Labour crossings in Eastern and Southern Africa

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2009

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negative stereotyping, that of purveyors of HIV/AIDS. For their part, Zambians, long 'the ugly step sisters' of Zimbabwe(ans) 'revel in the reversal … feeling a combination of revenge and fear'. The likely outcome of all this, seen all too graphically in South Africa in 2008, is xenophobic attitudes and xenophobic attacks. The 'making' of the 'working class' need not imply its unity.

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forging 'a new transregional supra-elite culture of a very modern type'. Thus, caravans became 'sites for the emergence of new ideas and meanings that penetrated much of East and Central Africa.' The reshaping of identities and ideas via 'labour crossings' is also touched upon in Sabea's article, which draws attention to the way in which colonial labour mobilisation, ironically, expanded aspirations. Besides an extensive understanding of conditions on the different plantations, the workers were able to construct both their own social spaces and 'their own ideals of manamba: free to choose employer, free to move around the country and around estates in search of the optimal conditions of work.'

Such cultural and political expressions and repercussions need not, of course, generate the transnational solidarities and identities that Linebaugh and Rediker stress. Arrington's contribution has a much more contemporary focus, and examines competitive divisions between Zambian and Zimbabwean workers in the Victoria Falls area – divisions often expressed in national and gendered terms. Her article shows how wars and civil dissension can radically reverse long-term patterns of migrant and labour crossings, and generate a multiplicity of social tensions and identity shifts.

In this particular case, Zimbabwe had traditionally drawn labour from Zambia, in part due to its more sophisticated economy. The contemporary Zimbabwean crisis has, however, seen substantial Zimbabwean immigration onto the Zambia side of the Victoria Falls. This takes the form of repeated crossings and returns, and is undertaken in a particular if familiar social form: the movement of single men and women, or at least men and women without their families. For both, the article shows, involves a crisis of self-valuation. Zimbabwean male immigrants experience 'an extraordinary blow to their sense of masculinity' involving 'a reversal of who sets the standards of masculinity'. For Zimbabwean women, it involves a catastrophic sense of marginalisation as they are presented with few means of subsistence and survival other than sex work. This in turn subjects them to a second form of

This special focus presents a selection of four papers presented to an international conference on 'Labour Crossings: World, Work, Society', organised by the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, and the Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg, from 5 to 7 September 2008. The conference drew in participants from four continents, with the East Asian and Latin American presence a particularly noteworthy development.

The intellectual agenda of the conference was to explore a wide range of 'labour crossings': between time periods, between regions and continents, between types of work, and types of worker, both free and unfree, between different imagined worlds, religion and labour, and gender and class – as well as between intellectual disciplines and traditions. The transnational turn in labour history was a key influence on the framing of the issues. Looking globally, and thinking beyond the traditional analytical framework of the nation-state, the very character of the 'working class' and its 'making' (Thompson 1991) needs to be rethought.

Mobility and control

A key issue is that of labour mobility: what frees and freezes movement of labour, and how and why does this happen? As the keynote address by Phil Bonner observed, for industrial capitalism generally – and not just for its offshoots, variations and repercussions across the world – the 'freeing' of potential workers to labour was vital, yet unfettered freedom presented an equally great threat to capitalist economic stability and political control. Mobility, while desired, had also to be controlled in what became South Africa. This took the form of vagrancy acts and pass laws, and similar systems were put in place in imperial Britain itself (see, for instance, Elbourne 1994). Elsewhere, it was enforced through contract law, more pervasive surveillance and policing and, of course, the ubiquitous system of industrial time discipline.

This conundrum of worker mobility under capitalism – so closely tied to but so subversive of labour mobilisation – merits more systematic attention. The mobilisation of wage labour in colonial India offers an object case study. As Ajuha writes, a troubling feature of most writings on the colonial period is they disconnect India's pre-colonial and colonial pasts (2002:793 – 826). The pre-colonial period is often romanticised as harmonious, stable, self-sufficient and communi-tarian, and as locked in particular localities.

This approach creates a history that lacks any real sense of mobility and change. As Bremen (1985), Ludden (1994) and Kerr (2006) have pointed out, this is fun-damentally misleading. Ludden (1994), for example, asserts that half of India's population in the eighteenth century was made up of mobile people, ranging from seasonal migrants to hunters, herders and pilgrims, living out lives in 'a terrain of perpetual movement'. Kerr instances the activities of construction workers (known to the British as Tank Diggers or Wudders), perhaps the most numerous group of migrant workers, travelling repeatedly from countryside to town, or from town to town (2006:93 – 6). Washbrook (1993:68 – 86) likewise con-tends that spatial mobility was as prevalent as sedentarism in pre-colonial India.

