

CALL FOR ARTICLES – SPECIAL ISSUE
International Labor and Working-Class History
“Counting Work and Workers in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa”

Editors: Chikouna Cissé, Annick Lacroix, Baptiste Mollard, Laure Piguet, Léa Renard¹

Socio-economic statistics in African countries have recently come under severe attack. In a widely debated book published in 2013, M. Jerven did not hesitate to describe the data used to produce these numbers as “poor”.² The statistical systems these indicators are drawn from find their roots in the dissemination of Western models and categories described as modern during the colonial period. Socio-economic statistics are also linked to the practices of nascent international organizations that developed at the same time.³ While the *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) has sought, for instance, to gather data on working conditions “for each country”⁴ since 1936, this organization has failed to describe the world of work in all its diversity, notably because women and men workers from colonized areas were very rarely included before the 1950s, apart from white urban workers. Such an absence can be accounted for both by the hierarchical representation of populations that is core to the colonial project and by the tradition of labor statistics, which were historically closely linked to the wage-earner’s status as a standard model and the development of labor law (mostly with regard to industrial work).⁵

Despite the fragmented nature of these numbers, censuses and surveys were regularly carried out during the colonial and post-colonial periods to measure labor or to estimate the labor force on the African continent. Drawing on sources like censuses by occupational category, company statistics and quantitative observations conducted by labor inspectors, this special issue seeks to take into account the wide and varied range of practices and to examine the shifting representations of labor and workers in Africa in the *longue durée*. How do political and organizational contexts, marked by the limited resources and staff dedicated to the statistical apparatus, or the fiscal agenda of censuses, influence the production of numbers?⁶ And how do these numbers contribute, in return, to the repressive, racist or managerial logics of exploiting these populations as mere resources?⁷ What dimensions of the labor world were measured during the colonial period and what dimensions were ignored?

While demographic statistics have been widely studied,⁸ the measurement and numerical representations of work in Africa remains a field of research yet to be investigated. The point of this special issue is not to assess the reliability of the produced data, but rather to question practices of counting work in different African contexts during the colonial and post-independence periods from the perspective of the historical sociology of quantification.⁹ Drawing on recent developments in this field of research,¹⁰ it will examine data production as a dynamic and multi-scalar process, at the intersection between individuals, local political structures, colonial bureaucracies and international organizations. The contributions in this issue move away from the premise of statistics as top-down tools of imperial domination.¹¹ Particular attention will be given to the financial and human resources allocated, as well as to the nomenclatures used to estimate the available workforce or to identify changes in labor practices. The aim is both to shed light on how diverse colonial situations (French, British, Portuguese or others) shaped the production of numbers and to sketch out comparisons across the African continent.

This special issue also examines the way quantification practices and data on work and workers as well as the categories used to classify workers or economic sectors were inherited or transformed by the administrations of independent states after decolonization. We therefore heartily welcome contributions that document the production of numbers at the time of the initial social policies in the 1960s, the role played by “technical cooperation” in training national statisticians or the circulation of “best practices” in the course of the Structural Adjustment Programs from the 1980s onward.

The proposed articles might address one or more of the following topics:

(1) The production of numbers on work and workers: Opening the black box

We welcome propositions that focus on the actors involved in the process of compiling numbers, data collection procedures and survey materiality (e.g., detailed written reports, statistical tables or standardized forms). Articles might explore the hypothesis of a tendency toward bureaucratization and standardization, which started as early on as in the colonial period, was supported by international organizations, and continued in different ways after independence.¹² We are particularly interested in contributions that include statistics produced by non-state actors (e.g. local religious authorities, missionaries, trade unions, companies); or that try to capture co-construction dynamics and conflicts between state and non-state actors, as well as between private and public numbers.¹³ For both the colonial and post-independence periods, contributions highlighting the role of international organizations in the production of an international framework for counting and observing work in Africa will also be highly welcome.

(2) Why counting?

