Crises of Accumulation, Coercion and the Colonial State: The Development of the Labor Control System in Kenya, 1919-1929
Author(s): B. J. Berman and J. M. Lonsdale
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Canadian Association of African Studies
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/484278
Accessed: 12/03/2012 13:14

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Crises of Accumulation, Coercion and the Colonial State: The Development of the Labor Control System in Kenya, 1919-1929*

B.J. BERMAN
and
J.M. LONSDALE**

INTRODUCTION: Explaining the Form of the Colonial State

Recent advances in theoretical understanding of the political economy of colonialism in Africa have focussed on the incorporation of the continent into the circuits of the capitalist world system and the complex and contradictory restructuring of the forms of production and trade in various colonies to meet the needs of metropolitan capital.1 Colonialism, however, involved an equally important and no less dramatic

*An earlier draft of this article was presented to the Ninth Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies/L’Association canadienne des études africaines, Winnipeg, 1 May 1979. The authors would like to thank Colin Leys and Rhoda Howard for their helpful comments and criticism.

**Respectively, Queen’s University (Kingston) and Trinity College, Cambridge.

transformation of the forms of political domination and control. While analysis of the development of the colonial state has received less attention than the more narrowly economic aspects of European domination, it is clearly vital for a fuller understanding of colonialism if we recognize both the coincidence of the initial stage of development of the colonial state with the period of the most active restructuring of African production in the quarter century before 1914 and the crucial role of the colonial state as a key agent of that restructuring. Moreover, most analysts of the colonial state agree on its most salient feature: its centrality in the political economy of a colony through the unusual scope and intensity of its intervention into colonial social and economic life. This intervention increased steadily with the growth of the state from the initial simple administrative control apparatus to the complex and sophisticated institutions of social control and economic management of the 1940s and 1950s, and often exceeded contemporaneous levels of intervention in the metropolitan state. The obvious conclusion that the development of the colonial state is a function of the socio-economic forces operating at the periphery of the world capitalist system hardly takes us very far, only as far, in fact, as bringing us to the real analytic problem, i.e. the specification of the linkage of these forces with the development of the colonial state in such a way as to adequately account for both its general form and the specific variations which emerged in different colonies; and, at the same time, account for the particular role of such structural forms and practices of the state in shaping the development of the forces and relations of production and processes of class formation in those colonies.

The most prominent recent analyses of the colonial state have seen it either as the agent of the metropolitan bourgeoisie or as "overdeveloped" in response to the needs of metropolitan capital. In both instances the forces determining the state as well as the forms of colonial production are external to the colony itself. Whether interpreted in structural or instrumental terms, these formulations encounter serious problems in meeting the explanatory tasks outlined above. A structural analysis in which the colonial state is determined by the needs of metropolitan capital is valid insofar as we recognize the hierarchal ordering of forms of production within the world capitalist system and the respective dominant and subordinate positions within it of metropolitan and colonial productive systems. The difficulty here is the level of abstraction involved and the consequent explanatory limits of such a formulation. What it does explain is the most general form of colonial economies as primary


commodity producers and, to some extent, the tropical commodities most widely produced. Correspondingly, to the extent that the colonial state directs the development and maintains the continuity of primary commodity production, its very existence is thus determined at the most general level by the structural needs of dominant metropolitan capital. However, this level of analysis cannot in itself account for why particular crops were introduced in particular colonies or, more importantly, explain the variant forms of colonial production that develop in different areas, e.g. peasant commodity production, corporate plantation production, settler estate agriculture, or as in Kenya, the contradictory and conflicting development of a combination of estate and peasant production. Nor is it sufficient to explain the variant forms and differing trajectories of development of colonial state apparatuses in particular colonies. What is missing is a conceptualization of the *internal* structural forces within each colony and the consequences of their interaction with the imposed external forces emanating from the metropole. To note, as Mamdani does, that the specific nature of domination in a colony is determined by concrete historical circumstances, simply begs the most compelling analytic question.4

An instrumental analysis of the colonial state as the subordinate “agent” of the metropolitan bourgeoisie acting at the level of conscious practice to meet the interests of that class similarly neglects the issue of the influence of indigenous political and social forces, especially the accumulative interests of local colonial classes of producers. The available evidence is complex and ambiguous. For each instance of colonial authorities acting directly to further the interests of dominant sectors of the metropolitan industrial bourgeoisie, either on their own or with the participation of capitalist interests through, for example, the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation, we can find other instances where the dominant sectors of metropolitan capital were not involved at all and metropolitan control over the actions of colonial states weak and sporadic, even when those local authorities challenged metropolitan policy and interests. The view of the colonial state as the tool of metropolitan capital runs into particular difficulty with regard to settler colonies such as Kenya in the light of the widely recognized antagonism of settler and metropolitan capitalist interests and the substantial degree of settler class power and influence over local colonial authorities.5 What is missing is consideration of the contradictions and struggles which define the concrete tasks of political domination by the colonial state regardless of the willingness of local officials to act as the agents of metropolitan interests or the directions and pressures from the metropole for them to do so.

This paper employs an alternative approach for analysing the development of the colonial state and suggests its value through an analysis of a crucial period of crisis in

---


colonial Kenya. This approach derives the specific forms of the state from the intersection of the contradictions of capitalist development in particular historical circumstances with the crucial state role in the formation and maintenance of the relations of production and the process of capital accumulation. Somewhat more perspicuously, the role involves two principal, functionally intertwined spheres of activity. First, the state acts as the ultimate institutional apparatus for ensuring the reproduction and accumulation of capital. This has involved, historically, increasingly complex and wide-ranging interventions into economic life, one of the most basic of which, and for the present context the most important, is the use of state power to create and sustain capitalist relations of production with an adequate, stable and docile supply of labor. Second, and equally important, the state is simultaneously the ultimate agency of political reproduction or, more plainly, the controlling and legitimate authority maintaining the pattern of class domination and subordination. This involves the state not only in the spectrum of coercive and co-optative activities by which class struggles are suppressed and contained, but also in a range of ideological and didactic activities to justify the existing distribution of property and the class relations of production and gain at least the tacit consent of the ruled.

The demands of capitalist reproduction and accumulation and of state control and legitimacy are, however, often mutually contradictory. This contradiction in the role of the state itself derives from the most fundamental contradiction of capitalist development, i.e., the struggle of capital to maintain and expand itself and of labor to resist exploitation—accumulation and class struggle—which are inextricably linked within capitalist relations of production. Thus, insofar as the coercive powers of the state are employed to create and sustain capitalist relations of production, particularly in the early stages of primitive accumulation when the direct producers are forcibly separated from the ownership and control of the means of production and the product of their labor, the legitimacy of state authority may thereby be threatened and the maintenance of the wider social order challenged by the resistance of dominated classes. In this sense the contradictions of capitalist society are reproduced or "condensed" within the state, and it becomes, through the roles of accumulation and legitimation, a "condensate of struggling classes." The fundamental condition for the successful management of this contradiction is the relative autonomy of the state at both the level of structure and the level of practice. At the structural level the relative autonomy of the state, i.e., its existence as a


separate and discrete institutional sphere, is the key general form derived from the link between the state and the social forces of capitalist production.

