'Opportunity Cost' and Labour Migration: a Misinterpretation of Proletarianisation in Northern Ghana

by Nii-K PLANGE*

The orthodox tradition in studies and explanations of labour migration has been to adopt the perspective of those who move. Such a framework of analysis has then addressed itself to (i) the reasons why individuals and groups decide to migrate, and (ii) the consequences. As regards the first issue, it has generally been accepted that the phenomenon of migration is in response to economic forces that push and/or pull people out of their own communities into others – the 'invisible hand of the market'. As for the second issue, emphasis is placed on the problematics of adjustment or assimilation into the host community, and also on the new values, as well as the other stimulants – good or bad – that the returning migrants bring home.

The general theoretical underpinnings of this mode of explanation are derived from, and used pervasively in, 'marginal economics'. Within this general tradition the concept of 'opportunity cost' has been employed, explained by P. A. Samuelson as follows:

some of the most important costs attributable to doing one thing rather than another stem from the foregone opportunities that have to be sacrificed in doing this one thing. Thus, Robinson Crusoe pays no money to anyone, but realises that the cost of picking strawberries can be thought of as the sacrificed amount of foregone-leisure. This same time and effort, or the sacrificed amount of foregone-leisure. This sacrifice of doing something else is called 'opportunity cost'.

Within the context of labour migration, and under the pedagogical direction of this theoretical perspective, the individual is conceptualised as having made a rational and free choice on the basis of knowledge of

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alternative opportunities. Migration then becomes a voluntary action, based on the appreciation of certain better chances for survival and/or perhaps self-advancement. The unit of analysis thus remains the individual – *homo economicus*. For traditional subsistence economies undergoing transformation, particularly in the twentieth century, proletarianisation then becomes a ‘natural’ process as peasant farmers begin to calculate rationally their individual chances and profits within the growing commercial and industrial sectors of the whole economic system. Consequently, they would be apt, at certain periods, to become wage-earners in the urban centres at the cost of the activities they might otherwise have pursued within their natal communities.

This general psychological explanation of migration has sometimes been curiously translated into ecological or demographic terms, so that the decision to migrate appears to stem from uneconomic and unprofitable features of the natural environment. These variants of the main argument have been used to explain migration among the savannah populations of sub-Saharan Africa during the period of colonisation, and consequently the proletarianisation of these regions has been seen as a ‘natural’, autonomous process of ‘economic development’. According to Elliot Berg:

> In the savanna zones, the relatively densely populated areas, men are underemployed during the dry season. In the forest and coastal zones, where conditions are favourable to the growth of export crops, suitable land is abundant and people are relatively scarce. At the same time, climatic zones in West Africa are so ordered that the slack season in the savanna zone is the busy season along the southern coast. Thus there is a seasonal dovetailing; the period of inactivity in the savanna regions corresponds to the time of peak agricultural demands in the cocoa and coffee regions of the forest zone. Short term-movement from savanna to forest was thus a natural adaptation.¹

As for the usual demographic argument, J. S. Nabilla explains:

> Overpopulation on a limited land resource base has been one of the major problems of the area [Northern Ghana]... consequently, there was a serious...land shortage with its concomitant problem of soil-erosion, periodic hunger and the like. Faced with such a situation out-migration provided an escape-valve from the stringent survival system.²

> It is the contention of this article, however, that none of the variants


of the decisions of *homo economicus* can be used adequately to explain the processes of migration, because extra-market mechanisms were used to direct the mobilisation, movement, and maintenance of labour.\(^1\) Thus, what is of primary concern is the structural arrangement within which migration occurred, and the supra-economic instruments used to coerce individuals to move out. Furthermore, the immediate problems of migration were not those of adjustment to the host communities, or the ‘pernicious’ effects of the new values brought back by the returning migrants, but rather the aggregate impact of the absence of large numbers of able-bodied men from their home communities.

In other words, the ‘social deficit’ of proletarianisation should be our primary concern, and not the ‘opportunity cost’ of labour migration. This means that we must direct our attention to the construction of relative underdevelopment or backwardness as a socio-economic reality through the use of a region within a colony as a labour-reserve. Another concern will be to confront the theoretical approach which emphasises individual rational choices within the broader landscape of ‘opportunity cost’.

My argument in this respect, then, is that within the colonial context, and in relation to plantation, public, or mine labour – with particular reference to Northern Ghana between 1900–40 – the individual cannot be conceived of as having made a rational decision, within sometimes an infertile and over-populated environment, to maximise his economic interests in response to market forces. Indeed, in many situations his rational and free decision was always contrary to those forces. And it was this that precipitated the use of extra-economic mechanisms, first to encourage and then to enforce migration,\(^2\) which then became an induced activity in captivity – indeed, an institutional creation to complement the demands of labour in the general process of capital accumulation.

