiesi has pointed out, colonial and postcolonial Africa shows, after all, 'that the globalization of capital did not only provide a minority of unionized workers with new opportunities to converse with the global working class. It has also, and more importantly, excluded and marginalized multitudes of producers, households, and communities.'<sup>30</sup>

The *GLHA* is not only part of an ongoing effort to bring labour history back into Africanist historiography and, at the same time, to imbue labour history with an Africanist perspective, it also seeks to be a pivot for studying labour in Africa from the global perspective. This is why the different topics in these chapters are largely based on five methodological assumptions: 1) labour history is the history of labour movements and trade unions, but also that of non-unionized working people as well as that of employers, entrepreneurs and capitalists; 2) labour history must not overlook the categories of unpaid and unfree workers; 3) comparative studies should be freed from what Marcel van der Linden calls the 'error of contamination',<sup>31</sup> that is, measuring everything happening in one place in complete isolation from processes occurring in other distinct areas; 4) history cannot be seen solely as originating mainly in the North Atlantic world, and then spreading to other societies and continents, given that historical processes can equally find their source in the global South, including Africa of course; and 5) labour history transcends national borders as the perimeter of analysis and gives way to local as well as global connections, between workers, companies (employers or workers) and commodities (the products of labour).

<sup>29</sup> Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, 372–8.

<sup>30</sup> Franco Barchiesi, 'How Far from Africa's Shore? A Response to Marcel van der Linden's Map for Global Labor History', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), 77.

<sup>31</sup> See Marcel van der Linden, *Globalizing Labour Historiography: The IISH Approach*, 2002, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/10/142.html> (accessed 10 January 2018).

## A CENTURY OF THE FREE AND UNFREE

‘Freedom’ and ‘free labour’ stand as central concepts through which the world of labour has been reflected and interpreted at least for the past two centuries. Considering the world of work relations and labour policies, the binomial ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ is of particular importance – especially in view of the centrality of the ideology of ‘free labour’ from the nineteenth century onwards – in slave, post-emancipation and colonial contexts. Indeed, the idea of modern ‘freedom’ helped to shape contemporary political language and provided a set of standards through which social experience is read. First, it created a master narrative that constructed the history of Western societies as a progressive path towards ‘freedom’ and ‘emancipation’, embedded in particular forms of social relations, institutions and values. Secondly, it set this narrative as the model towards which institutions and values developing in different cultural and social contexts should progress, and against which they ought therefore to be evaluated.<sup>32</sup>

In societies where slavery was an objective reality – as in Africa – the distinction between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ became essential, especially once slavery as an ‘institution’ became a public abomination. In these contexts, the clear divide between ‘slavery’ and ‘freedom’ became the source of all kinds of social and political anxieties and fostered various logics of continuity and discontinuity. And even if there seems to be a long-term trend towards ‘free wage labour’, so-called free labour ‘cannot be seen as the only form of exploitation suitable for modern capitalism, but rather as one alternative among several’.<sup>33</sup>

In Africa, slavery died slowly and, as many chapters in this volume show, gave way to a mix of different forms of labour relations. Desperate to make their overseas territories economically viable, colonial administrations,

<sup>32</sup> See Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labour: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350–1870* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden, eds, *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997). See also the articles in the thematic issue ‘Shifting Boundaries between Free and Unfree Labor’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 78.1 (2010), ed. Carolyn A. Brown and Marcel van der Linden.

<sup>33</sup> See Marcel van der Linden, ‘Labour History beyond Borders’, in *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Joan Allen, Alain Campbell and John McIlroy (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010), 368. However, the view that different modes of production coexist within global capitalism and constitute the very nature of its historical development had already been put forward by scholars such as Paul Sweezy, Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin.

although praising the gospel of free labour, resorted to various devices for mobilizing unfree labour. These included forced labour, conscription into the army or police forces, and the recruitment of contract labour by all kinds of dubious means.

The colonial discourse of development that began in the 1930s re-labelled work that otherwise could have been classified as forced labour as 'voluntary work', 'self-help' or 'human investment'. In this process, certain sections of African labour were rendered invisible as workers, and instead constructed as 'beneficiaries', 'participants' and 'volunteers'.<sup>34</sup> The issue of forced labour continued to be debated after independence. In 1962 the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations criticized a number of recently independent African countries, such as Guinea and the Ivory Coast, for having set up new forms of forced labour in the form of compulsory labour services for young people. As Daniel Maul points out: 'To be accused of a "classically colonial crime" such as forced labour was particularly hard for the postcolonial nations to stomach', and they reacted very bitterly.<sup>35</sup> As many chapters in this volume suggest, the problem of 'unfreedom' never went away: it is diffused and can be found in many sectors or embedded in various labour relations. In this regard, one widely discussed and highly controversial aspect is child labour. According to the ILO, in 2016 Africa had the largest number of child labourers worldwide: 72.1 million African children were estimated to be labouring, 31.5 million in hazardous work.<sup>36</sup> This is without any doubt a real issue, but there is a danger of thinking of it as just another peculiar feature of African culture.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Benedetta Rossi, 'What "Development" Does to Work', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 92 (2017), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940–70* (Basingstoke and Geneva: Palgrave Macmillan and ILO, 2012), 265. For a detailed long-term view on continuities of forced labour, see Alexander Keese, 'Hunting "Wrongdoers" and "Vagrants": The Long-term Perspective of Flights, Evasion, and Persecution in Colonial and Postcolonial Congo-Brazzaville, 1920–1980', *African Economic History*, 44 (2016), 152–80.

<sup>36</sup> International Labour Office, *Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends, 2012–2016* (Geneva: ILO, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> For a complex and differentiated view, see Gerd Spittler and Michael Bourdillon, eds, *African Children at Work: Working and Learning in Growing Up for Life* (Münster: LIT, 2012). For a historical perspective, see Beverly Grier, *Invisible Hands: Child Labor and the State in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005). Regrettably, a chapter on child labour for this volume could not be finalised, due to the complexity of the issue and differing views.

In 2016 the ILO also estimated that ‘there were a total of over 9.2 million victims of modern slavery in Africa’.<sup>38</sup> Immigrant workers from Africa are part of this number. The question is how to label all those Africans who by their own initiative cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy or Spain, or the Atlantic to the Canary Islands, to seek wage labour. Those Africans who, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, were sent across the Atlantic to work on slave plantations in the Americas were coerced, and they were called ‘slaves’. Today’s migrants, however, are in some ways the freest of the free: ‘they not only agree to leave Africa for Europe, but they go to great effort and great risk to do so’.<sup>39</sup> This is certainly an issue that will require further analysis.

To conclude, labour always was, and remains, a profoundly political, fundamentally social, and economically crucial question. The chapters in this volume attempt to contribute to the understanding of Africa by offering analyses and insights on many different aspects of the history of African working people over the past hundred years. The *General Labour History of Africa* is both a comprehensive reference book and a catalyst for advancing the study of African labour history, understood here as the history of those who produce wealth and well-being often in silence and often in poor conditions and to whom this book is dedicated.

## STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

This volume comprises six parts plus a conclusive section. These subdivisions are concomitant with various aspects connected to the study of African labour history. As stated by various authors, the twentieth century is the century of the expansion in Africa of one particular form of labour relation: free wage labour. However, this does not mean that, between 1900 and today, free wage workers were the overwhelming majority of the African labour force. On the contrary, for most of the twentieth-century wage workers remained a minority in comparison with tributary, household and unfree workers. But the century of wage labour means that since 1900, free wage workers have progressively increased in proportion to all others, and today free salaried workers constitute certainly a substantial portion of workers in Africa, especially in relation to unfree forms of labour relations. For these reasons, the first section of this book deals with free and unfree labour,

<sup>38</sup> International Labour Organization, *Regional Brief for Africa. 2017. Global Estimates of Modern Slavery and Child Labour*, <https://goo.gl/9MEqM7> (accessed 30 January 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, ‘From Enslavement to Precarity?’, 140.

containing an historical overview of wage labour in Africa (Chapter 1), the history of precarious and informal labour (Chapter 2) as well as the history of unfree forms of labour (Chapter 3). Part 2 focuses on sectors representing the emergence and development of wage labour in Africa: agriculture and plantations (Chapter 4), mining (Chapter 5), industry (Chapter 6) and transport (Chapter 7). An important aspect of African labour history of the period under consideration is the internationalization of the labour question, which occurred also with the creation of international organizations such as the ILO (Chapter 8) and labour mobility or international migration (Chapter 9). These histories are dealt with in the third part of this volume. Part IV, on varieties of work, contains essays dealing with labour sectors or situations where 'classic' labour categories do not hold. These include African domestic work (Chapter 10) and work in semi-legal or criminal activities (Chapter 12). In both sectors, the borders between free and unfree as well as between various forms of labour relations are blurred. The chapters on labour in the security sector (Chapter 11), on white-collar labour (Chapter 13) and on sport, tourism and entertainment (Chapter 14) are also part of the fourth section. In these cases, complexities of definition arise from the fact that in these sectors it is possible to find destitute workers next to extremely rich ones, managers or 'stars' who are self-employed. A comprehensive labour history of Africa cannot do without the history of employers. Thus, the fifth section of this book presents a history of capitalists (Chapter 15) and entrepreneurs more generally (Chapters 16 and 17). Finally, an important aspect of contemporary African labour history is the existing relationship between labour and the state and public structures. Part VI includes chapters on labour legislation (Chapter 18) and cooperativism and mutualism (Chapter 21). The histories of African trade unions (Chapter 19) and the welfare state (Chapter 20) are also part of this section. The concluding section (Chapter 22) contextualizes the contributions to this volume within broader debates on the place of African labour in world history.



PART I

# FREE AND UNFREE LABOUR





# ONE

## Wage Labour

ANDREAS ECKERT

Department of Asian & African Studies and International  
Research Collegium 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global  
History' (re:work), Humboldt University Berlin

### WAGE LABOUR, AFRICAN LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY AND GLOBAL LABOUR HISTORY

Karl Marx defined the worker as a category that does not apply to all times and places. According to Marxist theory, the worker becomes a meaningful social category only when labour power becomes a commodity, that is, when a class of people without access to the means of production is created. In this context Marx famously assumed that labour power in capitalism can become a commodity in only one way, namely through free wage labour in which the worker 'as a free individual can dispose of his labor power as his own commodity' and 'has no other commodity for sale'.<sup>2</sup> This powerful idea led to a rather narrow concept of the working class. As Marcel van der Linden put it: 'If only the labor power of *free* wage laborers is commodified, it implies the "real" working class in capitalism can only consist of such workers.'<sup>3</sup>

As questionable as Marx's hypothesis may be, for a long time it appeared self-evident, as it seemed to correspond to the process by which

<sup>1</sup> For some of the points developed in this chapter, see Andreas Eckert, 'Capitalism and Labor in Sub-Saharan Africa', in *Capitalism: The Reemergence of a Historical Concept*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Marcel van der Linden (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 165–85.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 272.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 19.

a proletariat was formed in the North Atlantic region.<sup>4</sup> In this context, two assumptions seem to be important. First, there was a fundamental change in the mid-nineteenth century linked with industrialization, when new ideas and work practices emerged. Work was legally codified, and from then on established the link between the individual and broader social groups, and especially the nation state: labour became the basis of the social and political order.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the nation state and the emerging welfare state, the difference between work or labour (in the sense of gainful employment, largely performed by men) and non-work (including other activities, for example at the household level, and largely performed by women) developed. Moreover, the difference between having work in the sense of gainful employment and being unemployed was reflected in the language and the statistics of the time and also became part of social policy.<sup>6</sup> Until this period, *Arbeit, travail*, 'work' and 'labour' had been defined in different ways but had never been limited to marketable work.<sup>7</sup> But from the nineteenth century onwards, in the industrialized world, work came to be defined more or less exclusively as gainful occupation, with wage labour as its most important and most widespread form.<sup>8</sup>