Such itinerant groups, these studies agree, were perceived as actual or potential threats to social stability and political security in colonial India, and a variety of legal mechanisms were instituted to settle and 'peasantise' them (Osella and Gardener 2006:xii – xvii). Since access to rural resources was invariably inadequate to sustain family life, such a pre-existing life of 'circulatory' migration had to be replaced by oscillatory migration to centres of colonial employment, something more predictable, regular, controllable and less threatening than itinerancy.

An equally illuminating and analogous pattern of labour mobilisation can be seen in the southern states of the United States of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Wil-

The ocean and its crossings thus constitute an important focus of labour history, telling a story that cannot be captured by a methodological nationalism that assumes the nation-state to be the key unit of analysis. Braudel pointed the way in this regard, showing how maritime space can provide an arena for dense social and economic overlapping of political entities (Braudel 1972 – 3). More recently Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000) have explored what they term 'the Atlantic working class' in the eighteenth century – a 'working class' centred on plantations, quays, docks and sail ships. The connections explored are multiple: between free and unfree labour, between black and white, between occupations, and between nationalities. In the eighteenth century, as they point out, a mixed mass of sailors and navvies formed a key part of wage labour, quintessentially engaged in the business of crossings and connections.

Critical here was the crossings of ideas and experience, which the authors see as circulating eastwards from the American slave plantations, Irish commons and Atlantic vessels and connecting back to the streets of the metropolis, London. This experience, these ideas and these crossings connected sailors, slaves, coal heavers, dockworkers and many others of diverse national and ethnic origins, in a linked set of slave revolts, shipboard mutinies, agrarian risings and prison riots which fed into a broad cycle of rebellions in the eighteenth century Atlantic world. As elsewhere, a central component of this cycle was a struggle against confinement, which was intimately connected with and to some extent premised on mobility.

Rockel's article shows that the complex crisscrossings of the African interior which slave and porter parties undertook had important political and cultural expressions and repercussions, analogous to those discussed by Linebaugh and Rediker for an earlier period in the Atlantic world. Slaves who had been socialised into a Swahili coastal world, after having been snatched as children from their home societies in the interior, now stood in the forefront of

Africa (much as Immigration Controls in the post-First World War United States served to anchor European immigrants to their new places of domicile) proved fairly ineffective. Most, as Dhupelia-Mesthrie shows kept their wives and families in their home village in India, where they retained access to plots of land. Almost universally, they returned to their places and families of origin in India one or more times.

This not only throws fresh and unexpected light on ongoing connections with the crossing to India Dhupelia-Mesthrie observes, but also breaks down the standard stereotypes of different categories of South African labour. 'The dominant image of African migrant workers,' she points out, is of those alienated 'for long periods from their wives and children and aged parents on the reserves'. The study of the Indian migrant, however, 'reveals a similar pattern of migration but one that crosses the ocean and is worthy of recognition in the labour histories of both countries.'

Connecting worlds and workers

Throughout this entire period much that was urban was linked to shipping. In 1780 the basic pattern of the city was the same as at the outset of the great sixteenth century expansion – emporium-type ports and bulking centres.

In 1880, well into the industrial revolution, most urban centres – such as Naples, Alexandria, Calcutta, Shanghai, and Buenos Aires – were commodity bulking centres and import distribution points. This meant that these port cities were as closely connected to other port cities in other parts of the globe as they were to towns in their own countries – and often far more so. The 'national' territory was less a smooth and flat space of shared experiences and unified processes than the site of overlapping grids, forged by ongoing human movements around multiple nodes.

ham Cohen (1991) identifies four successive waves of legislation being enacted in the south designed to limit the mobility of black labour in the post-reconstruction period. The fourth wave, which took shape between 1900 and 1910, was 'of such ferocious intensity that it dwarfed the other three'. Its central features linked vagrancy and contract enforcement laws to the criminal surety system. Once these laws were set in place any black man found 'loitering' or outside of formal employment risked being arrested as a vagrant and sentenced to a heavy fine or a lengthy spell in prison. Those who entered into sharecropping contracts found any attempt to escape these fraught with similar hazards.