In the light of this, the analysis of migrant labour within colonial systems requires a different perspective which will direct attention to

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2 J. Wayne has argued this point in ‘Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Kigoma Region, Tanzania’, in *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* (Montreal), xi, 3, 1975, pp. 916–32. Other areas of Africa have been similarly documented – e.g. Richard D. Wolff, *The Economics of Colonialism: Britain and Kenya, 1870–1913* (New Haven and London, 1974).
the socio-economic structures in question. It is also necessary to understand the agents who became active in setting in motion various internal forces, as well as the external linkages that subordinated economic activities to the needs of first a metropolitan economy, and thereafter the world market. This external ‘connectedness’ and subordination affected the distribution of the most important factor of production – labour power. It is through the attempt to understand and study the distribution of this factor of production within colonial economic systems that the theory of ‘opportunity cost’ begins to lose its explanatory power. Generally, the use of this concept does not seem to fit the historical facts of the colonial situation in Northern Ghana, especially at the turn of the century.

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

For an economic system to function, a labour force must not only be maintained but also reproduced, and this has to be achieved both at the level of adequacy – here referring largely to quantity – and at the level of efficiency in terms of performance, as well as loyalty to the social relations production.¹

Within a colonised economic system, decisions are made to mobilise and allocate labour in largely the same way as they are taken in relation to the extraction of other resources. Thus analytically, various mechanisms are available to the decision-making body, including a range of physical controls – which may eventually involve force – and especially taxation. Impressive remuneration might be used as an incentive, or conversely meagre wages could prevent a high labour turnover in the absence of any other means of subsistence. The application of one or more of these measures is dependent on the particular circumstances. Within the Marxist tradition, the concept of ‘primitive accumulation’ embraces any of the strategies which are structurally

¹ In metropolitan capitalist systems, efficiency in performance is attained by improved techniques of output, including ‘scientific management’. Loyalty to the relations of production is usually attained indirectly at the ideological level, and the power of the media is used very subtly to achieve this end, as carefully demonstrated by Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness (New York, 1976). Other methods include the threat of dismissal and the creation of an unemployed reserve.

In colonial economic systems, the existence of pre-capitalist patterns of production made the prospect of firing futile because individuals and groups usually possessed other means of survival. However, labour-intensive techniques of production often necessitated the use of force to attain the required efficiency and loyalty – sometimes this also involved the creation of inadequate and infertile ‘native reserves’, which then forced individuals to move out in search of cash to pay taxes.
employed to release groups of people from their previous forms of subsistence and make them available for capitalist exploitation. But, then, it is precisely because of these variations that the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ must be historically specified.¹

**PROLETARIANISATION IN NORTHERN GHANA**

The extraction of gold and diamonds in Ghana on a capitalist pattern came into operation towards the end of the nineteenth century, after mining concessions had been granted to expatriate businesses by the colonial Government. The Ashanti Goldfields were first to develop in this direction, with mining rights granted by 1896,² and they immediately faced the problem of how to acquire the necessary unskilled labour. The general circumstances which created this situation have been detailed elsewhere,³ but included the reluctance of those living near the mines to accept heavy manual employment, a brief experience with the importation of workers from other West African countries, and the Government’s refusal to encourage indentured labourers from elsewhere. The Northern Territories of the Gold Coast – as the Region was then known – soon became the target for labour recruitment, and able-bodied men were pulled from there into the mines in great numbers for the next 40 and more years.

Given the structure of socio-economic activities in pre-British and pre-capitalist Northern Ghana, this labour conscription precipitated a transformation of the entire area. Relatively self-sufficient peasants and traders were rapidly transformed into unskilled wage labourers in the mines, in public works, and in various expatriate enterprises in the eastern, central, and southern regions of the country. From a position where many Northerners owned their land in common together with rights of usufruct, they were pressured into earning their keep hundreds of miles from their homes.

The first stage of this transformation extended from the 1870s to the early years of the twentieth century, and witnessed the initial penetration and establishment of the colonial apparatus. The demand for labour in this period was largely for the formation of a ‘Carrier Corps’ for the transportation of equipment, the building of roads and bungalows, and other paraphernalia of pax Britannica. The second stage, covering the

³ Plange, op. cit. especially ch. 3.
years 1910–46, was marked by the intensification of labour recruitment for the mines and other expatriate businesses, because as the new economic system became entrenched, labour demands grew and organised recruitment was escalated.

By the beginnings of World War I the new structure of the emerging colonial capitalist economy had been established. This included a concentrated emphasis on the production of cash-crops for export, and a total control of the sources of gold by the colonial state, which then distributed concessions to expatriate enterprises. The general distortions of the economy were apparent: first, towards exports, as reflected in the infrastructural networks and the general re-allocation of the factors of production, especially labour; and secondly, in the geography of economic opportunity, since trade now moved southwards to the West Coast, and not across the Sahara through Northern Ghana. Of supreme importance was the development strategy of the colonial Government which affected and altered the previous distribution of labour and capital, and brought about the extension of cocoa and gold production.