Indeed the form of the appropriation of the surplus product in capitalism requires that relations of force should be abstracted from the immediate process of production and located in an instance standing apart from the direct producers. Thus, both logically and historically, the establishment of the capitalist process of production is accompanied by the abstraction of relations of force from the immediate process of production, thus constituting discrete "political" and "economic" spheres.10

This is reflected at the level of concrete political practice in the need for the state to be seen to act on the behalf of the social order as a whole, or as a disinterested and impersonal arbiter, rather than at the behest of the dominant class, and it may be obliged to act against the immediate interests of the dominant class in order to maintain or renovate the structures of domination and accumulation more generally.11

There are therefore definite limits on the degree to which the state can act as the direct agent of capitalist accumulation before its authority and wider social order are threatened by the struggles of dominated classes. At the same time, the state becomes the central object of class struggle. The crucial point is that there can be no functional equilibrium of state domination, but at best only a relative and temporary equilibrium.12 Domination and cohesive order is not a condition but a process, constantly undermined and reforged. The state, just as the sphere of production to which it is linked, is driven by crisis and struggle to the constant reformation of its structures and practices. This is the basis of the historical reality of the constantly expanding scale and intervention of the state in capitalist societies and for Marx's profound aphorism that the state is "the resumé of society."

The character and functioning of the colonial state, as a subtype of the capitalist state in the twentieth century, was defined by the specific contradictory social forces over which it presided, and these in turn were derived from the complex articulation of capitalism with the indigenous modes of production in African societies. Articulation involved a continuous process of interaction through which the indigenous precapitalist modes were subjected to contradictory destruction, preservation and transformation as their internal social forces were subsumed under


12. Our approach thus rejects the functionalist assumptions of, for example, Poulantzas because of the resulting difficulty in explaining the limits of state action and the material basis for the continual revisions and crises of state structures and policies.
the dominant dynamic of metropolitan capitalism. Concretely, articulation involved extracting surplus product from and/or forcing labor into capitalist or quasi-capitalist relations of production within or outside of the precapitalist formations, thereby partially transforming them and making their self-reproduction increasingly impossible. The form of articulation varied according to the particular character of capitalist penetration, the nature of the indigenous modes of production, and the local ecology and resource endowment. The resulting variations in the subjugation and transformation of local societies and the degree to which capitalist forms of production were introduced also determined the differing patterns of class formation within and between colonies.

In the colonial state the vital functions of ensuring accumulation and legitimation involved the state as "the primary mechanism of articulation between modes of production," and, as Lamb goes on to note:

The essential point is that the state takes on the central role of managing and representing the myriad encounters and struggles between classes and agents of different modes. The state provides economic, social and political services for capitalist penetration, orchestrates the de- and re-structuring of elements of the precapitalist mode... and "copes" so to speak, at the level of cohesion of the whole social formation, with the dislocative consequences of the expansion of the capitalist mode.

The colonial state actually straddled two levels of articulation, between the metropole and the colony, and, within the latter, between introduced forms of capitalist production and the various indigenous modes. It was thus involved in a complex process of social engineering in which the use of force was often necessary "to achieve the two initial objectives: the extraction of a labour force for capitalist production in plantations, settler farms, commerce, administration and some modicum of industry, and to generate peasant production of export crops." However, state


16. The relative importance of the different levels of articulation in determining the development of the colonial state varied in time and space, as did the particular mode of articulation. For a discussion of the effects of changing modes of metropole-colony articulation see B.J. Berman, "Changing Modes of Production and the Colonial State in Kenya" (Paper presented to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 1978), pp. 7-9.

17. Cliffe, "Rural Class Formation": 203.
preoccupation with ensuring the conditions of primary accumulation also threatened political order. Having subdued and subordinated local societies, the colonial state had to convert superior force into legitimate authority based on a substantial degree of at least tacit consent from the subject population. The process of articulation raised the dilemma of how far metropolitan interests could be pressed against the interests of local producers in a colony, whether African peasants or European settlers, or, internally, of settlers over Africans, before provoking resistance and undermining effective state control.

II – SETTLER PRODUCTION, STATE COERCION AND AFRICAN LABOR

The contradictions of articulation developed with particular sharpness in Kenya as a result of the establishment of both peasant commodity and settler estate production in the colony in the critical decade before World War I. 18 Peasant production, building in a number of instances upon the activities of precolonial classes of accumulators in the major African social formations, had grown through both African initiatives and the encouragement of colonial officials seeking sources of tax revenue and a material basis for African acquiescence in British domination. 19 Settler estate production had been introduced in Kenya as the result of a specific conjunction of historical and geographical factors, and was from the start dependent upon land and labor drawn from the surrounding African societies. The resulting articulation of estate production with indigenous modes increasingly overshadowed the articulation of the latter with the metropole, while estate production itself was articulated with the metropole through mercantile and finance capital. While the settlers constantly pressured the state to provide the necessary infrastructure and inputs for estate production, labor recruitment and control were initially left in the hands of European labor recruiters and individual estate owners. The result was marked by fumbling experimentation and exceptional violence by the settlers unrestrained by systematic organization or institutional controls. 20 The ferocity and unpredictability of the settler assault on the African population threatened to undermine the whole


20. Buell concluded that for the first fifteen years of white settlement, no effective standards for labor existed in the colony, and under the umbrella of colonial control, “the employer was nearly free to do as he liked.” R.L. Buell, The Native Problem in Africa (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 1:351.
apparatus of colonial control. In response, the state was poised by 1914 to extend its intervention and control of the African labor supply for estate production. While further direct action was postponed for four years during the war as state authorities were preoccupied with meeting military labor requirements, that wartime experience provided a crucial watershed demonstrating the efficacy of "total" pressure and systematic organization. The introduction of massive forced conscription to the military Carrier Corps which supplied porters for the British forces in East Africa provided both the example of organization and a threat which drove Africans to work on settler farms to avoid being taken.

The scattered and nonintegrated efforts to create such conditions before 1914 had henceforth to be streamlined in the light of the lessons of wartime experience... The difference after the war lay in the far more complete, systematic, and fully coordinated way in which partial pressures strengthened and complemented one another to produce a labor supply in peace time that matched the supply drawn out during the war.21

During 1918-1919 settler-producers in Kenya faced the task of restoring and expanding production for peacetime export markets with the African labor force of the colony severely depleted by the appalling casualties from disease and malnutrition in the Carrier Corps and from the global influenza epidemic which decimated the population of the reserves. At the same time, African peasants were attempting to reconstruct and expand commodity production, creating a conflicting application and demand for their labor. These particular historical circumstances reinforced the structural determinants of the extraction of African labor for estate production. First, the general condition of settler shortage of capital and a growing burden of debt for essential constant capital to bring the estates into production determined a desperate need to reduce the cost of variable capital (labor) as a condition of profitable operation. Second, the particular circumstances of Kenya, in which the major regions of labor supply for estate agriculture were simultaneously the major areas of developing peasant commodity production, meant that the settlers had to compete against alternative uses of African labor in commodity production as well as customary subsistence agriculture. The Kenya settlers could not operate within, or indeed survive, a fully deployed capitalist market of "free" labor. This determined relations of production based less upon wages and more upon the resort to extraneous coercion to extract semiservile labor from the peasant sphere at a price below its cost of reproduction. The necessary cheap labor was thus achieved not simply in a quantitative sense by keeping wages 'low' in absolute terms; for extra-economic coercion was also used to push wages below their 'value' (measured in terms of the socially accepted minimum to ensure the reproduction of labour power)... some of the means of subsistence (were) provided by the family's own 'subsistence' production.22


While the necessity of coercion remained, it was ideologically rationalized and, particularly during the crucial 1918-23 period, structurally contained, controlled, and legitimized by the state.

