

Permanent precarity: capital and labour in the Central African copperbelt

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a new history of mine capital and labour in the ‘Central African Copperbelt’ – the cross-border mining region of the Zambian copperbelt and Haut Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It doing so, it seeks to overcome the limitations of earlier structurally minded analysis rooted in modernist notions regarding the transformative capacity of mining capital and a ‘new’ African working class. Building on post-structuralist challenges to such assumptions, the article demonstrates the precarity, unevenness and uncertainty of the actually existing copperbelt economy and society. The comparison of the two copperbelt regions enables consideration of differential outcomes as a way of rethinking apparent inevitabilities. Analysis of how ideas about these mining societies were generated and circulated helps explain how dominant ways of understanding copperbelt capital and labour relations became established and continue to inform nostalgia for a ‘golden age’ of mining-fuelled prosperity at odds with historical reality.

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Introduction

The development of mine capital and labour in the Central African copperbelt is one of the classic exemplars of capitalist relations in Africa. Copper production, driven by global demand and enabled by European imperialism, transformed market relations and was thought to have brought modern industry to an African interior otherwise isolated from progressive historical change. The African mineworkers recruited to produce that copper likewise provided an ideal type of nascent working-class identity and consciousness. A quintessentially urban society was seen as developing in the new towns of the Northern Rhodesian copperbelt and the Haut Katanga region of the Belgian Congo, producing in turn a kind of modern social and political consciousness. Political nationalism and economic nationalisation of strategic mining resources were equally seen as flowing directly or indirectly from mining-led development. Socialist-oriented academics looked to the incipient African working class to develop into a vanguard of radical progressive change and, when this apparently did not occur, sought to explain this ‘failure’ in ways that characterised African workers as divergent from an implicit or explicit norm of class conscious development (Arrighi & Saul, 1973).¹

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This modernist viewpoint has been systematically undermined in two ways. On the one hand, critical academic analysis, most significantly in the work of James Ferguson, has challenged some of the assumptions underlying the supposed proletarianisation of the Copperbelt workforce, stressing their enduring ties to rural areas of origin, their fluid identities and demonstrating the constructed nature of the Copperbelt as a space of imagined modernity (Ferguson, 1999). On the other hand, events in the real world have demolished the notion that the Copperbelt would develop into a fully fledged industrial centre with a form of capitalism and a working class resembling that in the 'developed world'. In practice, neither copperbelt region developed in the ways expected by social scientists: having been perceived as a region of advanced capitalism and new urban African identities, from the 1970s the Zambian copperbelt experienced sustained economic decline, the loss of employment, outmigration and the increasing adoption of 'non-urban' survival strategies such as farming. Mining areas of Haut Katanga experienced a somewhat different trajectory – encompassing military conflict in addition to the economic collapse and political mismanagement experienced south of the border – that was if anything more devastating to the notion of a stable urban working class. Recent modest economic recovery, driven by Chinese demand for its minerals, has not stimulated significant re-urbanisation of the kind once envisaged and is not likely to do so.

The existing model of capitalist development and class-based labour relations has therefore been demonstrated to be a poor reflection of reality, for three linked reasons. It was based on structuralist assumptions about the inherent trajectory of socio-economic development in urban industrial societies. It tended to assume that modernising historical change could only come from Western forces acting on and in Africa, rather than being generated internally. And it tended to assume that capital-labour relations would ultimately take a form similar to that which developed in the industrialised countries. It is acknowledged that 'varieties of capitalism' exist (Hall & Soskice, 2001). The colonial model of capitalism certainly resembled Hall and Soskice's 'coordinated market economies' more than its 'liberal market' equivalent. However, both models, designed to apply to advanced economies, are of limited relevance to capitalist relations in imperial/transnational space, in which economic development in one territory was driven by the needs of firms in another. Similarly, the model of labour relations based on the Standard Employment Relationship is increasingly understood to belong to a specific period in post-Second World War global history and as an exception rather than a norm (Breman & van der Linden, 2014).

These models nevertheless remains a powerful concept in the minds of many copperbelt residents; nostalgia for the supposed boom time and the higher living standards with which it is associated, is prevalent, and contemporary political and social mobilisation is shaped in significant ways by that nostalgia. The convincing dismissal of social science analysis of the copperbelts, rooted as it was in incorrect assumptions regarding the modernist development of capitalist class-based societies along Western lines, has however, left us without a history of the actual development of relations between mine capital and labour in this region. Is it possible to recover such a history without falling back into modernist teleologies, to document actually existing capitalism and labour relations? This article aims to be a modest step in this direction.