The previously installed ad hoc system of government, based mainly in the coastal areas and in the service of the trading companies, proved inadequate for the changing socio-economic realities, and necessitated the creation of complementary political structures for the new stage of exploitation. There was the need to establish more complex institutions and procedures, including those that produced a legal framework to 'legitimise' the new relations of production, a centralised bureaucracy, and especially what has been called the 'repressive state apparatus'. For this too, as E. Hutchful has demonstrated, the irregular Constabulary forces were reorganised into the Gold Coast Regiment, and were made instrumentally responsible for the penetration and 'pacification' of the interior.

The reality of these processes for Northern Ghana was the immediate termination of its trading patterns with the southern and coastal areas, as well as its profitable middleman rôle. The historically important town of Salaga, previously a buoyant commercial focus in this part of Western Africa, was virtually shut down by the colonial administration, and a new trading centre was created, as explained when
the Commissioner addressed a gathering of local Chiefs and people in 1908:

I have asked you to meet me in Tamale today so that you may all see the new town which we are making the new centre and which we have no doubt will very soon form the distributing centre of trade...From time to time your Commissioner will tell you what is good to do for trade.¹

In the wake of enforcing various decrees on trade – including the introduction of a new currency which forcefully drove out the previous medium of exchange – the itinerant trade in livestock by Northerners was curtailed. Indeed, the supply of cattle to Ashanti and the coastal areas was entrusted to two European traders – Gastong Herting and Albert Raymond – who immediately bought most of the animals from local entrepreneurs, thus driving them out of the trading circuit, although a few Northerners were hired to transport the merchandise down south.² Other areas of trade and production were also seriously affected, notably cotton, shea-butter, and groundnuts, as well as skins and hides, which all eventually disappeared, along with their long-evolved networks of socio-economic relations. In other words, the local inhabitants were gradually divorced from their means of production and subsistence, and this marked the beginning of a process of ‘primitive accumulation’ for European capitalists deliberately undertaken by the newly-formed colonial state. The administration, with the military efficiency it possessed, began forcefully to recruit reluctant natives of the North into first, public works, then the mines, and also for other private enterprises.³

It is precisely on this note that the application of the theoretical instrument of ‘opportunity cost’ and its environmental and/or demographic variants become questionable. However, before saying anything more on this issue, it is first necessary to explore the mechanisms of labour recruitment.

The Labour Reserve: Stage I, 1880–1910

The initial demand for unskilled labour began when the Administration ‘opened up’ the country for the exploration of resources, mainly by building the minimum basic infrastructure. Thus the construction of the railway network connecting the various mining centres to the port at Sekondi began in 1898: first inland to Tarkwa,

¹ Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.  
² Ibid. 56/1/109; and Plange, op. cit.  
³ For example, Thompson Moir and Galloway Co.; Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
then to Obuasi, and finally to Kumasi by 1904. Geoffrey Kay has documented the rationale for this line, instead of the initially intended network, and the forces that lobbied for it.\(^1\)

As early as this period the colonial Government was faced with an acute shortage of labour as its demands for men went unheeded, and attempts to recruit in the coastal areas yielded next to nothing.\(^2\) Within the forest zones it is known that the inhabitants were particularly unwilling to accept unskilled manual jobs and flatly refused to become porters.\(^3\) Here the production of palm oil and rubber, and especially the new cocoa crop,\(^4\) was proving profitable, as well as a peaceful substitute for the previous violent slave-raids and chaotic marketing.

Of course, the development of these raw materials helped to make the Colony pay its ‘own way’, especially as regards the cost of administration, through ‘legitimate’ trade. Since ‘no reliable labour could be obtained from Ashanti, where the Chief Commissioner reports that the people are strongly averse to any form of systematic work’\(^5\), the Northern Region, in spite of its natural resources,\(^6\) was perceived by the Administration as ‘the only alternative’ for the labour needed. In the Legislative Council in September 1907, the Governor, Sir John Roger, stated that the ‘Northern Territories ought to form a valuable recruiting ground’.

Initial government calls and demands for able-bodied men for unskilled work were also unheeded by the Northerners. But here the Administration immediately set in motion a large-scale programme of labour recruitment whereby gangs were formed and sent down to the work-sites. The military force in the territory began to patrol various communities, even capturing men and handing them over to recruiting officers.\(^7\) But these could not cope with the demand, and soon the local Chiefs were enlisted to conscript their own subjects. J. A. Brimah and J. R. Goody, in their work on Salaga, had this to say:

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1 Kay, op. cit. ch. 2.
2 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/144 and 264.
4 From 1900 to 1907 the annual production of rubber and palm oil both averaged around 250,000 tons, while the output of cocoa jumped from 27,000 to 515,000 tons; Gold Coast Blue Book, 1907.
5 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
6 A distinction has to be made between ‘colonial’ and ‘natural’ resources, since the former are only a subset of the latter, namely those that a given colonial power, on the basis of its own economic and trading priorities, has decided to exploit. Nii-K Plange, ‘The Naturalistic Fallacy at the Level of Underdevelopment’, in Review of African Political Economy (London), forthcoming.
7 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
Practically every week carriers were demanded to take loads to Kumasi, Tamale and Kintampo. The right-hand man of the chief, the Leoppowurua and another sub-chief were often on horse-back twenty-four hours a day going from village to village to conscript carriers... Whips were constantly on men's backs and there was no one to complain to. When carriers were required the Kpembewurua was made to sit in the sun until the numbers of men had been made up even though he was a man who could ill-stand it.¹

