

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

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TOUTS

RECRUITING INDENTURED LABOUR
IN THE GULF OF GUINEA



WORK IN GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Work in Global and Historical Perspective

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Work in Global and Historical Perspective is an interdisciplinary series that welcomes scholarship on work/labor that engages a historical perspective in and from any part of the world. The series advocates a definition of work/labor that is broad, and specially encourages contributions that explore interconnections across political and geographic frontiers, time frames, disciplinary boundaries, as well as conceptual divisions among various forms of commodified work, and between work and 'non-work.'

Volume 14

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5 Lumpen-brokers

If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. There is, therefore, an economic difference between the two. [...] Marx's theory of historical repetition, as it appears notably in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of Louis Bonaparte, turns on the following principle which does not seem to have been sufficiently understood by historians: historical repetition is neither a matter of analogy nor a concept produced by the reflection of historians, but above all a condition of historical action itself.

– Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

Only a concept as loaded and stretchable as the assembly of workers and touts can suit them. Only a concept that can explain why and how they matched, and how they could consistently shift and escalate their extreme and effective techniques, can capture this oscillating movement. A worthy concept needs to show the power of combination of the same elements. The same contracts, often the same recruiters, and the same workers, altered their own assemblages, leading to vastly different outcomes. In one constellation recruiters allowed the island's cacao plantations to flourish on the backs of an unprecedented influx of quasi-kidnapped laborers in the 1930s and 1940s, and in the next step and decades, many of these same recruits combined with touts to unleash themselves on the colonial economy of the island.

The idea to rigorously develop the concept of “lumpen-brokers” to provide conclusions about their contradictory historical effects in labor markets needs to be prefaced with a precautionary note: the lumpenproletariat was very much a concept of its time and language. Marx and Engels were the only authors to consistently use the term in their lifetime, and most mentions are found in miscellaneous note-essays and semi-published manuscripts used to label different groups in different historical periods – sometimes it was applied to Irish immigrants in Manchester for their insalubrious dwellings and weekends spent hawking and peddling, or for their role as the “surplus” population keeping wages low; other times it was a distinctive invective against the pan-European *lazzaroni*, originally a Neapolitan underclass of the Bourbon era, characterized by their “unplanned” lives and being easily susceptible to bribery and thus easily engaged in reactionary alliances; sometimes it was applied to what Marx initially called *Tagelöhnerpöbel*, the unorganized daylaborers without property in the early modern towns; and initially it was used to designate the Roman class demographically called “proletarians” or “plebeians, midway between freemen and slaves, [who] never succeeded in becoming more than a *lumpenpro-*

letariat,” because they were not creating value in the Roman slave-based productive economy that depended on the “constant” importation of “new slaves.”¹

The inconsistent definitions of the term and its awry application in different historical settings could lead to the pre-emptive conclusion that the concept was never meant to be central for the analysis of social structure or the labor market or part of an outline of a genuine theory. The concept has usually been treated in the same way as the groups it supposedly designated, as an extraneous and superfluous idea, an “unproductive” “flotsam.” Instead, I offer what I think is a more precise interpretation of it as an economic category well beyond the object of criminology and social work, “the milieu of beggars and thieves,” found and sent, as Marx says, “to the work-houses and lunatic asylums, to the bar of justice, to the dungeon and to the scaffold.”² This chapter proposes a strict economic logic of the lumpen, with their own “financial science” as Marx called it. This particular reading moves away from the received understanding of the lumpen-proletariat as a primarily moral-political category that designates unreliable and corruptible factions of a radical political movement seeking allies and improved organization, or alternatively, as simply an old-fashioned catch-all term equivalent to the unregulated, criminal, outcast, precarious or informal sectors of the economy.³

Brokers and Merchant Capitalism

Brokerage or the figure “the broker” is a well-studied and theorized one, especially in financial markets and as political and cultural intermediaries. In other dimensions only loosely related to the labor market, they were usually seen as assimilated or assimilating agents, helping propagate and translate

1 Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 84. Written in early 1846, and first published in full in 1932. The best overview of the contradictory and inconstant usage of the term is Peter Stallybrass, “Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat,” *Representations* 31 (1990).

2 Raymond Huard, “Marx et Engels devant la marginalité: La découverte du Lumpenproletariat,” *Romantisme* 59 (1988): 7; Marx, “Class Struggles in France,” 50–51.

3 See the dismissal of the term on these grounds by Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, “‘Marxism’ or Marx’s Method? A Brief Response to Tom Brass,” *Science & Society* 82, no. 1 (2018); and the original and unconvincing critique, which botches the concept of the lumpen, by Tom Brass, “Who these days is not a subaltern? The populist drift of Global Labor History,” *Science & Society* 81, no. 1 (2017). See also Franco Barchiesi, “Precarious Liberation: A Rejoinder,” *South African Review of Sociology* 43, no. 1 (2012): 104; Clara Han, “Precarity, Precariousness, and Vulnerability,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 332–334.

new colonial political, legal, and economic orders.⁴ In a wonderfully recuperative review article, Johan Lindquist has excavated a conceptual genealogy of the broker trope in the history of the post-war social sciences. He notes how the figure ballooned in the era of decolonization for its obvious interest as a missing link in between the various stages of “modernization.” Early studies by Eric Wolf and Clifford Geertz, pioneers of a new “political anthropology,” dedicated themselves to these figures as the almost exclusive mediators between communities and imperial or post-colonial bureaucracies. Wolf, in his study of Mexican politics and economy from the early 1950s, linked the nineteenth century rise of “brokers” to the milieu of the “lumpenproletariat,” where “loosely-structured settlements of casual farmers and workers, middlemen and ‘lumpen-proletarians’ who had no legal place in the colonial order” developed in-between the haciendas, mines, or mills. He adds that “colonial records tended to ignore them except when they came into overt conflict with the law.”

The form and abundance of documentation of recruiters in the archives I consulted speaks well to this point: they were not demarcated or serialized objects of administration but appear in dispersed chains of incidence reports at points of constant conflict. Wolf goes on to focus on the more political brokers drawn from the ranks of landowners of the haciendas as well as the post-revolutionary *ejido* leaders, who were themselves independent from the government, and who were often the only representatives or point of contact for marginalized people who approached them for a variety of principally economic concerns. Wolf’s recuperation of the “broker” for social analysis led to his research into what he called the “integration into larger systems” of the communities which until then anthropologists had been studying in an isolated way, by way of these “crucial junctures or synapses” that were “Janus-like, they face in two directions at once.” Long before the “articulation” of Marxist theoretical jargon became en vogue in the 1970s, and still not able to use the word “contradiction” in the American academy, he says the “study of its dysfunctions” would be most revealing, as these concentrate much of the “tensions” and hold a “grip” on the contradiction, “lest conflict get out of hand and better mediators take their place.”⁵

Brokers also captured the attention of the then main conceptual alternative in the rapidly developing post-war social sciences, namely the Goffman-inspired

4 In African history see especially the excellent collection Benjamin Nicholas Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

5 Lindquist, “Brokers and Brokerage,” 871; Eric Wolf, “Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (1956): 1072.

characteristic thematizing of powerful characters that the transactionalists from the 1960s onwards set their sights on. Brokers were highly magnified points of action and authors of decisive acts. Deborah James, in her own recent review of the genealogy of the broker in social theory and anthropology, writes of them as not merely a bridge between the poles of either the “state” or “market” and the “people,” but as uniquely having a “bricoleurs” toolkit with which they generate social positions and identities. They are “producers,” not products of the social. She even notes their paradoxical embodiment of “the people,” of collective deliberations and communal desire, as they seem to blend “re-emerging traditional authority” with a consensus-based egalitarian ethos.⁶ The more skeptical and sobering and market-defined conception of them as “a professional manipulator of people and information who brings about communication for a profit” has of course always remained.⁷ It is wise not to lose sight of this opportunistic and short-term dimension of motivated actors when painting them in a completely different light, but even if they are reduced to their economic dimension, a much more ambivalent and encompassing picture appears.

Brokers were a well-defined figure in Roman and Medieval European law, clearly distinguished in jurisprudence as a dedicated but supporting element of trade. In other mostly literary sources, they were looked down upon and associated with failed or aspiring merchants, particularly in the realm of sordid businesses. While sometimes the broker was synonymous with small dealers and commercial agents or factors they are clearly distinguished from commissioning or proxy agents who were empowered representatives, as brokers would operate independently seeking out buyers or sellers on behalf of each, a messenger who brings two parties into a commercial relation with each other, quickly and secretly if need be.⁸ Theoretically, they are supposed to facilitate and ease transactions with their knowledge of both supply and demand to bring buyers to willing sellers and vice versa. They were rarely professionalized and licensed: in the labor market there was always at least some agents who would be, but these formal agents never formed the beginning nor the end of the recruiting operations.

6 Deborah James, “The Return of the Broker: Consensus, Hierarchy, and Choice in South African Land Reform,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 2 (2011): 319.

7 Joan Vincent, “Political Anthropology: Manipulative Strategies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 176.