Ideologically the need for cheap labor led to a local version of the myth of African “target labor” or, in its more intellectualized form, “the backward-bending labour supply curve.”23 This was based on the belief that African labor would not increase in supply with increased wages, but quite the reverse would happen, since it was assumed that the African had limited cash needs attached to particular targets, primarily the payment of taxes and the purchase of particular nonsubsistence consumer goods. Thus “three shillings give him as much satisfaction as three pounds,” declared Ewart Grogan, while at the 1913 Labour Commission “almost all employers agreed that increased wages would not attract more labour.”24 Governor Belfield concurred, adding that “a rise in the rate of wages would enable the hut or poll tax . . . to be earned by fewer external workers . . . it follows that if we increase the rate of remuneration of the individual we decrease the number of individuals necessary to earn a given sum.”25 It followed also that Africans must and should be forced to work if necessary, not solely for the benefit of the settlers, of course, but for their own good as well, since it would teach them the virtues of honest toil and the superiority of European methods. The ideological underpinnings of the labor system were completed by the rationalization of coercion through what Barnett calls the “theory of the organization of native labour” which “was influential within the entire imperial tradition”:

There are three assumptions in this strand of thought: first, native labour is by its nature recalcitrant, and therefore requires authoritarian treatment; second, native labour lacks initiative, and therefore requires very detailed directives and instructions; and third, native labour can, within certain limits, be improved, and the “civilizing” function of authoritarian methods in some way legitimizes those methods.26

Thus, despite increasing settler paternalism towards African labor during the interwar decades, the underlying belief in the necessity of coercion remained:

I always treat my natives the same as I treat children, I try to be kind to them, and to advise and direct them, but when kindness has no effect you have to do the same as they


do in the public schools at home and throughout the empires—use the cane.27

Structurally, a series of ordinances and policies enacted right at the beginning of and immediately after World War I and brought into effect from early 1919 crystallized the relations of production in estate agriculture and brought the state definitively into their regulation and maintenance. Before examining the development of the role of the state more closely, however, it is important to examine briefly the character of the labor force that emerged during this period in terms of its total size; relative size in proportion to the adult African male population of the colony as a whole, and of the principal “labor-producing” districts; and its internal structure in terms of sectoral, geographical and ethnic distribution.28

On the eve of the war in 1914, according to Clayton and Savage’s estimates, a total of 110,000 Africans were employed for wages in Kenya in the peak seasons, some 10,000-12,000 of them by the railroad and the Public Works Department.29 By 1920, after the ravages of the Carrier Corps and the influenza epidemic, the average number at work was 90,000 at the moment acute labor shortage hit the efforts at postwar recovery and development. Thereafter, the number of African men in wage labor increased sharply, almost doubling to 169,000 by 1926, then declining slightly to 160,000 by 1929.30 Even more important and revealing, however, are the statistics of the proportion of adult African men in wage employment. The total proportion for the colony as a whole in 1914 is estimated by Clayton and Savage to have been 24 percent or less, but up to 32 percent in South Nyanza and the districts closest to Nairobi.31 From 1921, with the report of the Labour Bureau Commission, the Kenya government began more systematic estimates of the potential labor force, at first of all adult African men aged fifteen to thirty and then, within a few years, of all those aged fifteen to forty, judging that approximately half should be available for


28. Statistics of African labor in Kenya vary from one official source to another and must be taken as rough estimates, particularly for the pre-1914 period, both because of the crude statistical procedures employed and, after World War I, the failure of some employers to fill out the official forms for the registration of all Africans they employed. Nevertheless, the general magnitudes and trends of development do emerge and can be taken as basic indicators of the parameters of the system, being probably under- rather than overestimates of the number of Africans at work in the colony at any particular time.


30. Ibid., p. 151. Clayton and Savage use figures drawn from the annual reports of the Native Affairs Department. Buell, drawing on the report of the chief registrar of natives, gives a total of 185,409 Africans in employment during the first three months of 1927. Buell, Native Problem in Africa, 1: 345.

employment outside of their reserves.\textsuperscript{32} Buell estimates that by 1926, 33.8 percent of adult African men were employed for wages on average during the year. However, when compared with the total labor force and rate of participation in other colonies, Kenya is revealed to have had a larger total number of Africans in employment than any colony except the Belgian Congo, and a higher proportion of the African adult male population at work than any except the labor-producing territories of southern Africa, the Transkei and Basutoland.\textsuperscript{33} Furthermore, given the short-term involvement of most African laborers, who worked for three to six months a year, and the consequent high turnover concealed in aggregate figures, the actual proportion employed \textit{for some time in a given year} was probably much higher. As early as 1923 the administration estimated that, excluding the pastoral peoples and those medically unfit, almost 75 percent of African men aged fifteen to forty had actually engaged in wage labor for some period during that year.\textsuperscript{34} Again, disaggregating the colonywide averages into the proportions employed from the principal labor-producing districts gives even more striking figures. The chief registrar of natives reported that in the first three months of 1927 the proportion of the adult male population in paid employment for Europeans was 72.28 percent in Kiambu District (Kikuyu), 72 percent in Lumbwa District (Kipsigis), 64.45 percent in Nandi District, 50.3 percent in Fort Hall District (Kikuyu), 48.2 percent in North Kivirondo District (Luo and Luhya), and 44.91 percent in North and South Nyeri Districts (Kikuyu).\textsuperscript{35} To these figures we can also add a steadily growing number of women and children seasonally employed, especially for the harvesting of coffee, and numbering perhaps 30,000 by 1927.\textsuperscript{36} Whether measured in absolute or comparative terms, the Kenya labor system was thus one which embraced a particularly high proportion of the African population, especially from the agricultural areas bordering the settled districts of the Highlands.

Significantly, only approximately half of the monthly employed laborers worked in estate agriculture, with the rest in various branches of government and commerce, with the state, including the railroad, being by far the largest single employer in the colony. While a small number of semiskilled artisans and clerical workers were beginning to appear, particularly in the urban areas and in the railroad, the vast


\textsuperscript{33} The percentage of adult men employed from the Transkei in 1927 was 41 percent, for Basutoland, 35 percent. Conversely, for Nigeria the percentage in employment was only 2.1 percent, in Tanganyika, 15.5 percent, and even in the Belgian Congo, with the largest absolute number of Africans in employment, the proportion was only 14.3 percent. See Buell, \textit{Native Problem in Africa}, 1: 346.

\textsuperscript{34} Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, Native Affairs Department, \textit{Annual Report} (Nairobi, 1923), p. 30.

\textsuperscript{35} Buell, \textit{Native Problem in Africa}, 1: 345.