The colonial documents on labour recruitment in the North are replete with complaints about 'intransigent' Chiefs who did not implement the local administrator's demands for labour. Those who refused to co-operate in this scheme were punished, sometimes by having their 'offices' taken away.²

To these 'mechanisms' was added the compulsory recruitment law known as the Master and Servant Ordinance. Introduced as early as 1893, it initially provided porters and other unskilled workers for the Administration in its 'opening up' of the country – desertion or refusal to work became a legal offence punishable by fines, commitment to labour gangs, or both.³ In the light of the available evidence we must concur with Sharon Stichter that 'Under colonial conditions forceful state intervention was the preferred solution'.⁴ By 1917 an annual supply of 15,000 Northern labourers had been established.⁵

It must be realised that during this period in the Northern Region there were no taxes of any kind or form – these were not introduced until 1932 – so it is small wonder that the Government had to initiate other mechanisms to contract labour for the mines and other public works. The state was compelled in many circumstances to employ coercion as an instrument for providing and maintaining the labour force on the job. From the foregoing, it is evident that European capital and native 'free' workers were not brought together by an autonomous process. They were unhappily united by other means,⁶ which depended 'in part on brute force'.⁷

² Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/44 and 969. ³ Ibid. 56/1/44.
⁷ Marx, op. cit. p. 703.
These processes of recruitment, as well as the relationship and rhythm of industrial labour, were a totally novel experience for people who for centuries had been used to farming, trade, and various forms of craft production. Economically it was more opportune for them to remain in their own social systems, where by-and-large they were the owners of their means of production, and were not dependent on meagre wages. These were some of the fundamental factors that explain the mass desertions.

The pattern of proletarianisation even during this early period provoked a violent response from many of the inhabitants, and as elsewhere in Africa 'this reaction was bound with reaction against the establishment of colonial rule per se'. In Northern Ghana there is no evidence that any of these rebellions assumed religious dimensions or that they gradually crystallised into Millenarian movements. But they did involve groups, communities, and sometimes whole chiefdoms, often related specifically to the quality and conditions of work. Porters had a particularly hard time, as explained by the Transport Department in 1908:

With constant walking for twelve months, averaging 400 miles a month, the work itself having been rather harder than usual, a large number of carriers have been incapacitated from sore feet, the metalling of new roads making matters worse. In one gang, the majority had soles almost completely worn through, to say nothing of cracks. The experience was then tried of tarring the carriers' feet. Coal tar is most suitable. It fills the cracks and is good anti-septic, besides affording some protection if applied thick. These results have proved good and many carriers are now able to keep to the road who would otherwise have to be up.

In the mines, working conditions were particularly uncomfortable, and included the use of the strap, inadequate sanitation, inappropriate housing and nutrition, and relatively unsuitable weather conditions for the Northerners.

Notable among the early violent reactions were the so-called Fra-Fra, Mossi, and Gurunshi 'rebellions', where the army played an instrumental rôle in 'restoring order'. Those arrested were committed to the mines or other labour gangs, while the Chiefs were replaced by the favourites of the Administration—Sgt. Major Chiefs as they came to be known. Yet the desertions and rebellions continued, as documented by the Chief Commissioner:

1 Stichter, loc. cit. p. 25.
the labourers were of an unwilling nature; especially after the first gangs returned to make their reports to their friends. The recruits deserted by platoons, one might say, and a considerable part of my job at Navarro... consisted in catching and trying them under the Master and Servant Ordinance.¹

The Labour Reserve: Stage II, 1910–40

The problems of desertion and inadequate recruits, mainly due to the reluctance of the population to leave the North, had a significant impact on projects in both the public and private sectors of the Gold Coast. As early as 1908 the Public Works Department had complained to the Colonial Secretary, while other organisations, especially the mines, reported that the Administration was failing in its responsibility and promises.² This same period also witnessed a great increase in the distribution of mining concessions by the Government, and this made the labour problem even more acute. From their initial experiences with labourers brought by the recruiting agents, the few mines that had been operating before 1910 were handicapped by their lack of a permanent labour force. Their most important and immediate concerns were two-fold: how to obtain a substantial number of unskilled workers, and what measures of discipline could be used to prevent desertions and to encourage an efficient reproduction of the labour force.

The representatives of the mines were the first to formulate new proposals to deal with these problems: they demanded stricter enforcement of the Master and Servant Ordinance, the compounding of labour, and a pass system that would be used to identify conscripted labourers.³ The Administration decided to encourage other forms of recruitment, and finally agreed upon a scheme which involved the payment of 'head money' to the Chiefs, as well as the employment of local agents who would also be remunerated in terms of the quantity of men they were able to recruit.⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, the introduction of higher wages as an incentive was not considered. As previously, the fixing of wages was left to the discretion of the District Commissioner in consultation with the local management, and it was not until after the 1940s that the mines introduced relatively impressive wages, bonuses, and long-service gifts as incentives.

