

13 LABOR

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Our analytical concepts in the political and economic domains of African studies derive largely from European languages, where their use first developed specifically within European history, and were then applied to Africa through trade, colonial rule, and the demands of international reporting after independence. The terms we use became an enduring lingua franca for all formal domains of life, in countries where the populations speak a diversity of languages in daily life, and where exact precision in translation from African to European terms can be impossible. Such concepts, however, have also not been consistently stable in the European contexts in which they were developed over the centuries. Labor falls into that category. It has a history and variability of application, and there were debates and discussions over a very long period, particularly in England, during which its applications developed from the English language tradition where the terms *labor* and *work* were applied differently, in both the social and economic spheres. These two terms also changed over time, under shifting political regimes, especially in formal quantitative and legal contexts. Consequently, the exact use of both terms in public and intellectual life needs to be examined in each case, and particularly where the economic dynamics of value creation and measurement, and the politics of control, are at stake.

The Terms “Labor” and “Work”

As a critical concept, whose diverse and changing uses deserve very close attention, we start from the European crafting of the term *labor*, over time, then move to its application in African public life and intellectual

2. 2011. "Urban Mythologies."
by Gerhard Marx and William Kentridge

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analysis, and then to the specific concepts within Africa's own societies and languages. We bring up the question of whether African languages and cultures make similar, or completely different, conceptual distinctions, and therefore how the terms that were developed in Europe have been engaged in African political and economic life. The two main themes here, then, are both focused on how the conceptual terms differ in different milieux: (1) in places, times, and politico-theoretical contexts; and (2) for populations who derive their concepts from different languages and cultural histories.

Labor has a long history in European social theory and public life, from which it was applied to the colonial world. In English, the concepts of *labor* and *work* derive from different etymologies. *Labor* comes from the Latinate legal vocabulary of the dominant class (the Norman-French aristocracy of England, after the Conquest), applying simply to physical effort. For example, the Africans who were traded into slavery did slave *labor*. *Work*, by contrast, is from old German, deriving from the craft trades, and thereby implies skill. These two terms have not always been used either consistently or precisely, but both have been brought forward into the present. In more detail: from its origin, the term *labor* derives from the verb *labourer* which refers to tilling of the ground, and where it is used in distinction from *travail*, which is usually translated into English as "work." In modern French, so also in the francophone African world, *travail* is used in many of the sociopolitical senses where *labor* would be used in English, such as *Ministère du Travail* (Ministry of Labor); *travail forcé* (forced labor).

The concept of *work*, by contrast with *labor*, in English depicts what people actually do and make, in all its variety, including by gender and social class: housework, office work, craftwork, and so on. The most straightforward way to understand a literature that may use the concept of *labor* in varied ways—by place, topic, and theoretical orientation of the scholar—is by simply following the words and examining how they are used, both intellectually and in the world. Here Marx offers a valuable guide. As a native speaker of German, he noted the English propensity to "use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflexion" (that is, for abstraction) (footnote 1 in chap. 1 of *Capital*). His own signal example is "worth" (in Teutonic terms) and "value" (in Romance terms). Here we have "labor," in the Romance vocabulary, and "work" in the Germanic vocabulary. *Labor*, then, implies a measurable variable, to be controlled and counted, whereas *work* depicts the multifarious actual tasks that people do.

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financial capitalism, labor came to designate measurable human effort, among the factors of production: land, labor, and capital. These are all acquired on the factor market, and combined and controlled to produce goods for the commodity market. *Labor*, as a term, thereby became most applicable to contexts where measurement and comparison were the technical purpose, and where control and management were the social and political purpose. This promoted the use of inclusive terms such as *labor force*, *wage labor*, and *labor laws*, created for analysis and administration. There developed ministries of labor (in government, for supervision of conditions), labor economics (a field within the economics profession), and concepts in regulatory law—for example, child labor—with respect to legal conditions.

Theory could then become generally applicable, such as the labor theory of value (Adam Smith, Karl Marx): that the value of commodities derives from the “socially necessary” labor time to produce them. Work remained in the vernacular register of meaning, in the practical world of place, skill, personhood, and cooperation (working men’s clubs). In the public sphere, however, the term *labor movement* was taken up by advocates for better conditions and stronger representation. Labor parties were founded in democratic political life, so political dynamics were also implied by the word *labor*, from the nineteenth century onward.

As an increasingly inclusive concept, *labor* could then be divided into subcategories according to conditions of mobilization, control, and productivity. The idea of a whole productive process composed of different parts gave Emile Durkheim, considered a major founder of modern social science, a much broader image of society, as in his *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) (*Travail*, in the original French). The social dynamics of organization and control implied in the concept of “division of labor” is later applied to the sexual (later, gender) division of labor, as gender studies developed.

