

African Independence Reconsidered

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Denouncing the neglect of the independence era by African historians, Frederick Cooper asserts that a continent of nation-states was not the inevitable outcome of decolonization.

Reviewed: Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2014, 130 p.

Writing in 1946, the historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois sat down for the third time in his long career to define the place of Africa and the people of the African Diaspora in World History. Du Bois, writing at the conclusion of the Second World War, had this to say about why he had once again taken up the pen:

Since the rise of the sugar empire and the resultant cotton kingdom, there has been consistent effort to rationalize Negro slavery by omitting Africa from world history, so that today it is almost universally assumed that history can be truly written without reference to Negroid peoples. I believe this to be scientifically unsound and also dangerous for logical social conclusions. Therefore I am seeking in this book to remind readers in this crisis of civilization, of how critical a part Africa has played in human history, past and present, and how impossible it is to forget this and rightly explain the present plight of mankind.¹

Frederick Cooper, one of the preeminent African historians in the American Academy, begins his short book, which is based on the three McMillan-Stewart Lectures he delivered at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University in February 2012, by recounting Du Bois' challenge that world history cannot be understood without African history and that African history cannot be written without reference to world history. Cooper begins by explaining the different ways in which the American academy has studied African history, highlighting his own biography.

¹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has played in World History* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1947) p. vii.

He began studying African history as a young man at Stanford University in 1967, where increasingly disillusioned with the Vietnam War, he started to look for a region of the world whose future held more promise than the endless quagmire in which Southeast Asia appeared mired. Cooper notes that following decolonization:

Among historians, the immediate urge was to prove that Africa did in fact have a history, that its societies were not caught up in the timeless continuities of 'culture.'²

African history went through several fads. In the 1970s, African historians were interested in the ways in which the world economy was rigged against the continent and its new states, while by the 1980s, Africanists were increasingly concerned with the colonial period and the ways in which the legacy of colonialism impacted the patterns of thought, social relationships and institutions of the newly independent societies (p. x).

From the 1980s until the present, Cooper laments that the majority of scholarly work has focused almost exclusively on the colonial period to such an extent that only a few have been willing to brave an investigation of the vast spans of African history either before or after the colonial era.

Africa and the World Economy

In the process, African historians have neglected the meaning and specificity of the independence era. Cooper's book is really a meditation on the significance of the end of the world-spanning European colonial empires and political independence in Africa. He asks how we got to where we are: a continent with more than fifty countries, each maintaining its own sovereignty. Cooper, along with the sociologists and documentarian Tukufu Zuberi of the University of Pennsylvania, is spearheading a wave of academic work that seeks to reevaluate the importance of independence and sovereignty for African states more than 50 years after the largest wave of decolonization took place in the early 1960s.³ Was political independence and the rise of a continent of nation-states a triumph that finally began to make Africa and Africans' place in world history visible? Was it a wrong turn, or something in between?

Over three chapters, which really form three individual essays, Cooper asserts that a continent of nation-states was not the inevitable outcome of decolonization. Provocatively, Cooper goes on to argue that it was possible, as a wide variety of Pan-African leaders believed, for the colonial empires to be transformed into federations in which the equality of Europeans and Africans would be respected. In the introduction, Cooper asserts that:

Colonialism and capitalism, Senghor, Williams, James, and Du Bois all believed, reinforced each other. Senghor feared that "nominal" independence for small, poor, weak territories – the formal end of colonial rule without the capacities to govern effectively – would serve only to perpetuate poverty. The solution to the iniquities of colonialism and

² Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014) x.

³ Tukufu Zuberi, *African Independence: A Film* (Philadelphia, PA: TZ Production Company, 2013)

capitalism for Senghor, was not to exit from empire but to transform it, not to withdraw from the world economy but to transform it too. (p. 5)

The implication is that while the end of colonialism in Africa was a triumph, the nation-states that independence spawned were at best consolation prizes. Cooper is at his strongest when he is highlighting the counter-factual that African independence could have been the laboratory for a new empire of equality, but this short book is weakest as a means of evaluating the implications of the change that actually took place.