These, then, were the broad guidelines with which the second period of proletarianisation was approached. In real terms they meant nothing more than the intensification of recruitment. As expatriate businesses

¹ Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84. ² Ibid. 56/1/82. ³ For the details, see Plange, op. cit. ⁴ Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
poured into the Colony, the demand for unskilled labour increased, especially as the mines expanded their production. During the years 1898–1902 the annual value of gold exported averaged only £55,000, but had risen to £597,000 by 1905, and to £1,131,000 by 1907.1 As output rose the Northern Region was increasingly ‘farmed out’ for able-bodied men, and the Administration consistently reiterated its promise to support the companies. At this time, however, it began to demand that the mines should provide the labourers with decent living conditions and a sanitary environment. The political officers of the Administration were then made responsible, together with other health personnel, for the occasional supervision of these centres.2 By 1913–14, an annual of 15,000 recruits were being provided to the mines through the efforts of political officers and local agents.3

Three new developments between 1916–19 intensified the demand for more wage-earners: the discovery of manganese deposits in an area geographically close to the Northern Region; the Administration’s recruitment for the Gold Coast Regiment, the local wing of the Royal West African Frontier Force; and the increase in the production of cocoa as a cash crop.

Polly Hill has demonstrated the extensive use of Northern labour in Ashanti and the Eastern Region by the emergent petite bourgeoisie who were often absentee farmers. Her study also shows that the interests of Northerners in cocoa was due mainly to their acquaintance with farm work, and the different social arrangements of production – though still exploitative.4 In addition, there is evidence that during this period many Northerners voluntarily found their way southwards in order to avoid conscription to the mines. Thus the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territories reported in 1915 as follows:

Our natives are leaving the country yearly in increasing numbers to find work in Ashanti and the Colony, and this is not to be wondered when their services on the cocoa farms are in demand at a higher rate per diem.5

Of particular importance, however, was the discovery of manganese deposits, because this once again led to larger demands in the South for labourers. The interest in this mineral by the Administration was related to its value in European markets, especially for the manufacture of munitions, as explained in the following revealing extract from a

1 Gold Coast Blue Book, 1907.
5 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
letter circulated by the Chief Commissioner to his District Commissioners:

Manganese ore is used as an alloy for the purpose of hardening steel and is in very great demand for munition purposes just now... the deposits [near Tarkwa] are about to be worked but the labour difficulty at once appears as it is not desired to draw more labour than can be helped from the gold-mines, as the Imperial Government wants every ounce of gold...

Will you please appeal to the Chiefs in my name and tell them that it is an opportunity, such as may not occur again, to demonstrate in a practical manner their loyalty to the British Government... every gang of fifty men you can obtain should be accompanied by a constable whom they can trust... and let me know as soon as possible the number of labourers that you'll be able to recruit in your province.¹

Other circumstances within the emerging world capitalist system, specifically its internal crisis, were also to compel the Administration to make more demands for the supply of labour, notably the outbreak of World War I. The Empire tapped its various peripheries for soldiers, and the Gold Coast Regiment was inevitably called upon to seek more recruits from the Northern Territories, as explained later by the Governor:

The population of the Northern Territories have usually furnished the bulk of recruits to the Gold Coast Regiment, the balance being made up of the immigrants from neighbouring colonies... since the war began, the Northern Territories have continued and are still continuing to supply the number of recruits required.²

In 1919, Governor Gordon Guggisberg inaugurated a ten-year development plan designed to transform the economy by extending the railway and road networks, expanding the harbour, and providing other facilities, especially additional schools and hospitals. When announcing these various projects the Governor stated that a labour force of about 27,000 men would be required immediately, albeit with no indication that they would all be taken from the North. However, December 1919 was to witness a more pervasive recruitment by government agents. Chiefs who were approached in this endeavour were made to understand that unless they were prepared to supply adequate labour, their areas would be omitted from future development projects.³ This recruitment, however, was to affect the average labour provision to the mining companies, which made angry representations

¹ C. H. Armitage, Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territories, to all District Commissioners, 29 September 1915; ibid.
² Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84.
³ Ibid. 56/1/144.
to the Colonial Secretary, and then formed a joint recruitment organisation to compete in vain with the Administration.¹

In 1920, the mines rejoined the Government’s recruitment scheme when assured that they were now to be supplied with adequate labour, and that contracts would be for a period of not less than 15 months. In an attempt to fulfil these promises, the Administration undertook to persuade the Chiefs to let their able-bodied men come forward for recruitment, and the campaign included a region-wide exhibition of ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures of a group of mine workers. This general scheme was to continue for the next two decades, with the various mines recruiting altogether an annual average of 25,000, including some workers from the adjoining French colonies when hard pressed for taxes there.² The exact breakdown of occupations is not known, but according to the annual reports of the Mines Department the following numbers were employed by the mining companies: 12,319 in 1932–3, 16,453 in 1933–4, then a sudden jump in 1935–6 to 33,405, followed by a rise to 41,012 by 1939–40—the numbers remained at or slightly below that level during the next 10 years, apart from a drop to around 30,000 in the period 1943–6. On the basis of the recruitment pattern it can be concluded that a very high percentage were Northerners.