It is clearly impossible in the space available to do justice to this long and complex history, let alone the ways in which material realities intersected with colonial 'ways of seeing' and Africans' own perception of their circumstances to create shared notions of Copperbelt

society and identity. Rather, the article provides a new narrative of capital and labour relations on the copperbelt as a way of challenging both older modernist characterisations of capitalist development and the widespread contemporary nostalgia for a stable and prosperous ‘Copperbelt’ that never existed, but which is commonly articulated in memories of a global age by former mineworkers (Dibwe dia Mwembu, 2001; Ferguson, 1999). By comparing the distinct yet interlinked trajectories of the two regions under analysis, the Northern Rhodesian/Zambian Copperbelt and the Haut Katanga region of the Belgian/DR Congo, it seeks to consider their differential outcomes as a way of rethinking apparent inevitabilities: whilst both regions were the subject of parallel historical processes related to the mining industry, their distinct outcomes also shows how these regions were shaped by sociocultural processes arising from the unpredictable encounter of minerals, capital and peoples on either side of the copperbelt border. The article, in demonstrating the ways in which capital-labor relations developed this region diverged in many respects from the development of capital and labour in the west, and therefore from the modernisation norms and narratives that arise from this once hegemonic example, are nevertheless entirely characteristic of capitalist exploitation and inequality of labour relations more generally, albeit in forms redolent of the precarity and instability normally associated with different, later forms of capitalism.

Mining capital in central Africa

In 1958, A.L. Epstein stressed the revolutionary change that the mining industry had wrought in central Africa in the space of a few decades:

Where once there was only bush with scattered African villages linked by a network of winding paths, there are now large towns of multi-racial composition, linked with one another, and with the outside world, by road and rail, telephone and wireless. (Epstein, 1958/1973, p. xi)

Copper mining was not, however, a new phenomenon in central Africa: copper ingots from ‘Katanga’ were exported by the Lunda and Luba kingdoms via African and Portuguese trade routes to global markets, providing a partial basis for their development into centralised societies (Bustin, 1973, pp. 3–5). Market relations based on mineral exports were thus already established in central Africa before the advent of colonial rule. Nor did Western companies introduce unequal labour relations: Lunda rulers used unfree subject peoples to mine for copper, generating surplus wealth that was realised via tax revenues on the coastal trade.

The capital that did arrive with European-controlled mining was certainly new but, like virtually all mining investment in Africa during the early colonial period, it took the distinct form of colonially connected capital, dependent both on the drawing of colonial borders and the exclusion of competition within mining concessions themselves. Indeed, both Northern Rhodesia and Katanga themselves were run by colonial concession companies for the first decades of their existence: the British South Africa Company (BSAC)’s legally questionable treaty of 1890 with the Barotse King Lewanika secured it both administrative rights and mineral rights over the new copperbelt, which remained in BSAC hands until independence in 1964. Katanga was administered autonomously from the Belgian King Leopold’s Congo Free State; from 1891, this administration was in the hands of the *Compagnie du Katanga*, in which the Belgian state had a 10% stake, and which was granted an exclusive concession for the exploitation of one-third of Katanga (encompassing its mineral deposits, agricultural land and water courses) for 99 years (Perrings, 1979, pp. 4–11). In 1900, the *Compagnie* and the Congo Free State created the *Comité Spécial du Katanga*, which

administered Katanga until 1933. These arrangements were brought to an end first with the establishment of Northern Rhodesia as a British protectorate in 1924, and with the integration of Katanga into Belgian Congo in 1933. In both cases, however, mine companies – Rhodesian Selection Trust (RST), the Anglo American Corporation and (in the Congo) *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* – continued to operate their concessions largely autonomously, with little interference from weak and/or compliant colonial administrations. Copperbelt mine companies were themselves representatives of interlinked capital: RST was underwritten by the American Metal (AMAX) company, whilst Rhokana was backed by the South African Anglo American Corporation: both were global and imperial companies, which kept managing directors in both Johannesburg and London (Parpart, 1983, p. 21). The Katanga mines were first developed by British exploratory operations and *Union Minière*, whilst headquartered in Brussels, was more closely linked – through company administration, transport links and labour policies – to the southern African mining nexus than to either Belgium, or the Congolese capital Léopoldville 1500 kms away.

Just as capital took distinct form in the central African copperbelt, the role of the colonial state was of course very different to that of the metropole state in relation to domestic capital: it was, in Parpart's words, '... designed to maximize the transfer of surplus to the metropole, while also maintaining political reproduction ...' (Parpart, 1983, p. 9). Peemans likewise emphasises the extraction of Congolese surplus to the Belgian metropole, and the central role of the colonial state – in the absence of an emergent indigenous capitalist class making use of an agriculturally generated surplus – in introducing and maintaining such an extractive model (Peemans, 1975, pp. 166–169). Colonial officials sought to facilitate company operations, for example, in ensuring an effective supply of labour (see below), but their administration was not strengthened by the presence of large-scale industry in its midst, for example, by the flow of tax revenue (Butler, 2007, p. 36). Both states therefore remained relatively undeveloped and certainly continued to be so relative to those in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, where the granting of considerable political autonomy to their much larger European settler populations led in turn to states delivering support to commercial agriculture and welfare programmes.