This special issue seeks to highlight the diversity of usages and motivations for the production of numbers, thereby also pointing to power asymmetries between bureaucracies and the populations they count. The transformation of indigenous people into a colonial labor force seems to have been one of the main reasons for keeping quantitative accounts.¹⁴ One other motive might have been colonial authorities' desire to control mobility toward cities, neighboring colonies or Europe.¹⁵ From the 1940s onward, surveying working conditions and developing labor and social rights became more prominent, and indigenous workers started to be (partly) included into this framework (e.g., with regard to the supervision and restriction of child labor, or the regulation of industrial accidents).¹⁶ One possible question here would be whether (and if so, how) statistics have been used as the performative manifestation of a stable power, thereby revealing its precariousness. In cases where data is missing, how to explain that public servants resisted measuring, whereas counting was at the same time a solid component of bureaucratic functioning in other parts of the world? To what extent was the manufacturing of statistical tables used as bureaucratic tools of reporting, rather than as instruments of knowledge to inform on populations and work?¹⁷ The aim here is to initiate a reflection on the precariousness of bureaucratic apparatuses, the role of ignorance, the assumption of modernity that was at the core of these practices, and the legitimization of the political projects they promoted, even after independence.

(3) Categorization in practice

The cognitive operation of quantification enables governments to confer legibility¹⁸ or "calculability"¹⁹ to the societies and economies they govern. Counting makes it thus possible to standardize heterogeneous environments and social worlds. When adapting to our object of inquiry the conclusions drawn from the historical literature on state techniques, we assume that labor statistics disseminate abstract models to portray reality and act on it, while at the same time reducing uncertainty and facilitating decision-making by authorities. From this perspective, articles might examine the ways workers were categorized in colonized, and later in independent, Africa. The culturalist and racist dimensions of the adopted categorizations (linked, for example, to the anxiety provoked by an imagined "detrribalized" proletariat or increasingly numerous unemployed persons in urban areas), the focus on wage employment, and the difficulty of grasping other forms of work, in particular female domestic work or the so-called informal sector,²⁰ are all dimensions that could be addressed by the proposed articles.

This special issue aims to test these research hypotheses (and others still to be formulated) on a variety of fields, using empirical case studies. Particular attention will be paid to proposals originality and to the use of new (or alternative) primary sources. We see the writing and publishing process as a way of initiating a dialogue between history and social sciences on these questions. To ensure the coherence of the special issue, the authors of the selected proposals will be invited to an authors' workshop (to be held in Fall 2024 in hybrid format).

Please submit article abstracts (no longer than 500 words) until 15 December 2023.

Contact: laure.piguet@unifr.ch

Tentative schedule:

- Deadline for abstract submission: 15 December 2023
- Notifications on acceptance by editors: 1 February 2024
- Authors workshop: Fall 2024
- Submission of articles for peer review: February 2025
- Final submission: Fall 2025

¹ This project stems from the collective discussions initiated by the French ANR program “Cocole - Compter aux colonies” coordinated by Béatrice Touchelay (<https://chiffrempire.hypotheses.org/>).

² Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It*. (London, 2013); Abel Kinyondo, Riccardo Pelizzo, “Poor Quality of Data in Africa: What Are the Issues?,” *Politics & Policy*, 46 (6, 2018): 851-877; Oasis Kodila-Tedika, “Pauvreté de chiffres : explication de la tragédie statistique africaine”, *MPRA Paper N° 43734* (2013).

³ Martin Bemann, *Weltwirtschaftsstatistik. Internationale Wirtschaftsstatistik und die Geschichte der Globalisierung, 1850-1950* (Berlin, Boston, 2023).

⁴ International Labor Office, *The ILO Year-Book, 1934-1935*, (Vol. II: *Labor Statistics*) (Geneva, 1935), iii.

⁵ Andreas Eckert, “Wage labour,” *General Labour History of Africa. Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries*, ed. Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert (Woodbridge/Rochester, 2019), 17-44; Alain Supiot, *Critique du droit du travail* (Paris, 1994), 190.

⁶ The connection between census and taxation had drastic consequences on population movements, and ultimately on census data. In the Ivory Coast, in order to escape the tax burden, northern populations chose to move to the neighboring colonies of French Sudan and Upper Volta, thereby disrupting the data needed to define taxable population. See Kimba A. Idrissa, “L’impôt de capitation: les abus du régime de surtaxation et la résistance des populations,” *African Economic History* 21 (1993): 97-111 ; Chikouna Cissé, “Révoltes fiscales, affrontements et circulations en AOF : l’insurrection de 1902-1903 en pays Pallaka (Nord Côte d’Ivoire),” *Locus: revista de história* 18 (2, 2013):143-158.