Studies on the British Empire have argued that anti-slavery played a crucial role in the process of privileging wage labour within the Atlantic-centred capitalist economy. Within the anti-slavery movement, the question of whether slavery would be clearly separated and rendered excisable from other forms of labour remained an open question for a while. In the end a narrowing definition of wage labour emerged that was clearly distinguished from slavery, and workers' organizations used assertions of maleness,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Bénédicte Zimmermann et al., eds, *Le travail et la nation: histoire croisée de la France et de l'Allemagne* (Paris: Éditions de la MSH, 1999); Jürgen Kocka, 'Work as a Problem in European History', in *Work in a Modern Society: The German Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective*, ed. J. Kocka (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 1–16.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur* (Paris: Belin, 1984); Bénédicte Zimmermann, *La constitution du chômage en Allemagne: entre profession et territoire* (Paris: Éditions de la MSH, 2000). The emergence of the welfare state is a good example of the fact that capital has been engaged with taming the excesses of some of its constituents, including wage workers, in the interests of stability. See Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Keith Thomas, *The Oxford Book of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale: chronique du salariat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

whiteness and Englishness to make claims.<sup>9</sup> This development had significant consequences for the ways in which African labour would be conceptualized: 'At a time when European elites were learning to think about workers as a class, they were confronting Africans as a race.'<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, much of the labour historiography on the North Atlantic realm (and beyond) focused on wage labour.<sup>11</sup> African labour history did not make a difference. Especially in its heyday between the late 1960s and early 1980s, the history of work in Africa was often treated as the history of wage labour. This chapter attempts to clear some paths in entering a vast subject by linking major related historiographical debates with the presentation of some crucial transformations in the ambivalent history of wage labour in twentieth-century Africa. It mainly looks at four broad thematic fields in which wage labour features prominently: first, labour mobilization in agrarian contexts that do not easily fit into the categories of 'peasant' or 'capitalist' agriculture; second, South Africa, probably the only region south of the Sahara where something like Marx's vision of original accumulation – the forceful removal of most cultivators from the land and the legal and administrative structure that enforced this process – took place; third, colonial imaginings of a working class, the role of labour struggles and the complexities of the proletarianization process during the decolonization period; and fourth and finally, the stagnation and often relative decline of formal wage employment, and the rise of 'informality' and 'precarity' in independent Africa.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1970s and early 1980s labour history was regarded as one of the most vibrant subfields of Africanist historiography. 'No subject has in recent years', Bill Freund proudly announced in 1984,

so intruded into the scholarly literature on Africa as the African worker. Labor has become a fundamental issue to those who seek to develop African economies or to revolutionize African polities. The elucidation and debate

<sup>9</sup> Thomas C. Holt, 'The Essence of the Contract: The Articulation of Race, Gender, and Political Economy in British Emancipation Policy, 1838–1866', in *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*, Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt and Rebecca J. Scott (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 33–60.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'African Labor History', in *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 100.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Allen et al., eds, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> It should be added that this chapter almost exclusively deals with developments in sub-Saharan Africa, while a few references are made to developments in North Africa, mainly Egypt.

about the relationship of labor to historical and social issues is currently under way over an impressive range of places and a number of languages.<sup>13</sup>

The historians whose work Freund presented and discussed reinterpreted the colonial period as a period when capitalist modes of production were introduced to Africa. Most authors stressed the autonomy of the working class, whose situation was rarely connected with the colonial situation. Much emphasis was laid instead upon the specific needs of capital in Africa at different times and different places. Many studies also emphasized what Robin Cohen called 'hidden forms of consciousness among African workers', which were placed into contrast with more conventional forms of labour resistance such as strikes.<sup>14</sup> A number of comprehensive collected volumes were published, each representing a specific pattern of African labour history.<sup>15</sup> The most vibrant historiography on labour could be found, not surprisingly, in South Africa, where wage labour played a comparatively important role.<sup>16</sup> From the 1970s to the 1990s the historiography on labour in North Africa, especially in the case of Egypt, also strongly focused on working-class and labour movements, and, as in the case of their sub-Saharan counterparts, with strong reference to E. P. Thompson.<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1980s African labour history – as labour histories of other world regions – ceased to generate the kind of intellectual excitement that it had before. There are numerous reasons for this. One was probably the fact that labour history was too embedded in the metanarrative of

<sup>13</sup> Bill Freund, 'Labor and Labor History in Africa: A Review of the Literature', *African Studies Review*, 27.2 (1984), 1. This article offers an excellent historiographical overview on African labour history in its heyday.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Cohen, 'Resistance and Hidden Forms of Consciousness among African Workers', *Review of African Political Economy*, 19 (1980), 8–22.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds, *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (London: Longman, 1975); Peter C. W. Gutkind et al., eds, *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978); Michel Agier et al., eds, *Classes d'ouvrières d'Afrique Noire* (Paris: Karthala, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Bill Freund, 'Labour Studies and Labour History in South Africa: Perspectives from the Apartheid Era and After', *International Review of Social History*, 58.3 (2013), 493–519.

<sup>17</sup> Zachary Lockman, 'Reflections on Labor and Working-Class History in the Middle East and North Africa', in *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Berne: Peter Lang, 2006), 117–46. Related studies include Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Ellis Goldberg, *Tinker, Tailor and Textile Worker: Class and Politics in Egypt, 1930–1952* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

proletarianization.<sup>18</sup> This thesis brings together a number of processes, and while historians have never been so naive as to assume that the story of proletarianization is everywhere the same, they treat the overall trend as universal: cultivators and artisans are deprived of access to the means of production, they move to cities or are forced into insecure wage labour jobs in the agrarian sector, their skills are devalued; in the process, workers develop a sense of their collective identity as the sellers of labour power and a class identity, they form trade unions and other labour organizations, they go on strike and they collectively challenge capital. Accordingly, most Africanist labour historians of the 1970s and 1980s assumed that Africa was becoming 'proletarianized', that its working class was growing and was becoming more self-conscious. However, fundamental questions remained. How did so many Africans come to depend at least partly on wages for their livelihood? And how did Africans try to redefine categories and practices imposed on them, such as private property, time and discipline? How did they attempt to seek alternatives to wage labour in responding to their growing interest in purchased commodities?<sup>19</sup>

The decreasing interest in labour history since the 1980s also reflected the fact that organized labour was on the decline in Africa, as elsewhere in the world. Unionization and worker solidarity had not brought about radical political transformation, as many labour historians, among others, had hoped. In industrial regions such as the Zambian Copperbelt, global trade arrangements and economic policies had changed employment patterns, reduced union membership and denuded sectors that used to offer employees regularized wages and benefits.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, political changes altered the landscape of workers' rights and representation, as the push towards multi-party democracies often fractured and weakened the political clout of unions and workers' organizations.<sup>21</sup> In Africa, job insecurity is the norm, not the exception. Not only in Africa, but in many parts of the world, masses of poor people who had left the countryside in search of a better life were not turned into proletarians. Instead, they were often 'recruited into informal slums where they eke out a living via a complex range of livelihood

<sup>18</sup> The following paragraph is based on Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12f.

<sup>19</sup> Cooper, 'African Labor History', 115f.

<sup>20</sup> James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Miles Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia: Labour and Political Change* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Emily Lynn Osborn, 'Work and Migration', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History*, ed. John Parker and Richard Reid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203.

strategies to which agriculture and formal sector wage labour alike are often marginal'.<sup>22</sup> The relative decline of wage labour also produced what has been called a crisis of masculinity. Young men whose social power long rested on their ability to earn wages increasingly found themselves in a more precarious position. In turn, others, notably women and pensioners, acquired new powers and possibilities. This transformation is partly due to the relative expansion of work in service industries that are more open to women than the 'blue-collar' industrial jobs of the past.<sup>23</sup>

In short, the narrative of proletarianization did not work in Africa. The penetration of wage labour was comparatively late, uneven and contested, and wage labour coexisted with complex non-capitalist relations. During the twentieth century, even in South Africa, few people had an entire 'working life' that was devoted to wage labour. However, it would be wrong to replace the older exclusive focus on wage labour simply with a new priority on informal and precarious work.<sup>24</sup> As important as it is to carefully identify structure and history where many observers only see 'informality', and to pay heed to the ways in which people make their living beyond wage labour – on the margins, in circumstances that are both precarious and unpredictable – it remains a crucial task for African labour historiography to bring out 'the variety of ways in which wage labour became part of people's lives in particular locations'.<sup>25</sup> This effort echoes one of the aims of 'global labour history', namely to locate the extensive and complicated 'grey areas' replete with transitional locations between the 'free' wage labourers and other forms of labour, to take into consideration that households often combine several modes of labour and to have an eye for the possibility that individual

<sup>22</sup> James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>23</sup> For the South African context, see Franco Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011). Among the fast-growing literature on other parts of Africa, see Aili Mari Tripp, *Changing the Rules: The Politics of Liberalization and the Urban Informal Economy in Tanzania* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Dmitri van den Bersselaar, 'Old Timers Who Still Keep Going: Retirement in Ghana', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, 22.3 (2011), 136–52. The central role of working women in urban Egypt in keeping their families afloat is highlighted by Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> See the chapter by Barchiesi in this volume.

<sup>25</sup> Cooper, 'African Labor History', 103; Osborn, 'Work and Migration', 203.

labourers can combine different modes of labour, both synchronically and diachronically.<sup>26</sup>

The observation that full-time wage labour over the course of an entire career was not a global norm, but rather the exception in many parts of the world, led to the insight that the male proletarian does not represent the quintessential worker but is rather one among a number of categories of workers whose histories are connected. Analysing work 'beyond wage labour' becomes increasingly important as it allows for marginalized groups and their activities to form part of labour history. 'Free' wage labour is more and more regarded not as *the* capitalist norm, but as one (important) alternative among several forms of exploitation suitable for modern capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

## LABOUR MOBILIZATION AND LABOUR ARRANGEMENTS IN AGRARIAN CONTEXTS

The arguments of both modernization theorists and Marxists often rested on assumptions about the 'backwardness' of Africa's rural economies. Again, in the 1970s one important historiographical branch highlighted rural proletarianization (especially in the context of southern Africa) and employed a rather linear view of agrarian change, which interpreted proletarianization as the last stage of a direct sequence leading from the independent to the impoverished peasant, and finally to the (migrant) worker.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, social histories of rural labour highlighted the complexities and shifts in labour arrangements, especially in the context of cash-crop production.

<sup>26</sup> Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Eckert, ed., *Global Histories of Work* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study on Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', in *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, ed. Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 180–234. Critical of this approach are Terence Ranger, 'Growing from the Roots. Reflections on Peasant Research in Central and Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5.1 (1978), 101–7; Frederick Cooper, 'Peasants, Capitalists, and Historians', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7.2 (1981), 284–314. The interest in African peasants (and their role in capitalist development in Africa) in the 1970s is reflected in numerous collected volumes and monographs. See Martin A. Klein, ed., *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980); Robin H. Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979); Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979). See the chapter by Tischler in this volume.



Colonial governments (and their predecessors) generally showed little interest in the conditions under which Africans worked for each other in small-scale farming. Crop production was often based on flexible relations of production, neither 'peasant' nor 'capitalist'. In general, the commercialization of agricultural production led to an increase in the use of hired labour in African rural economies, although in most African rural areas hired workers never provided a significant part of the total labour devoted to agricultural production. During the twentieth century, agricultural labour remained to a large extent 'family labour'.

The extent of wage employment varied considerably. It was most common in the cocoa economies of Ghana and Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> In her classic study on Ghana, Polly Hill, in 1963, noted: 'During the first stage of the migration the farmer depended on family labour and his cash outlay on day-to-day operations was possibly negligible ... The second stage ... was reached when the farmer had successfully established a sufficient area of bearing cocoa to support a labourer from its proceeds.'<sup>30</sup> In essence, Hill argued that, from the 1890s, Ghanaian cocoa farmers acted according to capitalist principles of profit motive and market forces, but they drew upon local resources such as established patron–client networks and kinship ties to meet labour demands.<sup>31</sup>

Later work on cocoa production in Ghana further stressed regional differences in the recruitment of paid workers.<sup>32</sup> The period after the Second World War, with booming world markets for crops, saw a significant increase in the demand for agricultural labour. According to the report of the Gold Coast Labour Department, in 1951–53 3,391 cocoa farmers in

<sup>29</sup> The best study on this development is Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). The following paragraphs draw heavily from this insightful study.

