

Labour and Capitalist Development in Africa

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Labour and Capitalist Development in Africa

E. Ann McDougall

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *The Workers of African Trade* (Berkeley: Sage Publications 1985).

Alan H. Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines' Labour Supply 1890-1920* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1985).

Henry Bernstein, Bonnie K. Campbell, eds., *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa* (Berkeley: Sage Publications 1985).

EACH OF THE THREE BOOKS under review deals with aspects of capitalist development in Africa. Two are edited works combining the perspectives of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists working in different parts of the continent, while the third is a specialized historical study of South Africa. *The Workers of African Trade*, edited by historians Paul Lovejoy and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, contains twelve case studies from West, East, and Central Africa, and takes as its theme the emergence of "workers" in the various commercial systems flourishing in the nineteenth century. In contrast, Alan Jeeves's study represents a very focused view of a particularly revealing moment in the creation of capital and labour in South Africa. And finally, the Henry Bernstein and Bonnie Campbell collection discusses the behaviour of capital in twentieth-century Africa, with the aim of analyzing how it has affected contemporary African politics. If its geographical coverage is more limited than that of Lovejoy/Coquery-Vidrovitch, the questions raised in the context of its seven case studies (Guinea, Ivory

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Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Lesotho, Tanzania and Kenya) are equally as pertinent to Africa's broad-ranging problems.

In recent years, African studies has produced a good deal of literature examining the penetration of capital in Africa. Irrespective of disciplinary approach, it has become clear that neither the process followed nor the results achieved have reflected patterns of "development" once predicted by many scholars. By the late 1960s, most analyses of the situation followed either the Marxian "dialectical" approach or the neo-Marxian "dependency" school of thought. Marxists in general argued that the sequential articulation of different modes of production generated a linear development path which would culminate in the domination of the capitalist mode of production. Disagreement centered around what exactly constituted a mode of production and how its dissolution or domination could be measured. The dependency people argued that the issue was a structural one — how did Africa and African societies function within the framework of a world system dominated by the capitalist mode of production? And given that any potential for autonomous change was (and is) minimal, where can Africa go from here?

Much of this early work focused on the concept of exchange. Whether within Africa or between Africa and the "outside world," it was almost as if the penetration of capital and capitalist relations could be traced along trade routes and measured in the volume of commercial exchange.¹ Nevertheless, this early interest in modes of production produced some very important advances. Africanists became conscious of what was to be learned by looking at systems of labour recruitment and control, and at processes of surplus extraction and accumulation. This view contained its own inherent expectations. It was expected that as capital generated through industry was accumulated (in this case primarily international capital generated through international industry), it would be invested to reproduce and expand this system. By definition, this process of accumulation would come to dominate labour. Simply put, all other forms of labour recruitment would be subsumed to those of the market, just as all other forms of surplus extraction would give way to those of wage labour. The emergence of wage labour would, in itself, become a measure of the development of capitalist relations of production.

On one level, therefore, scholars have been looking for the proverbial 'making of the African working class' and monitoring the spread of proletarianization; on another, they have been concerned to use the results of these investigations to refine our understanding of capitalism in the third world

¹Even purportedly Marxian analyses were caught up with such spurious notions as an "African mode of production," the most influential of which was Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's own model based on long-distance trade. See her seminal (and often reprinted) article "Recherches sur un mode de production africain," *La Pensée*, 144 (1969), 61-78.

in general. One of the most important and immediate results of this research has been the recognition that in Africa, as in much of the third world, domestic industrial capital remains severely limited. What has flourished since colonial times, however, is agricultural capital. Agriculture in its various commercial and peasant guises, has come to play the role of industry in shaping labour's relation to capital. Consequently, it is central to accumulation, social class formation, political ideology, and the nature of the state. While the books under review were by no means intended to represent the 'state-of-the-art' with respect to these particular concerns, considered collectively they in fact serve this purpose remarkably well.