Over these shifting political and analytical uses of the vocabulary, labor came to have a certain social class implication, whereas the poor and the craftsmen still referred to themselves as “the industrious classes” in the late eighteenth century or “the working class” (see E. P. Thompson 1963) in the nineteenth century. The difference between work and labor became an explicit philosophical theme in the mid-twentieth century. For example, in Hannah Arendt’s analysis, in *The Human Condition* (1958), the difference between *labor* and *work* is defined such that the former is repetitive, concerned with reproduction and necessities, and the latter can be aspira-

tional and creative, creating tangible products beyond necessity, including the products of intellectual work.

So *labor* is a concept to be understood broadly and historically, and also to be examined carefully in each particular use. For example, categories of work are generally depicted as labor when it is their status relative to the law, rather than what they actually do, that is at stake: slave labor, migrant labor, indentured labor, domestic labor, farm labor, child labor, seasonal labor, day labor, and others. When the tasks that they actually fulfill are at stake, the words *work* and *worker* are more often deployed. In summary, the overlap, and yet also distinction, between *labor* and *work* in English is important to pay attention to, since it carries political and analytical implications that are particularly relevant when examining closely their application outside Europe, across different languages, and under rapidly changing political-economic conditions, as in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. How did these conceptual shifts apply to African economic change?

The Literature on Labor and Work

The most voluminous literature that deploys the concept of labor in African studies is historical, since it is concerned with the colonial project of creating a labor force from a population of independent producers and traders. Critical social historical scholarship would refer to the West's gains as extractive processes that used outright violence or colonial domination to establish inferior status and thereby a nonmarket, or only partially market-governed, process of value creation. The foothold of capitalism in Africa has a specific history: the purchase and sale of people themselves as commodities, as slaves; the acquisition of land mainly by conquest or states' rights, without purchase, including for highly profitable mineral extraction; a long colonial history of forced recruitment for large public projects; the recruitment of African men into proletarian status in essential sectors such as plantations and ports (Cooper 1980; 1996); the intricate, racially discriminatory legal regimes for the supply of labor to large businesses, such as the mines, in Southern Africa (Murray 1981).

Into the present, much of the commodity supply economy is still defined as "informal," so outside of formally defined factor markets and considered recalcitrant to the frameworks of the law and status, such as taxation, standards, and reporting. This is rarely referred to as labor. There are, therefore, and even in European and American scholarship, some

theoretical variations in how the term "labor" is used. One emphasis is largely sociopolitical with respect to labor as a political category, with its own subdivisions. The other one extends the analytical potential with respect to measurement and comparison of hours worked, productivity, earnings (returns to labor), and the cost of their constant reproduction.

Bill Freund made a comprehensive review of the history of this literature in 1984. He points to the first major compendium on the topic, published in 1928: Raymond Buell's *The Native Problem in Africa*. The problem was always the inconstancy of the labor supply. As long as Africans had access to land, their rhythms of work would be set by their own targets in life and livelihood. The "freedom" of labor that had been produced by the enclosures in Britain was in fact a constraint for the workers themselves. Constraints would be put in place to free up "labor" for deployment in colonial enterprises. W. Arthur Lewis, Caribbean winner of the Nobel Prize in economics in 1979, developed a theory that did justice to the worker's perspective when he developed the concept of "the backward-bending supply curve of labor," using colonial data, showing that free workers who have their own means of production are target-workers when it comes to labor for others. The higher the wage the sooner they may return to their own livelihoods. He aimed to depict "economic growth with unlimited supplies of labor" (1955). The political economic logic of profit and control by large enterprises and the state would then favor precisely the kinds of constraint and low wages that Freund and Frederick Cooper both document for African history.

Cooper's (1996) comprehensive history of the labor force, labor policy, and labor organizations during the independence period moves from the imperial legal framework to the nationalist framework for labor laws and negotiations. He addresses the new regimes of sovereignty and the challenge of creating the kind of "free labor" that classic European working-class history had been based on, on a continent where work for companies and governments had rarely been based on regimes of freedom and on labor markets for recruitment and wage-setting.

The Southern African history of labor pays particularly close attention to dispossession and the legal framing of forms of citizenship that required labor migration and personal documentation through pass laws for travel, segregated residence, and labor in a large formal economy, including in domestic service for the elite, usually white (Hansen 1989). One source on dispossession that offers details of the implementation of a project that purposely created systematic conditions of land shortage and

livelihood uncertainty for the people, and labor constraints on the terms of their participation in the economy is a study entitled *The Surplus People Project* (1983), whose name evokes the “reserve army” concept. It documents, in five volumes of detail, the eviction of African landowners, and others, from what were called “black spots” in desirable farming areas for the white population, in South Africa under apartheid. James Ferguson’s (1999) ethnography of unemployed miners in Zambia in the postcolonial period examines the fate of labor that had been recruited under colonial conditions, now in a post-wage era.

