Introduction

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Is African labor history making a comeback? The historical study of the lives, practices, and modes of employment of African workers has recently been the object of growing scholarly interest. Following three decades of economic liberalization and declining working-class politics, such matters had seemed of secondary importance, if not decidedly *passé*. Over the past few years, however, there have been special issues on African labor history in various journals,[1] two quite well-attended panels on the topic took place at the 2012 meeting of the African Studies Association, and a project is underway—under the aegis of the International Labour Organization and the International Institute of Social History—for a new General Labor History of Africa. In a neoliberalized world, the study of work and labor had taken a backseat to other perspectives on Africa, such as the analysis of ethnic politics, informal urban practices, and religion and spirituality. But, in the wake of the growing disillusionment that has confronted processes of global economic liberalization, scholars of various hues now worry openly about the predicament of workers, deepening inequality, and the untrammeled power of capital.[2]

The papers presented in this special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* emphasize the irreducible multiplicity ("histories," rather than "history") of the experiences, activities, and conditions of African workers, which we regard as necessary to any attempt at a broader theoretical reconstruction. Authors have, therefore, covered a vast time span, from precolonial to postcolonial periods, addressing a variety of sectors—manufacturing, agriculture, mining, transportation, the military—under private, public, and missionary employers, domestic as well as multinational, and scrutinizing a range of employment relations, from wage labor to different forms of coerced and tributary work, across historical experiences shaped by British, French, Portuguese, and Italian colonialism. Yet multiplicity does not necessarily mean fragmentation or a methodological preference for empirical case studies. The realities discussed in this issue show, therefore, apparent connections not only to one another, but also to the transnational or global circulation of practices, ideas, and peoples. Within this dynamic, African workers interrogate key categories of their social world, such as the meaning of modern production paradigms under conditions of colonial domination, the precarious boundaries between free and unfree labor, and the capacity of local struggles to signify and

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contest daily existence on a continent whose historical trajectories have been conditioned more than anywhere else by external interventions.

Of course, interest in the field has never really waned, as Stephen Rockel outlines in his book review essay. But labor studies, like labor movements, have nonetheless greatly suffered from decades of structural adjustment, which have decimated the continent's regularly employed and organized working classes and shifted research agendas and funding toward democratization, governance, and the containment of social conflicts. An earlier generation of scholars, many of whom had witnessed the transition from colonial rule to independent nation-states in the 1960s and 1970s, had foregrounded, in their studies of African workers, a set of problems and concepts—strikes, unions, self-conscious class identities—emphasizing labor's progressive, transformative, or at least modernizing capacities.[3] Such discussions were often couched in characteristically optimistic terms. The introduction to a standard collection published immediately prior to the neoliberal turn stated that "labor protest does point to the rise of a working class consciousness, both economic and political, 'free from the mist of nationalism' and, one would hope, of narrow ethnic encapsulation."[4]

One can thus more easily understand the partial eclipse of African labor studies by keeping in mind the devastation wrought by economic liberalization in the ranks of the very organized working-class constituencies whose emergence had seemed to inspire early scholarly enthusiasms. Such enthusiasms were, on the other hand, far from unwarranted. Labor scholarship had greatly energized postcolonial African studies, largely on account of the major role organized labor played in many anticolonial and early postcolonial social and political struggles. The economic policies of independent governments also embraced ideas, usually inherited from the expert discourse of former colonial regimes and international organizations, that waged employment, capitalist production norms, and institutionalized industrial relations systems could operate as outposts of modernization, albeit under strict state supervision in ostensibly nonadversarial contexts.[5] The consequences of proletarianization on African social life have been, on the other hand, massive if unevenly distributed and concentrated in urban areas, transportation nodes, mining regions, and specific pockets of rural production, like plantation economies in Eastern and Southern Africa or smaller-scale commercial agriculture with large migrant labor contingents in West Africa. Labor studies helped establish once and for all a scholarly consensus on the transformative impact of capitalist production relations. Scholars working within colonial situations had instead struggled to accept the idea that urban and proletarian social forms were entrenched and widespread features, and not just episodic or temporal deviations from idealized and often stereotyped African "traditional" life. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, in the passage from decolonization to independence, ruling nationalist parties eager to avoid the dangers of class struggle had demanded cooperation and acquiescence from trade unions, with which they had once been united in anticolonial mobilization. As the rising African political elites saw in waged employment an avenue for social discipline and predictable productivity,

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working-class voices used it as a springboard for claims to better wages, working conditions, social provisions, and even political freedoms.