8 Morris Silver, “The Role of Slave Markets in Migration from the Near East to Rome,” *Klio* 98, no. 1 (2016); Wilhelm Endemann, *Handbuch des deutschen Handels-, See- und Wechselrechts*. Vol. 3 (Berlin: Fues’s Verlag, 1885), 132.

In his early and short book on the stock exchange, written with a first-hand account of the newly elaborated steps involved in this advancing form of European financial capitalism, Max Weber offers a particularly nuanced reading of a continuum between agents and brokers, and between brokers, merchants, and speculators, which are useful to transpose to this financially mediating element of the labor market. Weber distinguishes brokerage (*Makelei*) from merchant trade (*Handel*), because the broker is initially only a hired sub-agent charged with seeking out willing sellers. The commission of the broker is thus a kind of finder's fee for the work of seeking out a counterparty "willing to accept the conditions set by the person placing the order," especially in opaque and illiquid markets where it is difficult to find a willing seller at the offered price. The broker enters a mediating role not merely as a transmitter of this offer, but in two individual relationships established with the buyer and the seller respectively. In financial markets this is called the "spread" of a price, and the higher this straddled uncertainty about the closing price of an exchange the higher the broker's profits in exchange.

In terms of the labor but also other markets, the effective broker must make digestible the employer's fixed offer by making the "uncertain" seem certain, including with embellishments and misrepresentation. Brokers, like recruiters, could operate with speed and secrecy and conduct both commercial propaganda and hands-on improvisation. Their second role, and the basis for the *dash* recruiting technique, is their flexible relationship to the buyer or employer. This involves the setting and negotiating of the final price itself, since if the offer the buyer initially puts out is perceived as too low or unrewarding no exchange will take place and the buyer will have to agree on a higher price to purchase what they need from a broker-mediated labor market. The broker appears as an intrinsic parameter in the price mechanism itself, in independent and specific power relations with buyers and sellers or "supply and demand." Weber notes how the initially dependent or subordinate broker can become a "self-employed broker" or "*Propermakler*" by transitioning from fulfilling orders or completing assignments into becoming themselves those who acquire goods to sell on the other side, seeking "their business in the difference between the two." In this new position, the broker's power to determine the price increases and they can effectively corner the market with either a monopoly or an effective monopoly when they are the only available source for the commodity that buyers by necessity require for their production and thus are willing to pay almost anything for.

Only in the final and idealized stage, with the robust and free-flowing competition of liquid markets and without "shortages" of either buyers or sellers, does the broker become superfluous and blend into the operations of quasi-me-

chanical and decentralized “arbitrage” or the harmonizing of a price differential. It is this last fully formed domain that is considered the essential formula of merchant capitalism, flourishing at full capacity rather than in erratic and irregular semi-commercial bursts. The source of profit is the repetition of this same operation, taking advantage of price differentials in different locations, save the costs of custody, storage, and transport. Weber saw in this increasingly liquid, predictable and harmonized “price” the culmination of an economically rational, “*ökonomisch berechnet*,” space based on ever smaller, distributed, and recurrent monetary calculations. Only in this “gradual and imperceptible” way does capitalist business emerge in a “pure” form. At this stage, the broker or “market maker” becomes a synonym for price and a practical embodiment of cost, but at the level of transactions they suddenly lose their parameter-setting character and their ability to act beyond the laws of exchange.

Yet even in Weber’s schema, once rationalized, the brokers reappear and burst at the “top” in the uncontrollable, chaotic, and irrational, because unpredictable, force of speculation. For Weber, speculation appears automatically in an accelerated market, because it is just a predicted extension of the moment of exchange into the future. Calculating and expecting alterations of supply and demand would just present another opportunity for “arbitrage” between the present and the future, an abstract profit which substitutes both commissions and commissioning agents. Delinked from the organizational or political growth of a specific enterprise, the goal then becomes imagining and augmenting any final exchange value. Speculation in this sense means marking up prices in a scarcity through this very mechanism, and so Weber notes that “speculators in the most genuine sense of that word” are also just a type of broker, and in turn, no one can prevent a “self-employed broker” from “speculating.”⁹ As the planters in Spanish Guinea never failed to remind officials, touts were “neither planters nor merchants, nor are they even actual proxies or company agents.”¹⁰ A planter pleaded: “make the intermediaries disappear, for, as a rule, they are *persona extraña*” – external, but also strangers, strange, startling – “to *real* colonial interests, their only aim is the acquisition of maximum wealth with minimum effort, and for sure they do not create the permanent wealth” that agro-capitalist planters, like himself, liked to think of themselves as generating.¹¹

9 Max Weber, “Commerce on the Stock and Commodity Exchanges [Der Börsenverkehr],” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 3 (2000): 359.

10 Joaquín José de Sousa to GG (Manresa), September 17, 1931; Curaduría to GG (Manresa), September 26, 1931; Primitivo Álvarez to Chris Nordenholz, March 14, 1931, AGA, C-81/8126, L-1, E-34.

11 Cámara (Estrada), May 15, 1930, “Nota sobre el problema de brazos en Fernando Poo,” AGA, C-81/06415, E-13.

Weber's doctoral dissertation, *The History of Commercial Partnerships in the Middle Ages*, was precisely on the type of budding and germane trade associations called the *commendas* of the Italian city-states. His concern was the creation of the legal balance of profits and liabilities for failed or faulty ventures, in the formal and informal agreements between an investing partner, someone who fronted the money expecting a return, and the traveling partner, who organized the commercial enterprise and expedition, usually overseas. Braudel noted how this boom in capital or capitalization turned "the entire Venetian population" into "so-called capitalists," because the entire townsfolk, even those of "very modest means," were "advancing money to the merchant venturers, thus perpetually creating and renewing a sort of commercial society." The constant and "spontaneously offered supply of credit" created a new landscape of commercial temporary associations whose profits often depended on other brokers downstream, usually in territories colonized by the Venetians, who together would divide or expand the totality of profits from a successful venture or suffer complete losses if the arrangements failed.¹²

This commercial churning successfully instituted and streamlined a range of payment instruments, such as bills of exchange and accounting-money, but also innovations in labor recruiting and wage payment such as dynamic premiums linked to the success of the venture, making the laborer in effect also part of the brokerage enterprise. Before each voyage active "taskmasters" involved in the venture "signed on" sailors, carriers, guards and the like who were "paid" in advance the sum of the "entire voyage, which could last up to one year" while being provided with "daily rations (comprising biscuits, cheese, salt pork and wine)." Workers who received "wages beforehand and then failed to report at the ship's departure, hiding or pretending to be ill," paid off their "debt" by being "forcibly recruited" – an increasingly preponderant mode of recruitment when Venetian traders faced "acute" labor shortages. Sudden labor scarcities led to the extension of credit-led and force-backed recruitment, particularly of foreigners beyond the Venetian colonies.¹³

Jarius Banaji recently published a fragmented book, full of insights and loose ends about the chain-like "trading machines" of merchant capitalism, titled *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*, where he partly addresses the or-

¹² Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th century, Vol. III: The perspective of the world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 548.

¹³ Milios, *Origins of Capitalism*, 120, 159–160, 169. The usual protagonists were of course the commercial brokers Natalie Rothman called "trans-imperial subjects," with their ability to straddle and mediate more than one world and make money off that difference. Rothman, *Brokering Empire*.

thodox conceptions of the history of capitalism that had brushed off merchant and even financial capitalism as non-productive. Merchant capital was traditionally conceived as being mediating or circulatory and peripheral to the identification of capitalist dynamics and contradictions, which missed the obvious importance of the magnitude of accumulation coming from the expansion of new markets as such. Critics of Banaji, who would label him the most sophisticated of the so-called “neo-Smithians” or better post-Gunder-Frankians, cannot explain the extraordinary booms and windfalls of imperialism and colonization that far outpaced growth rates in the metropole, even while having to cling to the only unanimous definition of capital as the successful and compounded accumulation at a global scale.

In a chapter on the “Relative Autonomy of Brokers,” Banaji characterizes the new imperial dynamic in the “produce trade” starting in the late nineteenth century as one of increasing competition and concentration, with large volumes of “variable capital,” or fluctuating wage-like components “circulated as advances.” Even though the largest and most consolidated corporate firms in the colonial world tried to exercise “tight control over the prices paid to producers” in the end, entire economies seemed to only operate by way of advances “circulated via brokers and middlemen.” Analyzing Fieldhouse’s regional study on the United Africa Company in Nigeria and his figure of up to 3,000 middlemen and contractors operating in different produce sectors in 1930s Nigeria, he notes that the “advances” were constantly discussed as a system open to “abuses,” such as concealing the quality of the palm oil or simply selling palm oil to other firms for higher prices. They became an impossible to reform element as broker groups were either dispersed or coalesced into formidable units, into an “oligarchy of brokers.” They underpinned almost the entire volume of the wholesale trade. There was what Banaji calls a “‘structural’ impossibility of doing away with brokers.”¹⁴ The same is true of the labor brokers of the Bight of Biafra, and those elsewhere. To further refine the unique positions and operations of labor brokers, I now turn to justifying how the “broker” can be appended to the more political category of the “lumpenproletariat”.

