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Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. vii + 327 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-24214-9. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 0-520-24414-1.

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Frederick Cooper's many publications—over the course of a career that shows no signs of slowing down—have made him one of the most authoritative and far-ranging historians of modern Africa and European colonialism. From his early path-breaking trilogy on the dock workers in British East Africa to his monumental comparative study of British and French decolonization in West Africa, and, most recently, to a number of edited and co-edited volumes exploring “the tensions of empire,” Cooper has always assumed a dynamic and multi-polar interpretation of European overseas rule and African history in the modern era.[1] His latest collection of essays is in many ways a manifesto for such an interpretation, while at the same time a preview of a promising new research agenda.

For scholars unfamiliar with the turf wars that have accompanied the rise of a new interdisciplinary study of European colonialism in the 1980s and 1990s, Cooper's volume will appear common-sensical: of course historians should be studying colonialism as a specific historical process, endlessly varied in its particular manifestations, for that is the very definition of what historians do. For those, on the other hand, who feel that an ahistorical, generic understanding of Europe's former empires has somehow set the agenda for much recent scholarship on colonialism, this collection will appear a long overdue riposte to the hegemony of theory-happy critics, and perhaps as an invitation for historians to eschew theory altogether. Such a narrow and combative reading of these essays would be a pity. For while Cooper is indeed responding to a body of literature on colonialism that has, in his view, increasingly distorted the possibilities of the past and the contingency of all human actions, he is certainly not dismissing the insights gained from two decades of critical theorizing about imperial formations, colonial difference, and postcoloniality. His message is a more nuanced and constructive call for greater conceptual clarity among all those interested in colonial questions. And for the readers of this list-serve, it is worth noting that this message is framed by the particular history of France more than any other “empire-state.”

Cooper's volume is made up of three closely integrated parts. The first, entitled “Colonial Studies and Interdisciplinary Scholarship,” retraces his own intellectual trajectory as emblematic of a generation of Africanists who came of historical age in the heady era of anti-colonial struggles. Africanists—with a few exceptions like the French sociologist Georges Balandier—rejected bringing the history of the colonized and the colonizer into a single analytical frame in favor of history from below.[2] This choice *de facto* left the field of colonial studies open to other disciplines, since historians of Europe (or so Cooper implies) showed no interest themselves in the subject. Literary critics and anthropologists soon were using Europe's colonial past brilliantly to critique the Enlightenment, democracy and Western modernity in general. Cooper's central argument, stated in many different cogent ways, is that this critique has now run the course of its original inventiveness and vitality: reducing non-Western history to a lack of what the West had (i.e. Enlightenment, democracy, and modernity) is to assume (rather than prove) that the West actually had it (p. 16); conflating different strategies of European colonization into a single “colonial modernity” is to occlude the ways in which colonized people built meaningful lives “in the crevices of colonial power” (p. 16); “ownership of [bounded] notions of human rights and citizenship is conceded to Europe, only to be subjected to ironic dismissal for their association with European

imperialism" (p. 16); to see colonial power as "capillary," is to ignore how little interested colonial power was "in obtaining or dispensing knowledge about its subjects" (p. 49).

As Cooper reminds us, it is the nature of ideology to be internally contradictory, and tensions always arose when Europeans had to install real administrations over real people, whether at home or overseas. All empires have had "to articulate difference with incorporation," and while "modern" empires were more explicit about codifying difference as race than previous ones, there was also "enormous debate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about where the lines of exclusion would be drawn" (p. 23). In short, the colonial critic has been satisfied to push historians to question their own epistemological positions, without asking sufficiently what really happened. Cooper believes that historians should do more than decenter themselves; by searching out the many messy struggles of the past that crossed rather than reified the ostensible Manichean divide between colonizer and colonized, scholars of empire can not only better approach lived experience. They can also remind their readers that political mobilization has always mattered in the past and still does today. If history teaches us anything—and staking out this claim is perhaps Cooper's principal reason for writing this volume—it is that all forms of power invite challenges that might yield "tangible gains for those most concerned" (p. 233).

