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**CONTESTED INSTITUTIONS AND THE LIMITS TO STATE POWER: EARLY COLONIAL
NATURAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN THE CONGO, 1890-1914***

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In a perceptive critique of the contribution which New Institutional Economics has made to our understanding of the economic history of developing nations, Robert Bates has argued that the approach, despite claims to the contrary, has suffered from an inadequate treatment – in contrast to the attention paid to rent seeking and the reduction of transaction costs – of politics, social conflict, and power disparities as major determinants of institutional design and economic change.¹ In the present paper, I follow Bates in arguing that the development of economic institutions in early colonial Congo (the Etat Indépendant du Congo and its successor, the Belgian Congo, prior to the First World War) answered to inherently political rationalities. More specifically, I argue that an understanding of the making of the Congolese colonial economy requires engagement with the state not just as an arena in which various interest groups competed for influence, but as an organization subject to severe internal and external constraints and limitations. The fragility of the emerging colonial state itself, and its dependence on local collaborators and international capital, should play an important part in any explanation of the specific forms under which natural resource extraction took place. While it may be justified to emphasize the long-term consequences of the colonial state's 'choice' of institutions, it should not be assumed that it possessed either the freedom or capacity to design and enforce an institutional framework which best suited its needs.

* Versions of this paper were presented during 2010 at the workshop on Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development, University of Utrecht; and the African Economic History Workshop at the LSE, and – in a cruder form – at the 2008 interdisciplinary symposium 'The Quest for Natural Resources in Central Africa: the Case of the Mining Sector in the Democratic Republic of the Congo' at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

¹ Robert H. Bates, 'Social dilemmas and rational individuals: an assessment of the New Institutionalism' in John Harriss, Janet Hunter and C. M. Lewis, eds, *The New Institutional Economics and Third World Development* (London: Routledge, 1995), 27-48. To a certain extent Bates' pessimistic account is belied by the fact that politics features prominently in several contributions to the same volume, notably those by Khan, Clarence-Smith and Booth.

There is, of course, nothing novel about the suggestion that the incorporation of the Congo basin into international economic networks centered on Europe served political goals and was achieved by coercive, political means. The centrality of the colonial state, particularly in its coercive capacity, is a constant in the historiography on the Congolese colonial political economy.² This focus on state action finds its origin in European conceptions of sovereignty and the pathos of state building characteristic of colonial doctrine. The transformative ethos inherent in colonial ideology credited the emerging state with the power to create order out of chaos and mould the future development of African societies.³ In taking over this transformative project, post-war developmentalism also stressed the role the state had to play in guiding its subjects towards a brighter future. Marxist and dependency scholars have criticised the colonial state's failure to live up to its promise of leading Africans from meagre self-sufficiency to prosperous interdependence, but they too have tended to attribute a central, albeit more negative role to the state in engineering the country's underdevelopment and cementing its subservience to European capital and industry.⁴ Due to the comatose state in which the historiography on the political economy of the Congo basin under colonial rule has found itself in since the 1980s, state-centred narratives, often of a Marxist bent, have not been updated to reflect changed circumstances on the ground or research trends in African history over the past three decades.⁵

The study of the organisation of early colonial natural resource extraction is a case in point. In the case of wild rubber, the overwhelming historiographical focus has been

² Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

³ Capacities which are summed up in the 'Bula Matari' label, which state officials enthusiastically self-applied. See Osumaka Likaka, *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

⁴ Frederick Cooper, 'Africa and the World Economy' *African Studies Review* 24, 2-3 (1981), 1-86.

⁵ Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Le Zaïre à la Périphérie du Capitalisme: Quelques Perspectives Historiques', *Enquêtes et Documents d'Histoire Africaine*, 1 (1975), 114-51, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'Zaire enters the World System: its Colonial Incorporation as the Belgian Congo, 1885-1960' in Guy Gran (ed.), *Zaire: the Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), 29-54, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'Raison d'état ou Raison du Capital: l'Accumulation Primitive au Congo belge', *African Economic History*, 12 (1981), 157-83, Jean-Phillipe Peemans, 'Capital accumulation in the Congo under Colonialism: the Role of the State' in Peter Duignan and Lewis Henry Gann (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960. The Economics of Colonialism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 165-212, Young, *The African Colonial State*.

on organized state violence as a means to maximize output, while more generally the narrative has centered on the decisive role the colonial administration played in processes of 'primitive accumulation'.⁶ Through an engineered deflation of the economic carrying capacity of the countryside, so the argument runs, the state provided metropolitan capitalist enterprise with the low-wage ultraexploitable labour it needed for the profitable exploitation of the country's natural produce and mineral deposits. Africans were forcefully integrated into the international economy as dependent producers of raw materials, while openings for indigenous enterprise and capital accumulation were closed off.⁷

While this account works as a stylized history of long-term trends, it is inadequate as a historical explanation. It is largely at odds with the view, now widely accepted, that colonial administrations were 'ramshackle operations' whose power was negotiated and circumscribed, and fails to take into account the resilience of pre-existing forms of social and economic organisation as well as Africans' ability to negotiate changing opportunities and constraints.⁸ Whether the overarching narrative is one of modernisation or underdevelopment, colonialism is often depicted as a package deal abstracted from real historical choices and unimpeded by African resistance, structural constraints or internal contradictions. Crucially, the reduction of Congolese colonial history to a direct consequence of the objective interests of a 'colonial bloc' concedes far more power, efficiency, and foresight to the colonial administration than can be historically justified.⁹ Colonial officials did as much blundering as plundering, internal disagreement and muddled thinking led to inconsistent policies and, more importantly, the numerous internal and external constraints with which administrators

⁶ Jewsiewicki, 'Raison d'Etat'.

⁷ These are themes which can be easily taken up in a new institutional economics perspective.

⁸ Bruce J. Berman, 'Review: The Perils of Bula Matari: Constraint and Power in the Colonial State', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), 556-70; Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history', *American Historical Review*, 99, 5 (1994), 1516-45; Cooper, 'Africa and the World Economy'.

⁹ Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Hégémonies en Construction - Articulations entre Etat et Entreprises dans le Bloc Colonial Belge (1908-1960)', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16, 2 (1982), 313-30 ; Bruce Fetter, *L'Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, 1920-1940: le Mise en Place d'une Sous-Culture Totalitaire* (Bruxelles: Cahiers du CEDAF, 1973).

were confronted severely limited their power to mould the societies under their care.¹⁰ That such limitations applied with particular force at a time when the state had only just started to consolidate its newly won power needs no further elaboration.

That is not to say, of course, that the colonial state was not an important actor in the extraction of the Congo's raw materials. Of course it was. It provided basic security to European capital, granted and secured its property rights over conquered land and natural resources, created and (unevenly) enforced a recognizable legal framework under which it could operate, and intervened actively and often ruthlessly in the mobilization of African labour. It is in the field of African labour, which played a pivotal role in European civilizing ideologies and, conveniently, also enabled the extraction of resources on which the financial viability of colonial rule depended, that state intervention was especially active.¹¹ However, while representatives of the colonial system were often important players in the social transformations which marked the region's short colonial century, the state was not at the centre of all that happened within its borders.