\textsuperscript{36} Clayton and Savage, \textit{Government and Labour in Kenya}, p. 151.
majority of African laborers in all sectors were temporary, unskilled migrants — a semiproletarianized mass of single and temporarily single men moving back and forth between the African reserves, where their families remained on the land, and the settled districts and towns. Despite a combination between private employers and the state in 1921 which reduced the average wage by a third, under the pressure of settler economic expansion and continued growth of African commodity production, despite its increasing exclusion from export markets during the 1923-29 period, wages for unskilled labor rose from nine to eleven shillings a month, with a ration of maize meal, to twelve to fourteen shillings by 1923 and to sixteen to eighteen shillings at the end of the decade.37

These statistics on Africans working for wages on monthly contracts do not include a major, and for many settlers, the most important form of African labor in the estate sector: the resident native laborers or squatters. More than any other aspect of the labor system, the growth of squatting expressed the inability of the smaller settler estates in particular to operate with fully capitalist relations of production and the need to rely on a semiservile relation between peasant and landlord. While squatting continued to provide a reasonably stable and secure labor force, as well as access to squatter stock for breeding and dung for fertilizer and to the casual labor of women and children during peak harvest and planting periods, it also involved key internal contradictions which threatened the settlers’ position. First, the poorest and most undeveloped estates often engaged in “Kaffir farming” or share-cropping which created potential African tenants’ rights in the Highlands. Second, and even more important during the 1919-39 period, since the squatters relied largely on their own produce rather than their meagre wages, they tended to emerge as independent commodity producers in competition with the settlers who provided them with plots on their estates. In so far as the settlers had difficulty making productive use of their assets, this was a real threat. In 1917, for example, the D.C. Naivasha reported that “Agriculture has made little progress except at the hands of native squatters.”38 As a

37. The standard published source suggests that “although a substantial minority of workers were earning rather higher rates overall, those of unskilled labour represented little or no increase in purchasing power when the increased price of African consumer goods and increased taxation were taken into account.” (Clayton and Savage, Government and Labour in Kenya, p. 148.) Van Zwanenberg estimates that real wages in 1939 were essentially the same as they had been in 1909, see R. van Zwanenberg, The Agricultural History of Kenya to 1939 (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), p. 34. However, this estimate may conceal considerable fluctuation during that period, especially during the economic expansion of the 1923-29 period and the depression in 1930-36. Calculations by M.P. Cowen and J. Newman in an unpublished study show a substantial increase in real wages between 1924 and 1931 (“Real Wages in Kenya,” mimeographed, Nairobi, 1975). If accurate, this is both congruent with the continued growth and competition for African labor of peasant commodity production, and suggests the limits of settler and state control of the labor market.

result, after 1918 squatters also were subjected to increasing state regulation and control which eliminated tenant rights and regularized and extended the elements of compulsion and involuntary servitude. In addition, as the settlers began to accumulate capital during the 1920s, they acted to bring the squatters further under their domination and to restrict their role as competitive commodity producers, largely by reducing the land available to them and the quantity of livestock they could own.39 However, despite these restrictions, the number of squatters continued to grow, particularly as population pressures and land shortages began to be felt in the Kikuyu reserves. By 1931 the number of squatters in the Highlands reached 113,176 (the great majority of them Kikuyu), and they occupied no less than a million acres of settler land.40

Finally, the type and composition of the African labor force varied in different parts of the colony and in different types of enterprises. By the late 1920s the administration divided Kenya into three labor zones. The first, in the Western Highlands, comprising the Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu and Nandi areas, involved settler estates employing primarily squatter labor, many of them Nandi and Kipsigis, although there was one sisal estate employing 600 workers and developing tea estates near Kericho already employing some 1,600 workers. The second zone of Ravine, Nakuru, Navaisha and Laikipia was the heartland of white settlement in the Rift Valley and involved primarily maize and stock production employing Kikuyu squatters. The third consisted of Nairobi and the nearby settled portions of Kiambu, Nyeri and Machakos in the Eastern Highlands, and the most distant, low-lying areas of Kitui, Voi, Mombasa and the coast. The Eastern Highlands area, especially Kiambu and Nyeri, was the centre of coffee production primarily using wage labor drawn from the neighboring Kikuyu reserves. The lower-lying areas were dominated by the sisal plantations which employed some 16,000 men by the late 1920s, and by the fuel and ballast camps for the railroad. At Mombasa a growing mass of casual labor worked in the harbor.41 In the two last areas, Nyanza laborers, Luhya and particularly Luo, predominated, having proved more resistant than the Kikuyu to the hotter malarial environments.

This labor force, termed by a contemporary South African observer “probably the cheapest in the world,”42 could not in the end have been created or controlled without the support and sanctions of the colonial state. The administration proved on the whole sympathetic to settler pressures, and the state applied direct coercion to

39. Ibid., pp. 4, 8-9.


deal both with the problem of recruitment and the problem of ensuring that African laborers stayed at work. The involvement of the provincial administration in the recruitment of labor for the settlers reached its greatest intensity in 1919-21, coinciding with the most serious labor shortage of the colony's history during the brief initial boom of postwar development and culminating in the crisis over the Northey labor circulars. Responding both to the acute shortage of labor and the vagaries of earlier instructions on "encouragement" which left matters to the widely varying discretion of local D.C.s., Governor Sir Edward Northey, a South African general, ordered the chief native commissioner to produce a statement on labor recruitment policy. On 23 October 1919 the government issued a special labor circular stating, in part:

All Government officials in charge of native areas must exercise every possible lawful influence to induce ablebodied male natives to go into the labour field. Where farms are situated in the vicinity of a native area, women and children should be encouraged to go out for such labour as they can perform.

Native chiefs and elders must at all times render all possible lawful assistance on the foregoing lines. They should be repeatedly reminded that it is part of their duty to advise and encourage all unemployed young men in the areas under their jurisdiction to go out and work on plantations.43

At the same time, the government attempted to raise African taxes and, in early 1920, introduced the Native Authority Amendment Ordinance which empowered chiefs and headmen to order "compulsory labor" of up to sixty days a year at wages below that of "voluntary" workers for state purposes, especially for head porterage and railway, road, and public works projects. This was in addition to the already existing African obligation of twenty-four days a year (six days per quarter) of unpaid "communal labor" on local projects. The fact that exemption from compulsory labor could only be obtained on proof of employment for wages during three of the previous twelve months indicates that a key intention of the law was that "by threatening people with this type of work . . . the administration could increase the supply of labor to settler farms."44 The labor circular, tax increases and the compulsory labor ordinance combined in the new massive and co-ordinated application of state power to obtain labor for settler farmers. As a result, the provincial administration became directly and explicitly a recruiter of labor for private employers in the colony.