These broad themes are brought into much sharper focus in Part Two, "Concepts in Question." Here Cooper argues that three central and related concepts in the field of colonial studies—"identity," "globalization," and "modernity"—have outlived their analytical usefulness for historians because of the multiple conflicting meanings attached now to each. In the essay on "identity," co-authored with Rogers Brubaker, Cooper and Brubaker maintain that there so many different contradictory uses of identity in the vast scholarly literature on the subject that the idiom "saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" (p. 60). It can designate non-instrumental modes of action; self-understanding; sameness across persons or across time; allegedly core aspects of selfhood or the impossibility of core aspects of selfhood; solidarity and collective self-understanding or contingent and unstable contemporary selves (pp. 65-66). The problem here is twofold. First, social scientists have unintentionally imported identity as a category of political practice wholesale into analyses of past social experience. The current practice of identity politics—and the authors have no quarrel with such politics *qua* politics—assumes that nations, races and identities exist. But historians have no business reproducing or reinforcing such reification in their scholarly work. Recent constructivist efforts to correct for "essentialism" in identity studies by seeing all identities as in flux and fragmented have only muddied the waters: why use the term at all then, if its core meaning—i.e., some degree of sameness over time—is repudiated? Second, having let their presentist political practices determine their categories of analysis, historians have relied too much on official categorizations by the state or others to determine the self-understandings of particular groups. Cooper and Brubaker argue passionately that we need to treat "groupness and boundedness" as "emergent properties of particular settings, rather than as always already there in some form" (p. 83). The valuable theoretical work that identity is supposed to do would be better accomplished by parceling it out "to a number of less congested terms" [such as] "categorization" and "identification," "self-understanding" and "social location," and "commonality," "connectedness" and "groupness" (p. 71). A more precise vocabulary, they insist, is more imaginative analytically as well as—for those who wish to take this path—more liberating politically.

A similar set of preoccupations informs Cooper's essay on the totalizing term "globalization," a particular favorite of social scientists, social democrats, and bankers and directors of NGOs, who differ on whether "it" is good or bad, but not on the reality of the thing itself. Students seeking to understand the intensifying interconnectedness of the contemporary world have seized on the universal concept of globalization, without stopping sufficiently to reflect on what such a metahistorical category necessarily implies: that there was once a "pre-global" world of discrete bounded parts, which somehow moved lockstep toward today's greater integration (and concomitant fragmentation). In this teleological scheme, scholars too readily contrast the "global" and the "local," as these two mutually constitutive

frames have come to be called, without noticing that together these frames fail singularly “to analyze anything in between” (p. 93). Yet it is precisely “in between” that history takes place, and this history is principally one of power coalescing unevenly, of bounded connections that strengthen and weaken at certain nodal points at particular moments in time. Rather than assume an “amorphous anthropology of flow and fragments,” or see colonialism as the proto-history of globalization, Cooper recommends that those interested in understanding current inequities world-wide acquaint themselves more intimately with the many cross-territorial and intersecting circuits and networks (pilgrimages, resistance movements, trade linkages) that have characterized human behavior in the past (p. 108). Only then will historians begin to reveal the full range of opportunities as well as constraints created by greater “global” connectivity in the present.

“Scholars should not try for a slightly better definition [of modernity] so that they can talk about [it] more clearly. They should listen instead to what is being said in the world” (p. 115). No term has had a more powerful valence in colonial studies than “modernity”—that condition or representation of what the West supposedly had and the colonized did not deserve, but to which they should nevertheless aspire. While Cooper insists that the postcolonial critique of the Western claim to modernity was initially useful, his third essay is devoted mostly to illuminating how confining this term, like identity and globalization, has also become to historians. Seen as an epoch (post Enlightenment) modernity is given a misleading coherence. Seen as the inevitable by-product of capitalism, modernity becomes a generic process. Seen as a distinctive government rationality, modernity is an abstraction. Seen as a multiple phenomenon in the plural (autonomous or alternative modernities) modernity becomes “a word for everything that has happened in the last five hundred years,” and it leaves the concept of a “normative” Western modernity intact (p. 127). For Cooper, the only “alternative modernity” that can be usefully analyzed is one whose thinkers “specifically fight their battles on the turf of modernity, engaging a vision that represented itself as modernizing, and proposing an alternative to it” (p. 130). Cooper is even more skeptical of the concept of colonial modernity, much in fashion of late. As far as Africa is concerned, there is little evidence of colonial regimes successfully routinizing and normalizing their exercise of power in the Foucauldian sense, as their periodic resort to torture, rape and mass murder make all too clear. Colonial subjects, on the other hand, routinely appropriated modern idioms, practices and goals and harnessed them to their own political agendas. Colonial critics too often miss political mobilizations such as these in their quest to unmask the conceptual tyranny of categories like modernity—categories that these same critics nevertheless constantly reinscribe.

The final part of *Colonialism in Question*, “The Possibilities of History,” combines the critical insights enumerated so far with a number of new ways of thinking about empire. In “States, Empires and Political Imagination,” Cooper attacks yet another teleology, the inevitable “rise of the nation-state,” to posit an alternative thesis: the “importance and durability of imperial state-making and un-making in the modern era,” particularly among the important powers (p. 154). Nationalist struggles were only one political possibility among many that emerged in a revolutionary and capitalist world still defined by imperial centers and margins. To make this case, Cooper briefly surveys the Roman, Mongol, early Spanish and Chinese empires, before turning to the “post Enlightenment.” “By the end of the eighteenth century, Britain, Spain and France did not cease to act like old empires, turn themselves into nation-states and then conquer new territories in the interest of national power” (p. 156). To the contrary, imperial polities continued to constitute an international system “in which any serious competitor for geopolitical influence had to think and act like an empire” (p. 154). Thinking like an empire meant first, seeking a balance between incorporating the diverse subjects inhabiting the political and moral space of empire, and differentiating amongst them, and second, shifting actions constantly to respond to the actions of the colonized, who always upset these balances even as different groups accommodated to them.