The Coquery-Vidrovitch/Lovejoy work reflects something of the transitional stage in which many historians and anthropologists find themselves. Analyses of proletarianization are situated within the sphere of exchange. This presumes that trade, and in particular long-distance trade,² was the principal route through which capital was generated and surplus accumulated in most African societies; consequently, this is where the "proto-proletariat" was likely to be found. The editors ask what institutions were used to mobilize the porters and "teamsters" of trade, what remuneration there was for the workers, and who accumulated the surplus. They suggest a direct connection between the penetration of Western commercial capitalism and the appearance of a "proto-proletariat" characterized by a "sharp cleavage between the worker and the means of production," and look for the emergence of "class consciousness [as] revealed through struggle over the terms of employment." (11) Some of the contributors (myself included) were uneasy with the unstated carry-over here from earlier work, namely that the origins of capitalist relations of production could be located by looking at trade. But to whatever degree this doubt is justified, the collection brings forth some fascinating material about a sector of the economy which was undeniably central to many societies in the latter part of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century.

The case studies indicate that although both internal and external trade did grow, did expand profit, and did integrate both domestic and foreign capital, the sought-after working class and working-class consciousness were rarely evident. What was most striking about late-nineteenth-century labour even in highly commercialized areas like northern Nigeria (see the chapter by M.B. Duffill and Lovejoy) was the longevity and adaptability of so-called 'pre-capitalist' relations of production.³ In Mauritania (McDougall), Mali (Jean-Loup Amselle), Nigeria (Duffill/Lovejoy), and Angola (Linda Hey-

²The book, originally the subject of a conference held at York University, Toronto, in September 1983 was originally entitled "The Labour of Long-Distance Trade."

³The editors use the term "domestic mode of production" (15) which obscures the real nature of the social formation and strikes me as a way of avoiding the debate over the existence of pre-capitalist modes of production, as discussed below.

wood), to name but a few examples, traditional forms of labour recruitment continued to dominate even where wages or something comparable to them existed. In many instances accumulation from the "capitalist" sector was used to reproduce and expand not capital but existing systems of production and accumulation. Generally speaking, the research here reveals a continuing struggle taking place in which the balance between the two forms of accumulation shifted from time to time, thereby challenging the assumption that a sequential transition to capitalism was necessarily underway. The editors refer to such situations as "retractions" and posit that only "exploiters related to the development of capitalism [as distinct from 'pre-capitalism?'] could generate in time the emergence of class consciousness among the exploited." (23) We are left wondering just how this "development" was to take place, given that the expected transition seems not to have occurred in spite of a continent-wide growth of commercial capitalism. There is also some doubt that what we are talking about was really "retraction," for this presupposes the as-yet-unproven norm of linear proletarianization. Perhaps in looking for a working class and working-class consciousness in the traditional sense we are missing the real value of these studies of work in the early capitalist sector. *Workers of African Trade* reveals the roots of the particular forms labour organization, surplus extraction, and capital accumulation would take in the twentieth century — in other words, the roots of the "struggle" and "contradictions" focused upon by Jeeves and Bernstein/Campbell.

If the continued viability of 'pre-capitalist' systems within the capitalist economy developing at the turn of the century is surprising, it is perhaps even more noteworthy in the context of the one fully industrializing region of the continent, South Africa. Allan Jeeves's look at the emergence of the gold mines and their labour force from 1890 to 1920 in theory should have uncovered the next phase of the making of the "worker" and the development of capital. Instead, we find much the same story of ambiguity, though Jeeves's perspective on it is different. He is concerned to explore the difficulties mining capital faced in its attempt to dominate labour by revealing the problems it had first in achieving consolidation and second, in wooing state support. And he does so successfully, thereby countering functionalist arguments about the monolithic nature of mining capital and its 'natural' need and ability to capture labour. But this detailed examination of the phases of consolidation within capital, and between capital and the state, does even more. It reveals the lack of inevitability of the needs of capital, an assumption inherent in the "linear proletarianization" school of thought, thereby confirming for the early twentieth century what the Bernstein and Campbell collection argues to be the case for the colonial and contemporary eras.

One important question remains: why did labour have to be 'captured' at all? Why did rapid industrialization with its seemingly insatiable labour needs not in itself promote the expected domination of capital and wage

labour? Jeeves seems to imply that this was the consequence of the factional tendencies of the mining industry, in essence the 'weakness' of capital. Yet, he frequently chronicles the reluctance of Africans to engage in wage labour, or more specifically, to engage in it when and where it was needed. Indeed, the struggle was not resolved until the full power of state could be harnessed on behalf of the Chamber of Mines after 1920. In other words, the fact that workers were determined to resist the new conditions of work was crucial in shaping the battle at hand; Jeeves gives too little thought as to why this was the case and how it shaped the capitalist system he is observing. In fact, his evidence tends to confirm the findings of the Coquery-Vidrovitch/Lovejoy collection: labour had to be 'captured' and the struggle was often a protracted one because the 'non-capitalist' sectors of the economy remained viable. Indeed, they often expanded.

