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Frederick Cooper. *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xvii + 677 pp. $63.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-56600-1; $130.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56251-5.

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Workers and Decolonization

Frederick Cooper is the distinguished author of a historical trilogy which details the conditions of work and life on the coast of east Africa from the slave plantations of the nineteenth century to the urban working class of twentieth-century Mombasa. The first book uncovers a form of Islamic slavery which oscillated between the kinship slavery of sub-Saharan Africa and the more familiar plantation slavery of the Americas and Caribbean. In the second work, Professor Cooper shows how the onset of colonialism, with its peculiar "free labour" ideology, transformed the slaves of east Africa into squatters. The final work in this series turns to the late colonial period and examines the ways in which the colonial authorities attempted to counter the threat of unreliable and antagonistic "casual labour" at the port of Mombasa by creating a stable, urbanized, and carefully surveyed African working class.[1]

Professor Cooper's new work, *Decolonization and African Society*, shares many of the concerns of this previous work. The major theme is again the labor question, in particular how colonial authorities dealt with and tried to control the rise of an African working class. But it also marks a major departure, especially in historical methodology and geographic range. Whereas his previous work provided qualitative details of particular case studies, *Decolonization and African Society* presents us with a massive comparative study of all of British subsaharan Africa and French West Africa. In the east African trilogy, local archival and oral sources were carefully collected, in contrast to the official colonial documentation which forms the base of this work.

The story that Professor Cooper presents from these sources is predictably familiar. Much of it has been detailed in many articles and books by "imperial" historians like Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, Prosser Gifford, Wm. Roger Louis, and Jacques Marseille.[2] Yet Cooper presents a particularly wide-ranging and impressive synthesis which is still based on his original archival research. No doubt, he feels uneasy being placed alongside this "imperial" historiography, which he did so much to counter in his earlier work: in the preface he explains that he would not dare write such a book if not for his previous work on the social history of Kenya. But, significantly, he also recognizes that he was one of a group of Africanists of the 1970s who were "anxious to distinguish ourselves from 'imperial history"' and thereby "assume[d] that colonialism could be taken for granted, that we could probe the complexity of African initiatives and responses to outside intrusion without examining the colonial side of this encounter in similar depth" (p. xi). This statement does not do justice to the work of the Africanists of the 1970s, including that of Professor Cooper, but its recognition of the importance of studying the nature of the colonial impact from the colonial archives is welcome.

Professor Cooper continues to sanitize his approach by a dose of "discourse analysis" theory in the introduction. Here, in a somewhat patronizing fashion, he warns us against the "linear 'model' of proletarianization"' (p. 14), of the relationships between knowledge and power (p. 15), and of how "the command of discourse" defined the nature of imperialism and colonial intervention (p. 16). Much of this might be entertaining for an undergraduate, but it adds little to the substance of Professor Cooper's book, and is irritating to the serious reader. In fact, I found that the occasional use of discourse analysis, dotted through the book to satiate the (post?) modern appetite for novelty, did not help to clarify historical issues.

Fortunately, there is far more substance and depth to Professor Cooper's exegesis and argument. The first part of this four-part work explores the dilemmas of the French and British colonial regimes, with their espousal of "free labour" alongside the colonial reality of officially

sanctioned forced labor. Up until the mid-1930s, except for a few dissenting voices, both colonial regimes could not even imagine an African working class. "Africans," by definition, were not workers, and thus they had to be forced by the colonial authorities to work. Strikes by Africans, such as on the Northern Rhodesian copperbelt, were explained by the deleterious effects that "detribalization" had on the African. The colonial reality of a growing wage-earning African class had however begun to undermine such ideas. In France, officials of the Popular Front government (1936-1939) began to criticize the use of the two forms of "travail obligatoire"–"prestations" and the pseudo-conscription "deuxieme portion"–although the resulting reforms amounted at best to a slight amelioration of the system. The Vichy regime introduced new metropolitan visions of a corporatist colonial state, but, still, conditions in the colonies (the Ivory Coast is Professor Cooper's case study) ensured the continuation of forced labor. Although less directly implicated than the French in the use of forced labor, Great Britain continued to sanction the use of "Native Authorities" to conscript the labor required by the mining industries and settler farmers.

Part II deals with changes in the colonialist mentality along with new metropolitan governments and a wave of colonial strikes after World War II. With the coming to power of the Labour Government (1945), the objectives of British colonialism changed from the preservation of traditional Africa to an aggressive developmentalism led by familiar characters like Arthur Creech Jones, Sydney Caine and Andrew Cohen. France, under Charles de Gaulle, also began to reform its vision of Africans as essentially peasant producers and accepted the notion of an African working class.

In dialogue with these changes in metropolitan visions and policies, the growing African working class took to the streets in a number of strikes between 1945 and 1950. Professor Cooper compares four strike movements–Dakar (1945-1946), Mombasa (1947), the West African Railway Strike (1947-1948) and the Gold Coast (1947-1951)–showing the ways in which workers negotiated how power was exercised within the new post-war institutional framework of labor relations. Only in the case of the Gold Coast did the new framework prove insufficient to contain worker protest, and only here did the strike become an emancipatory movement which questioned the very legitimacy of colonial rule. But even if the colonial authorities successfully negotiated and manipulated an end to most of the strikes, an African working class, which the colonial powers could no longer afford to ignore, had asserted its identity.