These postcolonial sources give complementary empirical accounts of the formal sector labor force, which is now actively present in political life. A major innovation in the use of the concept of labor for the present, particularly the post-industrial economies of the twenty-first century, is Ferguson’s (2015) book on “the new politics of distribution” in South Africa. Ferguson treats labor, in the wage sense, as a historical creation, and then extends the concept to include the supervision and mediation of the new economy of cash distribution, which he terms “distributive labor.” This is labor in the sense of organized, measurable effort within the whole economic system; its functioning is central to the money-mediated economy as is production; and indeed—in the new economy in particular, but also more generally—the capacity to produce at all is dependent on effective redistributive mechanisms of the many formal and informal kinds which keep resources and money circulating and nourishing productive endeavors (2015, 45). Here the term “labor” still implies system and organization, but it also combines with the use of work to describe what is actually done, in all its detail and qualitative variety. For example, one subheading is “Distributive Labor and the Hard Work of Dependence” (94).

In African studies, then, the status designation of labor can allude to slave labor, forced labor, migrant labor, female labor, child labor, seasonal labor, and others, depending on the scholar, the legal framework of the case, and the topic under study. The term designates status in general, and also occupations such as mine labor and farm labor. For self-employed occupations, “work” is more commonly used, such as market workers, transport workers, and so on, in informal and short-term employment. “Laborer,” however, is more commonly used for those whose work falls under the authority of others and who—if not slaves—are directly paid, in cash or in kind.

These categories facilitate the grouping of different cases across time and space, in ways that make possible comparison and analysis, including

eventually with other parts of the world and in relation to theory itself. In some economic studies, this also allows the quantitative value of the work done by people who fall into that category to be studied and compared. For example, in the 1970s, feminist economics turned the "housework" of wives into "domestic labor," and started to quantify the monetary value that women add by "stretching the wage." In African studies, however, most of these categories of labor have been set up for analytical purposes that have focused on the *conditions of control* under which people work and their *social status*, rather than on analyzing the monetary value of the work itself ("returns to labor"), which can be exceptionally complicated to do across currency zones, eras of history, and self-employment situations. Slave labor varies widely in the value it produces, depending on the products; forced labor for colonial governments was a kind of tax, for public infrastructure projects for which no other labor force was available; the value produced by migrant labor, and its remuneration, depends entirely on its political control and the kind of work that it does.

Measurement becomes a challenge for scholarship, as well as for the authorities, especially for self-employed populations, but the concern with gender differences encouraged further thought. Following the publication of Ester Boserup's highly influential *Conditions of Agricultural Growth* (1965), comparative interest intensified in the kind of farming system common in historical Africa: under conditions of low population density with women playing an important enough role for some of these to be depicted as "female farming systems." Ken Swindell's (1985) summary entitled *Farm Labour*, a short but highly informed book focused on domestic organization, is a very good source on both the descriptive work on African farming at that time, and also on the deployment of the terms "labor" and "work." Where "mobilization, control and organization of farm labour" (3) is the theme, "labor" is the term used. Where its distribution by task and season is graphed, "work" is discussed, according to "patterns" in the tasks. When Swindell turns back to numbers of hours, crop yields, and conditions of hire, he uses "labor" again, as, for example, in his graph on "labor bottlenecks" (164) taken from a paper by J. Karimu and Paul Richards (1980).

In the 1980s there was a burst of empirical studies published about women in African economies, which focused not only on what women did as workers, but on their own control of the produce and income from their labors. The move toward quantification in farming and the informal sector allowed terms such as "returns to labor" and the "division of labor" to open up comparison: between men and women, and between different

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occupations. A paper of my own (Guyer 1980) compared the complementarity of male and female work and income control in two cocoa-producing societies. Another (Guyer 1988) reviewed the ways in which female labor had been combined with male labor, over time, in relation to value and control. Several further contributions focused on income itself, but only implicitly referring to women's control of their own "labor." The expansion of the ethnography of trade and informal sector enterprise, such as Clark's (1994) study of Ghanaian market women, hardly used a concept with the analytical weight of "labor," and indeed we might see the gender issues as reopening the question of "work" for European scholars, which then complements an African scholarship that moves away from labor in order to bring to the fore Africans' own conceptions of work.