This is not a new insight. African historians have a long history of being distrustful of state-centred narratives, but this attitude is most often translated into an abandonment of the state as a subject of analysis in favour of alternative, more 'African', units of social organisation such as lineage, kinship or ethnic groups.¹² However, claiming that the historiographical importance of the state is out of sync with its historical significance is itself a historical statement which requires a more direct assessment of the extent, nature and limitations of its role in shaping Congolese societies. Ironically, the abandonment of the field has left assumptions about the developmental potential

¹⁰ Geoffrey Kay, *Development and Underdevelopment : a Marxist Analysis* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975) and Anne Phillips, *The Enigma of Colonialism : British policy in West Africa* (London ; Bloomington, Ind: J. Currey : Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹¹ William J. Samarin, *The Black Man's Burden. African Colonial Labor on the Congo and Ubangi Rivers, 1880-1900* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); David Northrup, *Beyond the Bend in the River: African Labor in Eastern Zaire, 1865-1940* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1988) ; Samuel Henry Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880-1940* (Athens: Center for International Studies. Africa series, 1994); Charles Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa : Industrial Strategies and the Evolution of an African proletariat in the Copperbelt, 1911-41* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1979); John Higginson, *A Working Class in the making: Belgian Colonial Labour Policy and the African Mineworker, 1907-1951* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

¹² They have also largely abandoned questions of political economy, to the frustration of A. G. Hopkins, 'The New Economic History of Africa', *Journal of African History*, 50, 2 (2009), 155-177.

of the state untested, allowing the persistence of skewed historical memories which are distinctly unhelpful in determining future possibilities.

How important was the state in shaping the contours of natural resource extraction in early colonial Congo? Inspired by the thought that putting the state in its appropriate context requires thinking with as well as beyond it, the state will figure prominently in this paper which, through two case studies, offers a very concise overview of the exploitation of Congolese natural resources during the first decades of colonial rule. Each case study serves to make a different point. The first one, the predatory wave of wild rubber extraction, highlights how the structural and financial weakness of the Congo Free State (CFS), a 'failed state' in its own right, contributed to the development of a warlord economy displaying the familiar characteristics of local militias parasitizing on their environment. My argument here is that the spiralling violence associated with the rubber system was as much a consequence of distinct weaknesses in the organizational architecture of the state, as it was of colonial economic rationality and the legal framework designed by the metropolitan central administration and, hence, that a study of economic policy is incomplete without a discussion of the former. The second case-study, the development of the Katanga copper mining industry and the mobilisation of its labour force, further develops the idea that state policies were firmly imbedded in, and constrained by, a series of local, regional and international struggles and contexts. State intervention in the extractive industries was determined and circumscribed as much by (constructed) political necessities as by strictly economic imperatives. In terms of economic implications and institutional development, this brief survey presents us with the contradictory spectacle of a weak colonial administration disposing of a narrow range of policy options heavily impacting upon Congolese societies.

I.

While the exact nature of the link between economics and empire is still hotly debated, it seems well established that what Europeans sought in Africa was not so

much new export markets as fresh supplies of raw materials.¹³ While the potential for market expansion was a useful argument for binding export manufacturers to the colonial cause, Africa's place in international trade flows remained relatively marginal throughout the colonial period even as the continent developed into a major exporter of natural resources. This preoccupation was mirrored in a colonial ideology proclaiming the natural right of 'civilized' peoples to develop resources which would be left to lie idle under the management of societies with a lower level of 'social efficiency'.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, when faced with the choice between cheap labour policies keeping down the price of raw materials or the encouragement of free labour and produce markets increasing African purchasing power, colonial policy makers tended to favour the former.¹⁵

Even if its ambitions were initially ill-defined, Leopoldian colonialism was an integral part of this European scramble for resources. Driven by the desire to obtain the capital with which to pursue an autonomous imperial policy for and within Belgium, and armed with little more than a selective reading of an obsolete Dutch colonial system (characterized by the transfer of surpluses from plantation agriculture to the motherland) and the impressionistic information provided by a handful of European travellers, the King successfully secured exclusive political and economic rights over most of the Congo basin.¹⁶ Even though Congolese peoples, in addition to their earlier unfortunate role as a reservoir of slave labour for the Atlantic system, were already indirectly linked to Europe as exporters of palm products, ivory, copal and some rubber, little was known in Europe about the geography or natural resources of the region, and even less of this information had trickled down to Leopold and his

¹³ See Vincent Viaene, 'King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860–1905', *Journal of Modern History*, 80 (2008), 741–90 for a convincing analysis of the political and socio-cultural roots of Leopoldian colonialism.

¹⁴ As in the classic statements by Benjamin Kidd and Frederick Lugard.

¹⁵ The tension between low wage policies and the colonizers' duty to improve the moral and material wellbeing of their African subjects was felt by some administrators, and was an occasional source of conflict.

¹⁶ Jean Stengers, 'King Leopold's Imperialism' in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 248–76; Jean Stengers, 'Léopold II et le Modèle Colonial Hollandais', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 1 (1977), 46–71. Leopold was of course bound by the Berlin Treaty to open his territory to free trade, but the treaty left the door open to other ways in which particular economic interests could be favoured.

advisors.¹⁷ However, limited knowledge was generously compensated by a multitude of theories and an equally rich imagery.¹⁸ Geologists dreamt up a gold belt extending from the Transvaal to the Gold Coast, and explorers talked in glowing terms of the region's agricultural and mineral potential, at times depicting a veritable promised land for white settlement in the process.¹⁹ While 'virgin Africa' exerted a powerful attraction to romantics and speculators exploiting defective information flows, the absence of reliable information proved an important and enduring deterrent to large-scale capital investment.²⁰

Partially due to the legitimate timidity of European investors and entrepreneurs, Leopold's hopes for immediate profits from the export of tropical produce were not realized. Despite the intensification and attempted monopolization of the trade in (or confiscation of) ivory, the Congo State experienced severe financial difficulties, aggravated by undue expansionism and managerial inefficiency.²¹ From the 1890s onwards, state bankruptcy was famously avoided by capitalizing fully on the sudden surge in world demand for wild rubber. The forceful extraction of rubber from the equatorial forest was the first large-scale mobilization of Congolese labour for market production, and the CFS quickly became famous for the violence which accompanied

¹⁷ Roger Anstey, *Britain and the Congo in the nineteenth century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁸ Jean Stengers, 'Le Katanga et le mirage de l'or' in, *Etudes africaines offertes à Henri Brunschwig* (Paris: 1982),

¹⁹ E.g. Archives Africaines (AA), Brussels, RF 1713 (*Mémoire sur l'Etat Scientifique de la Question des Gisements Aurifères Exploitable*, 1896) and AA RF 1709, various notes on prospecting. Also see Felice Bellotti, *Fabulous Congo* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd., 1954) for a late example: 'The immense wealth of the Congo is still waiting for the work necessary to exploit it and to place it at the disposal of the human race [...] There is in the Congo a potential job for hundreds of thousands of men [...] the marvel of agriculture could transform the plains and the jungle into fertile fields, but this needs [...] arms, hearts and minds impossible to find among the indolent, superstitious and ignorant negro race which has halted in time, is opposed to all progress and is fast anchored to a way of life much more akin to that of animals than of men'. In many ways Africa has always been the 'potential continent', awaiting the right moment for its riches to be unlocked.