¹⁴ Banaji, *Commercial Capitalism*, 117–118, citing Fieldhouse, *Merchant Capital*, 443. To keep this footnote brief, for reference to the Banajian tendency and the alternative English-centric currents in the “origin of capitalism” debates, see Milios, *Origins of Capitalism*.

Lumpen: A Category of Political Economy

A historicist impulse would locate the concept in the intra-philosophical disputes of the Hegelian left during the *Vormärz*, as Marx picked up the term from Max Stirner in a critical and ironic way in the 1840s; or as part of the polemical dividing line between communist and anarchist political factions in the First International in the 1870s, as Bakunin explicitly tried to rescue and revive the concept against Marx; or in its consistent popularity as an insult in the later Kautskian period of German working class union and party organizing. There is no shortage of extreme contextualizing, including its literary motifs, such as those popularized by Marx's favorite authors, Balzac and Victor Hugo, where characters from the underclass and hidden overclass regularly figure as a brazen and immoral counter-society, operating like an "inverted monarchy" that worked cosmologically against efforts to recreate political power in the surface world.¹⁵ In the 1970s, and particularly in the past decade the concept has been subject to rigorous assessments and genealogical explorations, with entire doctoral dissertations and book length manuscripts dealing with it, with the explicit and semi-explicit aim to sharpen contemporary political analysis and help explain late-capitalist breakdowns and the decomposition of classes and parties in formerly industrialized countries.¹⁶

To define the worthy and dynamic object – the proletariat – its opposite had to appear in an endlessly negative way: not productive or parasitic in the social structure, politically unreliable, characteristically dishonest, and dishonorable, etc. The category worked through this negative ideal that captured the impediments and imperfections of a revolutionary movement. The concept of lumpen itself thus appears not as an analysis of social differentiation or its representation but as a political and strategic opposition in the heart of a messy and overlapping division of labor. It is easiest to find passages in Marx and Engels where these "heterogenous" groups are bunched and maligned in an absurdly lyrical way. However, it is important to note that the impetus behind the coinage of the term was to rectify their absence from political and economic analysis,

15 Dominique Kalifa, *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 30, 60–81.

16 Hal Draper, *The Concept of the "Lumpenproletariat" in Marx and Engels* (Paris: Institut de Science économique appliquée, 1972); Peter Bescherer, *Vom Lumpenproletariat Zur Unterschicht: Produktivistische Theorie Und Politische Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2013); Clyde Barrow, *The Dangerous Class: The Concept of the Lumpenproletariat* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Bennett Dempsey Carpenter, "Lumpen: Vagrancies of a Concept from Marx to Fanon (and On)" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2019).

and to show their essential role in periods of political instability and in the creation of new social forms emerging in convulsive peripheral markets.



Figure 14: “Before the Sunrise” by Mikhail Dzhanashvili (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels walking in London at night). Reproduced with permission of akq-images / SNA.

While the term has been etymologized to bits, it is worth briefly delving into an underexplored philological dimension. Lumpenproletariat, the untranslatable portmanteau coined by Marx and Engels in their long unpublished *The German Ideology* (1846), is mostly glossed as the “rabble” or “ragged” proletariat, as it was famously defined in the *Manifesto* as the “rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society.” There has been an acknowledged problem of mistranslation, as depending on the decade of popular English translations of key works it was rendered not only as rabble but as “slum proletariat,” “ragamuffins,” “dangerous classes,” and even “scum.”¹⁷ If one could create a more neutral translation truer to the original, then it would be something like rumple-proletarian, with its textile, unsmooth and disheveled imagery; or with its political significance, the “pro-rogue-letarian.”

The stand-alone noun *Lumpen* is translatable as fabric waste or rags, and while it has maintained this formal definition, its popular use is different and more varied. In the regional dialects of Bavaria, *der Lump* was a term not only

¹⁷ Barrow, *Dangerous Class*, 28.

for vagrants and beggars, its earliest early modern definition, but also specifically referred to dishonest and sordid knavery: a “crook,” a “scoundrel,” a “rascal,” a “good for nothing.” *Lumperei* was specifically the use of “miserable tricks.” Lump was a prefix for dozens of portmanteaus in southern spoken dialects, from the technical *lumpen-sammler*, or rag-picker, to the *lumpen-ding*, trifling things, to *lumpen-geld*, debased money or something cheap and worthless, and finally, and most commonly, in the expression *sich nicht lumpen lassen*, literally “not to be taken for a lump,” a synonym for showing honorable and generous behavior – which is the expression Marx gives quasi-theoretical form too in defining the proletariat in opposition to the *Lumpen*.¹⁸

The *Lumpen* as a social category was introduced by the Bavarian Max Stirner into the German socialist and literary scenes of the *Vormärz* period and designated the pauperism at the outer edges of a new advancing society, including of the working class. Marx criticized Stirner precisely because of this equation of proletariat with grime and misery, in the 300-page section of *The German Ideology* dedicated to Stirner, written in 1846. Practically all studies of the concept locate the “birth” of it in Marx’s critique of Stirner, but it is seldom remarked that it was used entirely ironically by both authors in critiques of each other. Stirner used the term interchangeably with the propertyless “proletarian” *Habenichtss*, have-nots, and posited it as the support base and end-result of political socialism. Stirner’s only book, *The Ego and his Own*, published in 1844, uses the figure of the *Lumpen* as an ironic critique of the moralizing “social liberalism” of Moses Hess, who was the young Marx’s leading mentor in Left Hegelian circles – and evidently also a key formative source of Marx’s lingering idealist view of money as an alienating corrosive Mammon.¹⁹ Stirner polemically linked socialism to a secularized Christianity and mocked its vision of the “state” and “society” as a tool of redistribution through seizure of property that would end up in equal impoverishment or a “Communitistic society where we could call ourselves

¹⁸ Kuettner, *New and Complete Dictionary*, 496.

¹⁹ Michael Heinrich, *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 33. Hess is said to have even helped Marx draft his reply to Stirner, as his handwriting is on the original manuscript. “Money make us vampire. [...] What God is to the theoretical life, money is to the practical life in this inverted world: the externalised (entäussert) capacity of men, their sold-off life-activity. Money is human value expressed in figures; it is the mark of our slavery, the indelible brand of our servitude. Money is the congealed blood sweat of the miserable wretches who bring to market their inalienable property, their most personal capacity, their life-activity itself, to barter it for a caput mortuum, a so-called capital and to consume cannibalistically their own fat.” Moses Hess, “The Essence of Money,” *Rheinische Jahrbücher Zur Gesellschaftlichen Reform*, 1845, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hess/1845/essence-money.htm>.

a ‘ragamuffin crew’ [*Lumpengesindel*]; “Let property be impersonal, let it belong to – society. Before the supreme proprietor we all become equal – ragamuffins.”

In his original critique Stirner also mocks the social figures created by varieties of socialism, which were populated only by exemplary “powerful persons (and) so-called ‘moral persons,’ ghosts,” vanguards and designated model followers, a card-carrying titled membership group separated from an undifferentiated mass. Stirner has been misconstrued through the lens of Marx’s reading of him as wanting to introduce the *Lumpen* as a revolutionary subject: as models of a utopia of “egoists” behaving like “care-free ragamuffins.”²⁰ Stirner’s undeservedly small reputation and original thought consisted in being a kind proto-Nietzschean rejector of “morality,” which, as he says, in the economic sphere is: “a solid business, an honourable trade, to lead a moral life,” and to anything opposed, “the swindler, the whore, the thief, robber, and murderer, the gambler, the penniless man without a position, the frivolous man,” the “doughty commoner designates the feeling against these ‘immoral’ people as his ‘deepest indignation’.” That critique still hangs like a long shadow on the use of the concept by vulgar political Marxism.²¹

20 Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own: The Case of the Individual against Authority* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 120–122. In a new translation from 2017 by Wolfi Landstreicher, published online at www.theanarchistlibrary.org, under the title *The Unique and Its Property*, the word lump appears as “pauper” instead of as the “ragamuffin” of the original and most widespread 1907 translation. The position attributed to Stirner by later Marxists was precisely Bakhtin’s position in 1872, when he was expelled by the Marx-led First International, because of his rejection of the idea that state power should be taken over by despotic “socialist savants.” Bakhtin insisted that “the flower of the proletariat is not, as it is to the Marxists, the upper layer, the aristocracy of labor,” but “precisely the great rabble of the people (underdogs, ‘dregs of society’) ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels in the picturesque and contemptuous phrase Lumpenproletariat. I have in mind the ‘riffraff,’ that ‘rabble’ almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, which carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future.” Bakunin, “The International and Karl Marx,” 294.