This effort ultimately foundered on both the emergence of African resistance to the escalation of official coercion involved and on the resistance to it both internally in

43. The circular is reproduced in Despatch on Native Labour, House of Commons Special Prints, 33, cmd. 873, (London, 1920). Administrators were also instructed to keep a record of whether chiefs and headmen were or were not helpful in recruiting labor.

the administration itself and from missionary circles in East Africa.\textsuperscript{45} The heads of the Anglican church and Church of Scotland in the area issued the "Bishops' Memorandum" in November 1919 which raised the issue that "to the native mind a hint and order on the part of the Government are indistinguishable," and warned of the abuse of power by chiefs and the deleterious consequences for African society in the reserves that would result from the policy.\textsuperscript{46} The issue quickly spilled into the metropolitan arena, causing consternation in the Colonial Office in the face of an uproar over "forced labor in Kenya" in humanitarian and church circles and the Labour party, as well as among prominent members of the Conservative and Liberal parties. This resulted in major criticism of the government in both the Commons and the House of Lords. In February 1920 a revised circular was hastily issued by the Kenya government reiterating the original policy in more circumspect language. This failed to mollify the critics, and the Colonial Office then intervened directly by drafting its own version of a third circular which reminded administrators that they had a duty to check abuses and favoritism by the chiefs, that Africans working on their own plots should not be pressured to go out and work, and that women and children could only work when they could return home each evening.\textsuperscript{47} This too failed to have the desired effect on the political uproar created by the original circular. In 1921 Winston Churchill succeeded Milner as secretary of state. Sensitive to the labor issue in Kenya as a result of his 1908 visit, Churchill brought the immediate controversy to an end with a dispatch revising Kenya labor policy. While rejecting accusations that the administration was exploiting Africans, he ordered that "encouragement" by administrators could not go beyond providing information on labor needs and resources for employers and potential laborers. In addition, while supporting the twenty-four day per annum communal labor requirement, he modified the compulsory labor policy for use, except for immediate government portage needs, only on "essential" government projects after permission had been explicitly requested from the Colonial Office for a specified purpose and period.\textsuperscript{48} The pressure on the provincial administration to recruit labor directly thus abated, although a brief effort was made by Governor Grigg to respond to labor shortages in 1925-26 occasioned by the last major railway extensions by instructing field officers to "do their utmost to promote the flow of labour."\textsuperscript{49} By the latter half of the 1920s, 

\textsuperscript{45} Administrative resistance to the circulars will be discussed below. In order to hold this paper to reasonable length, African resistance in 1921-22 will not be treated in detail. For a standard account see C. Rosberg and J. Nottingham, \textit{The Myth of MauMau: Nationalism in Kenya} (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 35-64.

\textsuperscript{46} The 'Bishops' Memorandum' first appeared in the \textit{East African Standard}, 8 Nov. 1919, and was reprinted in cmd. 873.

\textsuperscript{47} Circular no. 3, 14 July 1920, reprinted in cmd. 873.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 125.
however, the indirect pressures of taxation and growing population pressure in some of the reserves and a growing African taste for cheap consumer imports combined to ensure an increasingly adequate flow of labor without further direct administrative coercion.

In the face of the gruelling labor demanded, the frequent cruelty of European and Asian employers, and the generally poor housing and diet provided for migrant labor, the principal expression of class struggle in Kenya, especially in the white Highlands, was the individualized protest of unannounced departure of African laborers from their work, or 'desertion,' as it was termed. Retaining labor at work remained a continuing problem even as overall supply difficulties lessened, and it was in this area that the elements of involuntary servitude were most fully developed and consistently applied in the Kenya labor system. A body of legislation, enforced by the provincial administration and the Kenya police and periodically extended, constrained African movement outside of the reserves and limited their freedom to enter and leave employment through punitive sanctions under which "the infringement of labour laws is rated as a crime and the heaviest penalties can be imposed for minor acts of disobedience."50 This began with the Masters and Servants Ordinances of 1906 and 1910, and culminated in the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1916, fully implemented after the war, which extended the maximum penalties for labor offences, including desertion, to a fine of five pounds or imprisonment up to six months. In addition, offences were made cognizable by the police who could arrest and prosecute without a specific complaint from an employer.51 Since laborers had no other legal redress against employers, the legislation provided for their "protection" with penalties against the latter for withholding wages and other abuses. The 1910 ordinance, however, reduced employer penalties while introducing rules, extended in 1919, prescribing conditions of employment, food and housing to ensure "fair treatment" of labor. After the war a small labor inspectorate was established as a branch of the administration to see that the rules were observed, but the resources of the inspectorate and the provincial administration were never sufficient to inspect regularly all employers, and evasion of the regulations was common.52

The keystone of the complex of labor controls, which made possible the efficient enforcement of punitive sanctions, was the Registration of Natives Ordinance, first


51. The last provision was eventually cancelled by the Colonial Office in 1925, but was in force during the 1919-23 period as part of the massive application of state coercion to recruit and control African labor. Clayton and Savage, Government and Labour in Kenya, p. 147; the Masters and Servants Ordinances are reprinted in cmd. 873.

52. Buell, Native Problem in Africa, 1: 351-53. In 1939 the Mombasa Labour Commission noted, with regard to the employer's obligation to supply housing for his workers, that "We were astonished to find that both government and private employers have been ignorant of this provision in the law or have disregarded it." Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine Labour Conditions in Mombasa (Nairobi, 1939), paragraph 20.
passed in 1915, but only brought in force in 1919-20. This required every male African over the age of fifteen to register before an administrative officer, where his fingerprints were taken and he was issued with a registration certificate, the *kipande*, which contained his personal particulars and a record of his employment outside of his reserve, including the type of work and the wages and rations received. Copies were sent to the chief registrar of natives in Nairobi. The *kipande* had to be carried at all times when moving or living outside of the reserves, usually in a metal cylinder hung around the neck, and each time an African entered or left employment the employer had to sign him on or off on the certificate. By the end of 1920, 194,750 certificates had been issued and this climbed to 519,056 by the end of 1924 and to 1,197,467 by 1931.53 The registration system brought virtually the entire adult male African population under much more direct administrative control, and made it possible to trace back to the reserves and arrest deserters and other violators who failed to be properly signed off by an employer. The ordinance also created yet another category of labor "crimes" as Africans became liable to fine or imprisonment for failing to carry, losing or destroying the *kipande*. Penalties were also applied to employers who failed to demand the *kipande* when hiring labor, failed to file with the registrar the particulars of the Africans they employed and failed to sign a worker off when the contract was finished. In addition, the *kipande* also assisted in the maintenance of the cheapness of labor by restricting "both a man's freedom to leave his work and his freedom to bargain with an employer for a wage not necessarily related to that of his previous employment."54 Finally, the *kipande* also created opportunities for abuses by both employers and officials, especially with regard to the harassment of men identified as "trouble-makers" or "bad hats." The efficiency of the registration system was revealed in its very first year of operation when 2,364 of 2,790 reported deserters were traced and prosecuted.55 Little wonder that the *kipande* was the most hated of Kenya's labor laws and the one that came to symbolize for Africans their servile status.