Mine labour in central Africa

Central African mine companies certainly saw themselves as they were portrayed by Epstein, i.e. as self-sustaining enclaves of industry in the African 'bush'. They were, however, limited in their efforts in this respect by their dependence on the labour force that was necessary for their operations, and the subsequent claims made by those drawn to the new mining camps by the opportunities they created (Frederiksen, 2013, pp. 271–281; Parpart, 1983, p. 23). The recruitment of affordable and effective labour was an essential aspect of profitable mineral production. UMHK initially struggled to recruit African workers from the immediate hinterland of its new mines, largely because peasant agriculture, now expanded to supply foodstuffs to the mines themselves, provided sufficient income to enable Africans to avoid the hazards of mine labour. Recruiting companies, modelled in part on South African practices, were established to bring sufficient numbers of Africans to labour in the growing mine camps. The imposition of colonial taxes and the agricultural poverty of north-eastern Rhodesia meant that its Bemba-speaking inhabitants opted to labour in the UMHK mines, which were in full-scale production more than a decade earlier than their Northern Rhodesian

counterparts (Perrings, 1979, p. 14). UMHK production was nonetheless periodically constrained by the challenge of recruiting sufficient workers, and the company looked to the colonial state to provide direct assistance in this regard (Perrings, 1979, p. 29). Colonial officials collaborated with labour recruiters to provide increased labour, but ongoing shortages forced the company into mechanising aspects of production as early as 1913, increasing the skill base of the workforce in doing so (Perrings, 1979, p. 31). Ongoing pressures of this sort led company officials to lengthen contracts from 6 to 12 months and introduce a wage scale that rewarded skilled workers. Thus, the inability of the mine company to recruit sufficient labour prompted first, the use of state intervention to increase supply, but then a more conventional capitalist response, increased capitalisation and investment in the skill base of the labour force (Higginson, 1989, pp. 86–94).

However, the distinct development of the Northern Rhodesian mining industry in the inter-war period showed that this process of mechanisation and training was not an inevitable reflection of market conditions. White skilled labour was recruited not only from Britain but from a wider network of artisanal mineworkers from across the white Dominions and the United States: as Money shows, they brought with them to the Copperbelt a trade union praxis that was simultaneously militant and racialised (Money, 2016). Whilst the number and political influence of European labour in Northern Rhodesian mines steadily increased in the inter-war period, their counterparts in Katanga, following the defeat of industrial action in 1919, saw their numbers and organisational capacity effectively contained, enabling the steady advancement of cheaper African labour into more senior, skilled positions. Whilst limited African advancement of this kind occurred in the late 1930s in Northern Rhodesia, the European Mineworkers' Union (MWU) was able to take advantage of the prioritisation of copper production during the Second World War to secure an agreement that effectively barred Africans from promotion to jobs currently held by Europeans (Epstein, 1958/1973, pp. 102–104). By 1945, UMHK employed just 1100 European mineworkers in the most senior roles, whilst there were in 1956 still c. 7000 whites employed in Northern Rhodesian mines.

This had inevitable consequences for the advancement of African labour to more skilled positions. The late 1920s and, following the global depression, the late 1930s saw in Katanga significant investment in the skilling and stabilisation of longer term African employment: by 1941, 63.8% of African workers had been employed for more than 15 years. UMHK developed a rigorous job classification system and increased wage differentials between African workers. In Northern Rhodesia, Africans were much less able to advance to more senior roles, although there were considerable variations in this that reflected both company policies and geological variations (Perrings, 1979, pp. 117–129). The wider copperbelt economy was also shaped by differential company and state policies: whilst Northern Rhodesian policy encouraged European commercial agriculture to supply growing mine towns with foodstuffs, Katangese policy was to stimulate African rural prosperity via indigenous commercial agriculture, creating in districts neighbouring the mines a significant group of prosperous African farmers.