21 Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 101. The orthodox interpretation can be traced back to the revival of the term by Karl Kautsky in the Erfurt Programme of 1892, where it was translated as the “slum proletariat”: “The capitalist system of production has greatly increased the slum proletariat. It constantly sends to it new recruits.” Kautsky was the foremost proponent of a negative definition of the lumpen, “compelled either to perish or to throw overboard all sense of shame, honor and self-respect,” living “parasitically” as scroungers or “*schmarotzer*” of the wages and value produced by the productive classes. He normalized the imaginary of a “great gulf between the working-class proletariat and the slum proletariat.” He also gave it a universal character: “The slum proletariat has always been the same, whether in modern London or ancient Rome,” Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)* (New York: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1910), 170.

The German Ideology contains the first known and arguably the most accurate usage of the term: “the entire proletariat consisting of ruined bourgeois and ruined proletarians, a collection of *Lumpen*, who have existed in every epoch and whose existence on a mass scale after the decline of the Middle Ages preceded the mass formation of the ordinary proletariat.”²² The category was born split from the creation or preservation of national wealth and mushroomed into a pan-European class of roguery and *déclassés*, resulting from the socially aimless and commercially corrupted fragmentation of both the bourgeoisie and proletariat. An unacknowledged piece of early writing on the lumpen is Engels’ 1850 book on the sixteenth century *Peasant War in Germany*, where he already gives it a quasi-universal character: “This low-grade proletariat” consisting of “ruined members of the middle-class and that mass of the city population which possessed no citizenship rights: the journeymen, the day labourers, and the numerous beginnings of the lumpenproletariat” was a phenomenon which “in a more or less developed form can be found in all the phases of society hitherto observed.” It was a matter of not having a “definite occupation and a stable domicile,” but retaining parts of, what he calls, a “peasant nature,” without the extreme “degree of venality and degradation which characterise the modern civilised low-grade proletariat.”²³ The latter, Engels characterized elsewhere as being fermented in the “hell of modern England,” and needing secularized Christian impulses to combat “the lack of principle, the inner emptiness, the spiritual deadness, the untruthfulness of the age.”²⁴

In 1847, Engels includes the term for the first time in a published pamphlet about the history of the German class structure, where he notes that the *Zersplitterung und Zerstreuung* or fragmentation and dispersal of the working classes into “farm labourers, day labourers, handicraft journeymen, factory workers and lumpen proletariat” renders them unable to mobilize together and to become easily instrumentalized with “payment,” making them all individually “an aux-

22 Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 202. Marx’s main critique in this text is that Stirner represents communism as the equal distribution of wages.

23 Engels, “The Peasant War in Germany,” 407. In the 1870 preface to the book Engels changed the emphasis, in light of the political experiences of revolutions in urban Europe, where he dismisses them as potential “allies” of the “class of the population which entirely and permanently depends on wages,” the proletarians, who still being “a minority of the German people” were “compelled to seek allies” among the “petty bourgeoisie, the low grade proletariat of the cities, the small peasants, and the wage-workers of the land”, but definitely not the “lumpenproletariat, this scum of the decaying elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in all the big cities” as they are “absolutely venal, and absolutely brazen.” Engels, “Preface to the 2nd Edition,” 98.

24 Engels, “The Condition of England,” 445.

iliary army for the class employing them.” With the “*Lump*” he says, there is always a ready mercenary force, willing to “fight out with his fists the squabbles between bourgeoisie, nobility and police” for “a few thaler,” whether on the political or economic terrain.²⁵

In some of the longest and most notable list-like definition of these heterogeneous elements in Marx’s 1850 analysis of a tumultuous period of French politics, he defined them not so much sociologically, as a “mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat,” but rather ethically as the “recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds” and after a long and colorful exposition, which varies “according to the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong,” he says irrespective of what “nation” they belonged to, they never “renounce their *lazzaroni* character.”²⁶ This novel pan-European *lazzaroni* “character” is defined by a relationship to money. As Engels says in a short article on Swiss immigrant workers, they are “still largely what one describes as lumpenproletariat, prepared to sell themselves to anyone who will make extravagant promises.”²⁷

The concept of the lumpenproletariat can be recuperated as a tool of social and historical analysis, if we subject it to the same procedure that was used to create it: incorporating Stirner’s critique to transform this hot potato of a concept to reveal the productive logics and political protagonisms emergent in an unstructured *Lump*. As Marx says in his 1857 *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, the “mass of such rabble” includes everyone “from whore to pope,” and even the “honest and ‘working’ lumpenproletariat belongs here as well; e.g. the great mob of porters etc. who render service in seaport cities etc,” – or the “‘suitcasers’ who have until now have dedicated themselves in Calabar to trying to carry the suitcases of passing passengers in order to live off the tips,” as a Nigerian journalist says of the model target recruits, quoted in the introduction.²⁸ Working through the economic modes of organization and techniques of the lumpen-brokers and their recruits overcomes the original nebulousness and ambivalence of the concept, which were simply features of its function as a “limit” category. Its distinguishing limit was of course the “unproductive” element of mere circulation without value creation through labor. The serious pursuit of this dialectical and global concept implies giving an autonomous movement to the creation of the differentiation machine, the division of labor, and its dynamic filiations through money. The dialectical transformation that

25 Engels, “The Constitutional Question in Germany,” 83.

26 Marx, “Class Struggles in France,” 62.

27 Engels, “The Model Republic,” 43.

28 Marx, “Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy,” 203.

Marx undertook with the concept when he wrestled it from Stirner needs to be kept in mind when considering its renewal for social and colonial history, in particular the way the “bottom” can appear at the top, with a force and role in political analysis and political economy.

“Rogues and Vagabonds” in Labor History

The final ossified and misperceived limit is its supposed “European” nature – a static cross-section of the underclass of an advanced industrial city – which Fanon dissolved long ago. This type of analytic pastiche serves to ply apart an old reflex which was inextricably strengthened through the intellectually common nineteenth century association between the European urban underclass and remote and yet to be colonized worlds. The mutual transferring of motifs between the colonized “barbarians” and the internal “dangerous classes” was already generalized in Paris and London of the 1840s, where “tribes of rag-pickers” were endlessly discussed and said to lead a life that is “totally nomadic and almost savage,” culminating in a swamping of the Victorian mind with all things “dark.” In Henry Mayhew’s four volume *London Labour and the London Poor* published in the 1850s the protagonists of “uncivilized” life in the metropole were those figures inherited from early modern anti-vagrancy laws: “those that will not work,” which he labelled the “wandering tribes,” including “vagabonds, idlers, petty jobbers, gamblers and speculators.”²⁹ These shared templates are also clearly visible in Engels’ encounter with the Irish in Manchester in 1841, where in his chapter of *The Condition* dedicated to their immigration, up to 50,000 a year “packed like cattle” on steamships, he begins by citing Thomas Carlyle’s account of the “uncivilised Irishman” and “his squalor and unreason,” “degradation and disorder,” and adding that except for Carlyle’s “exaggerated and one-sided condemnation of the Irish national character, Carlyle is perfectly right.” It is in this chapter that Engels scents the concept of the Lumpen during his tour of Manchester’s slums, where the “filth and comfortlessness that prevail in the houses themselves” are “impossible to describe,” “a heap of straw, a few rags,” *Lumpen*, “utterly beyond use as clothing, suffice for his nightly couch.”³⁰

Vice-versa, descriptions of Africans drew in turn on the imaginary of Europe’s outcasts, for example the “unassimilable” Nigerian Hausa traders and dis-

²⁹ Kalifa, *Vice, Crime*, 158–163, 106. This shared lens is of course well established, but not in terms of the “labor question,” see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.

³⁰ Engels, *Condition*, 103.

putatious *braceros*, as I described in the *panya* chapter, were easily incorporated into the long-standing polarized schema of the Castilian cosmography of “Jews and gypsies.” This transference was often explicit, but was never meant to be more than analogical: for example, the Fang were described by an early official as being “very similar to our Gypsies,” as “they have a fierce character, tend to be loquacious, argumentative, shameless and somewhat fond of stealing. In business dealings they are used to haggling to the point of being tiresome.”³¹ This transposition was doubly strengthened by the inordinate expansion of the anti-vagrancy apparatus already fully elaborated and deployed in the *ancien régime* legislation, abolished or limited in moments of political reforms in the nineteenth century, but brought back in full force into the colonies, and further elaborated as colonization progressed.³²

The interwar period in Africa saw the development of a new colonial situation where “criminality” was no longer considered a niche occupation or marginal site, but where at times well over half of the population could be classified and targeted in one way or another with these revived codes – not only with anti-vagrancy and anti-smuggling laws but a whole range of specific ordinances related to, for example, liquor production or currency counterfeiting which aimed to combat, not unemployment, but alternative means of income generation.³³ If in Europe the juridico-discursive impetus was to differentiate and specify delinquency, at least in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* schema, then there was a great divergence in the colonies, where an old range of vague labels, from “undesirables” to “idleness” to “vice” were concretely reapplied to swathes of the rural and urban population, what the Spanish in legislative discussions called both *mal vivir*, crooked modes of livelihood, and *buen vivir*, extravagant