⁷ A report by Bernard Sol, French colonial inspector, showed that the fiction of an unlimited labor force in Upper Volta had been statistically inflated to justify forced recruitment practices in Mossi country. See Raymond Gervais and Issiaka Mandé, “Sol et l’abolition de la Haute-Volta : mythes ou réalités,” *La reconstitution de la Haute-Volta*, ed. Willy Moussa Bantenga et al. (Ouagadougou, 2010), 243-268.

⁸ See for instance: Kamel Kateb, *Européens, “indigènes” et juifs en Algérie (1830-1962): Représentations et réalités des populations*, (Paris, 2001); Raymond R. Gervais and Issiaka Mandé, “Comment compter les sujets de l’Empire ? Les étapes d’une démographie impériale en AOF avant 1946,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 95 (3, 2007): 63-74.

⁹ Alain Desrosières, *Pour une sociologie historique de la quantification. L’argument statistique I*, (Paris, 2008); Wendy N. Espeland and Mitchell L. Stevens, “A Sociology of Quantification,” *European Journal of Sociology* 49 (3, 2008): 401-436.

¹⁰ Ram Bhagat, “Census and Caste Enumeration: British Legacy and Contemporary Practice in India,” *Genus* 62 (2, 2006): 119-134; Pierre Karila-Cohen, “État et enquête au XIX^e siècle : d’une autorité à l’autre,” *Romantisme* 149 (3, 2010): 25-37; Morgane Labbé, *La nationalité, une histoire de chiffres. Politique et statistiques en Europe centrale (1848-1919)* (Paris, 2019); Tom Crook and Glen O’Hara (eds.), *Statistics and the Public Sphere. Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c. 1800-2000* (New York, London 2011); Lawrence Goldman, *Victorians & Numbers. Statistics and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Oxford, 2022).

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- ¹¹ Umamaheswaran Kalpagam, *Rule by Numbers. Governmentality in Colonial India* (Lanham, Boulder, 2014).
- ¹² Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden, Boston, 2014); Séverine Awenengo Dalberto and Richard Banégas (eds.), “Citoyens de papier en Afrique”, special issue *Genèses*, 112 (3, 2018).
- ¹³ Fabien Cardoni, Anne Conchon, Michel Margairaz, and Béatrice Touchelay (eds.), *Chiffres privés, chiffres publics, XVIIe-XXIe siècle. Entre hybridations et conflits* (Rennes, 2022).
- ¹⁴ Léa Renard, *Socio-histoire de l’observation statistique de l’altérité Principes de classification coloniale, nationale et migratoire en France et en Allemagne (1880-2010)* (PhD thesis, Potsdam, Grenoble, 2019), 403-410.
- ¹⁵ Daouda Gary-Toukara, *Migrants soudanais-maliens et conscience ivoirienne*, (Paris, 2008); Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds.), *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia, 2015).
- ¹⁶ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); Ben Scully and Rana Jawad, “Social Welfare,” *General Labour History of Africa. Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries*, ed. Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert (Woodbridge/Rochester, 2019), 553-583.
- ¹⁷ Romain Tiquet, “Rendre compte pour ne pas avoir à rendre des comptes,” *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, 137 (2017): 123-140.
- ¹⁸ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven, Conn., 1999).
- ¹⁹ Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002).
- ²⁰ Franco Barchiesi, “Precarious and Informal Labour,” *General Labour History of Africa. Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries*, ed. Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert (Woodbridge/Rochester, 2019), 44-75; Aaron Benanav, “The Origins of Informality: The ILO at the Limit of the Concept of Unemployment,” *Journal of Global History*, 14 (1, 2019), 107-125; Nicola Schalkowski and Marianne Braig, “Informal Work,” *Shifting Categories of Work. Unsettling the Ways We Think about Jobs, Labor, and Activities*, ed. by Lisa Herzog and Bénédicte Zimmermann (New York, 2022), 119-133.