Enforcement of these punitive sanctions fell heavily on the provincial administration. While the Kenya police pursued violators in the settled districts, the tribal police under the control of the D.C. did so in the reserves, and in both areas administrators dealt with the trial of cases in their capacity as local magistrates. Settler demands for immediate and severe punishment led to serious departures from accepted British judicial practice in the administration of labor laws, and "several circulars reminded the magistrates that they should first investigate whether a contract of employment existed before punishing a person for an alleged breach of

---


The level of coercion required to sustain the labor system in Kenya is suggested by the statistics on prosecutions for offences under the Masters and Servants (later Employment of Natives) Ordinances and the Registration of Natives Ordinance itself which totalled in 1922, 2,187 and 2,949 respectively.\(^\text{57}\) Even more revealing is the comparison of these figures with convictions for labor offences in other British colonies in Africa, which shows starkly the difference in the levels of coercion involved in sustaining the relations of production in Kenya and in colonies relying upon peasant commodity production.\(^\text{58}\)

The squatters too were brought under the coercive powers of the state. Up to 1918 squatting was an attractive proposition for many Africans, especially from the densely populated Kikuyu reserves where many already lived as *ahoi* or tenants. It permitted escape from the oppressive hand of the chiefs, gave access to land and a chance to develop their own crops and large herds of livestock in return for three or four months of labor service for the settler at a wage of approximately four shillings a month plus rations.\(^\text{59}\) The Resident Native Labourers Ordinance of 1918 sought both to encourage squatting as a source of labor and to bring it under systematic regulation. Kaffir farming was made illegal, squatters' rights as tenants were extinguished and they were reduced to the status of servants, while required labor service was extended to a regulated contract of 180 days per annum at around two-

---


58. Charges Under the Masters and Servants (or similar) Ordinances in East and West Africa Territories . . . during the year 1929:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of Charges</th>
<th>No. of Convictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>2,105</td>
<td>1,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyasaland</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanganyika</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanzibar</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


thirds the salary of contract labor and made applicable to all adult male members of the squatter's family over sixteen.60 A key objective in ending conditions which produced a landlord-tenant relation was to "destroy any rights the African might have in land by reason of the tenancy. A relationship of employer and employee involving elements of involuntary servitude was substituted, and one of the prime objects of later legislation in this field was to maintain the relation and prevent the development of a system of tenancy."61 Further legislation was soon required after a 1923 Supreme Court decision which held that a squatter was a tenant, not a servant, and thus not subject to the criminal penalties for desertion under the Masters and Servants Ordinance. An immediate effort was made to amend that ordinance to include squatters, but was disallowed by the Colonial Office, under a Labour secretary of state during the brief coalition government in Britain. The following year, 1925, a new Conservative minister permitted a new Resident Native Labourers Ordinance, which made the failure of a squatter to carry out his duties a punishable offence and prohibited residence on an estate other than under contract. In addition, the servile status of squatters was further reinforced by a provision which made their contracts transferable on the sale of a farm.62

African taxation, in addition to its function as a major source of state revenue and test of the efficiency of local administrative control, continued to play a major role in the labor system as a means of indirect coercion. Steady settler pressure resulted in an increase in the rate of hut or poll tax to five rupees in 1915 and efforts to raise the rate again in 1920 to eight rupees (sixteen shillings under the new currency then being introduced) as part of the co-ordinated pressures being applied to increase the labor supply. Subsequent African protests and unrest, culminating in the 1922 disturbances, led to a reduction in the basic rate to twelve shillings, where it remained unchanged for most of the interwar period. Nevertheless, the tax weapon had its desired effect in forcing more Africans into wage employment, the Kikuyu in particular responding to its pressure.63 The revenues from hut and poll tax rose in step with the increasing rate and the growing efficiency of collection, especially after chiefs operating on a commission were replaced by regular administrative officers as collecting agents, reaching £175,000 in 1914-15, £279,000 in 1919-20, and no less than £658,414 in 1920-21.64 Thereafter it settled back to an annual average return of


62. Ghai and McAuslan's assertion that this "clearly indicated the feudal aspects of the relationship" (ibid.) errs by failing to consider the relations of production in their wider structural (capitalist) context and their origin in the inability of settlers to appropriate surplus value from "free" labor.

63. Tignor, Colonial Transformation of Kenya, pp. 182-83. During the same period the settlers successfully resisted the administration's efforts to impose a light income tax on the immigrant European and Asian communities (McGregor Ross, Kenya from Within, p. 154-58).

64. Wolff, Economics of Colonialism, p. 117.
£500,000-600,000 per annum. In addition, Africans paid indirect taxes in the form of customs duties on imports at a rate from 1921 of 20 percent *ad valorem* that added another £200,000-250,000 to their tax bill during the 1920s. The impact of this burden is suggested by Buell’s estimate that the total value of cash crops marketed by Africans in 1924 fell short of the total African tax bill by some £320,000.65 While the official theory was that the rate of annual hut or poll tax equalled an average wage for one month, for many Africans the actual tax bill was considerably higher than the base rate of twelve shillings since they paid on the hut of more than one wife as well as for kin unable to earn the tax on their own. The 1927 Labour Commission found an average cash income of families in the reserves of 90-110 shillings per year, of which no less than twenty-eight shillings was paid in direct taxes by the head of the family.66 This tax burden made it difficult for Africans to accumulate savings and ensured that their net income could supply a subsistence living only if they maintained access to land and production in the reserves or as squatters. Failure to pay tax was, of course, a punishable offence, and in the mid-1920s special detention camps for hut and poll tax offenders were established near district stations, where they provided administrators with a convenient source of unpaid communal labor for local projects.67

The establishment of official boundaries for the various African reserves in Kenya reflected contradictory impulses on the one hand to protect Africans from further alienation of land and allay widespread insecurity, and, on the other, employ the reserves as yet another method of forcing Africans out to work. In 1905 the settler dominated Land Committee proposed setting up reserves containing the minimum land necessary for the current needs of various groups so that future population growth could only be accommodated by movement outside the reserves on to settler estates, while the 1913 Native Labour Commission repeated demands for reserves adequate for “the current population only.”68 In 1915 the Crown Lands Ordinance


66. Wolff, *Economics of Colonialism*, p. 119. With wages for farm labor as low as eight shillings per month in some areas during the mid-1920s, Africans often had to work two to four months a year simply to meet their direct taxes. Since few worked for a full year at a time, there was little left over for consumption or saving.

67. In 1922, 2,216 Africans were convicted of nonpayment of tax (Buell, *Native Problem in Africa*, 1: 358); and this later soared to 8,709 in the depression year of 1933 (*Report by Sir Alan Pim*).

empowered the governor either to reserve land for the use of the African tribes or cancel the boundaries and exclude land deemed excess to their needs. Implementation of these provisions was delayed, however, by indecision over the extent of the reserve boundaries as the administration was caught between settler demands for restriction of the area of the reserves, and Colonial Office concern for reserves adequate for an expanding population. It was not until 1926 that the administration finally gazetted twenty-four "tribal" reserves covering 46,837 square miles, 14,600 of which were in the sparsely populated Masai reserve. Even then Buell noted that the population density of the major labor-producing reserves adjacent to the white Highlands already exceeded that of many of the South African native reserves, and predicted a land shortage in twenty-five years.69 Given the general underestimates of the African population which prevailed at the time, these pressures were actually felt much sooner. Demographic recovery after the disasters of the first quarter of the century saw population growth of 1-1.5 percent a year by the late 1920s. From that time steadily increasing population pressure, primarily in the Kikuyu reserves and in the most densely settled areas of Nyanza, had some of the effect on labor supply the settlers originally desired.

