Sénégal: le travail au XXère siècle
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RESUME Senegal: Work in the 20th century

This research explores the evolution of Senegal’s labor market, giving readers a framework to understand both the current employment situation and the prolonged crisis of labor in this West African country. This study of the 20th century job market crystallizes, in a clear and straightforward manner, long-developing transformations that have occurred in the world of work. It uses sources that have different forms and value for an essay on social history. These include an extensive collection of materials from the colonial archives in Dakar, as well as open-ended interviews and a fresh reading of secondary sources. To tap these three types of resources, we opted for a methodology that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with greater emphasis on the latter. This approach rests on comparative analysis of print and oral materials, and makes possible a novel critique of views and positions in the literature addressing a number of major issues: explaining what work means in Senegalese society; mapping the transformations that have occurred in Senegal’s economic, social and political spheres from the colonial era to the post-independence State; analysing the formation of the job market; and identifying factors responsible for the many disruptions we have seen in the market’s different components.

This work is structured in two main parts, with World War II (1939-1945) serving as the demarcation line between them. The first part, entitled Work, Ideological Constructs and Colonial Policy (1900-1945), looks at the institution of work in agro-pastoral societies experiencing integration into the system of global capitalism. It analyses how ways of working evolved in localized subsistence economies, using as the entry point the prototypal “hero of the fields” who symbolizes a hard-working man known best for his physical strength, endurance and love of labour. It shows how work in this era relied mostly on physical activity and evoked feelings that ranged from dignity to contempt, depending on a person’s social status and type of occupation. But this changed as the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade allowed some elites to accumulate rifles and large numbers of slaves increasingly dedicated to productive activities. With this transformation, manual work came to be understood as a stigma, a degrading activity consigned to people of inferior status.
Paradoxically, it was with the colonially-induced rise of the monetary economy and increasing peanut production that work recovered a certain dignity. New economic opportunity allowed peasants to stake out some range of autonomy from the colonial system, removing themselves from the grip of dependence on traditional chiefs. As Sufi orders gradually transformed their rural religious schools into large-scale peanut farms, hard work became a means to express devotion to one’s marabout (religious guide) and a pathway to spiritual redemption. However, despite this partial rehabilitation of physical work and the formal abolition of slavery, the labor question posed major difficulties for the colonial regime, amounting to a persistent stumbling block for the implementation of colonial projects in many domains. Colonial elites were forced to rely on two kinds of contradictory labor mobilization tactics: those derived from slavery, and those that made reference to a free workforce, employed in new colonial projects and in the rise of early urban centers.

With the growth of the monetary economy, work for pay became widespread, producing incremental changes in how the local population perceived work. They increasingly saw it as an instrument of modernity, a source of income, and a key pathway for the major social and political changes that would happen in the country during the 20th century. Work for pay brought along a whole new line of services, but also the attendant challenges of new professions. It spread new ideas about how work should be organized and shared. As job opportunities increased thanks to the development of industrial activities and transport infrastructure, more and more in-migrants strived to move to the towns, which emerged as new population centers, arenas to try out new inter-personal relationships, as well as cradles of social strife and dissent.

Beginning in 1919, workers in the railway, river navigation and maritime sectors staged the first union demonstrations of a radical and sometimes violent nature, followed by workers in education and in the colonial bureaucracy. While union consciousness was developing, the colonial administration took a hesitant stance in passing social legislation and labour laws. It applied French social legislation to the colonies in a precautious and
even restrictive manner, granting freedom of association only to workers who were full-blooded French citizens. The ban on union activities imposed on French colonial subjects, who made up the vast majority of the population, explains the mushrooming of a wide range of professional organizations, taking on many guises (associations, mutuals, etc.) to creatively circumvent regulations and defend the interests of workers.