Before the rude awakening of structural adjustment in the 1980s, radical scholarship could draw comfort from continuing working-class assertiveness. The subsequent crisis of labor politics, however, forced a shift in the focus of inquiry toward cultural practices and discursive formations surrounding work and production. The relevance of such broader questions was, on the other hand, brought home by the unexpected resurgence of labor mobilization as a key ingredient in the movements that, following the suffering and frustrations brought by liberalization, led to the replacement of authoritarian governments with multiparty regimes in the wave of democratization of the early 1990s. Trade unions that represented numerically limited social strata—mostly male, waged workers in factories, public services, and extractive industries—and had been battered by deindustrialization, retrenchments of government employment, and the removal of trade barriers, emerged as catalysts of popular discontent in places as diverse as Egypt, Tunisia, Niger, Mali, and Zambia. In South Africa, labor proved to be the most significant organized actor in the downfall of apartheid. New, self-professing democratic governments would then roll back workers' demands as they confirmed their allegiance to neoliberalism. Scholars of African labor were nonetheless challenged to update their conceptual apparatus to make sense of the social and political activism of labor movements that were supposedly scattered and embattled. Theories of "social movement unionism" referred to the multiple locales inhabited by African workers—the workplace, the community, the household, the neighborhood—to argue for labor's ability to appeal to a range of claims for justice and dignity.[6] The shift came with its own brand of often exaggerated and idealistic optimism. Social movement unionism nonetheless replaced early ideas of a working-class consciousness linked to the inexorable advance of proletarianization with the awareness that, in Africa, commodified work has been historically precarious and localized, coexisting with a wide variety of social relations and cultural imaginaries, even if this is not necessarily a recipe for weakness and defeat.[7]

The new attention to the interplay of material and discursive forces, while emphasizing labor's complex position in African history, translated into important academic works during the 1990s, most notably Fred Cooper's study of the "labor question" in decolonizing Africa.[8] Cooper proceeded from the hypothesis that the African working class is not the mere product of a linear advance of capitalist production. It is, rather, "a contingent set of relationships, and also an imaginative project."[9] Toward the end of colonial rule, British and French policymakers tried to use waged employment and labor legislation to "stabilize" African commodity producers by giving them stakes in the system. Postcolonial governments would by and large continue on similar paths.[10] The stabilization fantasy, however, clashed with inconvenient material and discursive consequences. First, social reforms (including the regulation of employment conditions and benefits) remained confined to a minority of formally employed

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workers, mostly male and urban, thereby reinforcing the distinctiveness, if not the isolation, of wage labor. Second, African workers and trade unions used new official recognitions and benefits to amplify their claims for better wages, social provisions, and collective rights.

The structural adjustment policies of the 1980s attempted to solve the conundrum in terms favorable to capital but, even as they curtailed the ranks of waged workers, they did not completely suppress their social and political power. They underscored, however, changes in African workers' lives, which came to rely less on cohesive class identities and more on the intersection of different employment relations with diverse social agencies and cultural expressions. The rise of informality as a topic of inquiry[11] within labor studies resonates with neoliberal attempts to graft a template of self-entrepreneurship onto a progressively more precarious world of work. It also reveals persistent complications in trying to categorize the seemingly paradoxical status of commodity-producing jobs—socially fragmented, unevenly distributed, politically embattled, yet central to competing ideas of productivity, social order, and solidarity—in colonial and postcolonial Africa. If anything, the materiality of norms and discourse and the ways they intersect social reality—the contrast between labor as a set of official values and its degraded actual conditions—are decisive factors in the fragility and precariousness of work,[12] which even mainstream notions of informal self-entrepreneurship can only capture in highly volatile ways, as they plow through and disarticulate older narratives of working-class solidarity.

African working-class subjectivities have been sites of intense policy and institutional experimentation, which aimed to give them life as harbingers of orderly and disciplined development. Yet they have regularly proven to be far more unpredictable and indocile than official policy exhortations, nationalist ideologies, or Left prescriptions had envisaged. Not only was waged employment used to establish workers' demands in other spheres, it also connected in often ungovernable ways with multiple livelihoods, community protests, and survival networks, which defied neat boundaries between workplace and social life, or rural and urban. Highly localized, the social practices of African workers are moreover infused with ethnic and religious themes, which render the management of working-class identities all the more elusive.[13] The conceptual challenges underlying such complex realities have recently been taken up by scholars of "global labor history,"[14] who have engaged historians of African labor to creatively rethink spatial and scalar connections and the ways they are interrogated by situated practices. The impact of international influences on local dynamics is, of course, far more important in Africa than in other postcolonial contexts, yet African labor studies have lagged behind in this line of inquiry, especially to the extent that a certain "methodological nationalism" has configured the national as the key unit of analysis.[15] Orthodox Marxian views premised on the revolutionary potential of the national proletariat have something to do with such reductionism, as global labor historians inspired by Marxian analysis now recognize and address by placing subnational,

