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0521566002 - Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa

Frederick Cooper

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

“Everything is permitted, but nothing is possible”

Graffito, seen on a Parisian wall, fall 1984

The era of decolonization was a time when the range of political possibilities seemed to open up, only to close down again. When Ghana became an independent state in 1957, followed by Guinea in 1958 and others in the ensuing decade, Africans could, in theory, organize their governments as they wished and use them to transform their lives. Leaders – western educated, but rarely more than one generation removed from their milieux of origin – saw themselves as choosing the best of what Europe and Africa had to offer. A wide populace participated in the sense of triumph which attended the transition. In the new Africa, much was permitted, and something was possible. Yet within a decade or so, African writers were portraying societies disillusioned with the fruits of independence, with power-hungry leaders who sought to neutralize the social movements which had once helped them to challenge colonial rule, with the indifference of civil servants to the problems of ordinary people, with elite cultures overly focused on the West.¹ Were new states and new political and social organizations finding themselves constrained by the paths they took toward political independence just as they had been by the structures of colonial rule?

This book is about the changing definition of the possible in the era leading up to decolonization. It focuses on the intersection of French and British colonial bureaucracies with African labor movements and the way in which their conflict and connection both expanded and limited the labor question. From the mid-1930s onward, previous ways of thinking about African labor proved incapable of providing a guide to the social problems that increasingly forceful collective action by African workers thrust upon the colonial state. Before then, the question of colonial labor was limited to the numbers issue – how many low-paid workers could be obtained? – to the issue of compulsion – how much coercion could a “civilized” government legitimately deploy to make people with little interest in wage labor perform work for public or

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private employers? – and to the issue of disruption – was the delicate fabric of African “societies” rent asunder by the temporary removal of workers from them?

Both imperial regimes moved in a little over a decade from a conception of the African worker as very African – as a temporary wage earner at risk of becoming “detrribalized” if allowed to stay away too long from his village – to a vision of the African turned into industrial man, now living with a wife and family in a setting conducive to acculturating new generations into modern society. Colonial bureaucracies began to ponder the range of questions about labor familiar to their colleagues in the metropole, and they began to reproduce in Africa the legal and administrative institutions used to manage labor problems in France or Great Britain, hoping that treating African males as if they were industrial men would create the kind of predictable, known being who could make Africa into the orderly, productive, controllable society that seemed so vital in the post-war conjuncture.

Industrial man, in officials’ eyes, was indeed a male. That most migrant laborers who came forth in the early colonial years were male may have had more to do with whom African communities felt they could do without for a period of time than European hiring preferences. But when European officials sought to build a more stable, more acculturated, more experienced labor force, the complexities of African life were of much less concern to them than their own gendered imagery. What was critical to the reformers was the social reproduction of the labor force: that the new generation be brought up adequately nourished and familiarized with urban and industrial environments so that its members would be more productive and predictable than their fathers. Stabilization, as the new policy was called, implied that women should leave their villages to join their husbands near their places of work, and take up the reproduction of the labor force – under the watchful eyes of nurses, teachers, and bureaucrats. Ideas about society, as is so often the case, had their material consequences: jobs that came under formal regulation were coded masculine, while the kinds of things women did were more often labelled “customary labor” or the “informal economy,” with all the insecurities and vulnerabilities that such a status implied.

While colonial officials saw this as an effort of social engineering – using up-to-date European knowledge – the entire process was in fact carried out in dialogue with African labor movements. French and British officials were batting around plans for colonial reform in the 1940s, but the actual initiative in the labor field was a response to African agency: the wave of strikes that began in the mid-1930s and reached a climax in the late 1940s and the beginnings of political movements that