²⁰ Arguably, the speculative element was never completely ostracized from investment in Africa. Unsubstantiated optimism could be productive too: investment in the Katanga copper mines and its railway links initially relied on grossly unrealistic expectations of potential profit. Also see Jean Stengers, 'Le Katanga et le Mirage de l'or' in *Etudes africaines offertes à Henri Brunschwig* (Paris: 1982).

²¹ Jean Stengers and Jan Vansina, 'King Leopold's Congo, 1886-1908' in Roland Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa. Volume 6: from 1870 to 1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 315-58.

it.²² The Congo Atrocity accusations, directed primarily at a demonic King Leopold, a spade-bearded megalomaniac of great cunning but dubious morals, resound until this day.²³ While the King and his entourage bear undeniable responsibility for the Free State's pernicious administration, historical analysis does not end with the identification of villains. As a historical phenomenon, mass violence in the CFS was more complex, and understanding it requires a more sophisticated approach to the functioning of the state.²⁴

The analysis of Edmund Dene Morel, a prolific writer and active campaigner against the Free State's forced labour policies, remains influential. Morel's was a legalistic view on the issue: the violence prevailing in the Congo was a direct result of the laws decreed in Brussels to satisfy the King's pecuniary concerns. These laws alienated large tracts of land from their African occupants and instituted a labour tax by which the rubber they contained could be gathered.²⁵ While this may work as a structural explanation, it is not a historical one; though charming in its simplicity, it is monocausal and Eurocentric. The everyday reality of rubber exploitation was defined less by its legal underpinnings than by the methods devised to obtain high levels of production. A more searching historical analysis would look at how such plunder economies developed locally, which alternative policy options were considered, where ideas on labour policy originated, how pressures from Brussels were

²² Railway construction and portage services had already severely impacted the Lower Congo District.

²³ Most famously in Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1999). Other recent works include Martin Ewans, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe. Leopold II, The Congo Free State and its Aftermath*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Jean-Luc Vellut (ed.), *La Mémoire du Congo: le Temps Colonial* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 2005), and Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Voor Rubber en Ivoor. Leopold II en de Ophanging van Stokes* (Leuven: Van Halewijck, 2005). Reflections on the controversy in Belgium can be found in Michel Dumoulin, *Leopold II, un Roi Génocidaire?* (Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 2005) and Geert Castryck, 'Whose History is History? Singularities and Dualities of the Public Debate on Belgian Colonialism' in Csaba Lévai (ed.), *Europe and the World in European Historiography* CLIOHRES, 2006), 71-88.

²⁴ For a more sustained analysis than the one which follows, see Aldwin Roes, 'Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo, 1885-1908', *South African Historical Journal*, 64, 4 (2010), forthcoming; Jean-Luc Vellut, 'La Violence Armée dans l'Etat Indépendant du Congo. Ténèbres et Clartés dans l'Histoire d'un Etat Conquérant', *Cultures et Développement*, 16, 3 (1984), 671-707 and Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Réflexions sur la Question de la Violence dans l'Histoire de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo' in P. M Mantuba-Ngoma (ed.), *La Nouvelle Histoire du Congo: Mélanges Eurafricains Offerts à Frans Bontinck* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 269-87.

²⁵ Edmund D. Morel, 'The 'Commercial' Aspect of the Congo Question', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 3, 12 (1904), 430-48 and Edmund D. Morel, *Red Rubber. The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906).

transmitted and mediated, what structural constraints the taxation of African societies presented to state agents, what roles were allocated to (or claimed by) which African mediators and collaborators, and what influence such relationships had on the development of a brutal system of exploitation. In short, rather than drawing strict lines around a unique evil sprawling from the mind of the King of the Belgians, thorough historical analysis incorporates features and shortcomings (conceptions of the state, scientific racism, modernizing ideologies) which the CFS shared with other colonial regimes as well as the crucial importance of local societies and dynamics, some of which were related to, but not controlled by, the colonial regime.²⁶

While these arguments cannot be fully developed here, it is worth sharing some of the elements which such an approach throws up:

1. Since his priorities were never in Africa, but in Belgium, Leopold was both reluctant to tie up long-term capital in the Congo and determined to obtain quick and sizeable returns. The resulting capital shortage heavily affected the organization and functioning of the colonial administration: as well as inciting a continuous rush for the collection of easy revenue, it significantly weakened the fabric of the state. The loose network of posts backed up by mobile military columns was grossly inadequate for the routinized exercise of state power, central support and control functions were reduced to a minimum, communications remained poor and state officials and armed forces were inadequately provisioned, often leading them to fend for themselves. The state thus fragmented into a number of semi-autonomous plunder economies, with officials who were forced into a parasitic relation with their environment, scrambling for the food, labour and revenues they required.
2. The weakness of the state was also related to the structural characteristics of the African societies over which it established its sovereignty. While Congolese societies were both dynamic and diverse, their largely subsistence

²⁶ Morel defined the problem in such a way that it excluded criticism of British colonial policy. See Kevin Grant, *A Civilized Savagery. Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884-1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Bernard Porter, *Critics of empire : British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa, 1895-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Frederick Cooper, 'From Free Labor to Family Allowances: Labor and African society in Colonial Discourse', *American Ethnologist*, 16, 4 (1989), 745-65. The position that the CFS owed its uniqueness to Leopold is echoed in Jean Stengers, 'The Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo before 1914' in Lewis Henry Gann and Peter Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa (1870-1960)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 261-92.

based economies simply did not generate the surpluses required to support a strong state apparatus. To the paucity of taxable trade was added the difficulty of obtaining labour from societies which were not structurally compelled to provide it.²⁷ As African workers were able to flee, migrate or retreat into subsistence production, they could be difficult to control and discipline, thus complicating the regular employment of wage labour. Confronted with the same difficulties, a new breed of African rulers had discovered that the possibilities for surplus accumulation through slave-raiding and plundering were often greater than those of directly organizing economic production. Similarly, the limited arsenal of disciplinary methods which its inability to establish direct control over the movements and activities of its African subjects left at the state's disposal goes some way towards explaining the reversion to terror tactics in the extraction of revenues.²⁸

3. The exercise of state power relied heavily on the assistance of African rulers which were formally incorporated into the colonial system as *chefs indigènes*. Cultural affinities as well as a preference for centralised political systems tended to predispose colonial administrators in favour of that new kind of political ruler, such as the Songye ruler Lumpungu, whose ascent to power was closely associated with the extension of the slave frontier.²⁹ While these chiefs could mediate the incorporation of their subjects into the colonial order, they also used their privileged position to shift the burden of colonial tax and labour demands to slaves and subjected peoples, thus further deepening tensions and conflict within and between African societies.
4. African intermediaries not only mattered to the physical exercise of state power, but also made up the channels through which information on the region, its peoples, their practices and suitable methods of administration was

²⁷ Cooper, 'Africa and the World Economy'; Ralph Austen, *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* (London: James Currey, 1987); Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Le Mise en Dépendance de l'Afrique Noire', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 61-62 (1976), 7-58.