<sup>30</sup> Polly Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 188. For a careful evaluation of this book and its implications for consequent research, see Gareth Austin's introduction to a reprint of Hill's *Migrant Cocoa-Farmers* (Hamburg: LIT, 1997), ix–xxviii.

<sup>31</sup> For an example from Cameroon on the integration of commercial farming into the local economy and the importance of pre-colonial commercial networks and labour recruitment patterns, see Andreas Eckert, 'African Rural Entrepreneurs and Labor in the Cameroon Littoral', *Journal of African History*, 40.1 (1999), 109–26.

<sup>32</sup> Inez Sutton, 'Labour and Commercial Agriculture in Ghana in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Journal of African History*, 24.4 (1983), 461–83; Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

Ashanti employed over 30,000 labourers, exclusive of 'family workers'.<sup>33</sup> More important than this trend is Sara Berry's insight into the importance of 'exploitation without dispossession' for the mobilization of rural labour. Those who controlled land well suited to cocoa production often leased it to entrepreneurial strangers who in turn obtained labour through a variety of arrangements, from using kinsmen to casual labour by strangers, until the trees were bearing. More labour came from casual labour migrants and hired labourers. In West African areas of cocoa production, African farmers were often able to attract seasonal migrant labour, especially from less favourably endowed regions. These migrants tended to replace slaves who had left to become free peasants or free labourers themselves.<sup>34</sup>

The possibilities of exploitation in such a system were limited. Planters could not exploit workers too intensely or prevent others from gaining access to land and labour, because their own security of tenure and ability to recruit labour depended on connections of community and clientage. In the course of time, new planters faced increasing difficulties in getting started, and land disputes became more widespread, but this did not (yet) lead to what Marx has called 'original accumulation'.<sup>35</sup> In fact, at least partly in order to avoid proletarianization, colonial administrations often tended to discourage the sale of land among the local population. This went hand in hand with the decision not to introduce compulsory land registration and an ongoing interpretation of 'customary law' as opposed to private and collective land alienation. The hope of preventing the appearance of a landless class that would be difficult to control very much fuelled this policy.<sup>36</sup>

In essence, in those parts of Africa that had not been deeply affected by the slave trade or by slavery, African cultivators were faced with a colonial state whose presence was highly uneven and with local elites whose capacity to manipulate the system in their own favour was rather varied. This resulted in a patchwork of economic conditions across the continent, ranging from islands of European-controlled plantations and mines surrounded by larger labour catchment areas, to regions where African farmers developed,

<sup>33</sup> Berry, *No Condition is Permanent*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Gareth Austin, 'Cash Crops and Freedom: Export Agriculture and the Decline of Slavery in Colonial West Africa', *International Review of Social History*, 54.1 (2009), 1–37.

<sup>35</sup> Carola Lentz, *Land, Mobility, and Belonging in West Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Catherine Boone, *Property and Political Order: Land Rights and the Structure of Conflict in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Gareth Austin, 'Capitalism in the Colonies', in *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, vol. II, ed. Jeffrey G. Williamson and Larry Neal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 327.

as described above, sophisticated systems of labour mobilization in the production of cash crops and partly accumulated considerable wealth and influence. In other zones, outlets for produce were limited, and the seasonal export of male labour power to plantation and mining areas represented the only possibility for buying important commodities and paying taxes. Finally, in many areas, Africans could simply evade efforts to exploit them but could generate little economic surplus.

During the colonial period and afterwards, women remained the bedrock of food production. In some areas, women managed to extend their role in agriculture into producing cash crops and thus played a bigger role in agricultural labour than the colonial regimes intended. In the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, cotton cultivation enabled women to acquire a stake in production, but, in the context of labour migration and increasing constraints on the rural economy, they again became more dependent on remittances from male wage earners working elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Women's centrality in both agricultural production and household reproduction thus led to increasing pressures, especially from male elders, to leave out-migration to the more dispensable young males. Moreover, especially in southern Africa but also in Kenya, colonial administrations enforced rigorous laws to prevent women from moving to cities, although even in the face of such harsh policing, women asserted their own space in urban life and occupied occupational niches such as cooking, brewing and prostitution.<sup>38</sup>

## SOUTH AFRICA

It is not at all evident that, during the colonial period, many Africans wanted to commit themselves to a life of wage labour. On the other hand, Africans did not simply resist wage labour in all its forms. For instance, a period of wage labour could enable a young man to improve a farm or

<sup>37</sup> Erez Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859–1960* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For an incisive study on cotton production in Mozambique, see Allen Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938–1961* (London: James Currey, 1996). The author emphasizes that, in many regions of Mozambique, cotton production was imposed on women because men were away working in mines.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33, 125; Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in the South African Industry, 1900–1980* (London: James Currey, 1992); Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

plant trees, so that wage labour became a particular moment in a life cycle that embraced different economic activities. South Africa might be regarded as an exceptional case, where the systematic alienation of land since the late nineteenth century produced a workforce resembling the proletariat of industrial Europe. But even here, some people managed to work 'for no man – black or white', such as the sharecropper Kas Maine as portrayed by Charles van Onselen.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the mineral discoveries in the second half of the nineteenth century and the subsequent expansion of the industrial sector of the economy led to the emergence of an industrial workforce that included thousands of European immigrants and a large number of Africans. The workforce in the South African mines was divided along racial lines, whereby Europeans were assigned to supervisory positions while Africans were relegated to unskilled and menial tasks. The Land Act of 1913 consolidated a policy of depriving the vast majority of black South Africans of land ownership. This Act was crucial in driving down black real wages for two reasons. It not only reserved 93 per cent of the land to whites but also prohibited African tenancy on white-owned land. Before 1913, sharecrop tenancy had probably been the most important way by which black farmers could sell produce to the market, rather than selling their labour power.

The key to the capitalist character of South African development can be located in agriculture. Since the seventeenth century a culturally and socially distinct landowning class had been emerging, one that tightened its grip on land in the context of industrialization, forcing tenants to become wage labourers and bringing about a landless African proletariat in the process. 'Reserves' introduced by the South African state increasingly became dumping grounds for Africans who were no longer 'useful' to the capitalist economy. The attempts of mine owners to reduce labour costs sparked off confrontation with European workers and culminated in a large-scale strike in 1922.<sup>40</sup> Although the strike was defeated, white workers were able to use their voting power and helped to elect a new government in 1924 that introduced a number of reforms that were intended to co-opt white workers and set them apart from black workers. Despite their lack of legal rights, black workers began to organize themselves and launched numerous strikes. Black workers continued to protest against their harsh working conditions and low wages under the apartheid regime. It is a commonplace that the

<sup>39</sup> Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Krikler, *White Rising: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

South African trade union movement played a pivotal role in the anti-apartheid struggle and remained a powerful force following the transition to black majority rule in 1994.<sup>41</sup>

Much of the older literature on South African labour employed a 'from kraal to compound' approach. Related interpretations emphasized the linearity of the process of migrant labour, the power of the capitalist colonial state and the settlers, the complicity of African elites and the irreversibility of labour migration as incomplete but inevitable proletarianization.<sup>42</sup> The literature on South African labour history has undergone a remarkable transformation during the past four decades, which, given the significant influence it has exerted upon labour historiography on Africa in general, is instructive for the changing perspectives on the history of wage labour south of the Sahara. What remains a telling lacuna in much of the literature on wage labour is an analysis of 'what people do when they work, why they do it, and how workers and managers alike try to shape the pace, intensity, and quality of what gets done'.<sup>43</sup>

In the late 1970s a number of South African social historians became aware of the considerable distance between the analytical concept of 'class' and the concrete local experiences of 'real' classes with their overlapping ideologies and practices. A crucial study in this context was Charles van

<sup>41</sup> For a good introduction to the complex history of twentieth-century South Africa in which the aspect of labour plays a crucial role, see Robert Ross et al., eds, *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 2, 1885–1994* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa, 1939–1948* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Frederick Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 5, already noted this thirty years ago. Elsewhere, Cooper emphasized in his critique of poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches the importance of the 'nitty-gritty of labour', and noted that we should not assume that 'people spent all day thinking about who they are; they had other things to do'. Frederick Cooper, 'Back to Work: Categories, Boundaries and Connections in the Study of Labour', in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa*, ed. Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 213. There are, of course, exceptions confirming that rule, and recent research on the 'informal' or 'non-wage sector' provides very careful descriptions on work practices. See Trevor H. J. Marchand, *The Masons of Djenné* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009). A few anthropologists also offered impressive ethnographies of the nitty-gritty of work of herders and hunters in West Africa. See Gerd Spittler, *Hirtenarbeit. Die Welt der Kamelhirten und Ziegenhirtinnen von Timia* (Cologne: Köppe, 1998).

Onselen's *Chibaro*, in which the author presented a rich and varied history 'from below'. Capital accumulation and social control are dominant themes in *Chibaro*, almost organizing principles of the narrative, and black wage workers are frequently portrayed as victims of an omnipotent capitalist class. 'The compound', van Onselen emphasized, was 'the college of colonialism, that did much to rob Africans of their dignity and help mould servile black personalities'.<sup>44</sup> He describes a vibrant workers' culture, but this culture was largely either the product of drawn-out struggles with capital or the result of the capitalists' strategy of social control. Drunkenness, loafing, theft, desertion, witchcraft and the Watchtower movement were the 'hidden struggles' with capital through which workers constructed a class consciousness; at the same time, employers saw mine dancing and sport as a means of defusing class consciousness. Liquor drew men to the mines and held them there by raising their consumer needs; education and religion produced a disciplined and acquiescent workforce; and even sex serviced the needs of the industry.<sup>45</sup> Van Onselen's work definitely opened new and important horizons for the history of wage labour in Africa, but he underestimated the range of experiences and cultural resources that shaped the world view of migrating mineworkers. As he saw resistance as the black miner's natural response to his environment, he inverted into working-class values the vices – such as drunkenness, theft and laziness – through which Europeans had given visibility to Africans. At the same time, by portraying culture in terms of response rather than initiative, or in terms of employers' strategies, he ultimately subordinated the workers' lived experience to the rhythms of capital accumulation.<sup>46</sup>

Although more and more historians of labour in South Africa developed an interest in culture, the result was a largely administrative history, according to which Europeans built institutions and took decisions that shaped the outlines of workers' lives; the compound remained a prison, drinking purely a problem, leisure and Christianity functioned to assist the accumulation of

<sup>44</sup> Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900–1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 157. For the following sketch, see Patrick Harries, *Work Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), xi–xix.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Crush and Charles Ambler, eds, *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> In his following book, van Onselen took the argument beyond the compound and conceptualized the world of mines as the product of complex interactions and strategies of numerous actors. See *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914, Vol. 1: New Babylon; Vol. 2: New Nineveh* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982).

