Labor in the Horn of Africa: Historical and Social Dynamics

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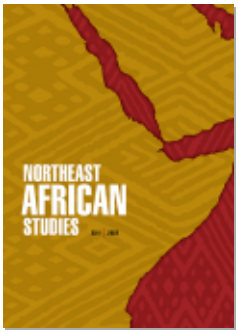

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FOREWORD TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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Labor studies enjoy a long tradition in African historiography. The topic already sparked considerable interest in the colonial era, when the "exploitation" of possessions and the problem of manpower shortage led many colonial administrations to look into the mechanisms that regulated labor supply and to formulate classifications, laws, and policies of control.[1]

The 1970s and 1980s were the golden age in the study of African labor, with a marked emphasis on wage laborers, labor activism, trade unionism, and strikes. In 1984, Bill Freund, an economic historian and a key figure in the tradition of labor history, published a review of the literature on labor and labor history in Africa.[2] The clarity and analytical skill of this study is still impressive today, and the over 600 titles included in the bibliography testify to the vitality of the research that developed around the topic of labor in that period. Among other things, it was an endeavor that did not claim to be exhaustive, because on some areas—for example, the Horn of Africa—Freund's bibliography included only a limited number of entries. In the literature of this period, certain topics occupied the forefront: the

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support that trade unions provided to the struggles for independence, and the emergence of an African working class, although, with some exceptions, work categories were confined to wage laborers, with a clear preference for male work in mines, ports, and railways.

The Marxist inspiration of this literature meant that when, towards the 1990s, this approach petered out, labor history in Africa was forced to undergo a radical reassessment of its approach, starting from the observation that the emphasis on wage labor risked limiting attention to a small number of African workers. Equal criticism was directed toward the national character of many of these researches and their teleological and Eurocentric approach, which assumed that the experience of workers in Africa would foster patterns and developments that had already emerged in Europe and North America.

Subsequent to the pressure of, first, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories,[3] and later of the appearance of global history, the new millennium has seen a robust revival in African labor history. Attention has gradually shifted from the creation of the industrial working classes and trade unions to the history of working people, recognizing a whole gamut of labor typologies including, among other things, informal and self-employed labor, and paying more attention to rural labor and gender.

The research promoted by the International Institute of Social History of Amsterdam and its project of a global labor history saw significant participation of African historians.[4] The publication, edited by Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert of the *General Labour History of Africa*, examines and summarizes the fruits of this intense, prolific endeavor.[5] Global labor history, in addition to the expansion of the temporal and spatial framework of research and its emphasis on interactions between the various parts of the globe, has contributed to broadening the interest of historians in new forms of work and worker categories: craftsmen, employers, self-employed, office workers, entrepreneurs, etc. However, this largely acceptable and inevitable approach has blurred the boundaries of the research field of labor history, running the risk, as some critics maintain, of embracing an excessive number of research fields. The relationship of the labor history of Africa to the various branches of economic history is equally complex. The divide between the work of African economic historians and their labor history colleagues is

evident and persistent. These are different fields have their own traditions of study and techniques, but their many convergences are also striking, so the lack of dialogue among sectors that have a great deal to say to each other is surprising.[6]

The historiography on labor history in the Horn of Africa follows—with minor exceptions—the periodization and thematization that we have seen on a general level, starting with the anxieties of the colonial period attributable to the manpower shortage and the transimperial practices to cope with it.[7]

From the 1960s to the 1980s, wage laborers[8] and labor movements[9] became the primary subjects of labor historiography in the Horn of Africa. This feature appeared even more clearly where workers espoused the nationalist cause and yearned for self-determination. Even the European colonial presence was reinterpreted in this perspective as a key factor in shaping new labor regimes and social dynamics that favored the emergence of new social and economic classes,[10] as exemplified by the Eritrean and Ethiopian experiences. Furthermore, in the Horn of Africa, the Marxist approach underlying the analyses of economic history, together with self-declared Marxist-Leninist revolutionary regimes (Somalia, Ethiopia), helped to emphasize some aspects. On the one hand, emphasis was placed on the political role of workers—and especially certain categories, such as the strikes called by workers in Ethiopia's textile and railway sectors, and on the other, the adoption of class categories and labor relations outside the context risked producing misleading interpretations. Lastly, in the 1980s, Third Worldism, the polarization of the Cold War, and the New International Economic Order further promoted studies of old and new forms of exploitation and cooperation that linked the Horn of Africa to other regions of the world.[11]

In contrast to what became evident on a continental scale, in the 1990s there was still a nonsecondary interest regarding the economic and labor history in the Horn of Africa.[12] Detailed studies also began to emerge on specific worker categories, such as farmers,[13] teachers, sex workers, and health workers.[14] Furthermore, greater attention was paid to the development policies of governments that, in their push for accelerated development, have often ranked workers' rights, decent working conditions and workplace health and safety as secondary to industrialization and economic growth.