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supranational, and transnational processes at the core of their work.[16] Global labor history therefore encourages researchers to think of Africa's connections with and disconnections from globalization as factors that redefine African social landscapes, including those of work and labor, in ways that are far from smooth and homogeneous but not for this reason refractory to theoretical elaboration.[17] Labor scholarship would rather appear as a vital terrain upon which African studies have the potential to complicate, disrupt, and reconstruct theoretical paradigms, such as those inspired by neoliberal policy convergence, rather than sustain widely accepted images of the global. As a precondition, however, African labor history is called upon to demonstrate a capacity for self-renewal by offering insights not only into the continent's political economy but its social processes and cultural dynamics writ large.

The papers presented in this special issue are steps in that direction, as they probe manifold terrains upon which research on African labor sheds light. Their authors' different perspectives and methodological approaches share a keen attention to historical processes that defy linear trajectories, planned outcomes, and foreseeable consequences. Regardless of whether they look at waged, forced, or slave labor relations, their approach to the conditions of work, its subjugation and value-producing practices is not limited to the organization of unrest, resistance, and strikes. Most importantly, the issue does not foreground the industrial proletariat as a central object of analysis, a tendency that narrowed the focus of older generations of labor historiography. The analysis of labor relations plays a central role in most papers, which use it nonetheless to transcend a focus on the nation-state and reveal often unexpected connections between local realities and regional or global forces.

Elias Mandala's paper on the birth of wage labor in precolonial Central Africa regards African work in the production and exchange of commodities as characterized from its very beginning by internal contestation. The Magololo porters David Livingstone employed in his travels became wage laborers not only, or not so much, as a result of colonial rationality or missionary imperatives. Rather, they appropriated their status in commodity circuits to criticize and subvert preexisting patterns of indigenous authority and tributary subordination. In the process, they also targeted the Europeans' pretensions of exclusively defining the terms of work ethics and production discipline, rather than embracing waged work as an abstract signifier of civilization.

The deployment of elaborate discursive frameworks—as Alan Cobley reminds us in his paper on early labor migrancy to the South African gold mines—was therefore central to early colonial procedures geared to create and regiment African working classes, especially to the extent Africans strived to relate to waged employment in accordance with their own needs. The elaboration by state administrators and mining managers of the idea of the "tropical worker" was premised on couching productive hierarchies in the guise of cultural differences so that colonial authorities could reclaim, on the basis of their knowledge of the "native," the prerogative of defining the productive potential and exploitability of different African populations. As such

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productive and epistemic networks spanned vast spaces of regional labor migration, the gold mine as a specific site of subjugation allows one to grasp the transnational dimension of local labor histories.

Yet, as Catherine Higgs shows in her discussion of European debates on the happiness and freedom of African workers in São Tomé's cocoa plantations, the colonizers' application of concepts and categories to rationalize and justify the economic exploitation of labor faced its own quandaries. British chocolate manufacturers armed with the Western idea of "free labor" as part of a progressive moral universe had to confront the problematic persistence of unfreedom among the suppliers of their raw materials. The haunting persistence of slavery in heavily racialized systems of domination disturbed the self-righteousness of colonial reformers who had reassured themselves with the thought that British colonialism and slave labor were essentially antithetical terms. The controversy ignited by the competing perspectives on freedom and happiness of British planters and Portuguese colonial rulers allowed for changes in labor relations, which to some extent benefitted African workers, even if their voices and demands remained silenced.

Contrasts between normative discourse, ethical motifs, and material realities are also central to Catherine Koonar's examination of child labor in the mission stations of colonial Ghana. The missionary project praised the pedagogical potential of manual labor and training as a mode to instruct subjugated others into the ways of Western civilization. Yet the Basel Mission found it difficult, as a result of resistance from the parents of the children they employed and the children themselves, to draw a clear line separating the alleged positive educational influence of work from the evident exploitation of child labor in trades upon which the economic fortunes of the mission came increasingly to rely. As a commentary on the ambiguities of freedom within progressive visions of colonialism, European missionaries saw child labor at best as an unwelcome yet functional necessity in the uncertain path of shaping colonial subjects according to Western notions of productive discipline.