capital, and coercion was the most visible aspect of everyday labour relations. Migrant labour was viewed at best as an appendage rather than an integral, if not dominant, part of workers' lives in the fields, and the systems of signification brought from the rural areas and developed by miners in and around their places of work were subsumed in an anonymous, industrial homogeneity.<sup>47</sup> Thus, radical historians initially viewed culture as a source of raw data that would provide the narrative with 'nuance and texture', allowing history to 'resonate' with the lives of ordinary people. Oral testimony became a crucial part of this enterprise, partly so as to 'reconstruct and record' the lives of 'obscure, ill-educated people', but also to examine consciousness as a product of everyday experience.<sup>48</sup> Dunbar Moodie provided a series of remarkable studies on the social networks, forms of identity and moral economy constructed by black workers in the gold mines. He conceptualized mines not only as sites of harsh exploitation, but also as locations where workers developed alternative life forms.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, it has been shown that capitalism did not necessarily generate altogether new migratory patterns in southern Africa. By the nineteenth century, Mozambican men were frequently travelling great distances to access new markets and opportunities for hunting and trading. When the mines first opened in South Africa, these footloose men needed little encouragement to go and work in them.<sup>50</sup> After the end of apartheid, labour history on and in South Africa lost much of its dynamic, but there is some recent work that examines current labour struggles in a historical perspective, analyses the connections between wage labour and social citizenship in the democratic transition, or explores the dynamic transformations of trade union activities and shop floor conflict during the apartheid era.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> This applies to two otherwise excellent studies on the early history of Kimberley. See William Worgner, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Robert Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> For this literature, see Tim Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Belinda Bozzoli (with Mmantho Nkotshe), *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (London: James Currey, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> T. Dunbar Moodie (with Vivienne Ndatshe), *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Harries, *Work Culture*.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Alexander et al., *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012); Franco Barchiesi, 'Wage Labor and Social Citizenship in the Making of Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*,



## IMAGINING A WORKING CLASS

'Free labour' was a central category of colonial thinking, although the gap between ideology and practice remained conspicuous.<sup>52</sup> Colonial rulers, confronted with a wide array of constellations on the ground, emphasized their task of turning Africans into reliable commodity producers. However, African rulers and slave holders, as much as peasants and slaves, redefined their relationship into something other than that of employer and worker, working out with each other relationships of long-term dependency not linked to specific labour services. Colonial rulers soon found that they could maintain order only by forging alliances with the very elites whose tyranny they had previously agitated against. Colonialism in most of the continent soon settled for living off the surplus production of peasants or extracting surplus value from labourers who retained a strong foothold in their villages. Many Africans were moving back and forth between wage labour, cash-crop production, small-scale marketing and food growing. Colonial rule produced a huge new demand for labour for the construction of roads, railways, dockyards and building, for work on European plantations, mines and other projects, as well as for increased food production. Colonial officials found it convenient to leave agricultural production to (former) slave owners and chiefs, or enlist their aid to supply the labour required for public, and even private, purposes. Moreover, desperate to make their territories economically viable, they resorted to various devices for mobilizing unfree labour themselves. These included forced labour, conscription into the army or police forces, and the recruitment of contract labour by all kinds of dubious means.<sup>53</sup> The Portuguese colonies were particularly notorious for relying

---

42.1 (2007), 39–72; Alex Lichtenstein, 'Making Apartheid Work: African Trade Unions and the 1953 Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act in South Africa', *Journal of African History*, 46.2 (2005), 293–314.

<sup>52</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa', in *Beyond Slavery*, F. Cooper et al. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 107–49.

<sup>53</sup> There is a rich literature on the slow death of slavery and on the complex transition from slave labour to other forms of labour, including forced labour. See Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Suzanne Miers and Martin A. Klein, eds, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds, *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation Without Abolition in German East Africa, c.1884–1914* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006); Kevin A. Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 189–1925* (New



on forced labour, and parts of Portuguese-ruled Africa fell at the far end of the spectrum of brutality of labour practices. However, at least until the 1940s, institutionalized violence to extract African labour was by no means a peculiarly Portuguese approach.<sup>54</sup>

After the First World War, during which Africans experienced a massive increase in forced labour, the debates of the day were about the necessity for forced labour and the extent to which Africa was becoming diseased and depopulated due to the colonial demand for labour. The newly founded League of Nations took up this issue. The debates culminated in the Forced Labour Convention of the International Labour Organization of 1930.<sup>55</sup> The realities on the ground in Africa were much more complex, and hierarchies and forms of exploitation much more subtle, than the discussions about forced labour in Geneva recognized. Moreover, neither the missionary critics who asked 'Africa: Slave or Free?' nor League of Nations investigators questioned the premise of colonial rule itself; consequently, the resulting

---

Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in the Colonial Sudan* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996); Thaddeus Sunseri, *Vilimani: Labor Migration and Rural Change in Early Colonial Tanzania, 1884–1915* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); Opolot Okia, *Communal Labor in Colonial Kenya: The Legitimization of Coercion, 1912–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). In the British colonies, the Master and Servant law provided a legal framework for administrators to recruit and control labour, while in French Africa, the *indigénat* became a wide-ranging instrument in the hands of local colonial officials to use as they saw fit, for instance in conscripting Africans for public works. See David Anderson, 'Kenya, 1895–1939: Registration and Rough Justice', in *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955*, ed. Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 498–528; Gregory Mann, 'What was the Indigénat? The Empire of Law in French West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 50.3 (2009), 331–53. See the chapter by Fall and Roberts in this volume.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Allina, *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Alexander Keese, 'Searching for the Reluctant Hands: Obsession, Ambivalence, and the Practice of Organising Involuntary Labour in Colonial Cuanza-Sul and Malange Districts, Angola, 1926–1945', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41.2 (2013), 238–58; Jelmer Voss, 'Work in Times of Slavery, Colonialism, and Civil War: Labor Relations in Angola from 1800 to 2000', *History in Africa*, 41 (2014), 363–85.

<sup>55</sup> J. P. Daughton, 'ILO Expertise and Colonial Violence in the Interwar Years', in *Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour Organization and Beyond*, ed. Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux (Basingstoke and Geneva: Palgrave Macmillan and ILO, 2013), 85–97; Cooper, 'Conditions Analogous to Slavery', 132–4. One important text voicing contemporary concerns about abuses in labour recruitment was Raymond Leslie Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

debate sought only to draw distinctions between labour policies considered acceptable and not acceptable in a European-dominated Africa.

Officials in the colonies wanted to use the labour of Africans as much as they could, but, at the same time, firmly believed in the necessity of stable African communities under the control of male elders. European administrators saw mining towns or cities as sites of labour, but not of the reproduction of the labour force. Those Africans who had left this imagined traditional village life and permanently settled in the cities were labelled 'detribalized'.<sup>56</sup> Until the 1930s European colonizers perceived Africans essentially as 'primitive tribesmen', whose unskilled or casual labour could be extracted when needed. These assumptions slowly began to be challenged in the decade before the Second World War. The capacity of African workers for industrial action that suddenly manifested itself was of fundamental importance here. From the mid-1930s a wave of strikes in cities and mining towns shook various colonies in British and French Africa; the strikes continued in the period after 1945.<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that these strikes were rarely confined to workplaces; in many of these struggles trade unions only played a minor role at best. Often urban social networks were crucial in organizing and running strikes. In many ways, the composition of the strikers reflected the complex mix of the urban populations, consisting of wage labourers, casual labourers, artisans, those who worked outside the wage sector and those who were called by official sources the 'floating population'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Cooper, 'Conditions Analogous to Slavery', 129. Note that, in this context, women also participated in migratory initiatives in order to get away from patriarchal authority. See Marie Rodet, 'Forced Labor, Resistance, and Masculinities in Kayes, French Sudan, 1919–1946', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 86 (2014), 107–23.

<sup>57</sup> Cooper, *Decolonization*. The Second World War was crucial to this story, as it brought for African workers 'contradictory experiences of "progressive" reform within authoritarian labor systems and the preservation of archaic oppressive systems of labor mobilization and control'. See Carolyn A. Brown, 'African Labor in the Making of World War II', in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 43.

<sup>58</sup> Since the 1970s strikes have constituted a centrepiece of empirical research in Africanist labour historiography. See, among many others, Wale Oyemakinde, 'The Nigerian General Strike of 1945', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7.4 (1975), 693–710; Richard A. Joseph, 'Settlers, Strikers and Sans-Travail: The Douala Riots of 1945', *Journal of African History*, 15.4 (1974), 669–87; Frederick Cooper, '"Our Strike": Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947–48 Railway Strike in French West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 37.1 (1996), 81–118.

A desire to mould 'more productive and orderly' colonies after the war, alongside an increasingly demanding African workforce and urban centres growing beyond colonial control, induced a shift in labour policy that emphasized 'stabilization'. The colonial state tried to conceptualize structures that would allow for a stable, 'detribalized' urban working class in towns focused on the European family model.<sup>59</sup> Colonial authorities thus initiated a set of projects, including the creation of living spaces, the approval of moderate trade unions and the establishment of social security systems. Such change, however, was not affordable nor politically manageable. Dualist policies that tried to draw a ring around a section of modernizable Africans broke down rapidly. To some extent, African labour organizers turned the new discourse to their own advantage by making claims desired by their followers, while African politicians found the resulting impotence of colonial administrators opportune. Major shifts in approach were especially dramatic and distinct in French West Africa, where elements of destructive compulsion were still firmly in place in the 1930s, but where the impulse towards modernization and assimilation quickly became much stronger.<sup>60</sup>

The fields of social security and unemployment refer to the contradictions and half-heartedness in the colonial efforts to create a new 'wage labourer' in Africa who should cease to be an African. According to dominant post-war colonial conceptions, African workers, in order to become 'proper workers', ought to be civilized, live in proper families and learn the dignity of labour. In this context, in a number of colonies, a set of social institutions was created for relatively small groups of formal sector workers.<sup>61</sup> Probably the most ambitious of these was the system of family allowances for the French colonies during the 1950s, which provided cash allowances to workers' families for the support of children. There are other examples as well. The major mining companies in the Zambian Copperbelt provided modest pensions to mineworkers, while Union Minière in Katanga went further by providing a broad package of social support meant to encourage

<sup>59</sup> At this point it is important to mention that, at least for some parts of West Africa, several authors argue that working-class experiences go back to nineteenth-century artisans. See Ibrahim Abdullah, 'Rethinking African Labour and Working-Class History: The Artisan Origins of the Sierra Leonean Working Class', *Social History*, 23.1 (1998), 80–96.

<sup>60</sup> Cooper, *Decolonization*.

<sup>61</sup> For the following, see Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*, 72–4; on family allowances in French West Africa, see Cooper, *Decolonization*, 305–20; on pensions in the copper field, see Ferguson, *Expectations*; on social support in the Congo, see John Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise and the African Mineworkers, 1907–1951* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

the 'stabilization' of the workforce. An ideology of familism was central to all these schemes, which were meant to support not only the worker but also his recognized dependants. However, administrations had the utmost difficulty in putting these schemes into practice. Necessary information, such as documentation of births, and reliable ways of assigning particular children to particular families and a single, bona fide wife to each wage earner were difficult to obtain, even in the case of 'advanced' formal sector workers. In this context, much 'social welfare' was restricted to recreational activities and adult education classes for formal sector workers in privileged industries and occupations.<sup>62</sup>

At this time, the idea that Africans could be unemployed still seemed to be rather strange to most European colonial officials. However, in the context of rapid urbanization, the problem of a reserve army of unemployed or jobless young men observable in towns caused increasing attention. In 1958 the French ethnographer and film-maker Jean Rouch produced the ethnofiction *Moi, un noir*, featuring three young men from Niger who had left their country to find work in the Treichville quarter of Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast. In the opening sequences providing impressions of Treichville and the plateau area (the business quarter of Abidjan), an off-camera voice tells us: '*Chaque jour des jeunes gens arrivent dans les villes d'Afrique. Ils ont abandonné l'école ou le champ familial pour essayer d'entrer dans le monde moderne. Ils ne savent rien faire et tout faire. Ils sont l'une des maladies des nouvelles villes africaines: la jeunesse sans emploi.*'<sup>63</sup> These words echoed a growing anxiety among colonial administrators, social scientists and African nationalist politicians in late colonial Africa: urban unemployment, conceived as a problem of the male youth.

However, in the very same year, 1958, the International Labour Office published its *African Labour Survey* and observed 'considerable underemployment' on the continent; it also concluded that 'unemployment, except in a few towns in the form known in highly industrialised countries, exists only to a limited extent; there are usually more offers of employment than applications for jobs'.<sup>64</sup> In general, colonial officials downplayed the issue of unemployment. For instance, in order to challenge the protests

<sup>62</sup> Andreas Eckert, 'Regulating the Social: Social Security, Social Welfare and the State in Late Colonial Tanzania', *Journal of African History*, 45.3 (2004), 467–89.