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challenged officials' exercise of power. Imperial governments wanted to confine the labor question to a set of institutions and practices familiar to them from the "industrial relations" experience of the metropole, to treat labor as separable from politics. The threat of a labor crisis becoming unbound – linked to people other than wage workers in countryside as well as city – made governments especially willing to pay the costs of resolving labor issues. As they did so, African labor movements seized the new discourse of administrators and turned assertions of control into demands for entitlements: if colonial officials wanted Africans to work like their idealized European workers, they should pay them on a similar scale and bargain with them in good faith. As African labor leaders participated in this dialogue, they became caught up in its terms: their very success encouraged them to think of trade unionism and collective bargaining as a "normal" way of organizing economic life. They too were part of the gendering of the labor question, and while women had participated in some of the general strikes of the 1940s, the formal labor organizations that followed in the 1950s were largely masculine affairs. For their own reasons, African unions demanded that men be paid a "family wage," enough to support a dependent wife and children.²

A careful study of late colonialism will hopefully be a step toward future analysis of how social issues were framed and reframed in the post-colonial era. The new states of Africa were constrained by their small size and military weakness, by the limited options available to primary-product exporters in the world market, and by their dependence on aid from former colonizers, other donor nations, and international agencies. But there were constraints of the imagination as well. Social scientists and policy makers outside Africa generally thought about social policy issues within the categories that emerged in the process of decolonization – with their insights and blind spots. Inside post-colonial Africa, political leaders and high level civil servants brought a variety of experiences and influences to bear, but they participated in this global discourse as well: most early leaders received their experience in defining and implementing social policy in the era of imperial reform after World War II; some were educated in Europe; some participated in organizations like the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. These connections immersed leaders in certain discussions and debates, which, while themselves shifting, also tended to separate a discussible issue from one which lay outside the boundaries of international political discourse.

In the present book I only begin to address such issues. My focus is on the final years of colonial rule: on the way a crucial set of social policy issues was framed within the administrative and political structures of the

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colonial state, on the way that framework responded to challenges from African workers. These responses both reflected and affected the ability of officials to maintain the “colonial” nature of the state itself, caught as they were between their claims to a right to rule over the colonized and their insistence that their knowledge of managing social change had a universal validity apart from their status of colonizers. Indeed, the very idea that work was work and a worker was a worker made it less evident why rulers had to be white. This line of reasoning also suggested that when Africans ruled, their options would be shaped by the same universalistic nature of work, of economic development, of agricultural modernization. This set of ideas was simultaneously universalistic and ethnocentric; a basis for claims to control and claims to entitlement; a liberating reference point for Africans to deny the claim of one nation or one race to dominate another and a constraining pattern of ideas that defined different kinds of social organization as “modern” and “normal” or “backward” and “inconceivable.”³

Thus if colonial governments’ rethinking of the labor question reflected an active engagement with certain African actors – and an effort to exclude others – the way in which this and other social questions were framed had long-term effects. This process also was subject to challenge: the meanings of a concept like “development” or “equal pay” were shifted as new actors made their voices heard. Meanwhile, African labor organizations found that they could achieve concrete and important gains for their members if, instead of constituting themselves as organizations clearly and irrevocably set against the forces of colonial and capitalist domination, they engaged substantively with the labor specialists of the colonial state, and subtly turned the assertion of authority into a claim to rights.

African labor unions played this sort of politics with sufficient results, in some colonies more than others, that officials by the mid-1950s were wondering if Africans were more effective in using official ideology to claim entitlements than were governments in asserting control over social and economic processes. By the late 1950s, both French and British officials were looking beyond the aura of normalcy and entitlement attached to imperialism toward a hard examination of the costs and benefits of colonial rule.

This book is not an explanation of the language of labor mobilization within African communities, although a study such as this would not have been conceivable were it not for a considerable body of scholarship that explores Africans’ involvement in wage labor, the material conditions they faced in cities, mines, and railways, the efforts they made to build family and community life in places of work, and the attempts to

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organize collective action.⁴ There is still much to do along these lines – particularly in exploring the forms of expression and ways of defining collective identity among workers in different parts of Africa – and such studies will almost certainly reveal a variety of languages of labor in different African contexts. Research is already revealing the variety of moral discourses among Africans – popular beliefs as well as those of an activist leadership – faced with the dilemmas of living in colonial cities. Indeed, colonial officials’ fears of a strange, dangerous, violent African world beyond their intellectual grasp made the demands of groups phrased in familiar language more compelling.⁵ My emphasis is on the intersections of European and African discourses about labor, on the portion of what was said in both camps that was mutually intelligible. The goal here is thus to get part way toward understanding the boundaries of the possible – in the interaction of bureaucracy, politics, and labor movements – at the end of the colonial era.