The change in the historiographical scale that took place at the start of the new millennium with global labor history seemed to go against the trend of a history of labor and laborers that in the region had been consolidating within national borders. The persistence of a rigid national framework continued to be a characteristic feature, and often a limitation, which can also be found in the most recent labor and economic studies on the Horn of Africa.[15] However, a greater attention to the broadening of the temporal and spatial framework, as well as emphasis on the interconnections between the various parts of the globe, is evident in scholarly works on economic and labor history in the Horn of Africa since the 2000s.[16] One example is the area's recognized role in the long-lasting and geographically extended commercial networks that connected the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean through the circulation of goods and people,[17] as well as gendered labor mobility, which characterized the circulation of workers within and beyond the Horn of Africa.[18] Menial jobs (e.g., street vendors, domestic workers, brokers) also appear in comparative studies.[19] Furthermore, the politics of labor relations in global production networks and industrialization through investment in labor intensive sectors such as agroindustry (e.g., floriculture industry),[20] light manufacturing (e.g., textile industry), as well as artisans,[21] paved the way to further issues, such as child labor and workers' rights, unionism, and unrest, from a historical perspective.[22] At the same time, the analysis of how labor relations are able to favor social dynamics—and vice versa—has become part and parcel of these labor studies.

The impression one gets when observing labor studies in the Horn of Africa today is of a zestful field of research, with a flurry of initiatives and research projects, but whose various authors, coming from different disciplines, tend to proceed in relative isolation from one another.[23] This was an inevitable situation in many ways, because the boundaries of labor studies are vague enough to allow continuous interactions with other fields of knowledge. It is in fact difficult to imagine a history of labor and laborers that does not engage in dialogues with economic history, and business and financial history, and that does not take into consideration the global labor market, employment studies, and industry history. It should therefore come as no surprise that some key aspects of economic and labor history have been overlooked, whereas others are waiting to be brought to light perhaps

paying due attention to the research published in local languages, a vibrant field that always brings surprises.[24]

The three articles included in this special section offer some points of reflection on labor history in the Horn of Africa, without any claim to provide a complete and coherent picture. The topics addressed offer a challenging dialogue on some non-secondary issues in this field.

Massimo Zaccaria's article on military transnational recruitment practices tackles two issues in the current debate about labor history in Africa. The first one is the inclusion of military work among the types of wage labor. His article follows the example of Erik-Jan Zürcher,[25] showing that soldiers have been, for all intents and purposes, workers, and that, among the variety of forms labor can take, military work cannot be omitted. The armed forces have been an institution that lives in osmosis with the world of work. In addition to its actual work units—the labor corps—armies, in peace as in war, have needed workers for a whole array of basic operational activities to keep the military machine running. Second, the massive presence of Yemeni soldiers among the Italian colonial troops in Somalia allows us to observe the interplay between local and global realities. Armies continue to be portrayed as the quintessential nation state but, on closer inspection, an analysis of the composition of many colonial armies in Africa reveals recruitment policies that clearly transcended the "national" dimension.

Caterina Scalvedi's article analyzes the work of the female branch of the Consolata Missions Institute in Somalia (1922–1950s) in turning Somali and mixed race children into docile, productive workers. In Africa, the education system was designed and built with an almost exclusive view to the world of work, and the issue of exporting certain professions and Western work ethics to Africa still remains insufficiently addressed. Her article explores the direct link between colonial education and postcolonial projects of cultural cooperation contained in the case studies of working life and "civilizing habits" of the Consolata sisters. In Somalia, they pioneered a new missionary era, in which the educational, charity, and health-care services provided by women became valuable tools for forging African manpower to cope with the colonial labor shortage, and to build Somalia both as a colony and as a soon to be independent Trust Territory. In her use of the abundant unpublished documentation produced by Catholic missionaries and her focus on

analyzing the state-sponsored textbook *Alba radiosa*, Scalvedi explores the history of female missionaries as grassroots experts in the field of education across different administrations.

Africa's labor history has too long been a strictly male purview. Valentina Fusari's article challenges this narrative by dialoguing with the literature on Africa's labor history through the working lives of the female employees of the *S. A. Cotonificio Barattolo & Co*., one of the main textile factories in East Africa between the 1950s and the 1970s. The article investigates the recruitment and training processes of African women, their socialization as salaried employees, their spatial and social mobility, and their overt and underground resistance practices. It investigates the labor history of the Horn of Africa beyond male skilled industrial workers, by recourse to oral history and a bottom-up approach, powerful tools for shedding light on previously neglected "occupational herstories." From the life and professional trajectories of Eritrean women Fusari provides an image of the transitory nature of their factory-work experience, seen not as a lifelong choice but as a form of stopgap employment. A further glimpse into their cultural worlds, family experiences, and political environment enables us to understand how Eritrea's urban spaces—and in particular its manufacturing industries—became spaces for the agency of female workers.

Taken together, the three contributions stress how the study of work from a historical perspective establishes a privileged observation point for better understanding the nature of the changes that African societies have experienced.

Notes

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6. Ewout Frankema and Marlous van Waijenburg, "Bridging the Gap with the 'New' Economic History of Africa," *Journal of African History* 64 (2023): 1–24.
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(1988): 1–20; Daniel Kendie, "Northeast Africa and the World Economic Order," *Northeast African Studies* 10, no. 1 (1988): 69–82.

12. Gebre Hiywet Tesfagiorgis, ed., *Emergent Eritrea: Challenges of Economic Development* (Lawrenceville, GA: Red Sea Press, 1994); Shiferaw Bekele, ed., *An Economic History of Ethiopia I: The Imperial Era, 1941–74* (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, 1995); Tom Killion, "The Eritrean Economy in Historical Perspective," *Eritrean Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (1996): 91–118.
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23. This is the impression given by the work of Mattia C. Bertazzini, "Towards an Economic History of Italian Colonialism," *Rivista di Storia Economica* 36, no. 3 (2018): 299–343.
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