²⁸ Jan Breman, 'Primitive Racism in a Colonial Setting', Jan Breman (ed.), *Imperial Monkey Business : Racial Supremacy in Social Darwinist Theory and Colonial Practice* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990). Jock McCulloch, 'Empire and Violence, 1900-1939' in Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220-239 expands the argument to other colonial contexts.

²⁹ Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, 'Un chef Songye face au pouvoir colonial: le cas de Lumpungu (1892-1919)', *Cahiers de Tunisie*, 33, 3-4 (1985), 49-70.

gathered. The prevalence of Zanzibaris and Afro-Arabs among these culture brokers facilitated the pernicious process of borrowing, extending and adapting the economic organisation of the Eastern slave frontier for the benefit of the CFS. The racism displayed by these Islamized 'Wangwana' towards the pagan 'Washenzi' resonated well with European racial conceptions, facilitating processes of dehumanization which enabled the commitment of extreme and sometimes sadistic acts of violence.³⁰ The adoption and extension of the Afro-Arab 'sentry system', involving the stationing of armed state auxiliaries inside village communities, frequently led to usurpation or erosion of chiefly power and the further fragmentation of political units, rendering the exercise of state power by indirect means more difficult on the long term.

Other limits to European intervention also merit attention. While the state's exactions did undermine African reproduction, there was no direct intervention in the vast field of subsistence production, no real separation of African cultivators from their land, no generalization of private property rights or capitalist transformation of agriculture. The state-capital combine, it turns out, was too weak to realize a total social and economic transformation of Congolese societies and would later shy away from the task altogether. Below the surface of self-legitimising discourses stressing the creative force of the state over the structural constraints under which it operated, a strong current of continuity in African forms of social and economic organisation can be observed.³¹ The CFS's reach and impact was also highly uneven, weighing most heavily on the Lower Congo and some of the more accessible rubber districts.

Be that as it may, the suffering engendered by the ruthless exploitation of wild rubber was only part of a widespread wave of violence and hardship accompanying the colonial shock.³² Due to a combination of factors, the demographic effect of the first decades of colonial rule was nothing short of devastating and the territory found itself

³⁰ Vellut, 'La Violence Armée'; Breman, 'Primitive Racism'; Jules Marchal, *L'Etat Libre du Congo: Paradis Perdu. L'Histoire du Congo 1876-1900* (Borgloon: Paula Bellings, 1996).

³¹ A point also made by Northrup, *Beyond the Bend*. Also see Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Likaka, *Naming Colonialism*.

³² According to Coquery-Vidrovitch this got worse before it got better: in her opinion African immiseration intensified until the 1920s. 'Le Mise en Dépendance'.

drained of manpower and resources without much meaningful compensation. This crisis could all too easily be explained away as an unfortunate but inevitable transitional phase associated with the incorporation of previously isolated societies into the international capitalist system.³³ Such abstractions are not very helpful. While the dynamics of the CFS can usefully be conceived as processes of ‘creative destruction’, exactly what was being destroyed and what was created in its place very much resulted from a multitude of concrete decisions which cannot be grasped in a tradition-modernity dichotomy.³⁴

II.

Partially due to the financial success of rubber harvesting, mineral prospecting – which really meant tapping into native knowledge – had scarcely begun in earnest by the early Twentieth Century.³⁵ The sparsity of geographical information gathered by white administrators during the first decades of colonial rule is in itself revealing of the limits to their control over Congolese economic life. The colouring in of the geological map of the Congo really started in earnest in 1902, when reports from British prospectors in Katanga confirmed the presence of some gold and vast reserves of copper there.³⁶ The readiness of British businessmen to invest their capital in the development of these resources did much to stimulate the interest of the Congo State authorities in the location and exploitation of mineral deposits.³⁷ Over the next two decades state as well as private prospecting parties located the majority of mineral

³³ Vellut, ‘Réflexions sur la Question’.

³⁴ Cooper, ‘Africa and World Economy’.

³⁵ On prospecting see John Bensley Thornhill, *Adventures in Africa under the British, Belgian and Portuguese Flags* (London: John Murray, 1915); Robert Rich Sharp, *Early days in Katanga* (Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, 1956).

³⁶ Belgian sponsored scientific missions had already located and mapped some of the copper deposits, but did not consider them of immediate economic value.

³⁷ The interest of British capital in Congolese deposits was itself a belated consequence of the effects of the 1895/6 crisis in the South African and Rhodesian mining industry as it affected the cluster of free standing companies associated with the firm of Robert Williams & Co, mining engineers. Following a period of retrenchment, amalgamation and consolidation, continued poor performance and a lack of fresh investment opportunities in the Southern Rhodesia and the Rand led Robert Williams to look increasingly further north for financial salvation.

deposits around which a more stable export economy would be built during the remainder of the colonial period.³⁸

The transformation from a plunder economy towards one in which substantial investments were made in mining and plantation agriculture took several years to materialize. At first, the British mining financier Robert Williams had experienced considerable difficulties in convincing the Free State government that it would be worth their while to facilitate investment in the mining sector.³⁹ In part, this hesitancy can be explained by the tension between such capital intensive development and the monopolizing tendencies of Leopoldian colonialism. Following a familiar pattern, Leopold had wished the state itself to locate and exploit the country's mineral wealth, for example suggesting at one point that some of the richest Katangan copper mines should be transferred to the *Domaine de la Couronne* in recognition of his sovereign rights.⁴⁰ It was up to the King's advisors to explain that the long maturation period of mining investment conflicted with the meagre resources at the state's disposal as well as Leopold's own unwillingness to tie up his capital. As the financial groups on which the unlocking of the Congo's mineral wealth inevitably depended insisted on considerable autonomy and security, the state had to satisfy itself with a (still sizeable) share in profits while its economic role shifted from direct exploitation to the facilitation of capitalist enterprise without direct interference in corporate management.⁴¹

³⁸ Jean-Luc Vellut, *Les Bassins Miniers de l'Ancien Congo Belge. Essai d'Histoire Economique et Sociale (1900-1960)* (Bruxelles: CEDAF, 1981).

³⁹ Simon Ellis Katzenellenbogen, *Railways and the Copper Mines of Katanga* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Robert Clarke Hutchinson and George Martelli, *Robert's people : the Life of Sir Robert Williams, bart, 1860-1938* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971).

⁴⁰ Note Leopold 23 Feb 1902, AA RF 1709. Contrary to the copper mines, the gold mines of Kilo and Moto, which relied largely on manual labour, were placed under direct state control. Northrup, *Beyond the Bend*; Vellut, 'Les Bassins Miniers'.