The scope and intensity of controls and pressures placed upon the African population in Kenya by the colonial state to provide labor for settler estates were far greater than those found in any other British colony in Africa under the overall authority of the Colonial Office, approaching and, in some instances, even exceeding those applied in the settler states of Southern Africa. The extremity of the coercive controls which emerged in Kenya can be more clearly understood not as the outcome of the particular cruelty or racism of the settlers and/or state officials, but as the surface expression of more profound underlying social forces, i.e., as a concrete example of the development of the forms of the state derived from the particular contradictions of capital accumulation and class struggle found in estate production in the colony. The dependence of settler agriculture upon, and its disruption by, the fluctuations and crises of metropolitan capital and international commodity markets; its constant shortage of capital and low level of constant capital; and its lack of technical skills determined a protracted and difficult process of primary accumulation within which estate production was unable to establish fully capitalist relations of production as the basis for the constantly expanded reproduction of capital. The essential condition for the expansion of production and the accumulation of capital within settler estate production was the increasing extraction of absolute surplus value through the development of more systematic control over the labor force, rather than through increased productivity as a result of the constant transformation of the means of production. This determined in turn the elements of servility and degree of coerciveness of the relations of production, as well as the extraction of labor below its cost of reproduction through a contradictory articulation of estate production with the indigenous African modes of production in which "the tendency to the destruction of the indigenous mode had to be halted before the point where it ceased to provide for the reproduction of the labour power itself."70


The sequence of crises over the labor supply to settler estates and the development of institutional forms and policies to deal with it during the early 1920s in Kenya is an instance of the "process of constant reorganization by struggle and through crisis of capitalist social relations, economic and political." Pre-1914 experience in Kenya had increasingly shown that settlers and labor recruiters were through their individual actions incapable of recruiting a sufficient labor force or stabilizing the required relations of production, rather the brutality and unpredictability of settler privateering threatened to undermine the legitimacy of colonial domination in general. During the 1919-23 period, therefore, the state moved to provide the level of organization and coercion to sustain the relations of production for settler estate production as a whole. State structures and policies dealing with the recruitment and control of labor provided for both the extraction of labor from indigenous African modes of production and for the increase in absolute surplus value produced by African laborers, especially with regard to the increasing labor obligation of the squatters. At the same time, however, the state confronted the contradiction that it could only accomplish the stabilization and control of relations of production in the estate sphere if it retained its constitution as a separate and autonomous entity, thus "taking the form of an impersonal mechanism of public authority isolated from society." The fundamental condition for the state acting in the interest of settler production was thus a limit on the degree to which it acted as the direct private agent of settler class interests, i.e., the state confronted the necessity of its relative autonomy as a condition of managing the contradiction between accumulation and legitimation. This was particularly sharply drawn in the colonial setting in Kenya where the state was also a subordinate institutional and ideological emanation of the state and dominant class of the metropole, as well as the sole legitimate agency of public order resting on the maintenance of the tacit consent of the indigenous African population. If the state moved too far towards becoming an explicit instrument of settler class interests it faced the threat of direct intervention from above, unrest from below, or, indeed, both.

The condensation within the state of the contradictions of accumulation and control of the labor system is clearly visible, on the one hand, in the growth in Kenya of a field administration exercising far closer and more intensive control over the rural African population than was found in other British African colonies. Simply on the level of the proportion of field administrators to population, Kenya reached a ratio approaching twice that of Uganda and four times that of Nigeria, both of which relied upon the development of peasant commodity production. In addition, the corpus of legislation discussed above conferred on the provincial administration not


73. Buell, Native Problem in Africa, 1: 361. Buell comments that the ratio:

... would indicate that a comparatively large European population demands administrative attention and also that a firmer control over the native is needed in a White Settlement Colony than in a native state.
only an exceptionally high degree of control over Africans both in the reserves and in their movements outside to find work, but also an unusually wide scope for intervention into indigenous social structures in the reserves. At the same time, the institutional structures of the state were modified by the creation of specialized agencies such as the chief registrar of natives to maintain the relations of production in estate agriculture, while the development of agricultural and veterinary services to Africans, which could have stimulated more rapid growth of competitive peasant commodity production, were retarded to a level well below that of Uganda and Tanganyika.74

On the other hand, however, the legitimacy of state authority in the reserves was also tied to commodity production as the material basis for a developing class of peasant accumulators and for the directly collaborating stratum of chiefs and lower level state functionaries. For the provincial administration the relative autonomy of the state was tied in practice to the maintenance of peasant commodity production, and local administrators continued to encourage its growth wherever it did not directly challenge the settler sphere. As a result, the principal labor-producing districts in Kenya were simultaneously the major areas of peasant commodity production, with the provincial administration having to maintain a tenuous balance in the contradictory articulation of the peasant and settler spheres. The marketed output of African agriculture actually continued to expand during the 1920s, directed not towards the export sector increasingly dominated by the settlers, but towards an internal good market to feed the African labor force on the estates, particularly on the coffee and sisal plantations.75 In addition, influential elements of metropolitan mercantile capital throughout the interwar period remained sceptical about the economic viability of settler estate production, and some firms remained involved in the marketing of African crops.76 Counter-pressures for the expansion of peasant production thus existed within both the colonial state and metropolitan capital, gaining strength at moments when the estate sphere stumbled.77

74. Ibid.: 384-88.

75. On the relationship between peasant commodity production and the legitimacy of state authority, see B.J. Berman, Control and Crisis in the Colonial State (Philadelphia, forthcoming), chapter 6.


77. The combination of local and metropolitan pressures led, briefly, in the aftermath of the 1921-22 depression and the 1919-23 political struggles (the so-called Dual Policy), and again during the depression in the early 1930s, to an official policy of encouraging peasant production by the central authorities in Nairobi. In both instances the resources actually committed by the state were minimal compared to the assistance demanded by and offered to the settlers, and faded completely with subsequent recovery of the settler sphere, leaving the encouragement of peasant production largely up to the discretion of local administrators. (Brett, Colonialism and Underdevelopment, pp. 205-08; and Berman, Control and Crisis, chapters 5 and 6.)
Furthermore, the state apparatus of labor control, as well as settler attitudes towards and treatment of Africans, greatly intensified the authoritarian paternalism of the provincial administration. This response is clearly illustrated in a letter sent home in 1920 by a young assistant district commissioner, H.R. Storrs-Fox:

The European settlers as a class are out to exploit the nigger. They [sic] try to drive him out of his reserve (where he certainly doesn’t do very much work but cultivates his own bit of ground and lives quite happily) by the Hut tax. Thus he is quite gently persuaded to go out and work for a white settler who pays him the princely sum of 5-7 rupees per month and as often as not takes no pains to look after his housing and comfort and treats him pretty harshly . . . It is the old capital and labour stunt, but labour can’t stick up for itself here.78

These remarks reveal not only the administration’s sense of detachment from the confrontation of white settler and black laborer, its belief in its own autonomy, but also its sense that this very detachment required its essentially disinterested intervention to moderate the class struggle and correct an oppressive and unbalanced relationship. Administrators’ belief that only they could provide the African with protection from unreasonable and overly harsh oppression led to internal struggles within the state over each of the various aspects of the labor control system and efforts to modify in practice those which most bluntly compromised its presumed autonomy. Administrative paternalism was further enhanced, moreover, as the new breed of public school and Oxbridge administrators, so distrusted by the settlers, increasingly dominated the administration and moved into its most senior positions during the 1920s.