<sup>63</sup> This sequence can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_jJspPtRmkQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jJspPtRmkQ) (accessed 10 August 2016). On Rouch's oeuvre, see Paul Henley, *The Architecture of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> International Labour Office, *African Labour Survey* (Geneva: ILO, 1958), 404.

of African trade unionists about the rising unemployment in the cities, a representative of the Labour Department in Tanganyika suggested: 'I can't help feeling it's a problem on which we ought to be better informed, if only we show that we know what we are talking about if we say the problem is not serious.'<sup>65</sup> In most late colonial labour laws, unemployment compensation was held to be particularly undesirable, because most officials would not acknowledge that the African wage worker who was not working was in fact a worker.

One also has to emphasize the gendered way in which the 'unemployment problem' was interpreted. Throughout the colonial period, employment and unemployment were overwhelmingly associated with men. Women had for long entered urban centres and, facing restrictions on the kind of waged employment deemed appropriate for them, they had made a significant contribution to sectors outside the realm of waged work. However, in the official imagination, it was male youth who constituted a potentially insurrectionary unemployed class, who were more visible 'loitering' on urban streets. The absence of female unemployed in surviving commentary reflects the gendered occupation of urban space. By contrast to young men, whose street presence has remained a concern up to the present, women were more restricted to the home and/or the workplace, or else they simply did not constitute a threat in the eyes of the male colonizer.<sup>66</sup>

How important were the labour question and the construction of an African working class in the decision of European powers to leave Africa? The decisive power over African affairs ultimately lay at higher levels of European public and private sectors, reacting to their own perceptions of Africa's role in the international economy. It was the crises of the Depression and post-Second World War eras, rather than colonialist understandings of what were still very small African urban populations and African working classes, that drove the modernization and development policies. It was also the recognition, by the mid-1950s, of Africa's relative irrelevance to the reinvigorated European and global economies that made the cost of misconceptions about managing newly growing African cities and African workers so unacceptable.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, the efforts of the French

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Andrew Burton, 'Raw Youth, School-Leavers and the Emergence of Structural Unemployment in Late-Colonial Tanganyika', *Journal of African History*, 47.3 (2006), 375.

<sup>66</sup> On gendered images of youth, see Andrew Burton and Hélène Charton-Bigot, eds, *Generations Past: Youth in East African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Ralph A. Austen, 'Africa and Globalization: Colonialism, Decolonization and the Postcolonial Malaise', *Journal of Global History*, 1.3 (2006), 403–8.

government to develop Eurafrica through 1957 or even later suggest that the French had not immediately given up on Africa, even after they recognized how costly it was.<sup>68</sup>

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE WORKERS GONE?

Around independence, the overall number of wage workers in sub-Saharan Africa was still rather small, as the ILO statistics reproduced in Table 1.1. show.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, in a number of African countries, labour movements played an important role in the road to independence, though not necessarily because of strong ties between trade unions and nationalists. Rather, the link lay in the murkier realm of colonial politics. Union demands and effective strike action helped expose the competing claims that the colonial state made to development, progress and civilization. In effect, the colonial state could not respond to demands for increased benefits and rights from organized labour – which would put its members on a par with metropolitan workers – without dismantling the justification of colonialism. There is an ironic charm – but also a kind of Pyrrhic victory – in the African success in defeating European developmentalist logic. The decision by the Europeans to accept union demands that African labourers be treated on the same basis as their European counterparts was a mutual failure to comprehend African social reality. It was a consequential failure, since the cost of providing European-scale wages and benefits under African economic conditions could not be borne by either colonial or postcolonial regimes. Reluctant European governments were thus encouraged to withdraw from Africa, while their local successors co-opted some of the labour leadership regime but rather quickly suppressed the unions as an autonomous force.<sup>70</sup>

Political leaders of the newly independent states claimed to harness all social and economic energies to build political unity and promote economic advancement. Trade unions, on the other hand, usually represented the relatively privileged 4 or 5 per cent of the population who worked for wages. They were largely concentrated in the civil service and the new state-led

<sup>68</sup> Marie-Thérèse Bitsch and Gérard Bossuat, eds, *L'Europe unie et l'Afrique: de l'idée d'Eurafrica à la convention de Lomé I* (Brussels, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> For more statistical data, see John Sender and Sheila Smith, *The Development of Capitalism in Africa* (London: Methuen, 1986). Their claim that 'by the end of the colonial period, capitalist labor markets had become predominant, and that a working class had emerged as a major social and political force' (p. 129) seems difficult to sustain.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, *Decolonization*. See the chapter by Freund in this volume.

Table 1.1. Numbers of wage earners in the main branches of economic activity

<i>Territory &amp; year</i>	<i>Agriculture &amp; forestry</i>	<i>Mining &amp; quarrying</i>	<i>Manufacturing</i>	<i>Building &amp; construction</i>	<i>Transport</i>	<i>Commerce</i>	<i>Domestic &amp; other services</i>	<i>Government services</i>	<i>Total</i>
Angola									
1955	—	22,758	47,255	—	—	30,902	—	—	—
Belgian Congo									
1950	238,835	114,350	134,466	84,869	62,211	62,050	265,228	—	962,009
1956	300,791	84,287	152,758	124,319	91,789	81,548	362,404 <sup>2</sup>	—	1,179,896
French Cameroons									
1952	32,307	4,706	4,713	12,000	9,295	13,718 <sup>3</sup>	10,052 <sup>4</sup>	28,822 <sup>5</sup>	115,613
1955	40,000	2,000	10,900	18,100	8,000	16,400 <sup>3</sup>	11,000 <sup>4</sup>	37,500 <sup>5</sup>	143,900
French Equatorial Africa									
1952	47,586	24,305	11,129	57,140	7,988	12,216 <sup>3</sup>	13,000 <sup>4</sup>	28,626 <sup>5</sup>	201,990
1955	39,945	19,575	14,941	22,089	15,713	13,042 <sup>3</sup>	15,150 <sup>4</sup>	21,374 <sup>5</sup>	154,754
French Togoland									
1952	1,874	—	686	2,691	1,243	11,690 <sup>3</sup>	1,400 <sup>4</sup>	8,338 <sup>5</sup>	26,401
1955	2,584	105	380	456	850	11,814 <sup>3</sup>	1,212 <sup>4</sup>	7,065 <sup>5</sup>	24,466
French West Africa									
1952	63,622	11,225	24,578	55,363	25,733	37,589 <sup>3</sup>	24,071 <sup>4</sup>	114,032 <sup>5</sup>	356,213
1955	73,600	11,700	31,000	42,800	33,300	52,000 <sup>3</sup>	20,500 <sup>4</sup>	107,600 <sup>5</sup>	372,500
Gold Coast									
1948–49	19,901	35,898	2,130	20,033	9,983	15,758	7,682	19,544	130,930
1954	33,929	36,959	14,755	49,690	21,775	24,486	30,275	32,547	244,417
Kenya									
1950	203,500	8,500	43,400	19,200	31,900	28,500	40,800	84,700	460,500
1956	235,200	9,000	57,700	29,500	47,800	37,900	45,700	134,100	596,700
Madagascar									
1952	80,828	9,595	24,000	12,477	5,925	15,239 <sup>3</sup>	36,253 <sup>4</sup>	44,325 <sup>5</sup>	228,642
1955	96,693	7,996	21,489	19,554	9,528	22,913 <sup>3</sup>	26,985 <sup>4</sup>	42,404 <sup>5</sup>	247,562
Mozambique									
1953	117,912	5,138	29,866 <sup>6</sup>	16,882 <sup>7</sup>	9,408 <sup>7</sup>	—	58,879 <sup>8</sup>	—	—
Nigeria									
1953	53,850 <sup>9</sup>	50,342	16,022	54,434	36,951	35,837	24,742	51,656	323,834 <sup>10</sup>







enterprises. Having seen the capacity of unions to foment discord against colonial administrations, African political leaders worried that trade unions could serve as the vanguard of opposition to their own regimes, especially in the urban centres.<sup>71</sup>

Three elements militated against this. The colonial state, through its policies of registration and welfarism that were only directed towards certain sectors of the economy, had already succeeded in breaking the unity of the working class before the end of the colonial period. Hence, independent African states inherited an already fragmented and increasingly weakened working class. Second, many workers considered 'stabilized' were in fact able to maintain links with rural areas, which continues to this day. This ensured a certain continuously shrinking level of security beyond their jobs. Thus, jobs have been less crucially important for basic survival than for European or American workers, and militancy has suffered. Third, the period of effective strikes in Africa in the final decades of colonialism was coterminous with a period of general economic expansion, whereas the economic contraction that independent African states have experienced has given workers naturally worried about their position in a faltering economy little opportunity to strike. Still, some parts of Africa did experience intense labour conflicts for many years, involving illegal strikes and bloodshed, between trade unions and ruling parties.<sup>72</sup> Even in the 1990s one finds moments when labour mobilization challenged a state.<sup>73</sup>

It should be noted that during the late 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s, many African countries experienced at least modest growth, life expectancy rose considerably, and education became more accessible. Workers in copper mines or railwaymen, for instance, had reasonable expectations that they could get something out of participation in economic activities. This did not necessarily mean that these workers simply accepted the notion of the European welfare state. They partly invested their salaries in social networks and relationships, often in the rural home areas.<sup>74</sup> When the oil shocks and worldwide recession ate into jobs and pensions, these personal relationships became crucial to survival. In most African countries, the regulated wage

<sup>71</sup> Craig Phelan, 'West African Trade Unionism Past and Present', in *Trade Unions in West Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. C. Phelan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 10.

<sup>72</sup> For the case of Senegal, see Babacar Fall, *Le travail au Sénégal au XXe siècle* (Paris: Karthala, 2011).

<sup>73</sup> Julius Ihonvbere, 'Organized Labor and the Struggle for Democracy in Nigeria', *African Studies Review*, 40.1 (1997), 77–100.

<sup>74</sup> Lisa Lindsay, *Working with Gender: Men, Women, and Wage Labor in Southwest Nigeria* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Ferguson, *Expectations*.

labour sector contracted. ‘Structural adjustment’ undermined the very sectors of African economies in which labour had become the most stabilized, and it sharply reduced state services that might have equipped younger generations with the skills they needed for a changing world economy. Instead, international institutions such as the World Bank celebrated the erosion of stable and protected waged employment and the rise of informal activities as pathways to successful entrepreneurship.<sup>75</sup>

The new combination of precariousness and flexibility that has emerged since the 1970s is usually captured by the highly problematic term ‘informality’. Informal sectors, however, were often highly structured; there was a considerable movement of people between regular jobs and unregulated income earning, and numerous ‘formal sector’ companies displayed a strong interest in the interplay of different forms of production. In essence, the term pointed to the continuing and growing ‘importance of forms of work that lay outside the form of labour legislation which African countries inherited at independence and outside the limits of the imagination of policy makers who thought they were modernizing Africa’.<sup>76</sup> The number of people who fitted into the category of wage worker in independent Africa did not grow as expected, while it was the category of the excluded – comprising customary labour, informal labour and precarious labour – that largely increased.<sup>77</sup> The recent economic growth of the early years of the twenty-first century has not translated into high levels of waged employment.

It would be misleading to see informal and precarious work as only a new phase in capitalism, in which workers in many parts of the world and most notably in Africa have become unnecessary and disposable. Multinational capital might still need workers from Africa, as long as they are cheap,

<sup>75</sup> See the chapter by Barchiesi in this volume.

<sup>76</sup> Cooper, *African Labor History*, 111; also Janet Roitman, ‘The Politics of Informal Markets in Sub-Saharan Africa’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28.4 (1990), 671–94. For a useful review of the literature on ‘informality’, see Kate Meagher, *Identity Economics: Social Networks and the Informal Economy in Nigeria* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), 11–26. For critical reflection on the concept, see Jan Breman, ‘A Bogus Concept?’, *New Left Review*, 84 (2013), 130–8.