In Southern Africa, surplus from industry was diverted by means of wages, incentive payments and taxes to reproduce and sometimes to augment so-called 'traditional' sectors. The household remained critical in shaping the demographic and geographic composition of the labour force, just as surviving authority structures influenced how that labour force functioned. Both remained central to the recruitment of labour to the mines in spite of the parallel structure of capitalist relations of production, and value generated in the capitalist sphere continued to be appropriated and redistributed through such non-capitalist relations of accumulation as age and gender, local clientage and patronage, and local political structures.⁴ At times, the needs of these various systems of production came into direct conflict, provoking the watersheds historians are so fond of identifying. In Southern Africa, (as elsewhere on the continent), the 'capitalist' and 'pre-capitalist' spheres did not merely co-exist; there was a process of articulation taking place which continues today.⁵

Hence, it is as crucial to examine the struggles for accumulation that accrued in the domestic sector as it is to analyse the influences of different fractions of capital on the formation of labour. Ultimately, these analyses must be integrated — no easy task for any individual scholar. In this respect, the Bernstein/Campbell collection takes us furthest of all, though the book is uneven in structure and focus. For anyone unfamiliar with the theoretical

⁴The article on Lesotho by Judy Kimble in the Bernstein/Campbell collection details this process superbly for precisely the period with which Jeeves is concerned. See "'Clinging to the Chiefs': some contradictions of colonial rule in Basutoland, c. 1890-1930," 25-70.

⁵The literature on this question of the continued articulation between the 'capitalist' and the 'pre-capitalist' sectors of South Africa in the twentieth-century context is voluminous, controversial, and among the most exciting in African historiography. Probably one of the best introductions to this body of material can be found in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, eds., *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (London 1982).

debates generated by the dependency school and its vocabulary, the introduction is more confusing than illuminating and might better serve as a concluding summary. And while there are some strongly based historical chapters which contribute substantially to the debates discussed above (see especially Campbell on Ivory Coast, Kimble on Lesotho, and Amselle on Mali) the main focus seems to be a theoretical one, rooted in contemporary politics. The collection essentially begins where the other books leave off, both chronologically and theoretically speaking. It posits the dual assertion that the penetration of capital in Africa did not set in motion the anticipated linear transition to wage labour, and that consequently, looking at labour *per se* will not tell us what we need to know about the growing domination of capital and capitalist relations of production. Rather, the contributors concentrate on the circumstances and situations in which surplus was accumulated, looking at how, when and why these situations produced crises or, as the title suggests, "contradictions." They are primarily concerned to understand how these historical conjunctures have shaped the nature of the state and influenced the preeminence of particular political ideologies. Together, they question the validity of so-called 'different' ideological paths to development; the chapters by Gavin Kitching and Peter Gibbon/Michael Neocosmos on Kenya and Tanzania, respectively, convincingly break down the potency of ideology in the face of exigencies produced by the processes of class formation and capital accumulation.

The contributors look at the question of accumulation in the international versus the domestic arena, as well as in the context of the continued presence of 'pre-capitalist' relations. If the Coquery-Vidrovitch/Lovejoy studies of the nineteenth century left some doubt as to the future of what they termed the "domestic mode of production," the Bernstein/Campbell collection shows unequivocally that far from being eliminated by or totally subjected to capital, localized social formations generated by 'pre-capitalist' systems of production accommodated themselves to and developed in conjunction with capitalism throughout the colonial and early independent eras. It would appear that it is precisely the inherent unevenness and instability of this continued articulation which underlay many of the crises that dependency people would attribute to the exploitative, controlling nature of international capital. In making this argument, the book delivers a strong and convincing statement against the usefulness of dependency theory for scholarly analysis and goes so far as to assert that it represents a deleterious influence in the context of understanding contemporary politics. Although one of the authors (Bjorn Beckman) attempts to reconcile elements of the dependency approach with a more orthodox Marxian analysis, Kitching's passionately articulate conclusion appears to reflect most accurately the views of the editors and contributors alike:

[T]he formation of a sophisticated socialist working class in Africa will take a long time and. . . a

prolonged period of struggle against a developing capitalism there is one of the important prerequisites of its creation. To that extent I am "happy" to see continued capitalist development in black Africa. . . . Only in such ways can liberation be won by African workers *from below* rather than "granted" to them from above. . . . But before all this, there is a block in the road of socialist construction in Africa which must be removed and removed entirely—this is dependency theory. For the construction of socialism requires activity born out of a realistically informed *hope*, not out of a desperate hopelessness, a hopelessness that is totally unjustified by history. (148)

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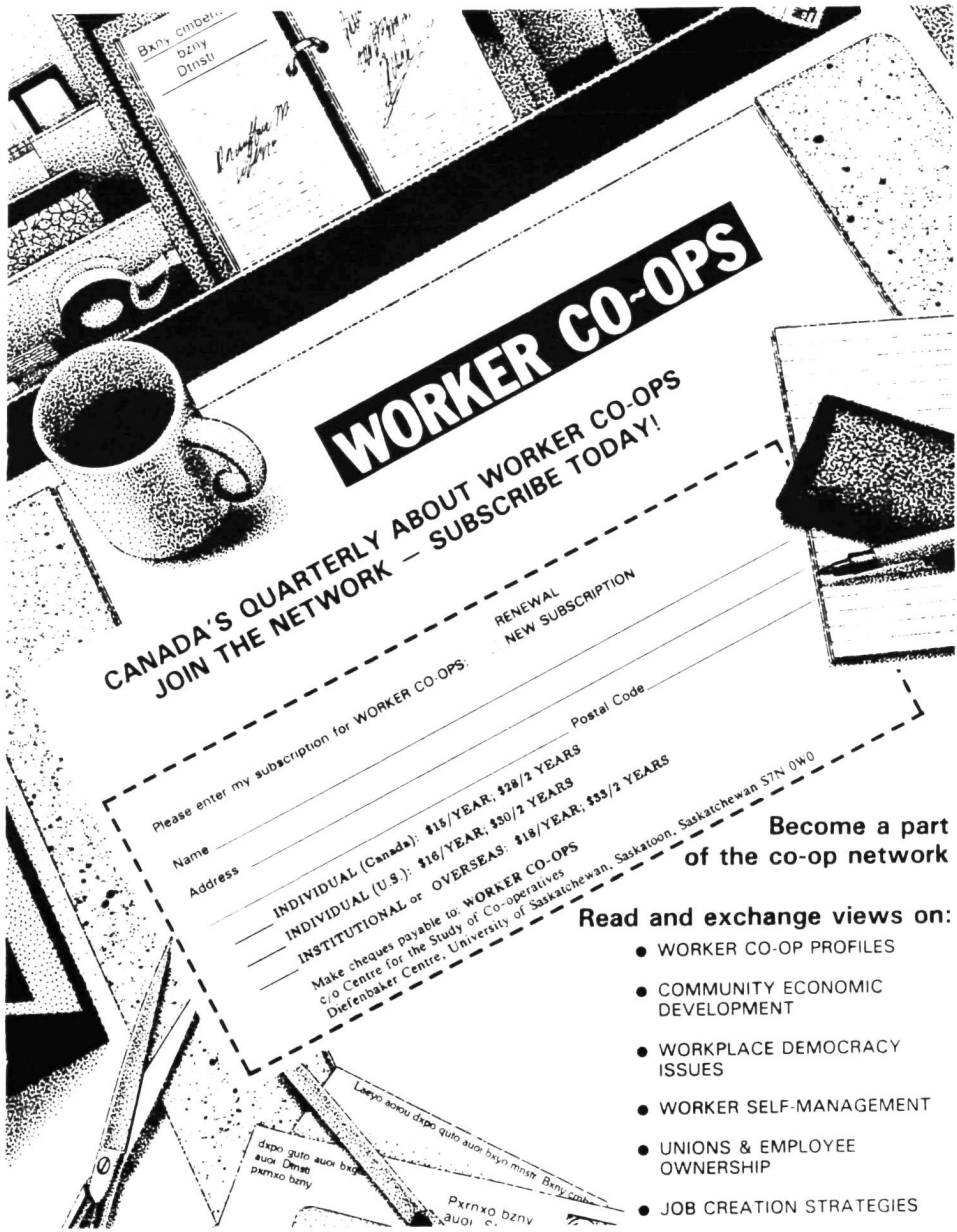
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