The supply of African mine labour, initially enabled by labour recruiting agencies, was by the late 1930s secured by the voluntary flow of Africans to what was increasingly perceived as attractive salaried employment, albeit via temporary contracts as migrant labourers. *Ad hoc* mining camps were steadily replaced with full-scale mining townships, where companies sought to secure effective control over all aspects of their workers' lives. Migrant workers were ostensibly engaged in temporary sojourns from their rural homes and reimbursed

accordingly: mineworker wages were supplemented with food rations but assumed a return to rural areas of origin at the end of the contract. In practice, however, many Africans successfully subverted the short-term contracts on which they were employed, moving from one mine to another and establishing themselves as de facto urban residents. Women also evaded gendered controls on their movement and settled in towns, where they supplied services to male mineworkers outside the company purview, including beer and commercial sex.

Stabilisation and unionisation

In both contexts, however, African wages were too low to support the full reproduction costs of mineworkers and their families, whether the latter resided in town or village. The wartime rising cost of living was a cause of major industrial unrest in Northern Rhodesia (1940) and Katanga (1941), unrest understood to reflect incipient class consciousness among African workers. European observers who saw African identity as quintessentially 'tribal' and rural were alarmed at the prospect of managing Africans unmoored from rural norms. European post-war corporatist policies and Keynesian economic models, designed to reduce class conflict and ensure stable economies, were accordingly implemented in central Africa in forms that indirectly reflected British and Belgian domestic policies.

In Congo, the authorities implemented considerable legislative reforms, including minimum wages, family allowances and paid holidays (Rubbers & Poncelet, 2015). Indigenous enterprise councils (CIEs) were established in 1947 in UMHK, following a directive from the Governor General (Dibwe dia Mwembu, 2001, pp. 217–220). Indigenous trade unions were authorised in 1946 but their progress was slow – by 1948 only 10% of the workers at one mine in Lubumbashi had joined the *Confederation des syndicats chretiens du Congo* (Brion & Moreau, 2006, p. 273). The European union, meanwhile, created a Congolese section and ran courses in trade unionism for Africans. There was as a result of union competition a radicalisation of language, in which the struggle against the employer was linked to anti-colonial feeling (Brion & Moreau, 2006, p. 274). UMHK combated radicalisation by significant social intervention, coupled with close surveillance of 'extremist' elements, i.e. those who sought to politicise the workplace by linking economic concerns to growing demands for decolonisation. In this UMHK was aided by the Catholic Church in shaping urban social policy in Katanga's mine towns; in contrast, Northern Rhodesian mines kept missions at arm's-length and out of compound management (Vellut, 1981). Although CIE representatives acted as company agents in mine compounds, the intelligence they provided regarding causes of discontent, and the proactive approach of UMHK management during this period, seems to have delivered a considerable degree of industrial harmony: from 1947 to independence in 1960, there was not a single major strike on the Katangese mines (Dibwe dia Mwembu, 2001, p. 55).

South of the border, the post-war British Labour Government introduced trade unions, with British Trade Union Council officials sent to Northern Rhodesia to establish African unions that, they hoped would engage in negotiations rather than strike action (Parpart, 1983, p. 130). The resultant Northern Rhodesian African Mineworkers' Union (AMWU), formed in 1949, was able to observe and draw lessons from the European MWU. AMWU accordingly made a series of demands for improvements of wages and conditions, supported by the threat and sometimes the reality of disciplined and generally successful industrial action.

They also secured the abolition, in an overwhelmingly successful ballot of all mineworkers, of the 'Tribal Representatives' who had previously provided the only form of representation available to them (Epstein, 1958/1973, p. 100). These distinct dynamics led Northern Rhodesian mineworkers to take a more militant and obviously class conscious approach to advancement than their Katangese counterparts, who appear to have partly accepted the paternalistic dynamics of UMHK policies. This did not of course prevent some mineworkers engaging in anti-colonial politics, but the close link between labour and nationalist organisation and demands that developed in the Northern Rhodesia Copperbelt did not occur to the same extent in Katanga.

As one element of these modernisation processes, Northern Rhodesian mines agreed – with varying degrees of enthusiasm – to 'allow' their workers to live permanently in what were now evidently mining towns. Whilst it is clear that this was in some respects a *de jure* acceptance of a *de facto* practice of widespread African urbanisation, legalisation of urban residence enabled mineworkers to live openly with their families in mine housing, much of which needed to be rebuilt to accommodate those families. It also necessitated a substantial expansion of social and welfare services, including education and health provision. Whilst mine companies incurred substantial new costs as a result, it is clear that in the long term, as had proved to be the case in Katanga, the stabilisation of the African workforce would, by enabling the removal of the expensive European labour force recruited from a global labour market, ultimately reduce labour costs (Parpart, 1983, pp. 136–137; cited in Phimister, 2011, p. 137). This investment was also enabled by the unanticipated long boom in the global economy that enabled a rapid and sustained expansion in Central African copper production, with the industry itself increasingly dominated by US finance (Butler, 2007, pp. 118–131; Lekime, 1992, pp. 133–142).