<sup>77</sup> Frederick Cooper, ‘From Enslavement to Precarity? The Labour Question in African History’, in *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins*, ed. Wale Adebani (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017), 152. For recent case studies, see Miles Larmer, ‘Permanent Precarity: Capital and Labour in the Central African Copperbelt’, *Labor History*, 58.2 (2017), 170–84; Ian Phimister and Rory Pilosof, ‘Wage Labor in Historical Perspective: A Study of the De-proletarianization of the African Working Class in Zimbabwe, 1960–2010’, *Labor History*, 58.2 (2017), 215–27.

Table 1.2. Wage and salaried workers in sub-Saharan Africa, 2000–10

<i>Country</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>
Angola	33.7	34.3	31.6	32.9	32.2	35.0	37.6	40.5	42.9	44.6	44.5
Benin	10.1	10.1	10.5	10.4	8.5	8.5	8.6	8.6	8.7	8.8	8.6
Botswana	62.1	82.6	75.8	76.2	79.2	79.4	79.8	79.1	80.7	82.1	81.3
Burkina Faso	4.8	5.4	5.8	5.7	5.3	6.1	6.1	5.7	7.1	6.4	6.5
Burundi	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.2	4.9	5.1	5.1	5.1
Cabo Verde	48.7	48.2	48.5	48.7	50.5	51.0	51.5	53.8	54.7	56.0	55.8
Cameroon	20.5	20.8	18.7	18.9	18.7	18.9	19.2	20.3	20.8	21.0	21.1
Central African Republic	30.3	30.8	31.2	31.7	31.0	30.7	31.1	31.4	32.0	31.9	31.8
Chad	4.2	4.3	4.5	4.8	5.1	6.9	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.3	7.4
Congo, Dem. Rep.	15.5	14.8	14.4	14.5	13.9	15.3	15.9	16.4	16.8	17.6	17.7
Congo, Rep.	22.6	23.0	23.2	23.2	22.6	23.4	23.9	24.1	23.7	24.5	25.0
Côte d'Ivoire	21.3	21.4	21.8	21.7	19.6	19.2	19.3	19.1	19.5	19.1	20.5
Equatorial Guinea	56.8	64.5	68.7	69.7	68.2	71.8	72.8	72.7	72.9	74.3	74.5
Eritrea	76.6	78.6	77.2	76.3	76.0	80.8	81.2	80.9	78.2	76.4	78.4
Ethiopia	7.1	7.2	6.8	6.4	6.9	7.9	5.9	6.4	7.5	8.1	8.1
Gabon	44.2	43.7	43.7	43.5	43.7	44.8	66.4	65.9	66.5	65.5	66.2
Gambia, The	22.5	23.4	22.9	23.6	25.6	25.9	23.5	23.0	25.1	26.1	27.4
Ghana	20.9	21.2	21.5	22.2	23.1	23.4	20.4	17.3	18.3	19.3	19.2
Guinea	28.8	29.7	30.5	30.5	31.8	31.8	32.2	33.1	33.3	33.9	31.9
Guinea-Bissau	36.1	34.7	36.3	35.9	35.4	35.9	35.7	35.8	36.9	36.5	37.1
Kenya	34.7	34.2	33.2	33.3	33.2	33.2	31.3	32.2	33.9	34.8	36.7
Lesotho	65.3	65.7	66.0	67.2	67.5	68.2	68.0	69.0	70.4	72.2	73.1
Liberia	17.2	20.2	20.9	19.1	16.1	16.3	16.4	17.1	18.1	18.7	18.8
Madagascar	16.0	15.8	16.9	15.1	9.3	9.4	8.7	8.7	8.9	10.0	9.3

Malawi	33.3	32.7	32.0	32.0	32.0	32.7	33.3	33.2	33.2	34.1	35.7	36.3
Mali	9.7	10.3	9.8	11.6	11.6	11.9	11.8	11.9	10.3	11.2	11.1	11.6
Mauritania	53.8	53.0	52.2	52.4	52.4	53.4	52.6	51.3	54.8	54.8	54.6	52.7
Mauritius	79.4	80.0	79.9	79.9	79.9	80.2	80.6	80.8	79.8	80.3	80.2	79.9
Mozambique	7.3	7.2	8.5	9.0	9.0	9.2	9.7	10.4	11.0	11.9	12.6	12.8
Namibia	63.8	71.6	72.0	72.2	72.2	72.5	62.7	64.1	64.4	64.7	64.4	64.1
Niger	7.2	7.1	7.1	7.2	7.2	5.8	5.8	7.3	7.3	7.6	7.4	7.5
Nigeria	54.5	55.0	54.1	56.0	56.0	59.9	60.6	61.3	62.0	62.7	63.3	63.5
Rwanda	7.2	7.5	7.8	13.8	13.8	14.1	14.5	15.5	15.4	15.6	16.7	16.9
Saô Tomé and Príncipe	46.9	47.4	48.0	47.9	47.8	47.8	47.8	60.7	62.0	62.1	63.3	63.2
Senegal	22.1	22.3	24.8	26.2	26.2	26.2	27.7	27.3	26.7	28.3	29.2	29.5
Seychelles	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sierra Leone	6.3	5.5	6.4	7.4	7.4	7.4	7.5	7.5	7.9	8.5	8.9	8.9
Somalia	58.4	58.5	58.3	58.1	58.4	58.4	59.0	59.9	60.7	60.7	60.9	61.4
South Africa	81.5	81.8	81.9	81.8	81.9	81.9	80.9	80.0	82.0	84.4	84.8	84.5
South Sudan	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sudan	50.4	51.1	52.1	51.7	51.5	51.5	52.3	51.7	52.3	54.0	53.0	53.3
Swaziland	78.4	78.5	78.3	78.6	78.7	78.7	78.5	78.8	79.0	79.1	79.0	79.6
Tanzania	6.8	6.9	9.4	9.8	10.3	10.3	10.3	10.7	7.5	11.5	12.3	12.6
Togo	26.3	27.0	26.8	25.6	26.1	26.1	27.4	26.0	26.3	28.3	25.3	24.9
Uganda	14.6	14.7	14.1	14.7	14.1	14.1	14.9	15.7	16.0	16.3	17.7	18.6
Zambia	17.1	17.5	14.7	15.0	15.7	15.7	16.5	16.8	16.0	17.5	19.1	19.6
Zimbabwe	39.7	33.5	32.2	30.4	29.1	28.2	27.6	27.2	25.1	23.0	23.8	23.8

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMPWORK.ZS?end=2010&locations=ZG&start=2000> (accessed 29 December 2017)

particularly to reach customers of modest means.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, precarity could be seen as a constitutive feature of capitalist labour, inasmuch as uncertainty and instability have always been inherent characteristics of wage labour, in Africa as elsewhere. Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden even argue that ‘the real norm or standard on global capitalism is insecurity, informality or precariousness’.<sup>79</sup> If this is the case, then Africa in the twentieth century could even be seen as a model case for global capitalism.

<sup>78</sup> Kate Meagher, ‘The Scramble for Africans: Demography, Globalisation and Africa’s Informal Labour Markets’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 52 (2016), 487.

<sup>79</sup> Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden, ‘Informalizing the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level’, *Development and Change*, 45.5 (2014), 920.

# TWO

## Precarious and Informal Labour

FRANCO BARCHIESI

Department of African American and African Studies and  
Department of Comparative Studies, Ohio State University

The concepts of ‘precarity’ and ‘informality’ have become prominent ways of characterizing the adverse employment impacts of global market liberalization. In sociological terms, the word ‘precariat’ is often used to identify vulnerable populations forced to depend on unprotected and unstable jobs.<sup>1</sup> By referring to both the insecurity of employment conditions and related broader social dislocations and inequalities, ‘precarity’ has tended to mirror the notion of the ‘informal economy’, largely applied to societies in the global South. The International Labour Organization initially used ‘informal’, with a focus on juridical norms, to define undocumented and unregulated activities, largely performed as self-employment. More recently, however, ‘informality’ has come to characterize unprotected occupations in a broader sense, or jobs lacking security and social provisions, even when performed within a legally ‘formal’ sector or in a subordinate relationship towards certified enterprises.<sup>2</sup> In older capitalist countries and emerging economies alike, the expansion of informal employment is crucially shaped by outsourcing and casualization in established companies, which explains the conceptual convergence of informality and precariousness.<sup>3</sup> Such changes decisively question the idea, which played an important role when the notion

<sup>1</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Franco Barchiesi, ‘Casual Labor and Informal Economy’, in *Sociology of Work: An Encyclopedia*, vol. I, ed. Vicki Smith (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 74–8.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Devey, Caroline Skinner and Imraan Valodia, ‘Definitions, Data and the Informal Economy in South Africa: A Critical Analysis’, in *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994–2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006), 302–23.

of the 'informal sector' first emerged in the 1970s, that a socio-economic dualism exists between waged and irregular employment.

In the early twenty-first century, precarious and informal work have spurred policy interventions and political strategies by labour and social movements. Collective mobilizations of precarious workers have emphasized that wage labour is failing as a conduit to and guarantor of social integration, citizenship rights, redistributive compacts and subjective stability. Yet the alternative, broadly inspired by a once-triumphant Keynesianism, of a harmonious and equitable wage-based social order has also faded as critics of the welfare state point to its environmentally damaging productivism, gender biases in favour of male breadwinning and narrow national focus of citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that they question the idea of wage labour as a standard and universal social norm, the concepts of precarity and informality usefully introduce this chapter's discussion of Africa in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a context in which capitalist production regimes have not led to employment relations typically characterized by stable and protected wage earning. The history of precarious, casual and informal labour in Africa rather brings into sharp relief the exceptionality and contingency of the social conditions through which capitalist employment can be conducive to socially inclusive deals. The penetration of wage labour across the continent was uneven, delayed and contested, as it responded to highly localized social processes and coexisted with complex, non-capitalist relations. Even where wages relatively quickly became the dominant form of income, as in mining or transportation nodes in urban centres, African workers chose casual labour, despite its precariousness, in preference to more regular workplace rhythms. Although capital drew significant advantages from such arrangements, which allowed for remarkable flexibility and containment of labour costs, they also persistently challenged capitalist control of the labour force. Finally, work in the capitalist sector was enabled by considerable degrees of coercion, usually carried out by authoritarian colonial states armed with racial ideologies of domination and hierarchical visions of the social order, in which African elders and notables played despotic roles while colonized working populations were relegated to manual labour.

<sup>4</sup> André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2011); see the chapter by Scully and Jawad in this volume.

Only in late colonial experiments after the Second World War, and mostly in French and British possessions, was the option of ‘stabilizing’ wage labour through social benefits and the recognition of trade unions pursued, and even then it remained largely confined to more ‘formal’ employees in the urban areas and did not provide for the entrenchment of democratic rights or political equality.<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial independent states inherited an explosive combination of strong-arm governance, workers’ expectations of improved living conditions and persistent refusal or evasion of wage labour, which new African rulers addressed through political solutions that led to further authoritarianism and instability. Even before the devastating impact on workers’ lives of the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, the limited extent of formal employment and the political weakness and subordination of trade unions rendered wage labour unavailable as a foundation of egalitarian and democratic social compacts.

The following pages will outline and analyse the precariousness of African labour in different periods and specific locales. My emphasis on precarity as an enduring condition of wage labour in the continent’s history requires a departure from a notion of precarious and informal labour as identified with specific employment relations and actors, such as fast-food workers or street vendors. Labour historians must instead face the challenge of confronting uncertainty and instability as constitutive features of wage relations, whereby compulsion to depend on unrewarding jobs amplifies and deepens the social vulnerability undergirding liberal ideas of ‘free’ economic conduct.