Moving closer to current studies on labor, as a subject of research and concept for analysis, we can point to the innovations being produced as now opening up much closer attention to Africa's own concepts, which so far have fallen mainly under the English term "work." As exemplified above, the concept of labor tends to imply that tasks are undertaken under authoritative control of some kind. Even where this is not the guiding definition, as in Swindell's book, "organization" still lies at the heart of the topic. By contrast, there is an interesting revival in certain key African studies scholarship of the use of "work" to open up the question of self-direction and innovation, in action, by those who have the expertise and the latitude to be inventive, for themselves and in their own ways. In this usage, the "actual," to which Marx drew attention, is the moment when all the faculties of a person's mind, skills, and toolsets meet with the tangible contexts in which action is called for. In some domains of life, the uncertainty of things—weather, markets, health, ecological shifts, and so on—makes people's capacity to invent and develop new trajectories, however mundane, in productive life, of central importance. I had this orientation in mind in my article entitled "Traditions of Invention" (Guyer 1996), although it was not focused primarily on production itself, or on work/labor defined as such. People were seen as doing all kinds of expressive works that had social implications: carving spoons and images, forging iron, applying medicinal cures, building houses and canoes, hunting, conversing with the spirits of the forest, dancing, fishing, and so on.

At this frontier of thinking, particularly by African scholars, we find the term "labor" used in reference mainly to a politics of resistance and "work" in the context of local innovation. Elias Mandala's history of *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy* (1990) blazes a trail in this regard, as one can see from

his chapter titles: "Resistance to Capitalist Colonial Labor Regimes, 1875–1923" (chapter 3); "The Land, Work, and Workers in Cotton Agriculture" (chapter 4, section 1), which the peasants themselves integrated with their patterns of production for millet and other food crops, evading the strict rules of blueprints sent to them by the colonial government, and creating possibilities for themselves. Agricultural laborers were experienced in running multi-crop and intercropping systems, with their own practices of fallow; hence the idea of a mono-crop and a singular labor regime was not only a political imposition on them but an ignorant intervention into an ecological microcosm, where "soil types, rainfall patterns, crop diseases and ecological fluctuations . . . can affect the labor process in many significant ways . . . often ignored in the literature" (1990, 271).

Clapperton Mavhunga's (2014) book on people's ecological management of game and the environment in Zambia and Zimbabwe goes even further in examining the actual science of those continual adaptations in what he calls *Transient Workspaces*. *Work* here refers to tasks and innovations, undertaken by "the professoriate of the hunt"—that is, people with profound learned and experienced knowledge of the uncertain, complex, and changing environments that they share with other beings of all kinds: flora, fauna, and human neighbors. He offers very detailed descriptions of the kind of "work" that "innovation" is, and he offers us terms within the Shona language that translate with difficulty into European concepts, so they do indicate the divergence in our understandings of the complex of dynamics around understandings of work. The word *nzira* "means a way (of doing things)"; "mobility as creative work . . . a quest for opportunities, or simply an anticipative mode," "technology as a way of doing . . . [a]s expertise, *unyanzvi* is a combination of *shavé* (spirit), *chipo* (talent. pl. *zvipo*), *zvidobi* (skills) and *ruzivo* (knowledge)." All of these practices depend on the guidance of the ancestors, consultation with the spirits of the dead, and observation of codes of conduct (taboos). People also developed collaborative modes through what they called *hlengwe*, gathering (Mavhunga 2014, 17–18). He calls the whole complex one of "everyday innovation." This frontier of appreciation for work and knowledge within Africa is a growing area, and is very unlikely to be designated as "labor," since it configures many qualities, rather than searching for a single variable to measure.

Conclusion

To reiterate, the one place where daily innovation has been accepted as constitutive of economic life is in what was designated as "the informal sector," so altogether outside of direct central control. Markets and small-scale specialist expertise have generally been described in terms of work, and they may well have been less subjected to case study for explicitly comparative and theoretical purposes than those domains depicted as labor. Nevertheless, they have always been important in the creation of livelihoods, and may well be expanding in importance.

We can infer a guide to future studies from this direction of change. With the shifts in emphasis in African economies toward enterprise and self-employment, which tap into certain past modes of organization, there may well be a change in empirical and analytical attention toward a greater inclusion of work in the sphere that used to be depicted as labor studies, and to people's own concepts for the configuration of their own inputs: effort, skill, imagination, collaboration, and so on. States will still deal with labor policy, and with labor unions, since there will always be a comparative nexus in the international political and economic world. But the new expansion in small-scale business and self-employment within Africa may well offer the terrain on which new analytical innovations will have to be made vis-à-vis the old concept of labor, and these will be informed increasingly by Africa's own concepts and practices, in which innovation and improvisation already figured.

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