Nothing more compromised the ostensible autonomy of the state, particularly the delicate balance maintained by the provincial administration, than its conversion into a labor-recruiting agency for settler farmers. Prior to World War I, when administrators were given repeated ambiguous instructions about “encouraging” African labor, a fragmented struggle emerged between many field officers trying to avoid involvement in recruiting labor from their districts, and settlers trying, often successfully, to force the transfer of unco-operative officials. Within the crisis over the Northeey labor circulars and the outbursts of African unrest and resistance in the 1919-22 period, the provincial administration was caught between the Nairobi authorities’ commitment of the state to recruit labor for the settlers, and the most serious challenge to administrative control since its establishment in the early years of the century. At this point opposition to the policy became generalized throughout the administration, even among the secretariat officials who had originally been involved in its formulation and quickly came to understand that a critical limit of state power had been transcended. This internal opposition, which simmered largely out of public view, was organized by John Ainsworth, the chief native commissioner over whose signature the first circular had been issued; H.R. Tate, the provincial commissioner of Kenya (later Central) Province, which contained the Kikuyu districts that were the most important source of African labor; and no less than C.W. Bowring, the chief

secretary. The "Bishops' Memorandum" discussed earlier was actually written after consultation between leading missionaries and the three senior administrators, with the final draft typed in his office by Bowring or one of his staff. "A Chief Secretary concerting a protest against his Governor's policy represents a remarkable event in colonial history," while Churchill's 1921 dispatch relieving the provincial administration of direct involvement in labor-recruiting was hailed by Tate as the "... Emancipation act for which the administration had fought long and persistently."79

The elimination of direct responsibility for labor recruitment permitted the provincial administration to attempt to reassert its disinterested role as paternal protector and equilibrator. However, the consequences of the indirect coercion of Africans and the removal of a large proportion of the male population from the reserves still posed serious problems of control.80 Administrators confronted the contradictory destruction/preservation of indigenous society concretely in terms of African workers' leaving the reserves, especially the squatters who took their families with them and escaped the authority of the administration and the chiefs for the settled districts where administrative controls were weakest. The contradictory pressures tearing at the state showed here in administrators' uneasy anticipation of the consequences of labor migration and the decay of indigenous institutions in advance of actual evidence of disruptive effects. Administrators insisted on the maintenance of jurisdictional boundaries,

believing that the best means of maintaining order in the reserves . . . was to ensure that every African remained under the authority of his chief and that individuals were not able to leave locations without good reasons. Flight from locations tended to undermine the chiefs' authority. For this reason the British were concerned lest labor demands undermine tribal economic and political stability, especially the position of the chiefs, and lead to violence.81

After World War I administrative concern found expression in aspects of labor legislation and in measures to expand the authority of chiefs

"to ensure that labor was recruited under carefully regulated circumstances and did not lead to the collapse of tribal authority . . . [and that ] the African population would leave the reserves only as legitimate wage laborers and . . . there would be no possibility of individuals leaving to escape tribal obligations and the authority of chiefs."82

Thus, while the Native Registration Ordinance facilitated the application of punitive sanctions on behalf of settler employers, it also gave to the provincial administration

---

82. Ibid., pp. 153-54.
a greater sense of control by enabling it to keep far more accurate track of men from a district both inside and outside of the reserve.

The fear of social disintegration and the loss of control also led to conflict within the administration over taxation and reserve policy. While administrators saw the necessity of tax as a source of revenue and as a means to stimulate economic development, they were often uneasy about its use as a coercive mechanism to force Africans to work for the settlers. In 1913 the D.C., Machakos, complained that "to increase taxation in order to drive natives out to work is forced labour under a subterfuge and it is impossible to get away from the fact."83 Again, in 1920 field officers were sharply critical of efforts to increase African taxation and their pressures were instrumental in gaining a reduction. Tate wrote to the chief native commissioner that the tax increase was "repugnant both to our feelings of justice and to the paternal relationship which we bear to the natives . . . I feel so strongly on the injustice of increasing at present the native hut and poll tax that if the proposal becomes law I shall . . . be compelled to give effect to a measure which neither I nor I believe the majority of my colleagues can defend in any way."84 Similarly, administrative indecision over the demarcation of the reserves arose from the clash of settler pressures to make them small in area to force out labor and administrative desires to use reserves of adequate size to isolate Africans from all but the most inescapable and carefully regulated economic and social contracts with the settler sphere and preserve the integrity of tribal society.85 The ill-fated attempt between 1917 and 1927 to create separate field administrative structures for the African and settled districts owed as much to administrative efforts to isolate Africans from disruptive contacts as it did to settler efforts to grasp greater control over their own local administration. The isolationist attitude remained, however, as an influence on the exercise of administrative paternalism until the 1950s.

The extent to which these administrative reactions could soften the harshness of relations of production sustained by state institutions was limited by a key internal contradiction, i.e., the extent to which the state itself relied upon the forced and often unpaid labor of Africans to meet its own needs. The use of call-ups for communal or compulsory labor for porterage, road works, and the construction of markets and government buildings in the reserves, as well as for large-scale state infrastructure projects on the railway, continued throughout the 1920s and only declined into insignificance during the next decade. Furthermore, abuses often occurred when local


85. Ainsworth was the leading exponent of strong reserves and segregation of Africans from disruptive contact with Europeans. Expression of his views can be found in PRO/CO533/130, especially Ainsworth to C.O., 8 Aug. 1913; and KNA/PC/NZAZ/3 "Memorandum on the Question of Natives who Leave their Reserve," 19 Oct. 1911.
administrators were able to employ compulsory labor at their own discretion, while the conditions for compulsory labor supplied to contractors on large government works projects, such as the Uasin Gishu branch line of the railroad, were as bad as on any settler estate and the death rate extremely high.86

The "labor problem" in Kenya was thus rooted in the need of settler estate producers for a mass of semiservile migrant and resident laborers and their inability to supply the requisite coercion without generating African resistance and threatening the basic framework of colonial domination. In consequence, a process of increasing state intervention which began before 1914 culminated in the early 1920s in a massive application of official coercion to ensure the recruitment of labor and sustain the necessary relations of production in estate agriculture under the paternal authority of the provincial administration. At no point in the process did the administration contest the basic premise that Africans had to supply the necessary labor for European estates, although for many officials it was a necessary evil if the colony was to be developed, nor did they deny that some forms of compulsion would be necessary. The contradictions of the process of accumulation and relations of production in estate production, and its contradictory articulation with indigenous modes of production, were condensed within the state in the sharp reaction to the use of the provincial administration as recruiting agents, which compromised the visible autonomy of the state and its role as paternal protector of the African and disinterested agent of social order, and to when the extraction of labor from the reserves threatened to undermine effective control. The state had, in effect, abstracted the relations of force from the immediate process of production, eliminating their crudest elements and giving them an organized order and predictability in their application; but this was possible only in so far as the state remained, and was seen to remain, a separate, relatively autonomous and disinterested apparatus acting in the general interest. Within the limits of state maintenance of the labor system, what the administration demanded of the settlers was that they live up to the obligations of paternalism themselves and cease their capricious and brutal treatment of African labor. In short, by replacing private oppression with state sanctions, the colonial state in Kenya made possible the more intense exploitation of African labor through the increasing extraction of absolute surplus value.