Yet this system could only circumscribe black mobility, not restrict it altogether. Southern farmers seem to have reconciled themselves to at least a modicum of mobility amongst their black tenants and workers, provided that it was piecemeal and short-haul, but they found it difficult to contain longer distance movements from, say Georgia, to the newly opened cotton fields of Mississippi. One problem facing southern planters was that a measure of mobility was inscribed in the seasonal agricultural rhythm. The months of July/August and November/December were slack periods in the agricultural cycle and many black sharecroppers exploited them to secure seasonal work in fertiliser plants, cotton-seed presses, sawmills, logging camps, turpentine camps, coal mines and even steel and other industries in the rapidly growing southern cities. In July and August farm owners supplied no food on credit, expecting sharecroppers to meet their own needs (Gottlieb 1987:19 – 20; Pleck 1979:60 – 7). Similar dynamics are visible in African farm labour stability and mobility in South Africa between the 1890s and 1930s, where pass laws and debt bondage conspired to anchor African labour tenants on white land.

Each of these case studies forces us to ponder, as did Wilham Cohen, the paradox of the co-existence of a considerable measure of black mobility and widespread semi-enslavement. The relationship of mobility and freedom would probably repay more atten-

tion in other societies in other times. Countless life histories of South Africans who ended up settling in the towns in the middle decades of the twentieth century are punctuated by repeated moves in search of new, or better, kinds of employment and constant mobility. In their cases moves were so common despite the encompassing frame of the pass laws and influx control that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that they lived out their lives within a culture of mobility. Such cultures require much closer scrutiny; only then will we start to fully understand the social, political and labour histories of these times.

Rockel's article, presented here, engages with the issues of the co-existence of a considerable measure of black mobility and widespread unfree labour directly. His subject is the caravan trade in nineteenth-century East Africa, where slaves and free labourers worked side by side, in a context of multiple crossings. Both carried out identical functions, and slaves could, and did, cross the boundary between bondage and freedom by buying themselves out. The key to the slave porters' anomalous status was their vigorous assertion of 'their rights to mobility', and their ability to roam over great distances and escape the direct supervision of the master. It was this that allowed them to negotiate and subvert the limitations of slave status, and to enlarge their sphere of freedom.

Sabea's article, in this journal, takes some of these issues through into twentieth-century Tanganyika focusing upon labour recruitment to the sisal plantations of the area. Following the displacement of German rule in the latter part of the First World War, she remarks, the colonial authority and the colonial economy rested on very shaky foundations. One key concern was the reliable provision of recruited labour to the coastal sisal plantations, the German period having resulted in the loosening of controls over African movement, and to use an evocative colonial phrase, 'the roaming around of up country natives in the sisal districts'. In other words, the issue was precisely unconstrained mobility. The new British overlords quickly set about reinstating controls over movement via

the Masters and Servants Ordinance, proclaimed in 1923, and the institutiona-lisation of contracts for recruited migrant workers.

A prime objective of the contract, besides curtailing free movement, as Sabea makes clear was to impose a predictable kind of time-discipline over its migrant work force, an issue which rarely commands enough attention in the literature. However, such efforts at controlling mobility and curbing freedom were constantly frustrated by the subversive activities of the labour force itself. Firstly, workers successfully exploited loopholes in the operation of this system, and its illegibility to those subjected to it (and those who operated it) meant a key mechanism designed to achieve colonial ends – the Kipands or pass laws – were subverted and effectively rendered unworkable within a few years. Secondly, the colonial authorities proved incapable of trapping or anchoring recruited migrants into contract status. The phase of '*Manamba*' status – variously meaning migrant, worker, or novice – was both temporary and permeable, and could be escaped over time. For migrant workers it became a period of learning to negotiate the system, and to undertake a deliberate crossing of social status to 'voluntary' labour which 'translated into a multi-layered notion of freedom'.

Dhupelia-Mesthrie focuses on issues of mobility in an entirely different context, linking south Asia and southern African experiences. Her subject is the movement of 'labouring passenger' Indians who crossed the Indian Ocean from India to find work in the Cape Colony in the early twentieth century. Up until the passage of the 1902 Cape Immigration, she notes, such mobility was relatively unobstructed, with immigration controls and passports having not yet made their appearance (although, of course, an *internal* pass system was long established).

Even after restrictions had been imposed on the movement of such workers, passenger labourer Indians insisted on maintaining the right to mobility. The issue of domicile certificates, which should, in theory, have anchored passenger labourers in South