

Bellucci, Stefano; Eckert, Andreas: *General Labour History of Africa. Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th–21st Centuries*. Woodbridge: James Currey 2019. ISBN: 978 1 84701 218 0.

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Published in conjunction with the International Labour Organization Regional Office for Africa, this edited general history is the rare example of this kind of book that actually lives up to its title. The editors have successfully conceived a volume that offers thorough geographic, conceptual and thematic coverage of this broad topic that also engages deep research. For the most part, the twenty-three individual chapters, although varied in approach, exhibit a breadth and depth of knowledge that give their comprehensive interpretive arguments weight. In short it is a „general history.“ It will be an essential resource for any scholars interested in the scholarly study of labor and work in Africa, whether approached as a comprehensive volume or through the important contributions made by the individual chapter authors.

Following the editorial introduction, the chapters are gathered into six sections that explore the topic from the perspectives of force and coercion, economic sectors, types of work, self-employment, organized labor and the state, and international dimensions. The book ends with a typically stimulating concluding chapter by the eminent historian of labor in Africa, Frederick Cooper. The substantial bibliography and thorough chapter citations placed at the bottom of the page will add to the value of this work for graduate students and for scholars who are exploring any dimension of this field. Even those who have themselves worked on aspects of African labor history will appreciate the material and the insights that the twenty-eight contributors have brought to their chapters. The volume also signals a reemergence of African labor history, once one of the most prominent research areas in African studies. But as Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon, the ILO Regional Director for Africa notes in her forward, the field has taken a very different shape, driven by the

realities of labor and work in African society rather than by European experience and conceptual frameworks.

In their introduction the editors forego a contents summary to stress the importance of framing studies of African labor within the context of global labor history. African labor history is not simply, or even predominantly, the study of male proletarianization, but a comprehensive history of all labor and laboring people, including millions of children (interestingly, the book does not include a chapter specifically on this topic). In that sense, this collection offers an opportunity to think again about African history more broadly, notably through the different schemes of periodization that the various authors develop to organize their particular topics. Early studies of African labor embedded a notion of Africans as „natural peasants,“ (2) a view that persisted even as materialist approaches focused on unionized male workers dominated labor studies. This scholarship on the development of „national working classes“ ultimately collapsed amid the destructive impact of neoliberal economic practice. From that point, African labor studies largely disappeared as a category of scholarship. Questions related to ideology and representation were subject to Frederick Cooper’s admonition that research needed to focus on the „nitty gritty“ of labor and work. Attention to that nitty gritty very much informs this general history. The chapters embrace all kinds of labor and laborers—women, men and children. They are positioned to transcend national boundaries, to avoid reliance on North Atlantic comparative experience and models and to engage with the implications of distinctions among paid work and unpaid and unfree.

Cooper’s concluding chapter pairs with the editorial introduction to enlarge on some of the critical questions raised by Bellucci and Eckert and informed by the individual chapters. He reminds us that scholarship on southern Africa, and especially South Africa, was an important exception in the apparent disappearance of labor studies from the 1980s. He also targets as the „obligatory miserabilism“ (p. 619) of much of the scholarship of the structural adjustment era and its lack of attention to the myriad ways that Africans and Af-

frican communities negotiated very hard circumstances, although their situations certainly remained precarious. The concept of precarity in the lives of people coping with the deepening and expanding informalization of economies provides an important tool for understanding labor in diverse historical contexts. But Cooper urges us to guard against the linear perspective, perhaps invoking a not-so-deeply buried memory of modernization theory, that might see informalization as the successor to proletarianization rather than a critical aspect in a range of phenomena. With characteristic originality Cooper draws on the Marxian theory of primitive accumulation, suggesting that particularly in circumstances where the cost of labor is not fully monetized the African past has been marked by various patterns of accumulation where capital, raw materials and commodities are mobile but workers are mostly highly constrained.

The three opening chapters of the volume, Eckert on wage labor, Franco Barchiese on informal labor, and Babacar Fall and Richard Roberts on forced labor, collectively interrogate some of the core concepts in African labor through conceptual categories that move beyond the narrow industrial models that once dominated the field to approaches that engage gender and embrace expansive notions of labor and work—including notably labor and work in rural agricultural sectors. Eckert takes a fresh look at the West African cocoa economy first studied by Polly Hill, noting that in the early 1950s farmers in Ashanti employed tens of thousands of laborers, not including many thousands more categorized as family workers. In a fascinating chapter on entrepreneurial labor, Sara Berry draws on this same literature as well as her own research on Nigerian cocoa farmers to elaborate on the critical „social work“ (p. 458) involved in cocoa entrepreneurship. In addition to addressing the history and persistence of explicitly forced labor, Fall and Roberts draw attention to the broad prominence of various degrees and elements of coercion in many African labor practices. Deborah Bryceson in her chapter on domestic labor explores the realm of the household, still the site of labor for a large proportion of Africa’s women who increasingly manage these enterprises in the absence of men. She

charts the impact of colonial policy on gender dynamics and in particular documents the role of capitalist development in intensifying labor demands on women and marginalizing children.

In contrast, the chapter by Dmitri van den Bersselaar weaves his research into the United Africa Company into a broad analysis of the categories of „white collar workers“ who have had pivotal roles in African political and economic life. Rory Pilosof looks at the history of professionals, including a detailed analysis of the brain drain that has resulted in more African engineers working in the United States than on the continent.

Among a truly remarkable and wide-ranging set of essays, Daniel Maul, Luca Puddu and Hakeem Tijani’s chapter on the International Labour Organization not only makes a detailed scholarly contribution but provides insight into the relatively little-studied history of international governance organizations in Africa. Finally, Bill Freund brings his astonishing command of the history of organized labor on the continent to an overview chapter that reminds us of the continuing importance of labor unions, evidenced recently in the Arab Spring, as well as the histories of cooptation and repression that have crippled their capacity to deliver material advantages for worker members. Still, Freund offers an important reminder of the critical leverage that unions exercised across the continent in the „heroic age“ of nationalist struggles and their continuing, if sporadic, importance for example in Nigeria, where it is estimated that more than two million women and men belong to unions.

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