What are the advantages of recognizing this *longue durée* of “empire-states”—in France’s case until 1962? Cooper wishes to use this fact to encourage historians to rethink how modern European states functioned, bringing, for example, capitalism back into the discussion. Old empires used terror tactics because they were strong at their centers and weak on the margins. Yet while French and British imperialists could have reversed this equation—they had, after all, the technological means to exert unprecedented power in their colonies compared to their predecessors—they too preferred empire on the cheap. This confusing reality is best explained not by the myth of total exploitation or of modern governmentality, but by “the ambiguous relationship of capitalism and imperialism over time” (p. 158). Another advantage in replacing a national/colonial dichotomy with a more nuanced concept of empire as a single political space is the light it sheds on the moral debates that attended Western expansion. Imperial actors before and after the Enlightenment repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of subjugation, slavery and forced labor in the colonies, precisely because they did not see a neat divide between “home” and “overseas.” Anti-racism, as well as new scientific doctrines of biological difference, thus competed with each other in the “age of empire.”

Last but not least, a cursory comparison of French and British overseas imperialism with the Napoleonic, Romanov, Hapsburg, and Ottoman empires confirms that “the story of empire is still a story of limits,” everywhere. Colonizer and colonized constructed each other “not against a ‘generalized modernity,’ but against the shifting needs and constraints facing colonial regimes in specific moments” (p. 190). This conclusion is echoed in Cooper’s final essay, a case study of one facet of the end of empire. In 1946, West African trade unions were willing to accept imperial citizenship in a postwar Greater France rather than their own national state, if it would secure them a comparable standard of living to their metropolitan counterparts. When West African nationalists—and stingy French legislators—preferred African independence and suppression of the labor unions to footing the bill for wage “equivalence” in 1956, the “limits” of both the French empire and the postcolonial order stood revealed.

This volume is a pleasure to read. Respectful of the work engaged, impressive in breadth, and informed throughout by a deeply felt commitment to history’s simultaneous possibilities and constraints, these essays are a model of what scholarly debate should be. Particularly helpful is the wealth of new scholarship (in African, imperial and world history) that Cooper both synthesizes and draws upon to argue for a more balanced and contextualized understanding of colonialism than that offered by the pioneering magisterial works of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Homi Babha, Franz Fanon, and Edward Said, or certain historians who have followed in their footsteps. *Colonialism in Question* thus promises to supersede Cooper’s earlier volume, *Tensions of Empire*, co-edited with Ann Stoler, as an obligatory reference for students of empire.

This said, a volume as ambitious as this one will not satisfy everyone. Those who might have hoped for a clarion call for historians now to shift their gaze to empire’s material foundations will be disappointed. If capitalism determines the precise contours of particular colonial encounters, Cooper offers only a brief analysis of the economics of empire in these pages. This is in part because he clearly also embraces the cultural and intellectual approach to the history of colonialism that postcolonial critics have long favored, as long as discourses are read as “frameworks for contestation and debate over the nature of social distinction and social knowledge across the colony-metropole divide” (p. 15). And while Cooper’s argument about the ubiquity of empire-states in the era of “nationalism” promises to be particularly productive, modern European historians will perhaps be skeptical of the claim that a country like France was *continuously* made from its empire from the Haitian revolution to the signing of the Evian Accords.

Finally, it might be argued that Cooper doth protest too much. If we turn from the iconic postcolonial texts of the 1980s and 1990s to the latest studies by historians of modern France and of the French empire, it is clear that many younger scholars are now writing the kind of multi-directional, empirically

based, contingent and conjunctural colonial histories that Cooper is endorsing. In the case of South Asian historiography, less of which appears in this volume, much of the most exciting new scholarship combines cultural history with a history of the development of capitalist relations. All of these histories remain challenging to write, because of the complexity of the sources and the difficulty of mastering multiple imperial, national, regional and local sources and historiographies, not to mention the requisite languages. In the best of cases, these works focus centrally on the historical agency of all actors, and acknowledge—*pace* Cooper—that “people made their moral and political choices,” then as now, within frameworks whose particular outlines historians cannot know ahead of time (p. 134). As the historical field of empire studies continues to mature, it will, of course, stake out new interpretive debates of its own. Whatever direction these debates take, this volume’s provocative and lucid synthesis of where colonial studies has been and where the history of colonialism might head will surely occupy a pivotal place.

NOTES

[1] Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Co-editor with Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); co-editor with Randall Packard, *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays in the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); co-author with Rebecca Scott and Thomas Holt, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and co-editor with Craig Calhoun and Kevin Moore, *Lessons of Empire* (New York: New Press, 2005).

[2] See in particular Georges Balandier’s important article, “La situation coloniale: Approche théorique,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 11 (1951): 44-79.

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