The rest of this chapter provides therefore a complex historical picture of how precarious, casual, intermittent and unprotected labour has shaped African workers’ lives, practices, identities and strategies. The empirical material is structured into four sections. The first (1900–18) is set in the early and contested advance of proletarianization as an explicit project of commodity-producing colonial systems. The second (1919–39) deals with the expansion of casual employment in a context in which the use of forced labour met increasing international opposition, and its complexities at the intersection of the strategies of states, capitalists, local communities and workers. The third (1940–75) is focused on casual and informal employment as responses to, and outcomes of, late colonial and postcolonial attempts to stabilize and discipline wage labour through institutional reforms, social provisions and political coercion. The fourth section (1976–2015) discusses the precariousness of labour in Africa in a period when the ‘informal

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); see the chapter by Freund in this volume.



economy' has become an explicitly formulated social and economic concept and a contested reality between ordinary workers' experiences and attempts by a now triumphant neoliberal discourse to establish informality as a new norm of African entrepreneurship.

## THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF WAGE LABOUR AND CONTESTED PROLETARIANIZATION, 1900–18

Under colonial governance and imperatives to produce primary export commodities, wage labour profoundly disrupted and restructured African economic formations and modalities of accumulation. Such impacts were most evident in extractive industries and agricultural sectors where European capital presided over the transition to cash crops, but also affected cultivations, such as cocoa in West Africa, largely introduced by African initiative. Local producers were generally quite resourceful and inventive in adapting, across the continent, pre-colonial social and economic relations to the requirements of colonial capitalism, which African notables and emerging elites could even turn to their advantage. Even the transition from slavery to wage labour, especially in the western and eastern portions of the continent, did not necessarily obliterate the power of slave-holding landlords, as they often managed to mutate into employers of migrant, largely casual or seasonal, workforces. Across these diverse experiences, wage labour was marked by social vulnerability, especially to the extent that the racial ideologies of colonial states defined the African as a natural manual labourer in constant need of white supervision administered through a mix of authoritarian and paternalist means.<sup>6</sup>

In the language of European colonialism, wage labour was not only an economic necessity but also a moral imperative, as colonialism legitimized itself as the continuation of a civilizing move from slavery towards 'free labour'.<sup>7</sup> Yet Africans were institutionally denied the ability to shape or signify their own incorporation into the wage economy. In fact, capitalist work routinely took the form of coerced employment – including 'masters and servants' legislation and measures against vagrancy and 'desertion'

<sup>6</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, *The Political Nature of a Ruling Class: Capital and Ideology in South Africa, 1890–1933* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press); Opolot Okia, *Communal Labor in Colonial Kenya: The Legitimization of Coercion, 1912–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

– which blurred the normative divide between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour and structured African experiences of working for wages as constitutively and quintessentially precarious. Etymologically, ‘precarious’ refers to one’s uncertainty-generating dependence on the will of another to which, in the absence of alternatives, pleas (*preces*) are addressed. The term thus fits a reality in which not only did colonial exploitation offer very limited opportunities of monetary income as substitutes for low-skill work, but wage labour had a tendency to erode the viability of subsistence agriculture as an independent economic alternative.

When new market opportunities developed, they often took the form of delivering goods and services to emerging areas of waged employment in modalities that would later come to be called the ‘informal sector’. African women felt the vulnerabilities generated by the wage economy in particularly acute ways, especially in regions – such as East African estates and central and southern African mining districts – where female roles were increasingly identified with maintaining plots and cattle in rural areas deemed native ‘reserves’. The arrangement was advantageous for employers aiming to shift reproduction costs towards African homesteads, but it placed women under specific pressures. Apart from being kept in a subordinate status by the operations of colonial administrators, abetted by African elders and patriarchal discipline, women were still needed in the urban and mining areas where ‘working men in the mines and towns, low-paid migrants though they were, still wanted cooked food, clean clothing, and sexual services’.<sup>8</sup> The contradiction inherent in this predicament was often solved by women themselves by escaping male authority in rural areas and moving without authorization to cities where intermittent occupations in the crevices between legality and illegality were available in the form of petty trade, domestic services, sex work, food distribution or brewing.

The existential precariousness of waged work was amplified by the disruptions of migrant labour in African family life, against which the semi-legal world of female urban employment often offered sex work as a simulacrum of domesticity.<sup>9</sup> Female ‘prostitution’, which in the case of Nairobi as studied by Luise White was almost entirely self-employed, inhabited an indeterminate boundary between exploitation and women’s agency in pursuit of autonomous livelihoods. Other routinely criminalized contingent female economic activities – such as hawking, distilling liquor and washing

<sup>8</sup> Teresa A. Barnes, ‘The Fight for Control of African Women’s Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939’, *Signs*, 17.3 (1992), 588.

<sup>9</sup> Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

clothes in the urban and mining areas – defied normative categorizations of ‘waged’ and ‘unwaged’ or ‘respectable’ and ‘disreputable’ occupations, as they reclaimed a space ‘to exist at a distance from the disciplines of time, productivity, and monotony that the more deeply proletarianized sections of the work force were experiencing’.<sup>10</sup> They also provided alternatives to jobs traditionally defined as female, such as housework.

Gender dynamics structured the formation of intermittent urban employment and its multifarious strategies, which ambivalently aided proletarianization while offering income opportunities outside the wage relation. Charles van Onselen documented the significance of masculinity for the *amaWasha*, a guild of Zulu migrant laundry workers in the Witwatersrand gold mines of the early 1900s.<sup>11</sup> The self-employed *amaWasha* were part of an informal economy providing clean clothes or food to a burgeoning and chaotically growing metropolis with still patchy infrastructure and escalating costs of living. Such solutions were temporary, and unregistered laundry operators declined as the sector came under the control of capitalist firms, even if informal food distribution would prove more resilient. Yet while they lasted, these economic modalities were integral to broader, usually unpredictable and often illegal social practices of evasion of wage labour, such as the ‘ninevites’ and other urban gangs, also studied by van Onselen in Johannesburg. Although the underlying subjectivity was generally apolitical, it was nonetheless steeped in widespread aversion to the labour regime with which a segregationist state attempted to shape African workforces.

Much historical research on precarious work and casual employment is focused on South Africa, especially in light of the linkages between those sectors and the country’s early capitalist industrialization and wage economy. South African processes were not, however, exceptional or uncommon on a continent-wide scale. In general, early colonialism heralded a pattern destined to shape twentieth-century African labour history: African workers did not necessarily become a ‘working class’ in order to confront capital and the state, especially to the extent that their societies were only partially and unevenly incorporated in circuits of capitalist production and exchange.<sup>12</sup> Casual, impermanent, undetected occupations at the crossroads of multiple economic activities and forms of livelihood provided opportunities to *resist*

<sup>10</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991), 145.

<sup>11</sup> Charles van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, 2nd edn (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Cooper, ‘Africa and the World Economy’, *African Studies Review*, 24.2/3 (1981), 1–86.

incorporation into waged employment and develop alternative identities, strategies and demands. Working conditions that Western, labour-centred social compacts would negatively connote as ‘precarious’ – for example, the simultaneous performance of contingent employment, informal trade and a temporary waged occupation – were widespread in early colonial capitalism. Such combinations could facilitate value extraction, although they usually implied for the employers some loss of authority in the production process. Colonial policies sustained exploitation by offloading workers’ living costs on to household-based agriculture, which was nonetheless also a buffer allowing workers to negotiate, delay or oppose entrance into capitalist production relations. In the end, ‘casual labor – the work men could do a few days a week or a month to eke out a living – might have been exploited, but it was beyond employers’ control’.<sup>13</sup> The persistence of casual employment suggested that wage labour did not advance uniformly; workers could prefer it as an alternative to forced labour, but also resisted it by choosing ‘precarious’ jobs.<sup>14</sup> The penetration of wage labour was neither the outcome of a higher form of economic rationality nor a linear and logical movement, dictated by income and productivity differentials, from pre-capitalist to capitalist production. Colonized populations were rather pushed towards wage labour by a mix of economic coercion, land expropriation, taxation and unequal access to capital and infrastructures. Even in a relatively capitalized business, such as copper mining in Katanga,<sup>15</sup> the oppressive conditions of which made African labour recruitment an almost insurmountable challenge, it was casual rather than ‘permanent’ work that opened vast tracts of territory to capitalist production relations. Capitalist labour markets and African participation in them took a predictable course, as Cooper put it, ‘only after the game was over’,<sup>16</sup> or once the erosion of independent peasant production had eliminated all viable economic alternatives to working for wages.

Migrant labour in mining, transportation and commercial agriculture underpinned the overlap and mutual imbrication of casual and regular work.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Luise White, ‘Cars Out of Place: Vampires, Technology, and Labor in East and Central Africa’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 437.

<sup>14</sup> On precarious workers in the urban transport sector, see the chapter by Bellucci in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> John Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise, and the African Mineworker, 1907–1951* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper, ‘Africa and the World Economy’, 40.

<sup>17</sup> See the chapter by Pérez Niño in this volume.

Mozambican miners, who made up more than two-thirds of the workforce for the Witwatersrand gold mining industry, toiled under oppressive labour contracts in a racially despotic environment. For them, therefore, the defence of a deeply embattled peasant agriculture, not proletarianization, was the main conduit to agency and identity.<sup>18</sup> In fact, in southern Mozambique – where by the late nineteenth-century Portuguese anti-vagrancy provisions had legally imposed work as the core means of African subsistence, and Africans subject to *indigenato* statutes could be inducted into forced labour – migration to South Africa was not the only escape. The Chopi night soil collectors studied by Jeanne Penvenne, for example, preferred precarious work in the city.<sup>19</sup> The female-headed households of male migrants provided casual work (*ganbo-ganbo*) for commercial farming, which led to renewed exploitation as older women employed their daughters-in-law, thus reproducing precarity along gender and age lines.<sup>20</sup>

In West African cash-crop agriculture, migratory flows were facilitated by the gradual abolition of slavery but did not result in a smooth transition to ‘free’ labour, rather remaining in a precarious balance of continuity and change.<sup>21</sup> British and French administrations outlawed slavery and ended the slave trade, but also allowed in their possessions the persistence of practices of personal servitude, which only became marginal in the 1930s. In the early twentieth century, massive movements towards areas fallen under European control, such as the Sokoto caliphate in northern Nigeria, involved perhaps more than one million former slaves seeking in commodity production an escape from their masters.<sup>22</sup> Former slave holders, however, often restructured themselves, also with the aid of new colonial administrators, into large landlords. Lord Lugard, the British High Commissioner in northern Nigeria, was concerned that a direct transition from slavery to wage labour could encourage casual work or subsistence farming, which he regarded as

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Jeanne Penvenne, *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877–1962* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Bridget O’Laughlin, ‘Proletarianisation, Agency and Changing Rural Livelihoods: Forced Labour and Resistance in Colonial Mozambique’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28.3 (2002), 511–30.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Cordell, *Hoe and Wage: A Social History of a Circulatory Migration System in West Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Thomas J. Bassett, *The Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa: Côte d’Ivoire, 1880–1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

recipes for idleness and sloth. He thus envisaged a system of reconstituted labour coercion in which old masters would remain in control of their slaves even if personal servitude would no longer be recognized or enforced in European courts.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than abruptly disappearing with the advent of cash crops, slavery in West Africa blurred into, and overlapped with, different types of precarious labour, in the literal sense of employment depending, often coercively, on personal subjection. Only gradually and unevenly did the production of export commodities lead to actual labour contracts. In the cocoa cultivations of the Ashanti territory of the Gold Coast, where slavery was finally abolished in 1908, colonial policy was explicitly aimed at labour recruitment from populations forced to move from the north. Migrants, even those who managed to establish their own small-scale cocoa cultivations, worked as casual, seasonal or task labourers on African-owned estates, which benefited from this early experiment with the state-assisted deployment of precarious wage labour.<sup>24</sup> Entrenched reluctance to working for wages in Ashanti, on the other hand, pushed wages to levels that made only casual work viable as a non-slave labour market.<sup>25</sup> Temporary agricultural labourers were not only employed in cultivation. Migrants to northern Nigeria from the Ader region of southern Niger performed a range of casual jobs, such as water and wood carrying or household goods' repairs, necessary to the reproduction of the workforce. Labour mobility and flexibility offset the risks of highly uncertain employment prospects, but also determined new vulnerabilities. Itinerant workers of slave descent lacked juridical status or rights, which made their survival depend on networks of patronage. Yet despite its precariousness, migrant labour could produce new solidarities and refashioned ethnic identities.<sup>26</sup>

Even in sectors where wage labour was more straightforwardly established, such as the Enugu colliery in Nigeria's Igboland, studied by Carolyn Brown, local labour recruiters often came from former slave-trading families, which reinforced resistance to proletarianization by migrant

<sup>23</sup> Louise D. Lennihan, 'Rights in Men and Rights in Land: Slavery, Wage Labor, and Smallholder Agriculture in Northern Nigeria', *Slavery & Abolition*, 3.2 (1982), 111–39.