It was precisely in this period when copperbelt towns were identified as developing in the direction of Western urban industrial capitalist societies. Social scientists, both from Belgium's Centre d'Etudes des Problèmes Sociaux Indigènes (CEPSI) and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia, deployed notions developed in relation to Western urban society: proletarianisation, class-consciousness, a decline in tribal identification, materialism and secularisation provided compelling frameworks to explain what was happening. Whilst CEPSI and RLI researchers disagreed about the ability of Africans to adapt successfully to such changes, or what needed to be done to help them do so, they agreed that a transition was under way from one sort of stable society – rural, kinship-based, paternalistic and tribal in nature – to another – urban, materialist, rational and capitalist (Larmer, 2016, p. 9; Rubbers & Poncelet, 2015, pp. 95–100). Epstein, as Ferguson rightly identifies, believed that he was observing a highly unstable set of social institutions, but was confident that this was the temporary flux of rapid and profound change that would result in a new form of stability that could be understood as westernised (Epstein, 1958/1973, p. xv; Ferguson, 1999, pp. 18, 29).

Certainly, the new African unions in Northern Rhodesia, especially AMWU, looked and acted a lot like Western trade unions. Their militant methods of organisation and agitation in the unitary space of mine workplace and community proved highly effective when deployed against a weak late colonial state fearful of political unrest and mine companies increasingly keen to promote African workers whilst paying them as little as possible. But if the adoption of trade union structures and working-class political forms had been a direct reflection of the material conditions experienced by workers, then it would likely have taken

similar form on both sides of the copperbelt border. The paternalistic policies of UMHK certainly appear to have influenced the less overtly class conscious behaviour of Katangese mineworkers (Banjikila Bakajika, 2015; Dibwe dia Mwembu, 2001, p. 58). However, a further influence south of the border was the proximity and example set by Northern Rhodesia's European mineworkers, who provided a valuable lesson in political effectiveness even as their defence of the colour bar was challenged by their African counterparts (Larmer, 2016, p. 8). Material conditions in mine workplaces contributed to workers' actions, but the adoption of working-class identity and action can be best understood as a learned mode of political operation, rather than a direct consequence of socio-economic conditions. Thus, wages and conditions of workers improved significantly in the fifteen years from 1945 to 1960, funded in both cases by the vast expansion in copper production and the resulting profits of the mining companies; but the perception of the reasons for this improvement were significantly different on either side of the border, a difference which was both influenced by, and influenced, workers' consciousness and action.

Production and reproduction on the 'urban' copperbelt

Mineworkers were, as noted, assumed to be reducing their ties to rural areas, which were perceived as an unwelcome hangover from their migrant status and the payment of below-reproduction wages. In fact the evidence for this is minimal: most mineworkers did not relinquish such ties and indeed continued to invest 'savings' in their rural areas of origin. Although trade unions asserted that their members should be treated as urbanites and therefore have the rights associated with such a status, those members retained strong and enduring links to rural areas of origin: remitting wages for investment in agriculture, hosting rural kin for urban education and other opportunities, and often retiring to rural villages. Likewise, mineworkers were particularly attracted to mines that offered plots of land on which they, or their families, could farm (Parpart, 1983, p. 32). UMHK encouraged mineworkers' wives to grow food, which the company bought and incorporated in its supply of food to its workers (Dibwe dia Mwembu, 2001, p. 61). In contrast, Northern Rhodesia encouraged European commercial agriculture and the purchase by companies of food from settlers, making company officials indifferent or even hostile to 'illegal' farming by miners' wives on company land (Larmer, 2016, p. 9).

Although AMWU activism suggested a high degree of worker unity influenced by colonial racism in general and the colour bar in particular, it is clear that what is often presented as an era of share prosperity was in fact one of growing inequality among the African workforce. AMWU was in the 1950s led by a small but unrepresentative group of educated men in the small number of skilled positions then open to African mineworkers. Researchers such as Epstein focused on this cosmopolitan minority because it was assumed that their 'intermediate' status – adopting what were considered 'European' modes of behaviour, language, attitudes and consumption – would over time spread to the African majority. The wage scales won by AMWU militancy, whilst achieving wage rises for all workers and limited advancement for those able to access the most senior positions, did not close the pay gap between unskilled and skilled workers: although the chasm between European wages and African ones remained huge, the highest paid African workers themselves earned 4–5 times what their unskilled counterparts did (Epstein, 1958/1973, pp. 244–245). Mine companies sought increasingly to differentiate their African workforce but were initially constrained in doing

so by the colour bar and their insistence on paying local rates to skilled African workers. Epstein demonstrates the uneasy unity within AMWU between the educated leadership and their rank-and-file membership, and instability in union membership that continued until Zambian independence in 1964. In contrast, wage differentials in Katanga, whilst considerable, were not associated in the minds of workers with the illegitimate colour bar and were therefore more likely to be perceived as reflecting meritocratic skill-based distinctions.

