Africa 74 (2), 2004

REVIEW ARTICLE

TRAINS, COAL, AND INDUSTRIAL LABOUR

Jock McCulloch

JAMES A. JONES, *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World: workers of the Chemin de Fer Dakar–Niger, 1881–1963*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann (hard covers US$59.95, ISBN 0 325 07089 X). 2002, 184 pp.

AHMAD ALAWAD SIKAINGA, *City of Steel and Fire: a social history of Atbara, Sudan's railway town, 1906–1984*. Oxford: James Currey (paperback £17.95, ISBN 0 85255 962 3; hard covers £45.00, ISBN 0 85255 967 4); Portsmouth NH: Heinemann (paperback US$24.95, ISBN 0 325 07107 1; hard covers US$64.95, ISBN 0 325 07106 3). 2002, 220 pp.

CAROLYN A. BROWN, *'We Were All Slaves': African miners, culture, and resistance at the Enugu government colliery, Nigeria*. Oxford: James Currey (paperback £17.95, ISBN 0 85255 634 9); Portsmouth NH: Heinemann (paperback US$24.95, ISBN 0 325 07006 7; hard covers US$64.95, ISBN 0 325 07007 5). 2003, 224 pp.

The train has been one of capital's most powerful tools; to many, railways have been the emblems of modernity, the engines of industrialisation and national prosperity. By 1880, the 100,000 railway engines in Europe were absorbing more labour than any other new industry. European railways moved commodities and people and in the process they used vast amounts of coal and steel. Trains brought economic opportunities, stimulated the rise of new urban centres, pioneered modern bureaucracies, and often became sources of labour militancy. Even today, railways are dangerous places. Mines too are dangerous, exacting a terrible price in industrial accidents and occupational diseases such 'black lung'.

In Britain, debate about occupational diseases gathered pace in the mid-1870s. The 1897 Workmen's Compensation Act made many concessions to employers, and focused upon accidents rather than occupational disease. Yet, in theory at least, it gave railway, mine and factory workers the right to compensation for workplace injury, and imposed a limited cost back onto employers. During the first decades of the twentieth century, trade unions and social movements in Britain fought hard to expand the list of Prescribed Industrial Diseases and to

JOCK MCCULLOCH is currently a visiting fellow in the Institute for Political Economy, Carleton University, Ottawa. His most recent book is *Asbestos Blues: Labour, Capital, Physicians and the State in South Africa* (2002). He is presently working on a global history of asbestos.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

achieve just compensation for those disabled by their work. Legislation to improve occupational health and safety, while most effective in state enterprises, eliminated neither occupational disease, nor avoidable industrial accidents. Yet, by the 1930s, the horrific workplaces described by Engels in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* a century previously had gone. British miners wore company-supplied boots and hard hats and occasionally were given chest X- rays. They were not shot when protesting for better pay.

African historiography has gone through various seasons over the past three decades. It is now axiomatic that when writing about the labour process historians should explain how men and women have shaped both toil and the workplace itself to their own ends. Feminist historians in particular have produced innovative work in this respect. There is now an impressive literature on domestic labour, stevedores, miners, market women, cotton growers, sex workers, and petty traders. The authors of the three books reviewed here examine the play of global capital upon local labour formations in three state enterprises: the mines of Enugu in Nigeria, the Sudanese railway, and the Dakar–Niger line. The authors write self-consciously about modernity, the lineaments of which they find among coal miners and railways workers. While each book purports to be about identity and cultural frames, Brown's work on Nigeria lies closest to subaltern historiography.

Colonial railways lay at the intersection of European and African societies. They introduced new forms of labour, created markets, and generated capital. The railways of the Sudan and French West Africa were quintessentially masculine enterprises. Their work forces were often militant and colonial administrations had good reason to fear men who operated such powerful machinery and were aware of their capacity to disrupt regional economies.

James A. Jones' *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World* is a romance about the Dakar–Niger line which was built between 1880 and 1923 to connect the Middle Niger valley to French-controlled ports along the Senegal coast. Using archival sources and oral evidence, Jones presents a specialised narrative which begins with French military incursions in the AOF and ends four generations later with political independence. As an historian, Jones is absorbed with the intricacies of the labour process, and his narrative is best when he describes them. Yet he also wants to explore how the models of industrialism born in western Europe were altered in their transplanting to colonial Africa. Consequently, *Industrial Labor* is a reminder that the writing of global history should begin with small events. The conditions of labour on the railway were in part determined by decisions made thousands of miles away, and in part by the resistance of local workers to bad pay and conditions. Jones describes how a small group of men reshaped the workplace to their own ends and in the process helped bring commercial opportunities to a wider community.