31 Almonte, *Los naturales de la Guinea Española*, 12.

32 Polanyi, *Great Transformation*, 81–136; Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*, trans. Richard Boyd (London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 191–280; In African history see especially Ocobock and Burton, “The ‘Travelling Native’”; Keese, “Slow”; and Stacey Hynd, “‘... a Weapon of Immense Value’? Convict Labour in British Colonial Africa, c. 1850–1950s,” in *Global Convict Labor*, eds. Christian De Vito and Alexander Lichtenstein (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

33 Bernault, “The Shadow of Rule”; Laurent Fourchard, “Urban Poverty, Urban Crime, and Crime Control: The Lagos and Ibadan Case, 1929–1945,” in *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective*, ed. Toyin Falola (Rochester, NY: University Rochester Press, 2009); Laurent Fourchard, “Crime and Illegal Work”; Ayodeji Olukoju, “Social Prestige, Agency, and Criminality: Economic Depression and Currency Counterfeiting in inter-war British West Africa,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 54, no. 2 (2021). Laurent Fourchard’s new range of comparative in-depth studies have traced precisely how such a category of “undesirables” came about in Nigeria and South Africa, particularly as discursively and administrative constructed.

and carefree. The change in the structure of the colonial economy – the growth of towns, warehouses and plantations with the added intra-imperial goal of monopoly and core-periphery autarky – generated a tremendous accentuation of colonial “discourse.” As elsewhere in early colonial urban Africa, in Spanish Guinea the early contours of a racist colonial ideology of “disease and inactivity” quickly shifted by the 1930s to the superimposed label of “criminality” and uncontrolled circulation.³⁴

In post-war social and economic history, the concept of lumpen along with many other uniquely Marxist ones were partly revived through new editions and translations of unpublished works from the Marx and Engels oeuvre. However, the immediate tendency was to dial back the dialectical potential of the category and keep it either as a synonym for pauperism and criminality or split it even further, to extract further politically notable and noble figures from the “mass,” such as Hobsbawm’s “social bandits,” which he vigorously distinguished from ordinary criminal “rogues.”³⁵ In the political context of the 1960s, the rediscovery and explicit revalorization of the concept in Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* led to its spread into various New Left formations as well as to fringe Maoists groupings who recalled Mao’s fondness for what he called the “bandits, robbers and prostitutes,” because as existing outlaws they were obviously more likely to risk joining illegal revolutionary parties.³⁶ These global political currents revived the concept outside of the African context of the struggles of decolonization and its specific contradictions and possibilities which Fanon put his finger on. The fate of the “academicization” of Fanon as a psychological theorist of racist encounters to be responded to with a “poetics” of counter-violence, distorted his legacy as the acute first-rate class analyst of colonial and decolonizing society that he was.³⁷

34 Odile Goerg, “De la ségrégation coloniale à la tentation sécessionniste: ‘l’urbanisme sécuritaire’,” in *Security, Crime and Segregation in West African Cities Since the 19th Century*, eds. Laurent Fourchard and Isaac Olawale Albert (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 256; Eckert, “Urbanization,” 214; Glasman, “Unruly Agents,” 91.

35 Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 102–108. See also Ralph A. Austen, “Social Bandits and other Heroic Criminals: Western Models of Resistance and their relevance for Africa,” in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, ed. Donald Crummey (London: James Currey, 1986), 89–108.

36 Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954), 80, 115.

37 Bashir Abu-Manneh, “Who Owns Frantz Fanon’s Legacy?,” *Jacobin*, October 12, 2021, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/12/postcolonialism-socialism-wretched-earth-class-violence>.

By the 1980s a consensus in various academic currents pushed the same conclusion: while the concept offered “striking metaphors” it could not offer sociohistorical, descriptive nor “analytical power.”³⁸ The suspended state of the concept is most visible in Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker’s classic *The Many-Headed Hydra*. Their study of the potent, spontaneous, and ruthlessly suppressed outlier assemblies, does not broach it except in passing. Instead, they employ rich and contemporary metaphors of unbreakable heterogeneity used by early modern English intellectuals of “order,” who imagined though Greek myth and biblical imagery. They nevertheless decide to give their key concept of “motley crew” a conceptual meaning related to *Lumpen* but one which, they say, highlights its “inter-racial” character, as “motley” was the multi-colored garment of the jester who would bring carnivalesque disorder and subversion by telling the truth, and by extension it could refer to any “colorful assemblage.” The lumpen proper, “the lumpenproletariat, *lazzaroni*, or underclass,” they write, was only a “*dramatis personae*” of a sub-group of bandits and thieves “who rejected wage labor.”³⁹

In labor history, Marcel van der Linden notably slotted the concept into one of five “subaltern classes or semi-classes in capitalism,” along with free wage laborers, the petty bourgeoisie, the self-employed, and slaves, and defines it as those “who fall outside the legalized labor market altogether.” By his own account, this schema follows quite closely the outline provided in the 1972 article, “The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa,” written by a communist trade unionist sent by the ILO to Nigeria in the 1960s. Its author, Vic Allen, gives it an even more prominent place, because, he was overwhelmed by the observation of the “large number” of “*lumpenproletarians*” in Lagos. More recently van der Linden has dismissed the category for its moralizing and non-analytical character, and reduced it to a intellectual history, in particular Wallerstein’s Fanon-inspired reading of the term, as merely the reflection of a political urge during the late colonial and early post-colonial “search for those who truly had nothing to lose but their chains” – “what is variously called the subproletariat, the lumpenproletariat, the unskilled (often immigrant) workers, the marginal, the chronically unemployed.”⁴⁰

38 Bussard, “‘Dangerous Class,’” 688; Cohen Robin and Michael David, “The Revolutionary Potential of the African Lumpenproletariat: A Sceptical View,” *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (1973).

39 Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 28, 63.

40 Van der Linden, *Workers*, 21–22, 298; Vic L. Allen, “The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, no. 2 (1972). For a more sociological and rural angle, see Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (Halifax: Kumarian Press,

Dedicated studies of the lumpen in African history were inspired by trends in European social and urban history such as Stedman Jones' 1971 *Outcast London*. Foremost and unsurpassed is Charles van Onselen's *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886–1914* as well as Andrew Burton's *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam*. Burton studied the *wahuni*, translatable as those who wander without a purpose, "vagabonds," but also specifically unmarried and lawless "wastrels," as well as the urban milieu of unlicensed traders, brewers, rickshawpullers, prostitutes and the like. Van Onselen expanded his earlier pieces on crime, gangs, and banditry in Johannesburg and through dedicated deep and chance archival finds turned that unique African industrial metropolis into a canvas of the fragmented new world of liquor sellers, prostitutes, cab drivers, washermen, domestic servants, transport riders, and brickmakers, etc.⁴¹ He uses the term lumpen mostly in passing, and as either synonymous with crime or with the "informal economy." The southern African social history increasingly distanced itself from the category for good, opting to flesh out the less politicized or technical vocabulary of an "underclass" or a "subordinated class" in the African "hidden" histories of primarily urban contexts of survival and "control."⁴²

This academic cordon sanitaire around the concept is closely related to intra-academic schisms as well as a sense of political contamination after the coming to power of Marxist-Leninist regimes, such as the Derg in Ethiopia in 1974, who explicitly used the category of the lumpenproletariat to designate

2010), 54. In Bukharin's famous manual in the section "The Classes and the Class," he includes a little table schematizing the difference between peasants, workers, and the lumpen, only the latter are "unproductive" and "unexploited," but like the peasants, the lumpen only work as "individuals" and like the other categories, may also be poor and oppressed, but not necessarily in the same way. Following Lenin, Bukharin emphasized their "shiftlessness, lack of discipline," and "impotence to construct or organize anything new"; this nonworking class moved only through "foolish caprice" and leaned politically to a "vacillating and hysterical anarchism." Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Cosmonaut Press, 2021), 332.

41 Charles van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886–1914* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1982), 148, 387; Andrew Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime & Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam* (Oxford: Currey, 2005), 5, 10.

42 Charles van Onselen, "South Africa's Lumpenproletarian Army Umkosi Wa Ntaba – The Regiment of the Hills, 1890–1920," *Collected Seminar Papers. Institute of Commonwealth Studies* 21 (1977): 80, 90; Martin J. Murray, "The Triumph of Marxist Approaches in South African Social and Labour History," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 23, no. 1 (1988). For incidental rhetorical uses see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *The Truth about Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 61–68, 137; and for its general disappearance see, Ralph Callebert, "Rethinking the Underclass: Future Directions in Southern African Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012).