The inherently uneven development of Copperbelt mining towns meant that, notwithstanding their representation as the epitome of African urban modernisation, they were even in the 1950s and 1960s officially bifurcated places, divided between the mine township and the (non-mine) town where most African urbanites actually lived. Here, Africans sought to engage in entrepreneurial activity, but they were severely restricted in doing so: mine townships offered only a handful of retail opportunities which were until the very late colonial period monopolised by European shopkeepers. It was also clear that the Northern Rhodesian mining towns had no prospect of developing a significantly broader industrial base: in this respect they couldn't escape the influence of the more developed South African and Southern Rhodesian economies, which provided the lion's share of manufactured imports for the industry and consumer goods for the copperbelt's more prosperous residents. As Parpart notes, the secondary industrial development necessary for Rostow-ian 'take-off' was notable by its absence: 'Mining equipment was usually purchased abroad; the skilled European labor force spent much of their large salaries on expensive imported goods; and transportation difficulties and poor land limited economic opportunities outside the line of rail' (Parpart, 1983, p. 25). Secondary industry was more developed in Katanga, but even here it was largely in the hands of Western companies and small businesses. Compared to west Africa, for example, the development of an indigenous capitalist class was severely restricted.

This unevenness was reinforced by economic policies that continued to drain off vast mine revenue away from the mine regions themselves, to the metropole exchequers and to Western-based companies. When the Northern Rhodesian mine companies did relocate from London in the early 1950s, it was to Salisbury, capital of the new Central African Federation, to which mine revenues were now redirected. The beneficiaries were in large part white settler farmers: an estimated £63m of revenue flowed from the Northern Rhodesian mines to the wider Federation during its decade of existence (Roberts, 1976, pp. 212–218; cited in Parpart, 1983, p. 17).

Thus, for most African mineworkers, the fondly remembered boom did not in fact bring about job security or high living standards. The flow of migrants to the mining towns was less a reflection of their rounded development than the continued poverty of rural areas. Thousands of mineworkers continued to reside in houses without running water or electricity, well into the 1960s. A small minority of Africans secured more senior positions, but the majority continued to receive wages that were barely at reproduction level, and relied for sustenance on the agricultural activity of their wives.² Mineworkers did, however, receive a social wage that supplemented their cash wages, something which not always replicated in other workplaces, despite legal company responsibility to provide, e.g. adequate housing. Mineworkers were free to sell their labour to other employers, but none offered the wages and conditions available in the mines. This was certainly unlike the long boom of the post-war metropole, in which full employment and a vastly expanded welfare state helped bring about significant and sustained increases in living standards.

In this context, mine companies, colonial state officials and increasingly African nationalists highlighted the inability of Copperbelt towns to provide jobs for their growing population, in a context where mineworkers increasingly held on to their jobs for life. They warned of the danger of juvenile delinquency; a growing force of social welfare and community development officials were employed by mining companies and the state to train the children of mineworkers in skills including farming, a clear sign that their future would not, or should not, be in the town.

Nationalism, national independence and nationalisation

The insecurity surrounding uneven capitalist development on the Copperbelt, and the limited degree of formal sector employment it provided, shaped the development of African nationalism in both territories. The Northern Rhodesian copperbelt was central to the rise of African nationalism in the mid-1950s, which was by the end of that decade dominated by the United National Independence Party (UNIP), led by Kenneth Kaunda. UNIP, whose initial support base was among urban Copperbelt residents and their rural kin in northern Bemba-speaking areas, came to reflect the state-linked, interventionist approach of the Northern Rhodesian state and the mine companies. Its policies sought more effective state control of the economy, which its supporters hoped would enable substantial economic 'advancement' for the majority, not simply the few able to take the place of European workers. Whilst UNIP, which ruled Zambia for 27 years after independence in 1964, was rhetorically committed to promoting indigenous business development, it lacked business representatives in its senior leadership and its policies tended in practice to promote state ownership and control of the economy, first entering into partnerships with new and established international companies, and then full-scale nationalisation (see below). The opposition African National Congress (ANC), which was more entrepreneurial, was restricted largely to rural areas of Southern Province and never came to power. At independence, most marketed agricultural produce in Zambia was grown by around 1000 European farmers, half of whom left in the first five years after Independence (Burdette, 1988, p. 82).