Railroads were the stuff of imperial imagination. During the 1870s, the French parliament debated the building of a trans-Saharan railroad. While that dream never came to fruition, the Dakar–Niger line, which

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

began life as a tool of conquest, soon grew into the largest industrial enterprise in French West Africa. The rail increased the demand for wage labour in the interior and allowed the easy importation of new commodities, which in turn brought wider economic change. As elsewhere on the continent, the railway's success rested upon the skills and endurance of African labour. Work began in 1883 with migrant workers from Morocco. Devastated by yellow fever, they were replaced by French, Spanish and Italian artisans and African labourers. The early takeover of the project by the military routinised the use of forced labour and coercion, with prisoners and refugees doing much of the construction work. To enforce discipline, white supervisors beat workers who responded with desertion and sabotage.

Jones writes in detail about the laying of rail lines, the construction of bridges and warehouses and the use of ballast. The project was plagued by a lack of funding from Paris. The architects of the Dakar–Niger line had little idea how to build a railway. The project was badly planned, and executed in fits and starts. The rail gauges were too narrow and the grades excessive. The Kayes–Niger section was completed twenty years late and forty million francs over budget; consequently, there was no new construction work after 1923. Jones skilfully identifies the gap between official rhetoric about an imperial rail system and the way the project was conducted. He also writes about the brutality and mendacity of management, and the conditions of work for the men who built and operated the line. Rail yards and repair shops used heavy machinery, and toxic materials such as asbestos. While Jones provides ample evidence that the railways were dangerous places, an explicit focus on occupational health and safety is missing from his narrative.

During the construction period African workers avoided the railway. Wages were poor, the conditions awful and the work had low status. This changed once the railway began operating. Soon, a stratified workforce emerged, with Africans taking jobs as stationmasters and in operations and maintenance, and obtaining much sought after skilled employment in repair shops, signals and communications. From the early 1920s, the French administration cultivated a group of 'professionals' or skilled workers to act as a buffer against militancy. Those men quickly developed what Jones terms 'a class consciousness' akin to that of their counterparts in Europe. Over the next two decades, the 'professionals' supported the French policy of assimilation and sided with management during the periodic labour disputes. According to Jones, it was only the shooting of six workers during a wildcat strike in 1938 which alienated them from their erstwhile patrons.

World War Two was used by the colonial administration as an excuse to delay labour reforms. By 1945 serious industrial conflict had become inevitable. Strikes among postal workers, teachers and dockworkers were followed by a general strike in Senegal in 1946. Dakar–Niger workers were part of the federation-wide rail strike of October 1947 that lasted for five months and became a key moment in the decolonisation process in the AOF. This campaign is the focus of the final two chapters of *Industrial Labor*. Using new archival material

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from Mali and oral evidence from Mali and Senegal, Jones shows that the strikers won widespread sympathy from the public as well as material support from the French CGT. Frederick Cooper and others have argued that the strike forced colonial administrations to recognise the equivalence of African labourers, a goal that was finally realised in the Overseas Labour Code of 1953 which gave them parity at law. Jones advances the literature by tracing that rupture back to the 1920s when African 'professionals' began to exert an influence over the railway.

Between 1948 and 1960, the Dakar–Niger railway line declined. The introduction of diesel engines fundamentally changed the ethos of workshops and rail yards. The system's strategic importance was further eroded by improved roads and the increasing use of lorries. Railwaymen could no longer threaten the regional economy; industrially, they became increasingly irrelevant. In 1960 the Dakar–Niger system was reduced to two truncated lines. As a group, the rail workers had helped to set the nationalist agenda, yet as that movement came to maturity their influence waned. Jones has written a vivid account of the physical and social conditions of railway labour, identifying how the play of technical and organisation factors shaped rail workers' lives and how they in turn made the workplace their own. *Industrial Labor* works beautifully as a specialised history. The narrative is less successful, however, as a story about modernity, with which the text begins and ends.