My account seeks to preserve a tension between political projects and social projects, assuming neither that labor movements naturally lined up with other social forces toward a more inclusive quest for national independence nor that a movement for political independence is an entirely separate category from a movement to foster the interests of workers. If, in certain circumstances, labor’s claims against foreign capitalists and the colonial state facilitated other attacks on the colonial state – and if at times unions and parties were strong allies – in other circumstances the two movements clashed.

Looking at such tensions lays the ground work for understanding how Africa ended up with the kind of independence it for the most part got: politically assertive and socially conservative regimes focused on their control of the coercive, patronage, and symbolic apparatus of the state, distrustful of and hostile to the continued influence of social movements that had once helped challenge the colonial state, fearful of groups that might make claims.⁶ I am concerned as well with the power of the idea of “modern” social policy in African states: how new leaders – before and after independence and in dialogue with “experts” of the “developed world” – came to define social policy around an imported future more than the extension of an observed present, around a package of institutions like labor unions, minimum wage regulations, and industrial relations machinery rather than around the complex, category-crossing social processes that had been going on around them.⁷

The comparison of French and British Africa suggests that colonial states’ labor policies were not solely determined by one empire’s structures or habits: confrontation with the labor question was part of colonial encounters themselves.⁸ The comparison also suggests that the way

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bureaucracies tried to frame the labor problem and regain control was, however, directed and constrained by particular institutional structures and discursive patterns. Neither imperial regime was free to stake out a unique path; both found themselves pursuing transformative agendas that could not be realized and confronting African labor movements that themselves reflected and challenged the evolving structures of the two regimes. France and Great Britain could not find a durable answer to the labor question within their colonial frameworks.

The attempts of both French and British officials to incorporate labor into the institutional fabric of the post-war colonial system seems at first a stark contrast to the direction chosen by the government of South Africa. The apartheid regime's fetishization of Africans as inherently distinct peoples, each with its own separate destiny, contrasts with the quest of French and British bureaucrats for the universal worker. Upon a closer look, the patterns appear to converge around the mid-1940s as South African officials – faced with the realities of an African presence in cities and the growing dependence of industry on African urban labor – contemplated variations on a stabilization policy. Then the policies diverged after 1948 as a new South African government opted instead for massive expulsions of Africans from cities and the vigorous policing of influx and residence to maintain a labor force while insisting that workers remain in an essentialized category of tribal African. Even so, South Africa found that it was not free to imagine its own labor policy, but had to allow some Africans to develop relatively secure access to jobs and urban residence in order to distinguish them from others and to respond to the pass demonstrations, bus boycotts, strikes, youth revolts, and mass movements that countered its own efforts at control.⁹ This comparison is a crucial reminder that neither the post-1948 South African pattern nor the post-war French and British one was the natural unfolding of social forces but that each represented political choices made in related and interconnected historical conjunctures.

On colonialism and decolonization

One of the problems in writing about decolonization is that we know the end of the story. Whether self-government is seen as the outcome of a process of preparation carried out by a colonial state or as a triumph wrested from the colonizers by nationalist movements, the story lends itself to be read backwards and to privilege the process of ending colonial rule over anything else that was happening in those years.

The metanarrative of nationalist triumph usually takes two forms. One, the narrative of social mobilization, claims that inchoate, often

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local, resistance to colonial rule which had been evident since the conquest was channeled into a unified anti-colonial movement in the years after World War II by a western-educated elite. Mobilizing people through a wide range of organizations – from ethnic associations to trade unions – and bringing them into political parties, these leaders forged a movement that attacked the intrinsically racist nature of the colonial state and claimed its territory, its symbols, and its institutions to bring material progress and a sense of national identity to the people of each African colony.¹⁰