In Katanga, the employment of large numbers of Kasaian migrants in UMHK mines became, in the brief and tumultuous run-up to Congolese independence in 1960, the subject of ethnically based competition for economic and political power. The Katangese secession from newly independent Congo (1960–1963) was financially underwritten by UMHK, which backed the Conakat party of Moïse Tshombe against the more radical Congolese nationalism of the new Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, which potentially threatened to nationalise its assets. Conakat leaders, who hailed from and derived their support from self-defined 'autochthon' Katangese societies, claimed that the advanced position of Kasaian workers in UMHK was illegitimate and resulted from Belgian favouritism towards this 'outsider' group (Larmer & Kennes, 2014, p. 746). Ethnic violence against Kasaian residents of Katanga during the secession can be partly explained by this dynamic. In the newly independent Zambian Copperbelt, however, ethnic difference between mineworkers was minimised by the focus on challenging and removing the colour bar, but even here citizenship-based demands were made that challenged the right of non-Zambians, e.g. Nyasas to hold skilled positions in the mining industry and to benefit from 'Africanisation' policies in the period immediately after independence (Larmer, 2016, p. 14). Zambian mines experienced a new wave of industrial unrest in the mid-1960s as mineworkers sought what they regarded as their legitimate

reward for supporting the nationalist struggle, wages they defined in relation to global mineral prices rather than the 'national' cost of living insisted upon by mine companies and the new UNIP government.

Both copperbelts were then places of profound inequality, in which economic inequality – between those in formal sector employment and those who were not, between mine-workers and other waged workers, between male 'breadwinners' and female farmers, and within the mining industry itself – intersected with a range of what Brubaker terms 'categories of difference' – race, ethnicity, gender and citizenship – that commonly provided the basis for decisions related to employment and economic advancement (Brubaker, 2015, p. 18). This heightened competition reflected both the potential for advancement presented by national independence, but also the very limited number of opportunities in an increasingly stagnant formal sector workforce (Daniel, 1979, pp. 37–42). Formal sector employment grew from 283,600 in December 1964 to 326,550 in December 1972, a relatively modest increase that did not close to matching either general population growth or the growing urban population (Burdette, 1988, p. 91). African nationalism sought to legitimise this as a meritocratic competition for jobs and opportunities among a reconstituted citizenry, but the terms of that competition were challenged by both mineworkers and other Copperbelt residents in the years after independence: they criticised and mobilised against the effective maintenance of the colour bar in independent Zambia; the persistent wage inequality between Europeans and Africans doing the same job; and demands for the expansion of waged employment by those seeking access to it.

At Independence, both Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo faced the challenge of establishing national control over economies dominated by global capital. Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda wrote of the need to secure 'economic independence', whilst both Patrice Lumumba and his ultimate successor, Joseph Mobutu, sought to secure effective national control over the strategic mining industry of Katanga. Whilst both states paid some regard to the importance of economic diversification and the stimulation of a broader-based national economy, neither proved able to put in place conditions that would allow the sustained growth of a national private entrepreneurial class, which remained both tiny in numbers and politically marginal, compared to many other African nations. Structural constraints were considerable: aspirant businesses lacked access to capital and were marginalised by foreign companies with established expertise, market access and links to the state (Bézy, Peemans, & Wautelet, 1981). Zambia's state-owned Industrial Development Corporation (Indeco) established partnerships with established foreign firms (Sardanis, 2003, pp. 164–223). Whilst this created economic growth, it also tended to crowd out indigenous entrepreneurship: private business interests were often opposed to state economic policies and became associated with political opposition, itself repressed with the declaration of a one-party state in 1972. Limited support to private business in the late 1960s was rapidly curtailed, and the economy became dominated by direct state ownership.

Partial and then more complete nationalisation of the mining industry followed in both countries (Burdette, 1988; Brion & Moreau, 2006, pp. 340–342; Saquet, 2001, pp. 133–153; Sklar, 1975, pp. 39–58). This was presented as a radical move to secure local ownership of otherwise unaccountable foreign capital in the national interest. It, however, served in practice to ensure greater state domination of the economy, and helped reinforce the incipient, albeit fragile, alliance between state and multinational business interests (Burawoy, 1982, pp. 123–124). Not coincidentally, in Zambia mine nationalisation coincided with UNIP's

declaration of a one-party state and the suppression of political opposition which found its strongest support base on the Copperbelt.

Nationalisation was ultimately unable to protect the industry, and the wider regional economy, from the precipitous and sustained decline in global copper and cobalt prices that began in the mid-1970s and continued, with minor fluctuations, until the mid-2000s. Elite accumulation took place within and in relation to the state, both in legal and illegal forms. The ultimate example was Mobutu's use of the 'national' Zairian economy as his personal ATM, extracting wealth to offshore bank accounts. But even in Zambia, where corruption was far less overt, the wealth created by the mining industry was channelled into largely unprofitable parastatals and a bloated and inefficient state-party bureaucracy.