In *City of Steel and Fire*, Ahmad Alawad Sikainga has written a rather different history of a railway. Given the current economic and political crisis in the Sudan, it is hard to imagine that Atbara, the headquarters of Sudan Railways (SR), once boasted one of the most radical trade union movements in Africa and the Middle East. That movement fought hard to improve the conditions of its members and on the wider political stage it helped bring down military regimes in 1964 and 1985. Using written sources from the Sudan and England, oral evidence from former workers, and material from trade union archives, Sikainga sets out to examine workplace experience and urban life in the shaping of the politics and identity of labour. *City of Steel and Fire* could have been a nostalgic study of lost political opportunities. Instead Sikainga has written a powerful narrative about the resistance of unionised labour against colonial and post-colonial states.

The first rail line in the Sudan was built at the end of the nineteenth century by the military, and from 1898 to 1905 Atbara was a railway station. The system required an extensive labour force for the construction, maintenance and re-laying of lines. The first three chapters of *City of Steel and Fire* examine the transformation of Atbara into a company town where workers lived with their families. The reluctance of local Sudanese to enter wage labour saw most workers recruited from the north, and village networks channelled new men onto the railway. Artisans were drawn from Britain, Greece, Ethiopia, India and Egypt. Until 1924, military personnel from the Egyptian Army Railway Battallion and the British Royal Engineers ran the system. Europeans lived in an exclusive quarter in the west of the town, Egyptians and a few Sudanese were housed near the market, and most

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sudanese were in the east. By 1939 the SR was the largest employer of industrial labour in the country. Most of its 20,000 employees were stationed at Atbara.

With the expansion of the cotton industry in the mid-1920s, the line was extended to Port Sudan, and Atbara became the centre of a national network. Even though the poor design of the track affected the speed and the volume of traffic, the tonnage and passenger numbers rose steadily. The railway workforce was distinguished by its size, skill and strategic location. The heart of the system was the mechanical division whose workshop operated like a factory. It was staffed by permanent employees who spent their lives in the city.

Formally there was a strict chain of authority and the workforce was divided between engineering, mechanics, traffic, accounts, stores and hotels. Each of those divisions was in turn composed of various job specialisations. Until the 1940s, the SR had over 300 grades of work spread across the various divisions and stratified according to skills and pay. Employees wore uniforms and were required to know the General Rules Book which set down regulations on every procedure from managing train movements to the types of goods carried on particular rolling stock. There were major disparities in wage rates between skilled and unskilled labour, and workers in each section soon developed a corporate ethos.

Sikainga describes the growth of Atbara with the gradual provision of electricity, sewerage, running water, and schools and gives details on everything from house design to shop rentals. There is also a brief section on households and the division of domestic labour. Company towns tend to concentrate power into the hands of employers, yet the railwaymen of Atbara were distinguished by their independence and militancy. Atbara was also a cultural centre. There was a vibrant social life with numerous clubs, charities, credit societies, village associations and sporting clubs, some of which also served as political forums. The social and sports clubs became centres for the emergence of Sudanese nationalism.

After 1945, the rising cost of living, rationing and the rigid job hierarchy encouraged local railwaymen to join the labour unrest which swept British and Francophone Africa. There was much discontent among artisans who bore the brunt of the petty insults and racism of British supervisors. The workers eventually won wage increases and with the formation of the Workers Affairs Association in 1946 the right to trade union representation. The 1947 strike, which received support from Egyptian trade unions, was a major event, and its success empowered labour.

The railway workers developed close links to the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), an alliance that provoked the hostility of post-Independence governments. During the 1970s Nimeiri encouraged foreign investment and built a network of paved roads to reduce the strategic importance of the railway and undercut the power of its trade union. After an ill-advised strike in 1981, Nimeiri dismantled the rail corporation. By 1990 the government increased its attacks upon rail

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

employees and dismissed thousands of men. According to Sikainga, Islam did not shape labour relations in the Sudan in any simple fashion. The history of Atbara, he argues, illustrates the crucial role of trade unions and political parties in expressing and, in turn, moulding working-class history. While Sikainga provides a very detailed portrait of a community, the text's centre of gravity lies in his account of the pattern of labour protest, the methods of mobilisation, and the role of leadership and ideology. As with *Industrial Labor*, Sikainga has little to say about occupational injury or disease.