Part III begins with a discussion of how the colonial regimes accepted the reality of this working class and attempted to fit it into a reformed colonialism which found its *raison d'etre* in a mission to develop the colonies along the industrial lines of the metropoles. The "great debate" in the French National Assembly over the Code du Travail led to the end of the legal use of forced labor by the French administration and European employers, and placed metropolitan standards, considered universal, as the governing norms over what Cooper refers to as a "bounded" working class. The universalistic language employed by the French was in turn adopted by African workers to demand entitlements and "equal pay for equal work." The reforms in the less centralized colonies of British Africa were not as homogeneously applied. To be sure, there were metropolitan initiatives, appealing for administrative reforms and encouraging the "stabilization" of a working class and payment of a "living wage." Yet the vicissitudes of reform depended on the particular colonies. Professor Cooper uses case studies of Northern Rhodesia and Kenya to show how white miners and settler farmers drove reform into the *cul-de-sac* of anti-colonial strikes and Mau Mau.

We finally reach decolonization in Part IV, entitled "Devolving Power and Abdicating Responsibility." Indeed, Cooper does not sympathize with a heroic story of nationalist struggle against the colonial regimes (after over thirty years of repression in the name of national unity it is difficult for anyone still to sustain such a position). With the apparent failure of the post-war developmental plans, the colonial regimes began to re-evaluate their commitment to empire in the 1950s. Harold Macmillan's cost-benefit analysis of empire revealed that decolonization would involve no significant economic loss for Great Britain. France also began to realize that the costs of empire in general outweighed any particular benefits. Here, in spite of Cooper's criticisms of Ronald Robinson (Robinson is accused of "Whig history" [p. 8]) and Jacques Marseille (Marseille's focus is so "resolutely metropolitan" that he misses details of the metropolitan-colonial economic relationship [p. 8]), Cooper confirms much of what they previously argued, the only divergence being his emphasis on the undeniable fact that concrete moves towards the granting of independence only came after the failure of the post-war developmentalist strategies. But unfortunately, as with many of the "imperial" historians, the contingencies and struggles of decolonization do not quite surface in Cooper's account.

The coming of independence also marked an end to the struggle for entitlements based on a universal no-

tion of economic rights. The development projects of the post-war colonial regimes based on standard norms of economic growth had collapsed and the colonial regimes rapidly denied any responsibility for the continued failures of African development. Instead, the colonial authorities handed over these mismanaged economies to a new African political elite. Much to the pleasure of those in power at the metropoles, trade union struggles for economic rights were subordinated to those of African liberation: "the ideology of nationalism was being used to put the workers' struggle in its place" (p. 422). With detailed reference to Sekou Toure's Guinea, the Senegal of Leopold Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, Cooper shows how, as the colonial regimes withdrew, workers' demands were subsumed to those of the new nations. Unions became branches of the dominant parties as ambitious union leaders eagerly adopted political roles. The "bounded" working class lost the ability to struggle for economic rights.

Professor Cooper, nevertheless, remains faithful to this working class and to a universal notion of economic rights in the face of a new "market universalism." He correctly argues against the accusation that African workers constitute a labor aristocracy, as this ignores the web of social and economic relationships that binds African wage laborers to other sectors. But I feel Professor Cooper edges too far in his support for that "bounded" working class by ignoring some of the consequences of the attempts of the late colonial and post-colonial regimes to encourage a developed urban sector. Indeed, Professor Cooper almost dismisses scholars who point out the effects of the state marketing boards which sucked surplus from the rural areas to finance urban development as right-wing supporters of IMF structural adjustment programs (p. 470).

This is only a taste of some of the themes and the basic narrative of the 472 pages of basic text. This, added to the 152 pages of footnotes, makes *Decolonization and African Society* a massive, well-researched and clearly-argued work. Perhaps the greatest problem with the work is its ambition. What is the point of a study of all of French West Africa and British subsaharan Africa? As a comparative study, the inclusion of too many examples, from too many different contexts, precludes any firm conclusions. If Cooper was trying to evaluate the differences between British and French policies towards labor, he should have chosen a more controlled comparison of, say, Senegal and Ghana. Or, if he wanted to examine the effects of settlers on the labor question, he could have compared Kenya and Nigeria. If inclusion was the criterion, certain areas (Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Senegal, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast) gained more prominence than others (the lack of detailed discussion of Nigeria is particularly disturbing). Instead, the examples and case studies seem to be chosen for the convenience of his narrative and argument or because colonial officials regarded those areas as important.

In spite of this problem, and even though the ground covered by *Decolonization and African Society* is well-trodden, Professor Cooper's lucid and intelligent discussion manages to unearth many buried controversies which reveal some of the forces that molded contemporary Africa. It is essential reading for any scholar interested in the history of modern Africa and the social and economic dilemmas which the continent still faces.

Notes:

[1]. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1987).

[2]. See especially the edited volumes: Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization 1940-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982) and W.H. Morris-Jones and Georges Fischer, eds., *Decolonization and After: the British and French Experiences* (London: Cass, 1980). Also see the special edition on decolonization in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies* 12 (1984) and Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme francais: Histoire d'un divorce* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984).

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