



Seminar

ANDREAS ECKERT

Guest of the Principal, SCAS.

Professor and Chair of African History, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Director, Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History', Berlin

Histories of Work and Non-work: African Labor History in a Global Perspective

Tuesday, 23 May, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT ANDREAS ECKERT

Andreas Eckert holds an MA and a Ph.D. in History from Universität Hamburg (1995) and a habilitation in Modern History from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (2002). Between 1995 and 2002, he was Assistant Professor at the Institute for Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and a Research Fellow at the Center for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin. Between 2002 and 2007, he was Professor of Modern History with a focus on Africa at Universität Hamburg. In 2007, he took over the chair of African History at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Since 2009, he has also been Director of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History', an international research center funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. He has held visiting posts and fellowships at the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme in Paris, Indiana University Bloomington, Harvard University, the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, Université de Genève, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris and the Institut d'études avancées de Nantes.

Eckert has written the following books: *Die Duala und die Kolonialmächte: eine Untersuchung zu Widerstand, Protest und Protonationalismus in Kamerun vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (1991); *Grundbesitz, Landkonflikte und kolonialer Wandel: Douala 1880–1960* (1999); *Kolonialismus* (2006); *Herrschen und Verwalten: Afrikanische Bürokraten, staatliche Ordnung und Politik in Tansania, 1920–1970* (2007).

Eckert is Chairperson of the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien and of the Arbeitskreis für Moderne Sozialgeschichte. He regularly publishes in German newspapers and weeklies, e.g. Frankfurter Allgemeine and Die ZEIT.

At SCAS, Eckert will work on a book tentatively entitled 'The History of Work in Africa in a Global Perspective'.

ABSTRACT

The Dutch scholars Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden recently argued that "the real norm or standard in global capitalism is insecurity, informality or precariousness". If this is the case, 20th century Africa could be seen as a model case for global capitalism. In this presentation I argue that Africa represents a context in which capitalist production regimes and their related forms of employment have confronted social practices and cultural forms that questioned the normative pretenses of the wage relation and challenged the universalism inherent in ideologies of "free" commodity-producing work. The history of wage, precarious, casual, and informal labor in Africa rather brings into sharp relief the exceptionality and contingency of the social conditions through which capitalist employment can be conducive to socially inclusive deals. The penetration of wage labor across the continent was uneven, delayed, and contested, as it responded to highly localized social processes and coexisted with complex non-capitalist relations. Even where wages relatively quickly became the dominant form of income, as in mining or transportation nodes in urban centers, African workers chose casual labor, despite its precariousness, in opposition to more regular workplace rhythms. Although capital drew significant advances from such arrangements, which allowed for remarkable flexibility and containment of labor costs, they also persistently represented a challenge to capitalist control of the labor force. Finally, work in the capitalist sector was enabled by considerable degrees of coercion, usually carried out by authoritarian colonial states armed with racial ideologies of domination and hierarchical visions of the social order in which African elders and notables played despotic roles while colonized working populations were relegated to manual labor.

In essence I argue that the history of different labor forms in Africa – as well as how they were categorized in much of the historiography on the continent - have a great deal to offer by way of lessons to both a history of capitalism and a global labor history interested in tracing the historical connections between regions and in critically engaging with the idea of the North Atlantic World as „normal“ and the rest as „exceptional“ and „in need of explanation“. If our historical analysis of capitalism has to transcend the notion of a single telos modelled after the example of the West, that is supposed to be achieved everywhere, or if we are to go beyond the conception that the non-realization of this telos represents somehow a "lack" or a "lag" in the societies concerned to understanding their specific examples coevally – to echo Johannes Fabian's insight – with that of the West, then we must take the different social forms – in this case particularly of labour – in Africa seriously in all their complexity, and all their linkages with labour forms elsewhere.