In writing '*We Were All Slaves',* Carolyn Brown sets out to rescue the Enugu miners of Eastern Nigeria from the dead hand of nationalist historiography. Much of the relevant archives was destroyed during the Civil War, but Brown has visited the mines and uncovered a rich vein of archival, photographic and oral evidence. Brown emphasises the continuity between colonial and metropolitan labour. She posits 'a country of coal' inhabited by all such miners. This common terrain, she argues, closed the gap separating labour forces on opposite sides of the imperial divide. To shorten the imaginative distance between centre and periphery even further, Brown employs the concept of masculinity. Her problem is that significant variations between the two sites keep breaking the surface of her narrative.

The Enugu mines produced steaming coal for the railways of West Africa, and for the tin mines of the north. The brutal enforcement of British rule in Igboland between 1909 and 1915 was the context in which mining began. Lord Lugard himself took an interest in an industry that by 1916 employed over 700 men. The colliery was a division of the Nigerian Railways. Together, these were the two major capital works projects in the Eastern Province. The mines had difficulty in recruiting labour and initially relied upon 'the local method', by which Native Authorities, established as an instrument for British rule, recruited workers. A work force composed of forced labour, supplemented by prisoners and artisans, many of whom came from the West Indies, gradually emerged. There was little European presence underground and management relied upon 'boss boys' to carry out supervisory roles. 'Boss boys' also controlled the wage rate of hewers and so in effect they ran the mines. According to Brown, the mine's incompetent and lazy management used 'a system of coercion' to enforce compliance from miners and she writes about the frequent beatings and racial slurs. Brown only mentions the Masters and Servants legislation in passing; it would have been helpful to learn more about whether—and how—the law authorised the physical abuse of workers.

Despite the harsh conditions, miners fought hard to gain control of the work process and to shape it to their own ends. The agricultural cycle placed limits on the availability of miners. Men worked in both cycles, selling their labour at times which suited themselves—a device which encouraged the British to perceive them as poor workers. The labour process which had men dispersed at numerous sites underground made attempts at centralised control difficult. Hewers owned their own tools and considered themselves to be artisans. The basic production

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unit—the work group—was controlled by individual contractors who rose from the ranks of miners; it remained largely independent until the eve of World War Two. In British coal mines, the introduction of heavy machinery during the early 1930s reduced the autonomy of labour. Because the colonial state refused to make a parallel investment, Enugu miners retained a large degree of autonomy.

The first generations of miners were given no training or protective equipment and they worked barefooted in conditions which had not been seen on British mines for a century. Both lighting and ventilation were inadequate and Brown describes how men worked in near total darkness shovelling coals on their knees. To management, the resulting high rate of serious injuries was proof of the workers' incompetence. Surprisingly, Brown claims that the mines were relatively safe and says nothing about 'black lung', the curse of British miners, except to repeat the official rhetoric that it did not occur. In contemporary Department of Mines correspondence from Zimbabwe and South Africa such comments were shorthand for the fact that occupational disease went uncompensated.

Management demands that miners conform to an abstract rhythm of work resulted in an endless struggle over work rates. The mines quickly developed a culture of protest as coalface workers, led by artisans and clerical staff, fought to improve their conditions. There were six strikes between 1919 and 1921, followed by a crisis in 1929. The strikes, Brown argues, were evidence that the men were becoming industrial workers, even though the management saw them as bereft of self-discipline or skill.

Enugu was a colonial city and like all such cities it was segregated by colour and class. Some miners lived in the town, some lived in labour camps and other in nearby villages. In exploring the emergence of self-identity among the miners, Brown writes of the intricate meshing of workplace, village and camp life. There were a large number of servants in the camps who tended to the miner's needs, thereby encouraging the flow of new commodities into surrounding villages. Enugu grew rapidly in the 1920s. By the end of that decade, there was a significant group of clerks, and a business class centred on transport, real estate and commerce. Skilled labourers established informal associations (*nzukọ ịfụnanya*) which introduced new men to the mines and in time became a focus for worker grievances.