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Vellut, *Articulations entre Entreprises et l'Etat: Pouvoirs Hégémoniques dans le Bloc Colonial Belge (1908-1960)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'Raison d'Etat ou Raison du Capital'. This shift was facilitated by Belgian annexation of the EIC in 1908 and the ascendancy, under colonial minister Jules Renkin, of a more liberal conception of colonial policy. It also came at a time when the development of revenue-yielding economic activity had advanced far enough to enable the administration to meet its fiscal needs by indirect means, though still supplemented by gold from Kilo and Moto.

Besides changes in the state's relation to capital, the shift to mining and plantation agriculture also led to changes in strategies of labour mobilization and control. Mining development and the construction of railways necessitated the raising of considerable funds on European capital markets and the regular servicing of debts. Company solvency therefore depended on more precise economic planning, reliable calculations, and predictable production rates – goals which would remain elusive without direct supervision of the production process and stricter control over African labour. In a capital-intensive mining industry labour shortages, large scale desertion, low worker productivity and the high degree of 'labour wastage' through death, accidents and disease inevitably became matters of concern to mining bosses and colonial officials. In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly discuss the imperfect and changing ways in which Europeans sought to deal with such issues before the First World War, paying particular attention to the limits to state power, the constraints of its external environment and the absence of a unitary vision on African labour within the colonial construct.

For practical as well as ideological reasons wage labour was preferred over forced labour for most mining and construction work. As African workers were not 'free' in the Marxist sense of being freed from the means of production, their labour remained embedded within a system of constraints forcing their regular participation in the cash economy.⁴² Direct and indirect compulsion persisted after Belgian annexation of the Free State, but was mostly externalized from the colonial system proper. Labour legislation instead focused on the relation between employer and employee, and the modalities of the contract which bound them together. This focus on temporary and freely enacted contracts enabled officials to see themselves as neutral arbiters equitably enforcing the observation of contractual obligations by Africans and mining bosses alike while the locus of coercion shifted to African societies themselves. Labour recruiters and state officials provided strong incentives to new or old 'native chiefs' to ensure a supply of workers commensurate with demand, while failure to do so was construed as an act of opposition to the colonial state which justified military

⁴² Julia Seibert, 'More continuity than change? New forms of unfree labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908–1930' in Marcel van der Linden, ed, *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations. The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

repression.⁴³ As African rulers' alternative means of income were often undermined, sustaining their wealth and power increasingly depended on their services to the colonial state.⁴⁴ However, by maintaining that in mobilizing labour chiefs relied on their 'traditional' authority, the state could excuse itself from scrutinizing their use of direct and indirect coercion. As a result, official sources contain very little information on this vast area of African labour mobilization.

Yet, it is clear that the reliance on chiefly power significantly influenced the market for African labour in terms both of the kind of worker available for employment (in terms of gender, physical properties, ethnicity, age, skills and social status) and of the duration and modalities of their engagement in European centres of employment. While from the commencement of mining development onwards important voices within the administration and business establishment argued for the long-term engagement of African workers, the recruitment of married men accompanied by their families, and even the encouragement of their permanent settlement (or self-stabilization) near the mines, a migrancy model characterized by short-term contracts and the re-integration of workers into rural society was ultimately forced upon them by chiefs such as Lumpungu who refused to organise an outflux of their subjects without sufficient guarantees as to their re-integration under their authority.⁴⁵ In the important case of Katanga's Northern Rhodesian workers, similar demands by the Rhodesian administration keen to protect its tax base only reinforced this pattern.⁴⁶

Chiefs were not the only Africans who decisively shaped the emerging mining labour market. Although hardly visible in the colonial archives, an unknown but sizeable number of Africans took advantage of the high labour demands of, and severe competition between, European employers to carve out an existence as casual labourers. For a brief period, these men and women enjoyed a strong bargaining

⁴³ David Northrup, 'Slavery and Forced Labour in the Eastern Congo 1850-1910' in Henri Médard and Shane Doyle (eds.), *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

⁴⁴ This development is not unambiguous. While incentives to chiefs to coerce their subjects into work for Europeans often increased, their means of enforcement was often undermined by the 'exit option' which increased security and alternative employment opportunities provided.

⁴⁵ AA MOI 3552. This emerges not from arguments made in abstract or doctrinary terms, but discussions about very specific labour contracts and recruitment operations.

⁴⁶ TC 137, Tanks Archives, University of Manchester.

position in an emerging economic sector structurally short of manpower, giving them the necessary economic independence to resist re-integration into the village community while also avoiding onerous long-term contracts. More important still were the number of African cultivators who responded to the stimulus provided by expanding urban markets by intensifying food production. The extent to which Africans were willing and able to enter the cash economy in order to acquire an expanding range of consumer goods and/or increase their economic independence, and the relative importance of the countervailing breaks which native institutions and ruling elites put on such participation, remain regrettably understudied. However, given the importance of African preferences in shaping the contours of Katanga's labour market, a historiography which focuses on the state's regulatory framework alone is inadequate in dealing with Katanga's changing economic landscape.

Yet, Congo's colonial historians have unwittingly downplayed the importance of African agency by, again, attributing too much creative power to the colonial system.⁴⁷ The active role played by the state in breaking open rural communities through targeted taxation and, where possible and expedient, the closing off of markets for their agricultural produce is indeed crucial to understanding the early labour mobilization for the country's copper mines.⁴⁸ However, while state officials were keen to push Africans into the cash economy, they were not in a position to fully control the conditions under which this occurred, nor were they sure how, and to what extent, this participation should be managed and regulated. Drawing on the historiography and experience of migrant labour in the South African and Rhodesian gold mines, it is commonly argued that the mining industry's systematic recourse to short-term migratory labour was consciously engineered to ensure maximal profitability. In this context, much is made of the monopolization of the labour market

⁴⁷ John Higginson, *A working class in the making: Belgian colonial labour policy and the African mineworker, 1907-1951* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), Charles Perrings, *Black mineworkers in Central Africa : industrial strategies and the evolution of an African proletariat in the Copperbelt, 1911-41* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1979), Bruce Fetter, *The creation of Elizabethville, 1910-1940* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), Simon Ellis Katzenellenbogen, 'Labour recruitment in Central Africa : the case of Katanga' in Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (eds.), *The imperial impact: studies in the economic history of Africa and India* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 270-279.