In the otherwise underresearched case of Eritrea, Stefano Bellucci and Massimo Zaccaria provide an innovative discussion of the multifarious social trajectories that brought waged employment to the fore. Wage labor emerged as part of colonial planning—the Italian ambitions of turning Eritrea into a settler colony—despite the overall economic failure of the Italian colonial experience. As prospects of large-scale immigration from Italy proved impracticable, other sociopolitical forces, namely military mobilization, intervened to facilitate proletarianization by connecting the colony to broader labor flows in the region and across the Red Sea. Bellucci and Zaccaria, like Mandala and Cobley, emphasize the transnational dynamics of local labor formations in ways that problematize labor historians' traditional focus on the national level. Their analysis of colonial capitalism is thus predicated upon juridically free and economically commodified wage labor as a matter of movements and exchanges. Although the article does not go as far as defining Eritrea between 1880 and 1920 as a fully-fledged capitalist society, it invites a

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complex look at the wide array of actors that, sometimes unintentionally, promoted capitalist relations of production.

Marie Rodet extends this issue's look at workers' agency and resistance by documenting the ways in which labor was entangled with masculinity and gender relations in the case of forced migrant work in the colonial plantation economy of the Kayes region (French Sudan). Coercive labor practices there were aimed at establishing a masculine ideal of African producers, yet masculinity was not merely a device for the purpose of colonial domination according to European values. It became itself a contested terrain for African male workers trying to assert their claims in the name of a family-oriented masculinity—which would then shift conflict onto that gendered arena—against the production-centered manhood with which colonial authorities and enterprises had imagined their laboring subjects.

Lynn Schler reminds us that the importance of meanings and symbols as sites of contestation was not limited to colonial realities but also accompanied African workers' transition to life in independent nation-states. For Nigerian seamen, the postcolonial nationalization of shipping companies was a potent symbol of regained national dignity underpinning democratic expectations. Yet, the symbolic rewards of independence—Nigerian flags on ships owned by a Nigerian company—and the improvements to workers day-to-day lives—for example, the availability of traditional foods—were undercut by the persistence of hierarchical labor control and workplace despotism, which merely updated colonial employment practices. In the absence of a comprehensive social transformation, workplace change in the limited domain of a specific public employer raises broader questions of freedom and self-determination for manual laborers.

Intersections of race and class are, finally, at the core of Danelle van Zyl-Hermann's study of changing Afrikaner mineworkers' politics in South Africa before, during, and after apartheid. The end of apartheid, which scholars often regard as the final episode of African decolonization, did not do away with the legacies of a racially ordered working-class formation. Under white rule, Afrikaner workers had accepted their own political subordination in exchange for the privileges and protections the state bestowed upon their whiteness. When the largely Afrikaner Mine Workers Union reclaimed an independent class agenda—in response to deregulation and the withdrawal of state protections in the 1980s and the transition to political democratization and majority rule in the 1990s—it fused it with an appeal to whiteness and the Afrikaner nation, now presented as besieged and endangered. Detrimental as this mixture proved to be for class identities, it provides nonetheless a salutary warning not to assume the primacy of class merely on account of its rootedness in political economy.

Taken as a whole, the various contributions highlight a productive tension between empirical investigation and theoretical questioning. The complex, fragmented, and ambivalent scenarios that these African labor histories reveal speak of solidarities and shared resistances as well as competing interests

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fracturing working classes along gender, religious, ethnic, or racial lines. As an entity whose meanings and directions have historically been, in Africa more than elsewhere, materially and discursively contested, labor might have to relinquish some of its claims to cohesive subjectivities and strategies. Also implicit here, however, are rich theoretical rewards as, now more than ever, Africa seems to have something to say about the precarious place of work during the troubled times in which we live.

NOTES

1. An important example is Lynn Schler, Louise Betlehem, and Galia Sabar, eds., "Rethinking Labor in Africa: Past and Present," *African Identities* 7, 3 (2009).

2. The history of labor and the history of capitalism are, of course, inextricably linked, as emphasized, for example, in Larry Neal and Jeffrey Williamson, eds., *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2014), to which several African and labor historians have contributed. On the importance of linking labor history to the study of capitalism in Africa, see also Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester, NY, 2008).

3. Examples of this early scholarship are Robin Cohen, Peter Gutkind, and Jean Copans, eds., *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1978); Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds., *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (Toronto, 1975).

4. Robin Cohen, Peter Gutkind, and Jean Copans, "Introduction," in *African Labor History*, 16.

5. For an overview of African labor studies in the postindependence period, see Bill Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge, 1988).