A new wage system introduced in 1939 ended the hewers' control over work teams and centralised power into the hands of white management. At about the same time, the system of beatings and petty insults used by supervisors to keep miners submissive began to collapse. On the eve of World War Two, a number of white supervisors were charged with assault and the resulting intervention by the Colonial Office saw the frequency of canings and extortion reduced. Improvements were also made to sanitation and living conditions in the work camps. Trade unions were legalised in 1939. Brown traces the history of the Colliery Workers Union, showing how its leadership used the gains made by British coal miners to frame its members' demands for better wages and

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conditions. Not surprisingly, fearing an alliance between trade unions and an emerging nationalist elite, management used the war to postpone workplace reforms. Production grew rapidly during the war. By 1944, the colliery workforce had tripled in size. It was a hard time for miners and their families as wages were eaten away by inflation.

A strike in November 1949 saw protesting miners' wives beaten by police. While negotiations between management and the Colliery Workers Union stalled, the government prepared itself for military confrontation. In a subsequent demonstration, troops fired on protesting miners, killing twenty men and wounding many more. There were spontaneous demonstrations in Port Harcourt and Calabar, and a number of expatriate firms were looted and burned. The incidents attracted international attention and became a centrepiece in the history of the anti-colonial struggle.

Brown argues that as state employees, the miners felt the state was responsible for their welfare and that was how they evaluated their workplace. They had a strong sense of their identity but management refused to see them as industrial men with legitimate demands. She argues that the boundaries between African and metropolitan miners were more imagined than real and that the idea of 'the African worker' was an imperial fantasy used to explain the deficiencies of colonial economies and their administrations. Brown's book is good on social process, although sometimes the binary oppositions she uses, such as urban/rural, or traditional/modern, become schematic.

Each of the three authors displays careful judgment, a keen awareness of adjacent literatures and inventiveness in their use of sources. Brown in particular presents a vivid account of how masculinity can shape expectations and conduct in the workplace. And yet, when read together, two of these three books raise questions about Western scholarship's inexorable drift to the right. Forty years ago, in 'The Pitfalls of the National Consciousness' (1967), Fanon observed that class structures were different at the imperial centres and peripheries because each stood at the opposite side of an historical process. He believed that process had made the European working class a labour aristocracy and had given African wage labour a different structure and a different project. Since the demise of academic and Soviet Marxism it is unfashionable to talk about history in that way but the problem of what the historical process means remains. Does it make sense, for example, to valorise modernity, as these three authors have done, in order to establish the equivalence of colonial workers?

Recently, debates about colonial and metropolitan class structures, and uneven development, have been reformulated in terms of multiple modernities. Two recent issues of the journal *Daedalus* (1998, 2000) contain a useful introduction to a literature that claims there is no single path or form of modernity but several, and emphasises how modern societies and their supporting institutions have developed within a variety of economic formations, among different ethnic and cultural groupings and over a range of institutional and ideological settings. Brown and Jones and to an extent Sikainga, in contrast, assume that

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there is but one path to modernity and they seek to close the gap between colonial labour and imperial centres by emphasising those elements shared by all industrial workers. To achieve that end, they leave out occupational health—the very point at which the systems diverged most dramatically.

African coal miners and railways workers enjoyed none of the meagre occupational health and safety measures whose introduction in France and Britain marked the first decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, colonial workplaces were even more dangerous than those of the metropole. Without reference to occupational disease or safety the critical edge is taken off the scholarship and the distance between the imperial centres and the colonial sites which these authors seek to close is maintained. What too of the role of industrial labour in the emergence of those hideous regimes which have blighted the post-war period? The ghost of a different future which appears in *City of Steel and Fire* is absent from the other two works. In its place we have an account of modernity from which the prospect of transcendence has been stripped. The context for that scholarly innovation are the ever worsening life circumstances facing most people in Africa.

REFERENCES

Daedalus. 1998. Vol. 127, no. 3.

——2000. Vol. 129, no. 1.

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. 'The pitfalls of the national consciousness', in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. by Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. (1961. 'Mésaventures de la conscience nationale', in *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris: F. Maspero.)

Guha, Ranajit (ed). 1996. *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric. 1994. *The Age of Extremes: a history of the world, 1914–1991*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Katz, Elaine N. 1994. *The White Death: silicosis on the Witwatersrand gold mines, 1886–1910*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Nieuwenhuys, Olga. 1994. *Children's Lifeworlds: gender, welfare and labour in the developing world*. London and New York: Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277 Published online by Cambridge University Press