⁴⁸ Giovanni Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: a Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *Journal of Development Studies*, 6, 3 (1970); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'Rural Society and the Belgian Colonial Economy' in David Birmingham and Phyllis M. Martin (eds.), *History of Central Africa. Volume 2* (London: Longman, 1983), 95-125 ; Vellut, *Les Bassins Miniers*.

by the *Bourse du Travail du Katanga* (BTK), the semi-official recruitment agency charged with organizing labour recruitment for the region's industrial centres, which in practice failed to supply more than a small percentage of paid African workers in the region.⁴⁹

In addition to over-emphasizing the importance of state agency in shaping the contours of the Katanga labour market, this historiography unduly homogenizes and rationalizes state policy by ascribing the colonial hierarchy with a unity of purpose which it rarely possessed. Overall, concrete economic decision-making was determined less by long-term strategic goals than by a variety of short-term pressures and perceived necessities. Official views on labour policy were not static: direct state intervention in the BTK's recruitment effort, for example, was only grudgingly agreed to from 1913 onwards, when alternative options had closed down. Rather than harmoniously pursuing the labour policy which mining interests desired, state policy developed in constant tension with mining development. In the early years of Katanga's exploration, development and alluvial gold and tin mining, the Comité Spécial du Katanga, the region's administrative authority, was yet to be convinced of the desirability of paying African labour in currency, insisting instead on payment in cloth which had limited appeal to African recruits.⁵⁰ Direct recruitment by the Comité Spécial du Katanga was briefly tried, but without the heavy-handedness characteristic of CFS rule elsewhere and with limited success.⁵¹ In an attempt to break decisively with the Leopoldian legacy, the early years of Belgian colonial rule (1909-1912) saw a conscious retreat of the state from such direct economic interference. State support to the newly founded BTK was strictly limited and based on the idea that this Brussels-based organization would prove easier to influence and control than the independent labour contractors which so far dominated the labour market. Underlying this liberal attitude was a naïve confidence that Africans would readily recognize the 'moral and material benefits' to be derived from their employment in a 'civilized'

⁴⁹ Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making*, Kuyunsa Bidum, 'L'Industrie Katangaise et les Problèmes de la Main d'Oeuvre Indigène Jusqu'en 1940', *Africa*, 32, 4 (1977), 577-91.

⁵⁰ Presumably, payment in coin was eschewed under the Leopoldian regime because it presupposed, and would therefore stimulate, the development of an independent class of merchants and petty traders dominated by non-Belgian elements.

⁵¹ Details from the CSK archives, Tervuren.

working environment.⁵² Indeed, if there was a long-term objective which animated the colonial administration in 1910, it was the creation of the necessary conditions under which the forces of supply and demand would naturally satisfy the labour requirements of the mining sector. By the time the First World War broke out the goal was not only not achieved, but also largely abandoned.⁵³

The stark contrast between the administration's rosy picture of 'civilized' employment and the appalling conditions actually prevailing at the mines and compounds goes a long way in explaining the BTK's failures in attracting sufficient labour.⁵⁴ However, drawing on their personal experience and close contacts within the Rhodesian and South African gold mining industry, Katanga's mining bosses more commonly shifted the blame to innate African laziness and undue administrative leniency. Interestingly, adding to the continuing agitation from the Congo Reform Association, a new critique of Belgian colonial government was growing in these circles which lamented that, as a result of the misguided efforts of British 'do-gooders', Katanga was now being administered by a weak and ineffective government, far too lenient in its treatment of Africans, and therefore inappropriate to their current level of civilization.⁵⁵

Such criticism should remind us that Belgian colonial legislation and administrative practice did not develop in isolation. In devising solutions to Katanga's labour difficulties, the administration drew heavily on the expertise and mental models of mining bosses with strong connections to the South African and Rhodesian mining industries. International business networks, in particular the group of companies centered on the mining consultancy firm of Robert Williams & Company, played an important role in transmitting information, procedures and ideas between the different

⁵² AA MOI 3551, AA MOI 3552, AA MOI 3554.

⁵³ Seibert, 'More continuity than change?'

⁵⁴ On the similar situation in Southern Rhodesia see Charles Van Onselen, *Chibaro. African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Ian Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890-1945: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (London: Longman, 1988); McCulloch, 'Violence and Empire'.

⁵⁵ E. g. Bulawayo Chronicle 24 Sep 1909.

sites in which they operated.⁵⁶ With few modifications, the group's 'expertise' on African labour recruitment and organization travelled together with its capital and personnel from the Kimberley diamond fields via the Rand and Southern Rhodesia to its new heartland in Katanga. The administration's recognition of the relevance of South African expertise to Katanga's mining development coupled with the superior manpower and sizeable financial stake which the Williams group held in the early development of its copper mining industry go a long way in accounting for the latter's influence over an embattled administration which, as yet, had few sources of independent advice to draw upon.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, the shift to direct state intervention on the South African model involved more than a convergence of the mental horizons of business and state elites. A geopolitical element was also important. With little Congolese labour forthcoming, and building on recruitment patterns established during the years of British prospecting in the region, the vast majority of workers in the Katanga mining industry were Rhodesian in origin.⁵⁸ The continuing dependency on Rhodesian labour and goodwill was perceived as a potential source of instability and a threat to national sovereignty.⁵⁹ It was far from clear if, or for how long, calls by Southern Rhodesian farmers and mining bosses for exclusive access to Northern Rhodesian labour would be resisted.⁶⁰ The possible impact of a ban on Rhodesian recruitment was painfully

⁵⁶ This is one of the central ideas which I pursue in my PhD research, which traces the activities of the Robert Williams group from its foundation in 1891 through to 1914.

⁵⁷ It became obvious that ideas have a material and geographical base when one reads the memoirs of Katangese officials who had to travel via South Africa and Rhodesia to reach their post, and often delayed along the way to obtain information on methods of administration. This was experienced by at least one of them [Hoornaert? Verify] as a form of time-travel: South Africa was Katanga's future.

⁵⁸ There is a strong element of continuity in this: Lamba from North West Rhodesia had worked as tribute labourers in chief Katanga's copper mines prior to Yeke dominance in the region (Brian Siegel, 'Bomas, Missions and Mines: the making of centers on the Zambian copperbelt', *African Studies Review*, 31, 3 (1988), 61-84), and recruitment of the Bemba from North East Rhodesia followed naturally from their earlier engagement as porters along Katanga's eastern supply route –offering them the opportunity of a paid passage to the place of employment. Mwela C. Musambachime, 'Labour Migration from Mweru-Luapula 1900-1924' in Robin H. Palmer (ed.), *Zambian Land and Labour Studies. Volume II* (Lusaka: 1974), 39-65. [I still need to check David Gordon on this – Bemba institutions would have facilitated migration to the mines]

⁵⁹ The perception of instability was shared by British directors as well, who were just as vigorous in advocating a diversification of labour supply. The presence of Rhodesian labour inspectors was particularly resented in Brussels.