Postscript

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, mining regions in both countries were in sustained decline: analysts began to identify out-migration, a return to rural areas and in some cases the adoption by workers' families of farming as a response to job losses (Potts, 2005). In Katanga, some retrenched mineworkers turned to artisanal mining as a survival mechanism, changing the form of their integration into the global mining economy (Cuvelier, 2011). Living standards certainly declined, but as we have seen mineworkers' families had always maintained alternative sources of income: farming may now have been a more important part of 'urban' life, but it had always been present, passed over by observers in earlier periods looking for their stereotypical notion of the 'urban' ideal and often overlooking the economic activities of Copperbelt women. By this time, both regions were characterised by a nostalgia for the supposed comforts of the boom era, associated in the popular imagination with high and rising living standards that were in fact the norm only for a minority.

The mining boom since the mid-2000s has brought new forms of 'shape-shifting' capital to the Central African Copperbelt (Gewald & Soeters, 2010). Whilst these certainly take a neo-liberal form, this is arguably reflective of the same economic considerations that influenced the shift to stabilisation in the mid-twentieth century: contemporary mining companies, able to sustain operations with a far smaller workforce than their predecessors, calculate that they can shift the cost of reproduction onto their workers and the state, but still find themselves resisting demands by copperbelt communities, expressed in various ways, to take responsibility for the social and, increasingly, the environmental effects of their operations (Fraser & Larmer, 2010; Rubbers, 2010, 2013).

Conclusion

The Central African copperbelt was indeed a place of capitalist development, but it was a capitalism characterised by profound unevenness, and an urban society marked by perpetual instability in its class relationships. Antagonistic relationships developed between capital and labour, but these took specific form which varied considerably from those that developed in Western capitalist states. The global and colonial origins of large-scale mining, the limited development of indigenous commercial agriculture, the weakness of colonial state development and the sustained extraction of mineral wealth from its area of origin, all set the Central African copperbelt on its distinct path of capitalism. Labour relations were partly shaped by the migrant labour model, but also by differential approaches to stabilisation and

skilling, the influence of European mine labour and African workers' retention of ties to rural areas and agricultural activity, as a way to offset their dependency on comparatively fragile urban employment. Militant union activism, nationalist political organisation and the achievement of national independence did not enable the Copperbelt to overcome its uneven, unstable form of development, rooted in its integration into the global economy as a supplier of minerals.

Many of the earlier misreadings of central African urbanisation and class relations stemmed from the widespread understanding, rooted in modernisation theory, that urban capitalism would follow an essentially national path of socio-economic development along the lines established in Western economies. This led to assumptions that the observed upheaval and uncertainty of Copperbelt life reflected growing pains, a stage along a journey to an envisaged destination of stability, sustained growth and development, of settled life. Clearly, some Zambian mineworkers had confidence in this modernist vision, but the ways they sought to achieve progress in this direction demonstrated that formal sector employment was only one aspect of how they sought to do so. In Haut Katanga, it may be that many mineworkers bought into the paternalism of UMHK, but the platform for this path remained fragile, beset by ethnically based conflict, state manipulation of their industry and the vicissitudes of the global market on which it depended.

It is, however, a mistake to see this as a deformed or incomplete type of capitalist transition. Rather, it needs to be understood as more typical of colonial capitalism and labour relations in the global south. In practice, African mining towns did not develop along the lines of Western cities, partly because of their integration into the global economy as suppliers of a single raw material, and partly because of the approaches taken by their African workforce in seeking to overcome or alleviate aspects of their conditions that arose from that integration. Towns in this region developed in highly uneven ways: with a small formal sector whose wages were of great importance to a much larger population; a larger informal sector of traders, small-scale manufacturers, farmers and semi-employed; and a still larger 'rural' population linked to these towns by migration, flows of money, goods, people and ideas. In these respects, they closely resemble the cities of the global south – of Africa as a whole, Latin America, South-East Asia and so on – in other words, the majority of urban capitalist spaces worldwide. In this sense, the precarity of the copperbelt, whilst only today taking neoliberal form, closely resembles the permanent instability of the longer history of global capitalism rather than its arguably distinct and unrepresentative mid-twentieth-century modernist phase.

Notes

1. See also subsequent discussion of the labour aristocracy thesis in Africa: Sandbrook and Cohen (1975). For its application to Central Africa, see Parpart (1984).
2. National Archives of Zambia, WP 1/2/21, Annual Report on Native Affairs, Ndola, 1952–1957, 'Annual report on African Affairs – 1955, Mufulira'.

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