“dangerous vagrants” and “criminals, beggars and coolies” that could be “employed” or pressed for “agricultural development projects.”⁴³ There was of course a distinct aversion to applying the term “proletariat” to African history, and needless to say for the lumpenproletariat category this new feeling was compounded. The micro- and narrative-prioritizing E.P.-Thompsonian side of African social and labor history that came to predominate by the 1980s had always vigorously opposed what they perceived as a structuralist tendency excessively concerned with precise class composition and neo-Marxist jargon reified by the offspring of Althusser in Africanist circles.⁴⁴

An argument to overcome this distinctly stagnant Anglo-French schismogenesis, needs to draw on the unresolved and encompassing terms of the discussion as they were emerging in the 1960s, or even the 1840s. As Peter Worsley, in his remarkable 1972 essay on “Fanon and the Lumpenproletariat,” forecast, the concept seemed to be destined for a clear analytical revival by forcing us to abandon “looking at the twentieth century through nineteenth-century eyes,” and by implication, what he called the “Third World” through European eyes. Worsley’s sociological turn to this new shadow added to by Fanon was already then unorthodox, and failed to manifest. Excoriating the excoriators, or those who used or heard the term in a disparaging and overly moralizing way, he notes the obvious importance of it in the world-historical context of the “explosive growth of urban populations composed of immigrants from the countryside,” where “thousands

43 Marco Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and Development in Urban Ethiopia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 114, citing “Lumpen Proletariat Here Begin New Life,” *Ethiopian Herald*, December 18, 1977.

44 Abdullah, “Rethinking African Labour,” 82; Mike Morris, “Social History and the Transition to Capitalism in the South African Countryside,” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 41 (1988); Frederick Cooper, “Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian’s Retrospective on E. P. Thompson,” *Social History* 20, no. 2 (1995); Bellucci and Freund, “Work across Africa.” I can already pre-emptively point to the best critique of a “mad” Platonism by Althusser’s harshest critic and former student, Rancière, in his “Althusser, Don Quixote, and the Stage of the Text,” originally published in 1990: “But also this anguish of speech that does not get through, of the story that doesn’t manage to be written, of men whom neither speech nor time link as subject of a story, is an old anguish, an inaugural anguish that Marxism localized and exorcized in the concept of the lumpenproletariat. Despite the praiseworthy efforts made to give it an economic-social materialist genealogy, the lumpenproletariat is first of all a phantasmagoric name, a stage name, the theatrical embodiment of all the disasters of scholarly speech, the generic name of nonmeaning, of disconnection, of non-relation. This stage name fixes non-relation in place and denies it by giving it form in the system of social relationships.” Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 139. I will readily drop any future mention of the *lumpen*, if another idea can explain *touts* and *braceros* in one go.

of new recruits flock to the favelas, *barriadas*, *bidonvilles*, and shanty-towns.” The sociological profile he gives of the new lumpenproletariat is an almost perfect characterization of both the recruiters and the recruited, broadly “petty entrepreneurial” aspirations and “unstable family” situations:

In the early days of colonialism, they had to be forced out to work on plantations and in factories. Now they go readily, [...] they have no steady jobs; they live from hand to mouth, sell a few stolen goods here and there, [...] sometimes they get a brief job as a coolie; a vast mass of them live off their relatives. Many of them come as ‘target’ workers, hoping to make money which they can invest (usually in land or in a shop) back in the village later. These people have no intention of becoming permanent city-dwellers. They are not even necessarily men who have lost their land.

Worsley opts for the term “sub-proletariat” following the French *sous-proletariat* and the cue of Amílcar Cabral who in an analysis of the social composition of Guinea chose to isolate the “easily identifiable” groups of “beggars, layabouts, prostitutes, etc.” as the “lumpen-proletariat, if we had anything in Guinea we could properly call a proletariat,” from the second type of sub-proletarians or quasi-*déclassés*, the “large number of young folk,” usually “without any training” who “come from the countryside, and retain links with it” and who do not yet form part of the “wage-earners.” To use the Cold War development economics jargon of the period, they were “unmodernized” “target workers,” that is those that wished to gain, as quickly as possible, a certain “target” sum through wage work, even if it meant heightened periods of extreme exploitation, in order to return “home” once their target had been met. On the way to and even at the “industrial” or other formal worksites, they still had to dwell in and navigate through local stratification systems such as caste and the harsh seniorities of social kinship networks, as well as what would later be called the translocal “informal economy” led by itinerant traders.⁴⁵

Worsley’s, and even Cabral’s application of the concept to African social analysis and theory, contrasts with the tactical and inspired writings of Fanon. Fanon’s positive revalorization of the “classless idlers” as a political force was extremely original: in an often cited passage he describes how the “workless less-than-men,” the “pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals,” and even the “prostitutes too, and the maids who are paid two pounds a

⁴⁵ Worsley, “Frantz Fanon and the ‘Lumpenproletariat,’” 200, 209; see also Ibrahim Abdullah, “Culture, Consciousness and Armed Conflict: Cabral’s *Déclassé*/(Lumpenproletariat?) in the Era of Globalization,” *African Identities* 4, no. 1 (2006). On “target” workers, see Elliot J. Berg, “Backward-Sloping Labor Supply Functions in Dual Economies – the Africa Case,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 75, no. 3 (1961).

month, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness,” will “throw themselves into the struggle like stout working men.” Fanon himself warns, like Engels had, that “colonialism” can readily use the lumpen to “manoeuvre” its domination by simply being “ready to pay a high price for the services of this mass” as quasi-mercenaries. Nevertheless, he leans his high hopes on this rising force of the “uprooted” urban lumpenproletarian, giving examples of the anti-vagrancy laws that intensified yet again in Kenya and Congo during the 1950s, precisely because neither “the brimming activity of the missionaries nor the decrees of the central government can check its growth.” He says plainly, echoing Stirner, without a sense of decay or decadence: “They won’t become reformed characters to please colonial society, fitting in with the morality of its rulers.”⁴⁶

The “Financial Science of the Lumpenproletariat”

What is usually missing in the lumpen-thematizing history and lumpen-adjacent social theory is the original dialectical encompassment of the “top,” which already clearly forms part of the category from the beginning, or at least starting in 1852, with the publication of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In this political analysis of the 1851 coup through which the initially elected Bonaparte would eventually crown himself the new emperor, Marx unambiguously names the strategy of his success: by becoming the “Chief of the Lumpenproletariat.” The “Chief” gained the confidence or votes of – in a wild enumerative definition of personae, legal classifiers, occupations, and souls – the

vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pick-pockets, tricksters, gamblers, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars– in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*.

Marx describes the methods Bonaparte used to “lure the masses” in the elections as the successful “speculation” on their “stupidity.” Bonaparte’s popular campaign promises consisted of the proposal to “increase the pay” of petty officers and to create a “loan bank for the workers” – “money as a gift and money as a loan.” “Gifts and loans,” he says, “these were the limits of the financial science

⁴⁶ Fanon, *Wretched*, 11, 129–130; see also Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 88.

of the lumpenproletariat, both the low and the exalted.”⁴⁷ Some of the subtlety of this remarkable passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is missed in translation; instead of “stupidity” read dullness or coarseness, “*Plattheit*”; instead of the low and the exalted read “vulgar and noble,” “*des vornehmen und des gemeinen*”; instead of “money” as a “gift” and “loan,” “*Geld geschenkt und Geld gepumpt*,” “*Schenken und Pumpen*,” read a much less formal meaning of “credit” such as shelling out or scrounging. Finally, “*Finanzwissenschaft*” was already becoming the German equivalent of political economy, so one could define the “financial science” of the lumpenproletariat as the political economy of promises of “pumped” – enthused and possibly fictitious – money.

Already in the prequel to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, a compilation of journalistic articles eventually published as *The Class Struggles in France* in 1850, Marx begins the series with an analysis of the “finance aristocracy” that had supported the ruling July Monarchy between 1830 up to the revolution of 1848, with a grotesque rendering of them as promoting “the same prostitution, the same shameless cheating, the same mania to get rich” that was “repeated in every sphere, from the Court to the Cafe Borgne, to get rich not by production, but by pocketing the already available wealth of others.” After providing graphic imagery of gambling and debauchery “where money, filth and blood commingle,” he gives the dialectal formula of the “finance aristocracy” which “in its mode of acquisition as well as in its pleasures, is nothing but the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society.”

The appearance of the dialectical element at the “top” splits the financial arm of capital into two. As Marx says, this “mode of acquisition” does not apply to the “aristocracy of finance” as such, meaning “the great [government] loan promoters” and “holders of government securities,” but rather the “series of speculations” promoted by a new “swarm of companies that have sprung up” trying to sell shares of “Californian gold” and other mining ventures, resulting in “sheer swindling which is characteristic of the French and Chinese alone.”⁴⁸ I would thus subscribe to Hal Draper’s notable but neglected emphasis that despite the weight and bent of the term, “it is not poverty that is the crux of the lumpenproletariat. It is the second meaning, suggested by ‘knave,’ which accounts for Stirner’s usages, as well as Marx and Engels’.” As Draper underscored, the same criteria applies at the dialectical “top”: capital not directly based on profits of production but on “unproductive” and “parasitic” “speculation and

⁴⁷ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 50, 57; for a different translation that renders it “Money as a gift and money on tick,” “Donations and loans” see *MECW*, Vol. 11, 149, 143.

