

Call for papers for *Politique Africaine*

## **Labour and Politics**

Coordinated by Laurent Bazin (CNRS-CLERSÉ)

In an ironic twist of fate, the logic of structural adjustment visited upon Africa and Latin America thirty years ago now seems to have closed in on Europe, its main ideological proponent. Despite significant differences in the configuration of the economies involved, the same general mechanisms obtain. Three decades apart, once on one side of the Mediterranean and the Sahara and now on both, the debt crisis that states face underscores their dependence on financial markets and institutions (be they public or private) and on conceptions of the economy of which these are the bearers. The burden of debt and repayments results very directly in pressures on the “cost of labour”. This engenders lower wages, increased flexibility, the dismantling of workers’ protections and declining public employment, while recession and fiscal austerity lead to the destruction of the job market, or to what is commonly termed its informalisation. A break with forms of labour regulation previously put in place by states is commonly presented as a necessary corollary to these “crises”. The pressure of international competition and the need to restore competitive production systems are in turn invoked, rounding off this scenario. The latter is now well rehearsed. Indeed, it is a direct emanation of economic policies and international agreements specifically designed to organise the world as a system of open economies and increasing competition as the central mechanism of economic regulation. In this setting, it is clear that work is the primary target of the internationalisation of the market.

These phenomena and the circulation of crises and “recipes” developed to recover from them are economic in appearance alone. They give the impression of following intangible economic laws and mechanisms only if the economy is projected as a hegemonic and totalizing instance of contemporary societies, whether they are situated at the core of global capitalism, like Europe, or at its periphery, like Africa. Seen in this light, the economy acts as a means of spreading a model of representation about the world – one that is disconnected from reality, yet impacts on it in profound ways and generates multiple contradictions. At stake most saliently in the return of economic liberalism and in the normalisation process brought into being by international financial and commercial mechanisms beginning in the 1980s is the definition of the state: its role and the scope and nature of its interventions. The very foundations upon which states build their legitimacy and authority, as well as the meanings of citizenship, are transformed.

As historian Frederick Cooper has clearly demonstrated, African states inherited at independence in the 1960s the idea of development as a legitimizing ideology. This idea was built in previous decades around concerns for the regulation of labour and the stabilisation of the working classes. As a result of the liberal turn of the 1980s, this ideological cornerstone shifted from labour and development to market and governance. Labour thus became a peripheral “adjustment variable” and the “fight against poverty” replaced policies previously devoted to the stabilisation of the working classes. Labour standardisation continues nonetheless to progress at the international level, driven notably by the ILO, with mechanisms

such as the universalisation of categories of employment and unemployment, the invention of the category of decent work, the standardisation of requirements pertaining to labour law (and to unions) and the search for ways to strengthen social protection systems. Finally, the intensification of migration, both within Africa and on an intercontinental scale, corresponds to an internationalisation of the labour market. Restrictive migration policies and widespread xenophobic tensions contradict this state of affairs, but the dependence of many African countries and regions on the remittances of migrant workers continues to grow.

Reshaped into new ideological formats and new international standards, abandoned to the hypothetical regulation of a market itself no less hypothetical, expressed in new terms such as self-entrepreneurship associated with the mechanisms of microcredit, rendered asunder by the fragmentation of employment situations and strategies for alternative sources of income, confined to family, village, ethnic, migrant or clientelistic networks, relocated and dispersed through migration, nationalised through policies of national identity, work remains a key political issue. The political interpretation of work was previously integrated into research relating to the formation of the working class and the proletarianisation of the African peasantry. This echoed the ideological centrality of labour, the strength of labour movements and the attention that states dedicated to them. Such a political reading of work is now made more difficult as it is veiled by trends towards the fragmentation of work situations and employment as well as by the host of ideological phenomena mentioned above.

This special issue of *Politique africaine* seeks to examine the many ways in which the political dimension of labour manifests itself today on the continent. Alongside studies of social and political movements or of trade unions formed on the basis of claims articulated about work (or its absence), the objective is to gather articles that highlight the importance of the state in representations of work and in the configuration of work situations. Conversely, we will ask how much attention African states devote to labour issues today. What is the place of labour in representations of the state, in definitions of citizenship, in the political ideologies of governments, in opposition movements and/or various forms of protest and rebellion? What employment policies are implemented for the benefit of what social classes and with what effects? Due to the scarcity of labour as a resource, employment and its distribution can also take on a strategic role of primary importance in imposing social control or establishing clientelistic networks associated with local or national powers or with various forms of movements (from religious groups to political parties and rebel armed groups).

Although the main focus of this special issue will be Africa (North and South of the Sahara), contributions integrating other contexts, including Europe and North America, are welcome.

Paper proposals (max. one page) should be sent to the guest editor of the special issue, Laurent Bazin ([bazinlaurent@wanadoo.fr](mailto:bazinlaurent@wanadoo.fr)) by **May 15 2013**. Selected articles will be sent to the editorial board of the journal for peer review by September 15 at the latest. Expected publication date: March 2014.