⁶⁰ Van Onselen, *Chibaro*; Ian Phimister, 'The Reconstruction of the Southern Rhodesian Gold Mining Industry, 1903-10', *Economic History Review*, 29, 3 (1976), 465-481; Phimister, *An Economic and Social History*.

demonstrated in 1907, when the outbreak of sleeping sickness led to the temporary closure of the border.⁶¹ Even if this closure was often circumvented, and its impact thus somewhat compensated by uncontrolled African migration and resettlement to Congolese territory (in itself a significant reminder of the limited reach of state power), the potential disruption which could be caused by sudden labour shortages became a leading concern of mining bosses ever since.⁶² This concern was translated into constant pressure on government to more actively support recruitment and extend its control over the Congolese population, and in the meantime also led to attempts at obtaining a more diverse and secure supply of foreign workers. Recruitment experiments in Angola and Mozambique, however, met with disastrous results – disastrous to the BTK, but especially to the recruits themselves, who died in vast numbers.⁶³

One option explored with surprising tenacity was the utilization of large numbers of Asian (Chinese or Indian) indentured labour. From its beginnings in 1904 onwards, the Chinese labour question in South Africa in particular was foremost on the minds of the British directors and local management of Robert Williams & Company, the firm in charge of the technical works and labour organization of the Katanga copper mines.⁶⁴ Even before the large scale immigration of Asian workers became practically feasible, such indentured labour was presented as the only real alternative to forcing unwilling Africans to take up mining work.⁶⁵ Convinced of the superior efficiency of

⁶¹ Thandekile Ruth Mason Mvusi, 'The "politics of trypanosomiasis" revisited: labour mobilization and labour migration in colonial Zambia: the Robert Williams Company in Lubemba, 1901-1911', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 23 (1994), 43-68.

⁶² Mwela C. Musambachime, 'The Social And economic effects of Sleeping Sickness in Mweru-Luapula 1906-1922', *African Economic History*, 10 (1981), 151-173, Mwela C. Musambachime, 'Protest migrations in Mweru-Luapula, 1900-1940', *African Studies*, 47, 1 (1988), 19-34

⁶³ Charles Perrings, 'Good Lawyers but poor Workers': Recruited Angolan labour in the Copper mines of Katanga, 1917-1921', *Journal of African History*, 18, 2 (1977), 237-59; Leroy Vail, 'Mozambique's Chartered Companies: the rule of the feeble', *Journal of African History*, 17, 3 (1976), 389-416. Also see F. E. Sanderson, 'The Development of labour-migration from Nyasaland, 1891-1914', *Journal of African History*, 2, 2 (1961), 259-271.

⁶⁴ Peter Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Gary Kynoch, 'Controlling the Coolies: Chinese Mineworkers and the Struggle for Labor in South Africa, 1904-1910', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 36, 2 (2003), 309-29; Kay Saunders, 'Chinese Indentured Labour in the Transvaal Gold Mining Industry, 1904-1910' in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Grant, *A Civilized Savagery*.

⁶⁵ 8 Mar 1906, George Grey to Albert Grey in Earl Grey Papers, Durham 189-4. Also see CSK 16 (note Manfroy 17 Mar 1906).

Chinese workers, the Union Minière's Belgian directors were equally interested, and were also able to draw on their important business and political connections in China to organize the recruitment and transport operations.⁶⁶ Moreover, Belgian and British businessmen in Tsientsin (Tianjin) and South Africa who had been actively involved in organizing the Chinese labour migration to the Rand found themselves out of employment when, in 1910, the South African government was forced to abandon Chinese recruitment following fierce opposition from white workers and British humanitarians.⁶⁷ These men readily offered their services and expertise, allowing for the swift development of a fairly detailed settlement plan, starting with the speedy engagement of 2,000 workers on a three year indenture. A press campaign was mounted to gather political support in China, political contacts were put to use, plans for the construction of compounds were drawn up, the issue of Chinese food was discussed, and transit arrangements and transport rates were agreed with the Rhodesian railways. In an effort to counter objections to the possible influence of Chinese 'moral turpitude' on Katanga's African population, the influential Belgian missionary Vincent Lebbe, who was based in Tianjin after extensive missionary experience in its rural hinterland, devised a plan by which entire communities of Christian converts, with chaplains, would be temporarily relocated to Katanga.

As a consequence of their conception of a unified colonial system, Katanga's labour historians have largely ignored or dismissed these schemes, maintaining that their ultimate non-implementation was the predictable outcome of a simple cost/benefit analysis of Chinese indentured labour.⁶⁸ Upon closer inspection, however, mining bosses and sections within the colonial administration never abandoned the idea completely. As late as 1914, the Department of Economic Affairs at the colonial ministry in Brussels was still supplying its minister with fresh arguments in favour of the scheme. Objections to Chinese immigration had little to do with the profitability of mining, but were based on geopolitical, moral and international considerations.

⁶⁶ Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, *Léopold II et les groupes financiers Belges en Chine* (Bruxelles, 1972), Ian Phimister, 'Foreign devils, finance and informal empire: Britain and China c. 1900-1912', *Modern Asian Studies*, **40**, 3 (2006), 737-759.

⁶⁷ Grant, 'A civilized savagery...'

⁶⁸ Simon Ellis Katzenellenbogen, 'Labour Recruitment in Central Africa: the Case of Katanga' in Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (eds.), *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 270-9.

Opposition came from Katanga's local administration and its Vice-Governor Emile Wangermée, from the Department of Foreign Affairs and from Belgian diplomatic circles.⁶⁹ It was argued that Asian indentured labour constituted a departure from the 'ethical colonialism' by which the Belgian administration had been trying to efface the Leopoldian legacy, opening the door to renewed humanitarian agitation and diplomatic complications. Principles aside, it was therefore considered practical politics to at least await British official recognition of Belgium's sovereignty over the Congo, after which point the country would find itself in a much stronger position to resist foreign objections.⁷⁰

What finally decided the fate of the Chinese labour scheme, however, was a combination of political change in China and Belgian fears of South African expansionism. The Chinese revolution of 1911 altered the power relations between Western governments and the Chinese state. The new republican government, while not opposed to the settlement of its subjects in Katanga, strongly insisted on the dignified treatment of its people and refused to accept the restrictive conditions, modelled on the South African precedent, under which labour recruitment was proposed to take place.⁷¹ While the importation of Chinese labour may still have presented cost benefits to the mining industry, the degree of control to which these immigrants could be subjected was now strictly circumscribed. Crucially, Chinese objections to forced repatriation clauses presented a real danger that indentured labour would herald the beginning of a permanent and possibly preponderant Chinese presence in Katanga. As it was widely believed that a free Asian population would economically outcompete potential Belgian colonists, the issue took on serious security and geopolitical dimensions: driven by the conviction that Belgian demographic ascendancy was the only real safeguard to the threat which South African expansionism in particular presented to the Congo's territorial integrity, the

⁶⁹ Such as consul Forthomme in Johannesburg, and ambassador Lalaing in London.

⁷⁰ S. J. S. Cooley, *Britain and the Congo Question, 1885-1913* (London: Longmans, 1968).

⁷¹ In this case, the Belgians would also not be able to operate under the cover of the stronger British flag, as they had done in the illustrious case of the CEMC. See Ian Phimister, 'Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China c. 1900-1912', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 3 (2006), 737-59.

colonial administration had made Belgian settlement of the region one of its first priorities.⁷² If Katanga were to remain Belgian, the Chinese had to be kept out.