As the colonial system gradually restructured the economy of Ghana it began to re-allocate factors of production in terms of its own priorities, and by independence in 1957 the new economic system had been made to crystallise into a seemingly ‘natural’ form, in which the direction of the Northern labour movement was always southwards. Roger Thomas has aptly summarised the situation thus:

The existence of a forced labour system for public and private enterprise had been part of a wider attitude of the administration towards the Northern Territories, which, working with a bare minimum of funds and European manpower, justified the contribution of labour as a repayment for the maintenance of Pax Britannica...[and thus] the major day to day impact of British rule...lay in the recurrent call for labour, often unpaid.³

What are some of the main conclusions that we can draw from this exposition of the general processes of allocation of labour as a

¹ Ibid. 56/1/84.
² Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/144.
factor of production? The process as it has unfolded so far, upholds the instrumental rôle of the political variable – the colonial state – in ensuring the mobilisation, mobility, and maintenance of the labour force. The invisible hand of the market which could exert a push-pull effect, and thus influence individual choices, has been remarkably absent. The psychologistic mode of explaining the activities of *homo economicus* as he makes ‘rational’ and ‘free’ choices also becomes questionable, and ultimately undermines the Crusoe analogy and any of its variants which force a marriage between psychologism and environmentalism.

These various shades of ‘Vestehend economics’ – the phrase belongs to Göran Therborn – ignore the general social context in which behaviour occurs, and thus carefully overlook the specificity as well as the importance of the initial relations of political domination. This is epitomised by the presence of the repressive state apparatus which evicted peasants and independent petty-commodity producers from their pre-capitalist economic system, and delivered them into an exploitative relationship of production as wage-earners. Crusoe, indeed, never experienced the arm of the state as Samuelson correctly points out, but his decision to pick strawberries instead of – or at the cost of – raspberries cannot in any of its variations be made analogous to the labour migration patterns in colonial economic systems.

As E. A. Brett has shown for East Africa, contrary to classical economic theorising, it has never been true that the market has operated independently of political and social structures in allocating resources, except in the most limited sense: ‘In the colonial sphere it is even more misleading because of the direct and extensive role played by the state in the economy from the beginning of colonial production’.²

**PROLETARIANISATION AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT**

Let us now examine the construction of underdevelopment as a socio-economic reality through the transformation of a region into a labour reserve, and its connectedness with the installation of

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1 See Göran Therborn, *Science, Class and Society: on the formation of sociology and historical materialism* (London edn. 1977), pp. 110 and 227–315: ‘To the class to which economists belong, this economic common sense may be easily understandable. To a class that experiences the capitalist market economy as poverty, oppression, and periodic unemployment...any attempt to portray the economy as, by and large, based on free and rational human action may appear preposterous or blatantly apologetic’.

the colonial economic system. Here ‘underdevelopment’ may be defined as the process by which a country’s realistic possibilities for economic growth are thwarted and distorted, usually by contact with another and more highly ‘developed’ economic system. Empirically, social scientists have defined underdevelopment to include the general absence of adequate educational opportunities and health services, the existence of high unemployment and underemployment, as well as low productivity with archaic techniques, and an overall poor net income.

According to Marx, industrial capitalism itself was seen as ‘first making the production of commodities general, and then by degrees transforming all commodity production into capitalist production’. He emphasised this ‘revolutionary’ potential of the capitalist mode of production in his writings on India, and later Lenin was to explain the motion of capital in its imperialistic forms in the same tenor. The transformation forecast, however, has not occurred, and recently the question of the impact of industrial capitalism on pre-capitalist economic systems has been reconsidered. It is becoming increasingly understood that as capitalism intercepted the motion of pre-capitalist economic systems it precluded their articulation and growth, and generally led to dependence. But underdevelopment itself was also – and even more so – the result of pre-capitalist ‘involvement in the world capitalist system’, which in the process ‘uses different areas, peoples and classes in different ways’.

Northern Ghana was involved in the world capitalist system, via British imperialism, as a labour reserve. As such, certain general consequences occurred in relation to the pre-capitalist economic system and social structure. First, and most important, many young able-bodied men were siphoned out of the Region. This process soon affected not only the demographic balance of certain areas, but also the social division of labour, with attendant changes in the rôle of

men and women in production as the various households and communities struggled to eke out a living. The common sight in Northern Ghana from the 1920s onwards was 'a woman or a man well advanced in years working laboriously on the farm', or women and children herding cattle. Thus, gradually, communities were depopulated, leading to diminishing returns in production. Indeed, by 1948, it was reported that out of an ethnic group of only 7,000 Grunshi, 65 per cent lived in the South, where also were to be found 52,000 Fra-Fra out of a much larger total community of 187,000.