⁴⁸ Marx, “Class Struggles in France,” 51.

swindling,” forged by the “near-criminal or extralegal excrescences” from both rich and poor, who, he adds in an orthodox vein, are as “dangerous to the long-range interests of the real capitalist class as the others are to the real proletariat.”⁴⁹

Any attempts to recover a “clean” logic of production, or separate a brazen “financial science” from the terms of colonial trade and exchange, fails, because of the characteristic lumpenproletarianization of the imperial economy itself, particularly in its “gold rush” moments. As Rosa Luxemburg says, when she first tried to note this, the “*Lumpen*” cannot be reduced to “merely a special section, a sort of social wastage which grows enormously when the walls of the social order are falling down,” because it constitutes and is generated by the new and founding elements of an expanding commercial and colonial society. Luxemburg adds, in relation to the character of the capital flowing to the colonies for the sole reason to seek much higher and thus more volatile rates of return, that the

gradations between commercial profiteering, fictitious deals, adulteration of foodstuffs, cheating, official embezzlement, theft, burglary, and robbery, flow into another in such fashion that the boundary lines between honorable citizenry and the penitentiary has disappeared. In this the same phenomenon is repeated as in the regular and rapid degeneration of bourgeois dignitaries when they are transplanted to an alien soil in an overseas colonial setting. With the stripping off of conventional barriers and props for morality and law, bourgeois society itself falls victim to direct and limitless *Verlumpung*.⁵⁰

Here, Luxemburg remarkably extends the scope of the category for the analysis of colonialism itself. As she suggests in the *Accumulation of Capital*, the “emigration of capital from the old centres to the colonies” is then “followed” by economic migrants themselves, whether the “stream of people from Europe settling in North and South America, South Africa and Australia in the nineteenth century,” or where “different modes of ‘moderate’ slavery and forced labour” was imposed by “European and North American capital” to “secure the necessary minimum of labour in the African colonies, in the West Indies, South America and the South Seas.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Draper, *Lumpenproletariat*, 35; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution Vol. II* (New York: NYU Press, 1977), 473.

⁵⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 73–74.

⁵¹ Rosa Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 121.

If *lumpenproletarianization* is not given a more expansive and dynamic role in imperial capitalism, it will remain reduced to a lens which categorically renders them as “ghostly figures outside the domain of political economy” and economic analysis, as Marx wrote in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the text of his first encounters with political economy and written before he coined the term:

political economy thus does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working man so far as he is outside this work relationship. Swindlers, thieves, beggars, the unemployed, the starving, poverty-stricken and criminal working man, are figures which do not exist for political economy but only for other eyes. [The eyes of] criminal law, doctors, religion, statistical tables, politics, and the work-house beadle.⁵²

In contrast to equilibrium-based concepts of exchange which converge on a generality, the recursive “mode of acquisition” or modality of payments in “gifts and loans” created an open-ended dynamic, every time an event. To capture this dialectic a third term must appear, one which deviates from the poles of a static opposition, whether that is between buyer and seller or between workers and employers. The term I have used, the “lumpen-broker,” is simply the “broker” prefixed by the dialectical breakdown between two commercial positions or social classes arising, as Jeffrey Mehlman notes in his precise discussion of the meaning of the term, from the “decomposition” of each pole and resulting in the “strange irruption of something lower than the low . . . at the top.”⁵³ The hyphen keeps the dual or equivocal nature of the “lumpen-broker” intact. Touts are almost by definition lumpen-brokers, engaging in *déclassé* or *Lazzaroni* brokerage operations. At the same time, the susceptible and temptable targets of recruitment were also largely drawn from the largest pools of the lumpenproletariat, as put forth by Worsley. What can be found through the concept, is not merely the inherent intrigue of their para-commercial techniques, but a fully historical understanding of how the colonial economy unfolded through its undercurrents. At times, the structure of accumulation was gained, allocated, and halted as a by-product of these techniques, almost completely.

52 Karl Marx and Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man: Including 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1961), 91.

53 Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 13.

Conclusion: Making Colonial Labor Markets

For the one dominating truth which overshadows everything else at this point is a political and economic one. The Industrial System, run by a small class of Capitalists on a theory of competitive contract, had been quite honestly established by the early Victorians and was one of the primary beliefs of Victorianism. The Industrial System, so run, had become another name for hell. By Morris's time and ever since, England has been divided into three classes: Knaves, Fools, and Revolutionists.

– G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*

the 'makers' of economic entities – of descriptions, of simulacra or provocations – are presented in a strangely anodyne, benevolent light, and all deceit, manipulation or negativity seems strangely drained out of worlds in which, at best, we see a kind of horizontal contest between practitioners. Economic reality is not just stripped of its forms of symbolic violence, power and exploitation, it also appears here largely shorn of dissimulation, malevolence, negativity – to remain in the dramatic language of performance, it largely lacks comedy, tragedy or farce, as though the sociologists of the performative turn were still too tied to a kind of value-free 'technical criticism', or straining too hard not to ...critique capitalism.

– Alberto Toscano, *Structured by Cows*

This is what I have been able to uncover and piece together: starting in the 1930s, but with important earlier anchors, a surge of touts sweep through Nigeria generating an unexpected lifeline for a new generation of Calabar middlemen trying to recoup the fortunes lost to British monopoly-capital and plunging palm oil prices; these touts sometimes promised a *dash* as a wage advance, but they simply added it to their own commission once they could drop the workers off at the Spanish Labor Office; but after mounting the largest labor trafficking network on the African coast they are effectively replaced by resident touts, who harness and radically realign an existing labor force; employers flood the market with escalating offers of advances to adept workers finishing their first or second contract, but these amounts quickly become a pittance because of post-war inflation and the lagging revisions of official wage rates, which are certainly not considered enough to compensate their first largely unpaid contract; so re-contracted workers start outmaneuvering the stipulations on capped wages and the pass-laws to pocket advances, often deserting to other plantations and signing new contracts under false names, and are joined by new illegal recruits posing as experienced hands who also receive the always increasing *dash*. Guards, guards everywhere, yet they are unaware of the hide-outs and usurped identities of illegally recruited labor and deserters and are unable to trace back the forged initial permit that was the first step to legitimately acquire other permits, because there are a

dozen offices able to issue these and many more bribed functionaries who had been selling them to touts.

How to theorize this? In a first instance, it is remarkable how the historically present mediators have been mostly lost or not pursued in the study of free and forced labor markets, fading into a new background of vertically integrated “labor supply chains” or “communities.” Not endowed with the capacity to act independently and lacking decent impulses, they were at best intermediary or passive instruments of other primary agents and forces. In histories of colonial labor regimes, recruiters have appeared as relatively simple, callous but hazy agents who somehow imposed, manipulated, and reordered the values of local societies to successfully extract labor from these. The absence of a specific theoretical engagement with this type of recruitment is even more surprising because recruiters are agents of singular historical consequence and also of profound conceptual importance, because through their techniques they set the parameters of the price and even the experience of labor.

Considered in this more encompassing way they are the fragmented mirror image of unions where syndicalism could not appear – they mediated entry and exit, deployed and cashed out on a kind of pseudo-political power arising from an artificial labor scarcity, were delegated the selection of the final place of work, and recursively managed to differentiate and pull the average working conditions in certain directions and push out other employers as a concomitant to the allocation of the advances of re-hired workers. Their deliberation and bargaining was done in extremely chaotic and in irreducibly excessively transactional ways. Their importance lies precisely in their power to affect and interfere in the organization of production and become antagonistic stumbling blocks at various junctures. They were far from a quasi-automatic stepping stone between workers and employers.

It is at the same time unnecessary but still instructive to recall how the techniques and characters of this historically emergent labor market already appear in Engels, if only to underline how distinct and accurate the schema proved to be. In *The Condition of the English Working Class*, Engels first noted the characteristics of “early stage” and “incipient” labor markets, with its “miserable wiles and subterfuges which are considered the acme of cleverness, and petty-devices of swindling and pilfering.” For the England of the 1840s, he concluded that “those tricks do not pay any longer in a large market, where time is money, and where a certain standard of commercial morality is unavoidably developed, purely as a means of saving time and trouble. And it is the same with the relation

between the manufacturer and his hands.”¹ The ongoing existence of “incipient” labor markets, or as he says elsewhere, the creation of the division of labor involved four “means”: “violence and robbery, trickery and fraud.” This sequence is a precise characterization of the steps of colonial recruitment, “by fraud, by promises, threats, violence,” as he says again, is unmistakably *ürsprungliche* or “primitive” accumulation.²

Engels starts his first *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* with precisely this insight, written in 1843, a year before the *Condition*: “Political economy came into being as a natural result of the expansion of trade, and with its appearance elementary, unscientific huckstering was replaced by a developed system of licensed fraud, an entire science of enrichment.” He describes trade relations, drawing from his own experience, as an antagonistic two-way struggle, that with the figure of the broker would constitute two separate and distinctively asymmetric relationships, to the buyer and seller, but operating with the same principles. In order to “become a direct source of gain for the trader,” there is in “every purchase and sale” a “mutual mistrust,” which leads to what he calls the two axioms or bluffs of trade: first its “secretiveness – the concealment of everything” and thus permitting one “to take the utmost advantage of the ignorance, the trust, of the opposing party,” and second, to “impute qualities to one’s commodity which it does not possess.” Thus, exchange itself acquires tout-like and highly empirical characteristics: “legalised fraud. Any merchant who wants to give truth its due can bear me witness that actual practice conforms with this theory.”³

With Engels’ ethnographic account of a “real exchange,” a more practical theory of labor exchanges and even trade can be found in this tradition. In Marx, the most elaborate characterization of trade which “multiplies money circulation” and “dissolves the old relationships” appears in Volume III of *Capital*, in particular the chapter “Historical Facts about Merchant’s Capital.” The way Marx delimits this type of non-equivalent exchange would characterize the recruiter as a mercantile agent well, as the recruiter “fixes the values of commodities,” in this case of the commodity “labor,” but also “appropriates an overwhelming portion of the surplus-product [as] a mediator” of “underdeveloped” communities. Here “commercial profit not only appears as out-bargaining and cheating, but also largely originates from them.”⁴ “Cheating”

1 Engels, *Condition*, 312.

2 Engels, “The Mark,” 1892, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1892/12/mark.htm>; Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 386.