<sup>24</sup> Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Gareth Austin, 'Cash Crops and Freedom: Export Agriculture and the Decline of Slavery in Colonial West Africa', *International Review of Social History*, 54.1 (2009), 12–14.

<sup>26</sup> Benedetta Rossi, 'Migration and Emancipation in West Africa's Labour History: The Missing Links', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35.1 (2014), 23–46.

outsiders for whom wage earning was a continuation of slavery.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, until the 1920s, workers' protests consisted of desertion and withdrawal to village economies as much as strike action. Across the region, former slaves hired as waged employees hardly fit the description of proletarians as they maintained some access to households' land and cattle. As in the case of mining, the impermanence and precariousness of waged work in export agriculture satisfied capitalist accumulation but also offered African labourers opportunities to resist working for wages.

Plantation systems in East Africa confirmed the emerging pattern thus far noticed, in which workers used uncertainty and instability as weapons to negotiate or subvert wage labour. Cooper's landmark analysis of the end of slavery in Kenya and Zanzibar showed that indigenous farmers participated in the capitalist economy largely as day labourers, which allowed for the survival of independent agriculture for local markets.<sup>28</sup> 'Squatting' was also a way for migrants to preserve plots of their own. Before the First World War, Kenya's developing European-owned tea and coffee estates attempted a shift in modes of exploitation of African labour from rent extraction from semi-independent cultivators ('kaffir farming') to the use of 'squatters' as labourers residing within European properties and often employed in temporary and even casual occupations such as bush clearing.<sup>29</sup> Similarly to other forms of contingent employment, then, squatting served the landlords' cost-cutting goals by keeping wages low and avoiding expensive recruitment from labour reserves, while providing casual workers with income sources in preference to wage labour.

As in West Africa, East Africa's former slave societies knew no uniform economic logic driving workers into waged employment. Similarly to northern Nigeria, British rule in the Sudan opposed immediate and full slave emancipation and boosted the masters' claims, often legitimized by the use of Islamic legal codes, to their servants' subjugation. Yet escaping slaves sought autonomy not in 'free' labour contracts but in the casual and informal jobs of a blossoming urban society.<sup>30</sup> Coercion accompanied the development of cash crops across the region, but also stimulated labour migration in search

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn A. Brown, *We Were All Slaves': African Miners, Culture, and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> John Overton, 'The Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem: Land Alienation and Land Use in Kiambu, Kenya, 1895–1920', *African Studies Review*, 31.2 (1988), 109–26.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmad A. Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).



of independent income opportunities. German authorities in Tanganyika extensively used servile and forced labour in sisal plantations, which often hired slaves on a seasonal basis from Indian or Arab intermediaries.<sup>31</sup> In Ethiopia, a fragile imperial state, albeit committed to abolition, could not stop the revival of slave raiding in the 1910s or the aggressive strategies of surplus extraction by Abyssinian aristocrats enforcing labour *corvées* to cater for the global demand for coffee grown in recently conquered southern territories. Precarious working conditions also resulted from the attempt of incoming settlers to turn former rent-paying tenants into wage labourers.<sup>32</sup> In response to worsening living and working conditions, peasants in the south-west of the country embraced *shifita* banditry as a form of rebellion and surplus reappropriation. In the eastern and western parts of the continent, then, abolition seldom meant stable economic opportunities, land access and bargaining power for the formerly enslaved. Their continuing precariousness reflected severely constrained options, belying the image of a simple, linear transition from 'unfree' to 'free' labour.

The development of monocultures for export, with or without plantation-type economies, also underscored the precariousness of employment – extending from rural to urban areas – in North Africa. Egypt's growth was driven by cotton grown on land owned by local landlords but coming increasingly under the pressure of foreign financial institutions. The resulting squeeze on tenants contributed to a situation in which, by 1907, 90 per cent of rural families had no or inadequate land for subsistence. Migration was a recurrent solution, but also reproduced gendered hierarchies, as men chose to leave rural waged jobs at 'women's rates'.<sup>33</sup> Many sought employment in the cities, where the most likely outlets were informal work as pushcart vendors or self-employed transport operators, or temporary and casual jobs in the docks or construction sites, where workers were hired by contractors (*khamli*) also operating as moneylenders, thus pushing precarious labourers towards debt peonage.<sup>34</sup> Since very few enterprises, such as the railways or the Suez Canal,

<sup>31</sup> Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa, c. 1884–1914* (Oxford/Athens, OH: James Currey/Ohio University Press, 2006); Hanan Sabea, 'Mastering the Landscape? Sisal Plantations, Land, and Labor in Tanga Region, 1893–1980s', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 41.3 (2008), 411–32.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy D. Fernyhough, *Serfs, Slaves and Shifita: Modes of Production and Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> James Toth, 'Pride, Purdah, or Paychecks: What Maintains the Gender Division of Labor in Rural Egypt?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23.2 (1991), 213–36.

<sup>34</sup> Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 24–5.



had large contingents of regular waged employees, the oppressive labour contracting system, which became the target of early strike actions, absorbed many who held little hope of jobs in eroded and degraded artisanal production. Old craft 'guilds', which had once played an important fiscal role in the now declining Ottoman state, collapsed, while small workshops of shoemakers, tanners or blacksmiths joined informal barbers or laundry workers in a still prosperous yet increasingly embattled *bazaar* economy. Craft traditions survived among highly skilled artisans, while a section of former guilds' *shaykhs* became labour contractors, thereby shifting downward the precariousness of a rapidly changing world of work that they themselves experienced.

In North Africa, however, as in the rest of the continent, the instability of the workforce served both employers' needs and employees' strategies. Peasants resisted proletarianization by clinging to their plots while entering urban employment (as in Egypt) or by migrating away from plantations on expropriated land (as in Algeria) or work in the mines (as in Morocco's phosphate industry). A preferred alternative was unskilled casual work in the railways and ports run by the Société Sfax Gafsa in Tunisia. The precariousness of city jobs was, nonetheless, heightened by the fact that Spanish, Italian and Greek nationals controlled skilled and high-waged unskilled positions, especially in construction, cigarette making or carpentry.<sup>35</sup> Despite the absence of colour bars as in South Africa, non-European employees were pushed into low-wage and insecure occupations whose vulnerability was ensured by the colonial use of 'native law' to curtail the labour rights of Muslim subjects.

Colonial North Africa mirrored, however, the labour landscape of the opposite end of the continent to the extent that precarious and informal labour found new impetus in the process of urbanization. The next section will show how the expansion of casual employment in the interwar years brought new opportunities for workers to contest wage labour discipline, thereby amplifying the instability and precarity of the colonial economy.

## URBANIZATION AND CASUAL WORK, 1919–39

After the First World War coercive labour regimes came under increasing international scrutiny and sanction, especially with the 1926 Slavery Convention and the 1930 ILO Forced Labour Convention. Although colonial

<sup>35</sup> Claude Liauzu, 'The History of Labor and the Workers' Movement in North Africa', in *The Social History of Labor in the Middle East*, ed. Ellis J. Goldberg (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 163–92.

powers continued to practise forced labour by delaying the ratification of the conventions (for example, Belgium and Portugal) and exploiting exceptions and loopholes in the ILO statutes, capitalist accumulation also confronted the challenge of managing the formation of waged employment, not only in export agriculture and raw materials but in cities whose functions as transportation nodes had expanded in wartime. Urbanization seemed to promise new opportunities and alternative sources of livelihood for Africans, especially when escaping compulsory and precarious work in the rural areas. The urban jobs available were, nonetheless, inadequate to satisfy demand, forcing many residents, often with uncertain property or tenure rights, to eke out their survival in largely unregulated small-scale manufacturing, service or trade. In the early 1930s the negative impacts of the Great Depression on African exports only exacerbated the predicament of precarious urban sectors, while swelling their size.

British and French strategies of managing urbanization generally regarded casual employment as preferable to the formation of a permanent, city-based working class. The contingent nature of most urban jobs open to Africans served the goals of colonial policymakers, as did the linkages that urban workers maintained with rural networks of production and income and the African migrants' reluctance to move permanently to the cities.<sup>36</sup> Among major employers of African workers, the shipping industry had highly mutable schedules, depending on variable commodity flows, while municipalities reserved only the most unskilled operations to 'natives'.<sup>37</sup>

Occupational, and sometimes legal, segregation, the break-up of migrants' families, inadequate housing, utilities and infrastructures, and gendered productive hierarchies determined the fundamental fragility of urban African employment. Yet casual and informal workers were not mere victims of socio-economic forces. In 'settler' colonies and labour reserves, whose rural productions were increasingly unable to provide the youth with the means to personal and family independence, urban employment was an opportunity to earn bride payments outside the control of headmen, who rather used their influence to recruit labourers for the mines or agricultural estates. The city could thus become a repository for alternative cultural norms and social

<sup>36</sup> James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Justin Willis, "'Men on the Spot", Labor, and the Colonial State in British East Africa: The Mombasa Water Supply, 1911–1917', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 28.1 (1995), 25–48.

practices, which were also ridden with conflict.<sup>38</sup> South African studies have shown that, as older generations of migrants saw in the ethics of regular work an avenue to stability and recognition in urban areas, they also regarded their respectability as threatened by younger arrivals who preferred casual occupations and were often stereotyped as criminals.<sup>39</sup>

Alarm at the criminality of the urban ‘underclass’ was deeply connected, in the mind of colonial administrators, to the imperative of controlling masses of precarious workers whose urban lifestyles had lost the restraints of ‘tribal’ life while remaining recalcitrant to white rule. In the case of Dar es Salaam, whose population rapidly increased after Tanganyika passed from German to British rule, Burton shows that by the early 1930s the most common urban occupations for Africans were domestic servants, self-employed petty traders or service providers – such as hawkers selling fish, vegetables, milk and charcoal by the roadside or carpenters, water carriers and rickshaw operators – and unskilled or casual labourers, especially in the docks and the city government.<sup>40</sup> The state’s criminalization and repression of those engaged in these contingent and informal jobs, which threatened to escape official controls, exacerbated their precariousness.<sup>41</sup> By the 1940s the word *wabuni* was used to negatively connote casual workers as well as wandering and shiftless vagrants. Locatelli’s work on Eritrea, a society where wage labour was much more widespread than elsewhere in East Africa, similarly points out that colonial authorities defined criminals as a quasi-anthropological category defined by an aversion to regular work.<sup>42</sup>

The regulation of informality and casualization was therefore for colonial authorities not only an economic matter of value extraction but also a political issue of social control. Cooper’s celebrated study of dockworkers in Mombasa demonstrated that casual workers were attracted to the port by the

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Cooper, ‘Urban Space, Industrial Time, and Wage Labor in Africa’, in *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa*, ed. Frederick Cooper (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983), 7–51.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, ‘The Ma-Rashea: A Participant’s Perspective’, in *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 436–56; David Goodhew, ‘Working-Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930–55’, *Journal of African History*, 41.2 (2000), 241–66.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam, 1919–1961* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> See the chapter by Fourchard in this volume.

<sup>42</sup> Francesca Locatelli, ‘“Oziosi, Vagabondi e Pregiudicati”: Labor, Law, and Crime in Colonial Asmara, 1890–1941’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 40.2 (2007), 225–50.