In terms of sex ratios, the increasing absence of men in Northern Ghana has been clearly documented. It is known that in 1931 there were 95 males per 100 females within the 'actively productive' age range of 15 to 45, but in 1948, according to T. E. Hilton, the ratio was 89 males per 100 females, and by 1960 had dropped to 75: 'The present tendency is towards longer term migration, although most northerners intend to return home eventually'. Furthermore, there is evidence that during the period 1931–60 the population in the North decreased by a quarter, including every settlement for which a comparison could be made between the years 1931 and 1948, so that on the basis of his research Hilton concluded:

It was formerly considered that the annual exodus of a large number of adult males did not have any unfortunate effects on social and economic life... This view now needs some reconsideration. Longer term migration results in reduced numbers available to cultivate the land.

This demographic imbalance was worsened by the generally unseasonal nature of migration, especially between 1910 and the 1940s. However, as I have argued elsewhere, given the projects for which the Northerners were conscripted it would be erroneous to speak of their movement in terms of seasonal migration. This is supported by

1 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/46, and Nabilla, op. cit.
3 The intention to return to natal communities has always been strong among immigrants, and many times became a substitute for seasonal migration. The desire then would be to stay longer than usual with the hope of realising some decent savings for the return. In my various interviews of migrant workers as a Research Assistant to Margaret Peil in Ghana between 1966–9, this desire was reiterated.
5 Plange, op. cit. Seasonal migration was more predominant among those who were employed on cocoa farms, and in the bungalows of colonial officials as servants.
Conclusively, there was a depletion of the young and able-bodied population, with a direct impact on the productive capacity of households and communities, gradually creating the need for some cash to complement the diminishing returns in subsistence productivity. The onus then was on the outgoing migrant to send a remittance so that the family could survive more comfortably. As pointed out earlier, this led to the gradual inflow of limited funds used to purchase commodities from the local stores, initially opened by the Administration but later operated by expatriate entrepreneurs. Gradually, the cash nexus was introduced into the local economy as production decreased, and – in the face of rising inflation – various aspects of social relations became slowly monetarised. Foremost among these were the bonds of kinship which were previously cemented through labour and livestock, and Northern migrants reported increasingly that they earned cash to pay for a variety of customary rituals, notably ‘bride price’.

The introduction of cash and other commodities also affected local commercial production – especially in cotton, shea-butter, crafts, and skins and hides – already being phased out by the colonial Administration through the termination of markets and the withdrawal of the personnel involved in this circuit. In the past the production of a variety of crafts had been undertaken for local consumption, and itinerant trading. But in the absence of buoyant markets the techniques were unable to expand and often became obsolete. Markets also shrunk, except for curious national and international visitors who trickled into the villages looking for exotic cultural artifacts, the so-called ‘primitive art’.

This pattern of production did not lead to the formation of any large capital investment, but served simply to supplement subsistence now seriously affected by the new demands for labourers. Essentially, the domestic mode of production remained in limbo: neither pre-capitalist nor successfully transformed into a capitalist mode of pro-

1 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/84. 2 Fortes, loc. cit.
duction. Indeed, in its amorphous and stagnant form it continued to serve the needs of the dominant mode of production, and to reproduce the next generation of migrants as well as absorb those who returned, thus providing the linkage with industrial capitalism and the world economic system, even if ‘at a distance’.1

Who were these returning migrants? They were mainly above the years of productive activity, usually not able to undertake the heavier physical demands of domestic production, such as building roads, digging wells, or slashing and burning forests. In the absence of adequate cash to acquire modern instruments of production, food production gradually fell. Small wonder then that among the many complaints by the Native Authorities, after their introduction in 1936, was that they should ‘not have to send labour to the mines because when they come back they are unable to work’.2 On returning, ‘their looks of misery and emaciated frames bore out their story that this particular scene of labour was for them in no sense of the term either a home away from home or a health resort’.3

Other factors relating to migrant labourers were to affect the health of the Region. As early as the 1920s a group of deserters had complained ‘that they were frightened by the death of some of their party from pneumonia’,4 and the conditions of work in the mines were over the years to generate widespread tuberculosis and silicosis. The mines tended to lay off workers as soon as any serious infection was detected, and ‘after a stay of varying periods in some overcrowded area, they return home to die.’5 The Commission to investigate the working conditions in the mines reported that ‘the returning tuberculosis emigrant must do much to spread the disease in his community, especially in the absence of any adequate health facilities in both the mines and his community’.