3 Engels, “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” 418.

4 Marx, *Capital*, Volume Three, 328–329.

workers directly out of their wages, but also the outbargaining of employers through upfront commissions and advances can only appear in a labor market when the primary form of payment is conducted with “gifts and loans.”

A broad and insistent emphasis on lumpen-techniques is absent from the historically argued final section on “primitive accumulation” in Volume I of *Capital*, with its elaborate description of the early proletariat “forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes,” which coincides with only one aspect of the lumpen: “turned en masse into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination, in most cases from stress of circumstances,” “whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system.” In this “historic genesis of capitalist production,” capital “wants and uses the power of the state to ‘regulate’ wages, i.e., to force them within the limits suitable for surplus-value making,” an “essential element of the so-called primitive accumulation.” The “colonial system” here, figures along with “public debts, heavy taxes, protection, [and] commercial wars” as the state-birthed engendering of “industry,” were labor, “like [for] the royal navy” was “recruited by means of the press-gang.”⁵

Wages did not fall or rise with the market as they were pre-set by the labor legislation and were only irregularly revised upwards. This was the “essential element” of the indentured contract. Nevertheless, the commissions and advances moved rapidly and created the traps and bonanzas of the labor market in formation. These two extremes constantly crystallized in the Gulf of Guinea, and direct our attention to the actions of the mediators of these two systematic potentials. Precisely because wages were capped via top-down and state-regulated contracts, a necessary surplus of money emerged from it. This “pumped” money spread through the actions and visions of recruiters, who turned advances into a great many false promises or considered the rising *dash* of experienced workers as just another opportunity to seize a smaller but overall inflating share of labor costs being paid out by employers. This “surplus” is constitutive of the irrevocable and imposed contract, which releases a commission and the possibility of advances.

The “release” forged an almost century-long dynamic of recruitment in Fernando Po with its distinctly “peaceful” recruiting techniques. As Samita Sen says so precisely in relation to her study of indentured recruitment for Assam and elsewhere: “what was at issue was not so much the capacity of market penetration to loosen workers from the land but an excess of commercialized labor mobilization, over which neither the planters nor the state was able to establish ef-

5 Marx, *Capital*, 701, 537.

fective control.”⁶ Moulier Boutang refers to this as a “heightened” commodified character of labor in the mercantile sense of the term: “forms of unfree labor (workers under peonage, or workers tied to their employers through debt bondage) resembles more what economists and merchants have historically called a market than the very paradoxical market of free wage-labor.”⁷ The post-emancipation concern with the impermissibly excessive commercialization of labor was reflected on the surface of the new order of contracts which formally suppressed what it structurally generated – the continuing wholesale purchase of people and the possibility of workers treating themselves as their own speculative commodity. The measure of this “excess” is purely its price, achieved by a kind of arbitrage and speculation without entering the world of production. The price of labor was not based on a simple traffic of equivalents formalized in money, labor as just another barter-commodity, nor on any consistent or averaged labor theory of value-based exploitation. Contracts were not simply more or less opaque options of rational choice or market-mediated necessities backed by outward facing legal frameworks or the generalized monetization of social reproduction.

It was entirely historical forces that created the horizon in which new labor would be priced. The contract led directly to the clumping, bundling and intervals of wage payments, which drove the recruiter-driven labor market. Within this contract form, the search for the price in the search for labor involved the massive imprint of the brokers who created the social form of volatile new markets. Absolute windfalls and total failures were both common outcomes. It is the variations in the final price, and its subdivisions and allocations, that should preoccupy us because this price mechanism directly shows the extreme and unstable political power of the imperial order. The instability revealed by examining recruiting techniques is impossible to see if wage payments simply take place on the abstract economic “stage” of exchange without the context of the concrete roles and power relations within semi-anonymous and impersonal markets. Recruiters and their mediation of wage payments not only contradicted the colonial self-image of free or regulated contracts, but also exposed the contradictions of imperial capitalism itself, which is to say, they thwarted colonial ideology and permitted its economy to develop explosively towards its collapse.

Touts thus revealed the historical “truth” about the imperial mode of production and rendered any attempts at marrying liberal ideology and imperial capitalism fully incompatible. Touts also exposed the false consignment of unfree

6 Sen, “Commercial Recruiting,” 11.

7 Moulier-Boutang, “Unfree Labor.”

labor into an unpolitical history. They combined the wage contract and the labor question, its “scarcity” vis-à-vis an imperially propelled new demand, into a dramatic circulation and determination of the closing price of labor, where the location of the contradiction between capital and labor outside of the strike could take hold. They generated wealth on the move, at a distance from both capital and labor. Touts could confound and reroute imperial economics – they spotted gaps and pushed it and its principally paper-based surveillance apparatus to extremes. The political economy of contracts within a labor scarcity was weaved and laced with autonomous intermediaries that could contradict – add loopholes and shortcuts – and cause the entire “economic force” of the colony to, alternately, intensify or crumble. They compromised channels, found its weakest link, and made visible the foundations and inconsistency of a colonial capitalist mode of production that had tried to distance itself from slavery and issue the false inauguration of the era of free labor.

Recruiters appear between perpetual and punctuated labor, between the permanent and unpaid labor of the “slave” and the daily payments to casual, precarious and self-assembling “free labor.” On either end of this theoretical and metaphorical spectrum there is no need for recruiters. However, only by considering the extreme distribution of the structure of payment within recruited labor is it possible to conceptually suspend the poles of the “free” and “unfree” labor spectrum and gain a closer insight into the variety of recruiter-driven labor markets. On both ends of this recruiter-only spectrum the wage suddenly disappears: the absolute commission, a fully parasitic owner, and the absolute advance, receiving payments before having done any work whatsoever. The way the wage of contract labor was consequently lumped and dispensed directly led to the expansion of commodified labor and the unfolding of the “real” price of labor, through the handling of the “excess” generated from the contract, the commissions and the *dash*.

It is remarkable how much of this volatility and political potential simply disappears when touts are considered to be merely a component of “high transaction costs.” The now hegemonic new institutional economics of Douglass C. North considers contracts, formally enforced by external third parties or the state, as lowering uncertainty and liabilities and thus reducing transactions costs. In the labor market, all the extra steps and costs imposed by brokerage and their financial elements, such as advances and the imprecise calculations of returns, are usually said to be merely reflections of an intense scarcity or an artificial border, occurring only in booming sectors where labor was in great demand, where a business had a high labor turnover, or where work was remote and inhospitable – but without giving theoretical weight to the many possible and impermissible twists. As John Holt, Frederick Cooper and Rebecca

Scott say in *Beyond Slavery*, in relation to situations of “intimidation and deception” that “led the poor of Asia or Africa into boats headed, like the slave ships, for the West Indies or the sugar islands of the Indian Ocean-or, later, the cocoa islands off Central Africa,” such movements arose simply where “labor was not readily available in the right place” or “at the right price.”⁸ All this is lost too when recruited labor is considered either an upgraded substitution of slavery or the imperfect new generalization of free labor; a dubious fog or blurry middle. The contract manufactured both the status of the worker and the dynamism that would make these appear via a new generation of recruiters. One can even speak of the contract or recruiter-contract mode of labor production, much like land was the underlying leverage in serfdom or property the ultimate tool in slavery. The base of this colonial economy was the contract, or beyond it but with the same effects, the configurations of sovereignty and money creation.

⁸ Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 22–23. A related literature has considered “this kind of labor scarcity” to be “only a problem in the colonial agricultural periphery of an expanding capitalist universe,” Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor*, 5; where “only” designates a world being draped in enclaves of export and exploitation that exploded beyond the Caribbean heartlands with the formal abolition of slavery, an expansive implanting of an “immense accumulation of commodities” and the wholesale creation of new labor-intensive sectors, such as shipping and freight or logging and mineral extraction along new commodity frontiers requiring mass and medium-term relocation of workers and portage, and the commercial farms and plantations growing all sorts of industrial and consumer crops such as cotton, palm oil, rubber, cocoa, coffee, etc., each employing from a few to several hundred workers, rarely if ever locally sourced, situated in a patchwork of slopes, valleys, islands across different imperial territories on various continents: i.e. what one may properly call the global economy.