But pressure against this ban from the international community, from French progressives, as well as from employers themselves, forced the administration to smooth out the labour regime with the October 22, 1925 decree on working conditions in French West Africa (AOF). It was intended to quell two major criticism of French colonial labor policy to date: denying freedom of association to unskilled workers, who constituted 60% of the labor force, and the longstanding use of forced labour to make up for what it termed the shortage of labour. Following the rise of the Front Populaire in France and at the instigation of Governor-General Marcel De Coppet (1936-1938), key provisions in French social legislation began to be enforced in French West Africa (AOF). This change in the legal order made it possible for professional workers’ unions to blossom. It also nourished the rapid growth of an entirely new political and social class made up of salaried workers who gradually recognized their power to organise themselves, vigorously demand better living and working conditions, and eventually, subvert the colonial order itself. The new social forces unleashed by the salaried worker made the old colonial of an Africa neatly split between enlightened citizens and masses of peasant subjects utterly obsolete and unviable.

The second part is entitled *Industrialization and Workforce Development: Moving Back and Forth Between Public and Private Domination of the Job Market Sector (1946-1990)*. This section follows the evolution of both colonial development policy and of independent Senegal’s industrialization policy. The latter set of plans received considerable impetus in the early postwar years thanks to large investments from the Fonds d’Investissement pour le Développement Economique et Social des Territoires d’Outre-mer (FIDES). The period from 1948 to 1956 was the golden era for import substitution industrialization investments by French companies. It saw the emergence of a
varied range of manufacturing plants in Senegal in many sectors, including vegetable oil refining, fish and grain processing, tobacco, coffee roasting, textiles, soap, engineering, shipping, public works, construction materials, and mineral extraction. Senegal, and Dakar in particular, harboured just under one third, or about 31.98% of the salaried workers in all of French West Africa. But, looking at the formal, salaried workforce in relation to the total population, this new social category of salaried workers made up only a small minority whose importance resided not so much in its numbers as in the vital role it played in efforts to set up modern economic structures in the colonies. Indeed, salaried workers represented less than 9% of the working population and just over 2% of the total population of French West Africa. And yet, they formed the core group of a new working class about to flex its muscles.

Beginning in 1946, African unions launched numerous forms of mobilization and struggle. With support from European counterparts and nationalist political parties in the colonies, they gradually secured more progressive labor legislation and improved working conditions, building on the small victories they had won in the wake of the Union française and the adoption of its assimilationist constitution in 1946. Their efforts bore fruit in the June 30th 1950 Act which aligned salaries of local public servants in the colonies with those of their counterparts in metropolitan France, as well as in the adoption and promulgation of the overseas labour code on December 15th 1952. But lax enforcement of the new legislation, as well as the regressive indexing of workers’ salaries to local costs of living got the unions agitating again between 1952 and 1956. The government of France, in the face of growing favour for decolonization in the international community and defeat in the colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, reframed its strategies for the colonies and opted to grant internal political autonomy to some of the overseas territories. In doing so, it was able to tilt the balance of power in its favour with the passing of the June 23rd 1956 Framework Law (Loi Cadre) that accelerated the break-up of major federal entities such as French West Africa.
From 1957 onwards, change in political relations between France and its colonies happened at an accelerated pace, culminating in the many proclamations of independence in 1960. In the case of Senegal, labor and legal uncertainty in the first postwar decades cast considerable doubt over the industrialization process, leading to the loss of major markets and the increasing obsolescence of production facilities. Today’s employment crisis in the industrial sector is a direct consequence of this situation. The private sector progressively ran out of steam, and in 1966 it lost its status as the country’s main source of employment, eclipsed by burgeoning public sector job growth.

This analysis of the evolution of Senegal’s job market reveals an intriguing paradox: the State’s role as the country’s biggest employer is not a legacy of the colonial era. Forces unleashed in the post-colonial period, not some residual colonial heritage, made the State the dominant player in the labor market. The economic crisis that began in 1968, as well as the effects of rapid population growth and accelerated urbanization, deeply compounded the problem of an oversupply of unemployed and underemployed workers. The implementation of structural adjustment programmes beginning in 1979 brought the employment crisis to the public eye in stark and painful ways. The withdrawal of the State from the job market seems to have further stimulated the expansion of the so-called informal sector and changed the structure of the labour market into one dominated more and more by unemployment among young people and women. It is a sobering reminder of the failure, or at least severe limits, of employment and development policy that growing numbers of workers, of all ages and many professions, see out-migration as the only recourse left in the face of the current severe job crisis.