Health hazards and their detrimental effects in already depleted communities seldom, if ever, feature in the numerous writings on labour migration. The emphasis has instead been placed on the cash

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1 Cliffe, loc. cit.  
2 Ghana National Archives, A.D.M. 56/1/46.  
3 Ibid. 56/1/84 and 56/1/358. By way of sharp contrast, according to Elliott P. Skinner, ‘Labor Migration among the Mossi of the Upper Volta’, in Kuper (ed.), op. cit. pp. 68–9, the returning migrant, usually decked out in costumes purchased from the South, and weighed down by the burden of gifts for friends and kin, distributed largess to the minstrels who were singing his praises and those of his ancestors. The songs, however, as explained during my fieldwork, recaptured the horrors of the mines and thanked the ancestors for having provided a safe return.  
5 Murray and Crockett, op. cit. and Gold Coast Medical Reports (Accra, 1945).
injection into the villages via remittances by migrants. Elliot Berg advances this argument:

But most important, because of the seasonal character of much West African migration...there is an increase of effort by migrants’ families and by other villagers...that bulk of village output, should not show a marked decline on a per capita basis...The analytic balancing of short-term costs and benefits from migration thus points to a considerable net gain for the village economy, for while output in the village declines only slightly, the aggregate incomes of village residents are swelled by the net earnings of those who migrate.¹

Admittedly, limited cash was received by some families and therefore entered the Region, but it did not swell aggregate incomes because the mines recruited the cheapest labour possible. The actual wage levels were established by the mine managers and the District Commissioners, but their discretion was prejudiced by a desire to prevent high turnovers. The general thinking was that workers were apt ‘to desert’ if and when they made impressive savings.² This, plus the fact that the migrant labourers were responsible for their own keep, with incomes which provided only for bare subsistence, prevented the possibility of any significant remittance to the families at home.

At the same time, given the inadequate output from the small farms in the various communities, there was always pressure to supplement the subsistence production. It was this situation which led to pre-payments of part of the migrant’s earnings being remitted to the family—usually in a lump-sum—and this meant that some kinsmen were pawned into ‘bondage’ for the sake of survival. This scheme, introduced by the emerging cocoa petite bourgeoisie, was soon adopted by the mines and other expatriate enterprises, as well as by the Government. District Commissioners recorded in their diaries that the scheme ‘worked quite well’, because ‘many Northern households had no other way of earning cash...and without it such imports as kerosene and sardines cannot be bought’.³ The cash remittances to the North were negligible primarily because of low wages, but there was another relevant factor which is explained by J. C. Caldwell:

the frequency [of remittances]...varies inversely with distance...and in two major immigrating regions where towns were found, the South and Ashanti, almost two-thirds and over half respectively of the remittances are recovered...but the fraction drops to less than one-third in Volta and to one-sixth in the North.⁴

However, it must be understood that what the issue of under-development seeks to explore is not the consumption habits of individual migrants and their family’s income, nor the amount of cash available in the region, let alone the cash augmentation of subsistence farming. The approach seeks to explore the changes, albeit qualitatively, that are wrought within a given economic system so that its various patterns of production and exchange are unable to articulate themselves in terms of productivity and expansion.

Seen in this light, cash income generally aggravates the overall lack of productivity. The remittances are seldom invested in production, because most families have lost the most active members who could generate wealth from the cash inflow. Furthermore, the absence of fundamental developments in the Region—which would have been a way to utilise the able-bodied population—meant that the mere increase in local expenditure usually resulted in increase in imports rather than expansion of local production. The general effect of this was to ‘retard any processes of social differentiation and diminish the size of their internal markets’. The economic structure of Northern Ghana, then, became distorted towards the export of labour-power and the import of manufactured consumer goods. This was complemented by some production from subsistence farms with their increasingly archaic techniques, usually organised around pre-capitalist relations of production, with minimum yields, given the shortage of labour power. This situation encouraged the need for cash, and thus reinforced the ‘pawning’ of kinsmen.

This general poverty was encouraged by the introduction and provision of education because, within the historical materialist framework, this is largely a process of reproducing first the social relations of production, and secondly the social division of labour. The former refers to the ideological content of education, and the latter relates to the instrumental aspects of education. As primary schools were reluctantly introduced in Northern Ghana they created a mass of ‘educated’ people without corresponding jobs being available in the Region. Consequently, those who finished their elementary education were compelled to move to the South, only to find themselves ‘untrained’ for the types of jobs available for educated people. The only recourse then was to take menial and manual jobs, or to accept

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1 Laclau, op. cit.  
2 Plange, op. cit.
employment in households as cooks, stewards, gardeners, and night-watchmen. It was this group of the Northern Region’s emerging proletariat who were able to realise some cash and often return home. But they returned with skills that did not encourage productivity, and with life-styles whose ‘demonstration effect’ attracted others to the South, gradually creating in the North an ideology of migration. The use of force was no longer required. As migration now became a way of life for able-bodied men, the Region was left with its traditional values, forms of production, and political institutions which were together mobilised to maintain survival at the subsistence level. As long as production remains at the pre-capitalist level, the attendant myths in religion and normative behaviour, as well as a number of outmoded rituals, also remain impervious to radical ideas and progressive change.¹ These general conditions of impoverishment are supported by the tenacity of traditional structures, and continue to reproduce themselves as the integration into the capitalist system persists.

Gradually, then, through the involvement of Northern Ghana in the world capitalist system as a labour reserve, the colonial state assembled all the characteristics and structures of underdevelopment in that Region. If the complexities of backwardness differ in detail from those of other areas, it is because of the particular way in which this part of Africa was involved in the capitalist system.

¹ Ibid. Kwaku op. cit. has reached similar conclusions in his study of peripheral underdevelopment in the Volta Region of Ghana.