The second version is the revolutionary one, most powerfully articulated by Frantz Fanon: the anti-colonialism of western-educated intellectuals – and indeed of wage workers, aspiring only to become a labor aristocracy – was false, and the revolutionary dynamic lay in a peasantry and a lumpenproletariat willing to face up to the absolute denial of identity that colonialism entailed and to use violence to overthrow the colonial regime.¹¹ Fanon had little sympathy with the rhetoric of racial unity or the invocation of symbols of the African past which “bourgeois nationalists” embraced and later used as they set themselves up as brokers between African “tradition” and post-colonial “modernity.” His imagined future came out of the struggle itself: “‘The last shall be first and the first last.’ Decolonisation is the putting into practice of this sentence.”¹²

Both versions show nationalism subsuming all other struggles. Both miss a lot of history, notably the tension – at times a creative one – between the national question and other sorts of social questions, and both have dangerous political implications, positing a True Cause against which opposition has no legitimate place. In post-colonial Africa, stolidly “bourgeois” regimes like that of the Ivory Coast and radical regimes born of peasant mobilization and violence, such as those of Mozambique or Zimbabwe, have shown a similar impatience with formal opposition and autonomous organization; the single-party state is but one manifestation of this tendency.¹³ In practice governments lack any such unity or autonomy from social groups within the “nation” and they are in constant dialogue with the “western” world. But official ideologies focused on the integrity of the nation cannot speak to the dilemmas which the state’s porousness implies or open up a wide debate on what states, social movements, and individuals can and cannot do to reform poor and unequal societies and on ways of permitting wide dialogue and common action by people with diverse pasts.¹⁴

The narrative of decolonization from above, meanwhile, has the same singularity of focus as the narratives of nationalist triumph but from the other side. Ronald Robinson, for one, argues that the impetus for decol-

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onization originated within the British bureaucracy before nationalist parties arose to challenge it, as a result of calculations of British interests and power and consistent with an older conception of colonial rule, based on the trajectories of Canada or New Zealand, as a stepping stone to self-government. By 1947, Africa had been set on the road to decolonization, and the effect of subsequent nationalist agitation – particularly the Gold Coast riots of 1948, which the Colonial Office took to be more serious than they were – was merely to accelerate the time table. This is a classic bit of Whig history – rereading history to conform to a subsequent notion of what constitutes progress – and has been rightly criticized by other British historians of empire in these terms. By detaching discussions of political institutions from their social and economic context, Robinson misses the extent to which the British government in the 1940s was actually intervening more deeply into the lives of its colonial subjects than before, and he ignores the serious challenge to these interventions coming from groups – labor included – that were not specifically nationalist. The contention that self-government was well launched by 1947 ignores the question of whether the colonial imagination could see at the time any group of Africans who conformed to its notion of what an acceptable successor class would look like; in fact the Colonial Office saw potential leaders as either demagogues or school boys, the first unfit to rule, the latter unready.¹⁵

France's eventual surrender of its colonies, Jacques Marseille argues, stemmed from a cold calculation of their value. The protected zone of colonial economies had been most valuable to weak sectors of the French economy and especially when world markets were depressed. But in the 1950s, France's economy was growing and its focus was increasingly on Europe: the colonial business lobby became increasingly marginal and the sentimental imperialism it had once inspired became increasingly burdensome. Marseille's focus is so resolutely metropolitan that he does not ask what inside of colonies accounts for the fact that they didn't pay and couldn't adjust. The question is not just one of whether rule can be preserved or even if the economic balance sheet is positive or negative, but whether an imperial vision of a subordinate society modelled in accordance with the metropole's needs and conceptions can sustain challenges and whether alternatives are actually imaginable.¹⁶

The metahistories of decolonization imply particular readings of colonialism itself: top-down interpretations take colonial projects at face value, nationalist ones either accept the goal of modernizing society while denying that colonial regimes were bringing it to Africa or insist that colonialism was destructive of the very personality of the colonized subject. The danger lies in centering colonialism too much in people's

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lives, leaving them no room to see themselves in other ways and no possibility of selecting and adapting symbols or elements of European domination in calculated, instrumental ways or in acts of creative cultural *bricolage*. Much is lost by reducing the life worlds of people into the category of colonized subject and shoehorning political action into the category of “resistance” or “nationalism.”¹⁷

Much recent work has broken down monolithic views of colonialism, to see the divisions among colonizers, the deflection of colonial projects against the complexity of the societies they intended to transform, and the insecurity of colonial officials about their own social coherence and power.¹⁸ Whereas some colonists in some circumstances wanted to create an abject, obedient colonial servant, who could be coerced into agricultural labor, others sought to “colonize minds” in a more active way, to reshape the way Africans thought about themselves and their futures.¹⁹ But much of this scholarship has been more persuasive in showing what kinds of identities and ideas missionaries, teachers, traders, and administrators tried to “inscribe” on colonial subjects than in showing how such individuals actually thought of themselves.