Despite its abandonment, the importance of the Chinese labour question transcends its value as a historical anecdote. Fears within the local administration that the Chinese settlement scheme would gather sufficient support in Brussels to be carried through despite its opposition, led it to reassess its role in the mobilization of African labour. Under pressure to present a viable alternative, the administration stepped up its support to the BTK, extended tax collection and co-ordinated its perception with the Bourse's recruitment. Remarkably, the administration's perception of the country's population density also changed: in contrast to earlier pessimism, reports sent to Brussels now regularly alluded to the 'discovery' of new concentrations of African population able to provide the necessary labour. Mining bosses had pressed the administration for years to extend its control over Katanga's rural hinterlands, to verify their labour potential, and bring their populations firmly under control to facilitate labour recruitment, discourage desertion and enforce the execution of the Africans' part of their labour contracts. As Chinese labour had been so convincingly presented as a viable alternative to the intense exploitation of Africans, the administration now had to accept the reverse as being equally true: to safeguard the mining industry without recourse to Chinese labour required much stricter control over Africans. The closing of the Chinese option and the increased pressure on the Congolese population were two sides of the same process.

Unlike the structuralist versions which have preceded it, this reading of the development of Katanga's labour policy recognizes that history meanders, changes course, and is ultimately open-ended. However, against the background of the above shifts in state policy and perception, it is fitting to stress some of the continuities which may be more difficult to perceive when relying solely on state records. (1) Rhodesian labour continued to be dominant roughly until the take-off of copper mining in Northern Rhodesia in the 1920s.⁷³ Throughout this period, the majority of

⁷² Rumours of planned raids on Katanga and Kivu occasionally reached the Belgian administration as well as the British Foreign Office.

⁷³ Larry J. Butler, *Copper Empire: Mining and the Colonial State in Northern Rhodesia, c.1930-1964* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); F. L. Coleman, *The Northern Rhodesia Copperbelt, 1899-*

Katanga's mineworkers were mobilized without recourse to the Belgian colonial apparatus, relying instead on recruitment and enforcement in British territory. Therefore, the study of actual patterns of labour mobilization, rather than labour policy, needs to leave Katanga behind and shift its focus to dynamics across the border. (2) Below the colonial radar, and also without the state's intervention, a group of Africans had entered the colonial economy on its own terms. While the colonial apparatus was blundering its way towards a satisfactory solution of the labour problem, construction and production continued with the aid of this elusive and ill-studied group of semi- and self-stabilized workers who engaged with Katanga's many labour contractors.⁷⁴ While their contracts were at least as short as those of the BTK's recruits, they often did not return to their village of origin when these were completed, but took advantage of their strong bargaining position to find more lucrative employment in the emerging cities and mining centres. Acknowledging the importance of these workers, whose independent spirit was distrusted by the administration and whose wage demands were resented by employers, also influences our perception of the stabilization policies which the Union Minière inaugurated in the 1920s: these did not merely mark the transition from a migratory to a stable, long-term labour force, but also cut those who had stabilized themselves out of the most lucrative and desirable jobs.⁷⁵

III.

The above case studies each serve to illustrate a different point. The spiralling violence of the rubber regime shows an administration which was extremely disruptive despite, or because of, being weak. The obvious implication is that state weakness does not equal its insignificance: shortcomings in the fabric of the state

1962: *Technological Development up to the end of the Central African Federation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971); Kenneth Bradley, *Copper Venture: The Discovery and Development of Roan Antelope and Mufulira* (London: Mufulira Copper Mines, 1952).

⁷⁴ Labour contractors had an onerous reputation with the colonial administration and mining bosses. Some were violent, racist and abusive, but overall they offered higher wages and more freedom to their African employees than either the colonial government, the BTK or the UMHK.

⁷⁵ Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa*; Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making*; Bruce Fetter, *The creation of Elizabethville, 1910-1940* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976); Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Histoire des Conditions de Vie des Travailleurs de l'Union Minière du Haut-Katanga/Gécamines 1910-1999* (Lubumbashi: Presses Universitaires de Lubumbashi, 2001).

were directly related to the culture of violence which surrounded the ruthless exploitation of wild rubber, causing widespread disruption and a severe demographic crisis which rendered the subsequent exercise of political power more difficult. State influence on the development of the Katanga copper mining industry was initially more limited: the dynamics driving the establishment and growth of the Katanga mining industry and the mobilisation of its labour force largely escaped the administration's control. The availability of British capital and expertise was tied to the changing fortunes of the Southern African regional economy, African chiefs imposed short-term labour contracts, workers were largely recruited beyond the state's boundaries, and many took advantage of their strong bargaining position as casual labourers to enter the mining economy on their own terms. Without direct state intervention, however, the labour market, marked by worker indiscipline and wage inflation, did not conform to the wishes of mining bosses.

The institutional framework set up in support of the copper mining industry did not flow directly from the structural imperatives of expatriate capital, but was the imperfect outcome of a slow and meandering historical process. If, by 1913, the colonial administration did not see any alternatives to a South African migrancy model supported by direct state intervention, this reflected the failure of earlier Belgian liberalization, the closing off of the Chinese option, the need to accommodate African elites, geopolitical imperatives, the perception that the UMHK was 'too big to fail', and the preponderant hold South African and Rhodesian precedent had on the colonial administration's political imagination. The solution to the industry's labour problem was not merely considered in its technical or strictly economic aspects, it was equally determined by political necessities, and internal and external constraints.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the use of state power in shaping the Katanga mining labour market lies in its limitations. While administrators liked to think of themselves as the even-handed enforcers of freely enacted labour contracts, they were rarely if ever able to play this role. The fundamental difficulty was that the state lacked the power, or will, to create the circumstances under which Africans would freely render their services to European employers. Crucially, it did not actively enforce health regulations or legal stipulations on acceptable living and working conditions, nor did it put a stop to Europeans' ubiquitous use of physical violence as a

means of maintaining labour discipline. Instead, state officials embraced the employers' view that African reluctance to engage in the mining industry was mainly attributable to their inert laziness, lack of wants and continued economic independence, of their not been 'freed' from the means of production. The result was a rather one-sided system of pressures and controls, which stifled African initiative and tended to block rather than support the growth of peasant agriculture or self-stabilized African worker communities.

This paper, then, makes three points which have relevance for the role of the state in African economic history beyond its own specific geographical and chronologic limitations: (1) the state needs to be decentred and contextualised. This entails analysing the structure of the colonial system and the tensions within it, looking at the mutual interaction between its components and their relation to other sub- and supranational actors and developments, and examining the structural constraints to which the state was subjected as well as the available knowledge which determined how these constraints were perceived, (2) what historians can contribute to social analysis is a focus on *process* rather than *structure*, and a realization that social change does not originate in functional or structural imperatives but in very real everyday struggles over power and access to resources, and (3) we need to move away from an overly voluntaristic, 'creationist' conception of what the state did, and can do. The state was never free to do just as it pleased, society did not just follow its lead, and its actions usually had consequences officials did not foresee. The colonial state was not as much a force which decisively propelled society forwards, as an arena in which outside pressures were assessed and mediated based through specific mental models. Its importance lies in the creative process of responding to such constraints.