6. See Karl van Holdt, "Social Movement Unionism: The Case of South Africa," *Work, Employment and Society* 16 (2002): 283–304; and Pauline Dibben, "Trade Union Change, Development and Renewal in Emerging Economies: The Case of Mozambique," *Work, Employment and Society* 24 (2010): 468–86.

7. Examples of this literature, including its optimistic orientation, are Mark Harcourt and Geoffrey Wood, eds., *Trade Unions and Democracy: Strategies and Perspectives* (Manchester, UK, 2004) and Jon Kraus, ed., *Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa* (New York, 2007).

8. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996). It is indicative of the status of African labor history at the time that Cooper's book was published in the same year as Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996). Mamdani stressed the importance within decolonization of the "native question"—the rule of African populations through ethnically and culturally inflected notions of difference—as opposed to the "labor question," the focus of Cooper's study. It is telling that Mamdani's book went on to win the 1997 Herskovits Book Prize of the African Studies Association.

9. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 14.

10. See also Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya. The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964–1971* (London, 1975).

11. See Ilda Lindell, eds., *Africa's Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances, and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa* (London, 2010).

12. See Franco Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany, NY, 2011).

13. An important case study is Paul Lubeck, "Islamic Protest Under Semi-Industrial Capitalism: 'Yan-Tatsine Explained," *Africa* 55 (1985): 369–89.

14. See Marcel van der Linden, "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 57–76; and Franco Barchiesi, "How Far from Africa's Shores? A Response to Marcel van der Linden's Map for Global Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 77–84.

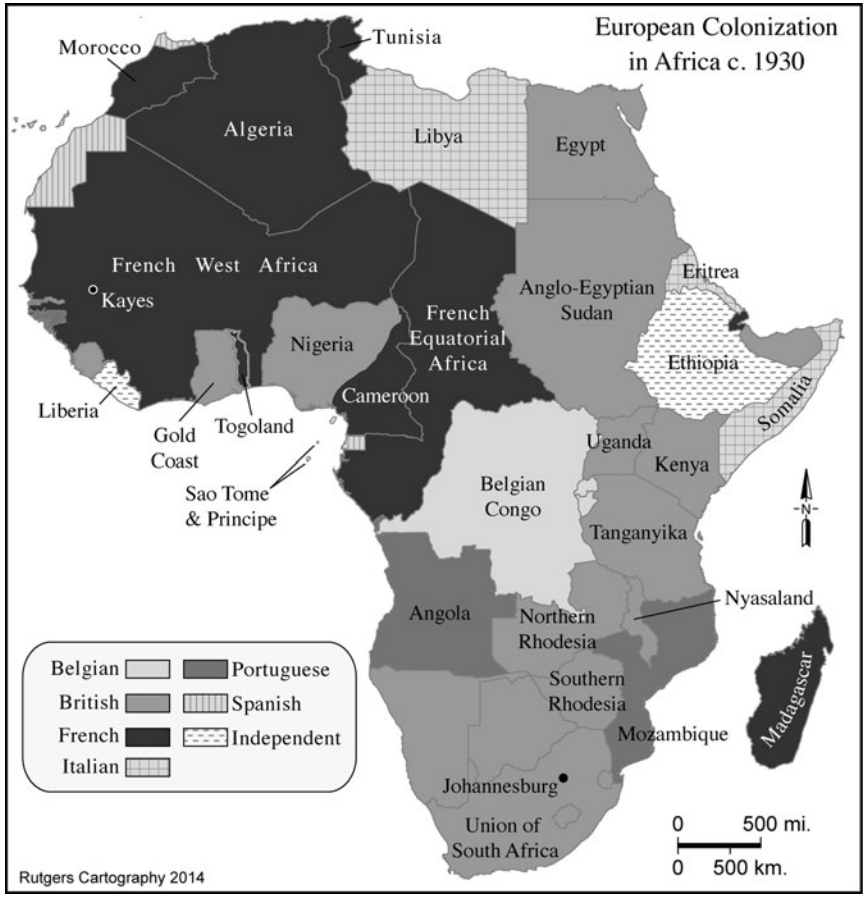
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15. On methodological nationalism and its critiques, see Christian G. De Vito, "New Perspectives on Global Labour History: Introduction," *Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts* 1, 3 (2012): 7–31, especially 8–14.

16. See Karl Heinz Roth and Marcel van der Linden, *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century* (Leiden, 2013), 21.

17. Useful discussions of this point are in James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC, 2006).

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