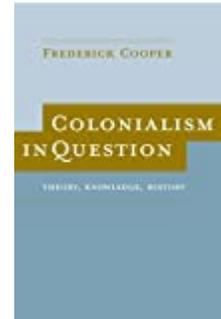




Frederick Cooper. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xii + 327 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24414-6; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24214-2.



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Fresh Thoughts on Empire and Colonial Studies

Colonialism in Question is an erudite book, boldly written in an engaging, accessible style. While it grapples with often difficult theoretical concepts, it has a pragmatic goal and tone. How to make sense of scholarship about the colonial experience in Africa that has emerged out of post-colonial or subaltern critiques of Western epistemology? As Cooper sees it, those critiques are important but at times are convoluted, logically contradictory, and conformist. He illustrates the latter with a graph showing the dramatic rise in the use of the word “identity” in academic titles since 1993. But what, exactly, do authors mean by this term? Cooper differentiates five distinct usages. He argues that the word has in effect become empty of any analytic (hence, political) power that it may once have had. To get back that power, he proposes alternative terms that state clearly and precisely what they mean, and are more aware of their theoretical implications.

Cooper takes his inspiration in part from George Orwell on the English language, and in part from that tradition of scholarship that seeks to understand the world in

order to change it for the better. But this is no paean to the glory days of political scholar-activist. Indeed, he has strong criticisms of past abuses in the name of improvement, from modernization theorists to Marxist revolutionaries to those who, in the worthy name of anti-Eurocentrism, arrogantly reject (or claim to reject) everything about Western analytic models (even when Africans themselves evidently do not).

Cooper remains committed to a vision of doing history that empowers people to work against injustice and inequality. The book is an eloquent excursus on how to get there without recreating the arrogance and imperialism of Eurocentric models.

The first substantive chapter is a history of critical writing about colonialism in Africa. Beginning with George Balandier, he charts the major trends, changing themes, and new insights by leading scholars across disciplines as they struggled to understand how empire operated, how people understood empire, and how they variously resisted, embraced, used, corrupted and otherwise responded to the diverse opportunities that em-

pires created.[1] Sometimes the discussion feels rushed: Walter Rodney and Immanuel Wallerstein get a paragraph, for example. But Cooper's thesis is convincing. While he appreciates the way "new" scholarship calls critical attention to the cultural assumptions of the observer, he ultimately finds the new less helpful than the best of the old. The key issue is whether the research treats Africans as historical actors within specific, contingent systems of power and political symbolism (that is, not simply victims of supposedly intrinsically oppressive post-Enlightenment thought).

The next three chapters focus on specific instances of conceptual muddiness within the historiography and ethnography. First, Cooper walks us through the various ways that the term "identity" has been bandied about to explain African tribalism, class formation, nation-building and such. He sees it as almost inescapably imposing essentialized categories upon people who may or may not recognize those categories as they are imagined from outside. Cooper proposes, among other things, using active, verb-derived terms to better reflect vibrant historical process—notably identification, categorization and self-imagining.

Chapters 4 and 5 take on two other popular concepts "that confuse normative and analytic categories and reinforce the meta-narratives that they pretend to take apart"—modernity and globalization (p. 9). As with identity, Cooper illustrates how these are deployed with distinct, sometimes quite contradictory meanings at times by the same author within the same book. At bottom, however, Cooper sees a basic agreement between Walt Rostow-style modernization theory and proponents of plural, non-Western modernities (that is, a narrative of progress). Globalization also wrongly implies something historically new, progressive and intrinsically universalizing even in the hands of its critics. Cooper makes specific suggestions on how to guard against implicit essentialisms and Eurocentrisms in these terms.

The second part of the book moves from critiques of generalizing claims in the scholarship to two case studies. Here, Cooper tries to demonstrate a method of doing history that does not fall into the traps identified earlier. The first is a wide-ranging comparative essay on the historiography of empire, from ancient Rome to contemporary

United States. It refutes the notion that ostensibly modern empires are inherently different from non-Western or old empires. Both were characterized by "long arms [political imagination] and weak fingers [actual ability consistently to impose that imagination on the day-to-day lives of the subjects of empire]" (p. 197). This tension makes the fact of empire fundamentally important to understanding global history. More attention needs to be placed on how, exactly, a people or a nation comes to think and hence to act like an empire in specific historical contexts. The corollary of this that has immediate pertinence to contemporary debates about "post-coloniality" and American unilateralism is, how do a people or nation stop thinking like an empire or determinedly pretend not to be one in the first place?

The second case study draws on Cooper's research in primary documents pertaining to the post-World War II tensions between French and British imperial ambitions, on the one side, and West African trade unionism and nationalist aspirations on the other. This is a succinct summary of Cooper's influential 1996 monograph, *Decolonization and African Society* and other articles he has published previously on labor history.[2] It provides an effective riposte both to teleological thinking about the decolonization process and to overstated heroism on the side of African nation-builders.

Colonialism in Question is a welcome, refreshing contribution to debates about theory and method not just in African but also in global studies more broadly.

Notes

[1]. Georges Balandier, "La Situation Coloniale: Approche Thoretique," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 12 (1951): pp. 44-79

[2]. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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