A collective of innovative scholars of India, the Subaltern Studies Group, challenges scholars of colonialism by tying together a series of important questions: to what extent can the consciousness and actions of ordinary people be recovered? Have narratives of universal progress defined the framework in which even opposition to colonial rule was asserted? Do the categories in which colonial knowledge was collected – labelling people “peasants” or “communal groups” and their actions as “fanaticism” – continue to entrap scholars? Their work is a reaction not only against elite nationalism but also against a Marxism which reduces the colonial subject to a stick figure in a drama written elsewhere.

Ranjit Guha has argued that colonialism’s transformative project was necessarily incomplete, for it needed to preserve social and cultural difference to constitute and justify external rule, and it therefore left a realm of subaltern “autonomy” which he seeks to explore in all its complexity.²⁰ The problem in this rich and varied approach to history is the concept of subalternity itself: subalterns are to be autonomous and agents of their lives, yet to remain subaltern. Are not structures of power and the idioms in which power is expressed forged and reforged in relationships – unequal as they may be – and does not this give-and-take test, at the very least, the boundaries of groups? In practice, Subaltern Studies historians have shown that the category of subalternity was itself created by colonial and nationalist elites’ flattening of the intergroup relations within India, and their work, if not the group’s manifestos, reveal the many lines that connect the top and bottom of a power structure. African historians

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have also begun to document the way people – in daily life and frequent efforts at political mobilization – built diverse networks and combined different cultural idioms, simultaneously engaging with and asserting independence of colonial institutions and ideologies.²¹

Colonialism, Guha argues, went against trends in metropolises to envelope the exercise of power under universal social practices and norms: it was “dominance without hegemony.”²² The claim of a government to rule a distinct people denied the universality of market relations weakened colonial claims to be bringing “Improvement” to India, and led the regime to seek legitimacy by hitching itself to indigenous notions of authority and obedience. Nationalist elites, seeking to displace colonial rulers without undermining their own authority, found their own progressive projects and universalizing tendencies constrained by particularistic and backward social relations and ideologies which were politically impossible to jettison.

The distinction between capitalist universality and colonial particularism is a stimulating one. But it underplays both the limits of colonial coercion and the implications of the numerous attempts colonial regimes made to articulate some sort of hegemony, contradictory as those attempts were. It misses as well the exclusions and violences of twentieth-century Europe. Guha’s insight, however, offers an opportunity to explore the tensions of particularism and universality within colonies themselves and in a dynamic interconnection of colony and metropole. As I will argue below, the inability of colonial regimes to maintain “dominance” amidst the uneven effects of capitalism led them to deploy the “universalistic” conceptions of social engineering developed in Europe, only to find that their own hopes for such technologies to work required giving up the beliefs about the uniqueness of Africa on which a sense of “dominance” depended.

Colonial rulers’ hegemonic projects, however incomplete, brought colonizers into ambiguous relations with indigenous social structures, with all their tensions and inequalities. Such projects were subverted as much by “collaborators” – chiefs and elders who used “customary law” for their own purpose or who turned agricultural improvement into tribute collection – as by those who “resisted” them. Indeed, and contrary to James Scott’s distinction of “hidden” and “public transcripts”, effective challenges to colonial authority came not just from groups who had preserved their discrete ideologies and identities and mobilized them at the right moment in the struggle, but from the subtle and ongoing interplay of cooperation and critique, of appropriation and denial.²³

Such considerations imply a view of colonialism in which its violence and its cultural aggression are located precisely: their limits, contingent-