In the first essay “Africa and Capitalism,” Cooper takes on the trope that Africa is marginal to the world economy, either because of its isolation or its poverty. Instead, building on the work of Eric Williams, Kenneth Pomeranz and Prasannan Parthasarathi, Cooper illustrates how central Africans and Africa have been to the creation of the Atlantic world and the economic development of Europe and the Americas.

Cooper departs from the familiar narratives of Walter Rodney, Eric Williams and the other members of the dependency school and builds on the more recent work of John Thornton and Linda Heyward, when he shows that it is not possible to think of Africans as the dominated economic partners even in a process as harrowing as that of the slave trade. Instead, Jane Guyer has described West Central Africa’s place within the early modern Atlantic World as one of adaption, where “the interface of African and European networks [...] created a spiral of involvement, regional militarization, and in some places the creation of Creole Atlantic societies.” (p. 17)

Cooper comes closest to answering the question of whether or not the territorial nation states that emerged across the African continent after the end of the colonial empires improved the lives of Africans when he engages with the recent work of Morten Jerven, particularly his book *Economic Growth and Measurement Reconsidered*.⁴ As Cooper notes, Jerven provides a powerful argument for rejecting the thesis of many postcolonial scholars that independence only gave way to poverty and neo-colonialism. Instead turning to the economic performance of African states after independence, Cooper cites Jerven in order to say that “generalizing about a lack of growth is not the issue.” There have been moments of growth in Africa that met or exceeded the fastest contemporaneous world growth rates. Jerven “cites parts of West Africa in the era of the slave trade, the cocoa boom in West Africa in the colonial era, and the export boom of the 1950s and 1960s, plus – more ambiguously – the recent revival of exports.” One of the biggest lessons from Jerven’s work is that what most development scholars have noted as the failure of African growth is actually a result of their fixation on the economic downturn of the 1980s, which they haven’t placed in a longer perspective. (pp. 32-33).

While Cooper rejects the cliché of Africa being home to Paul Collier’s *Bottom Billion*⁵, one of the questions which remains to be answered and for which perhaps the necessary

⁴ Morten Jerven, *Economic Growth and Measurement Reconsidered in Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia, 1965-1995* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

empirical information is not yet available, is what role state sovereignty has played in what the economist Thomas Piketty has noted is a gradual global convergence of output and income, a convergence in which Piketty has noted China is the leader and Africa is the laggard.⁶ Even while sketching broad strokes, Cooper is always cognizant that discussing Ghana or Kenya's growth rate requires a very different discussion than that which is necessary when talking about the ongoing conflicts in the eastern Congo, Mali, Somalia, or South Sudan. Talking about progress even broadly defined in postcolonial Africa requires telling multiple stories.

A Counter-Factual Perspective on the Independence Era

The question that haunts Cooper's work is whether or not there existed an alternative to small, individualized nation-states that would give Africans more control over their own destinies. In the second and third essays Cooper attempts to answer this question. In the second chapter, "Africa and Empire," Cooper posits, "Empire, in one form or another, has a very long history, alongside which the concepts of nation-state, popular sovereignty, and self-determination have a short and possibly transient existence." (p. 39) Cooper frames this chapter by arguing that Du Bois believed that the long history of African empires from the Nile Valley to Ghana, Mali and Songhay demonstrated that Africans were more than capable of ruling themselves, and that "whatever the sins of African empires, associating a race with inferiority or backwardness was not one of them." (p. 39) The usefulness of empire as an analytic concept for Cooper is that "empires govern different people differently," avoiding the nation-state's need for a fiction of homogeneity. (p. 40) For Cooper, and he argues for Nkrumah and Senghor in 1958, the idea of empire held open the possibility of the unity and political autonomy of African peoples taking place at units above and beyond that of the territorial nation-state, whether of Africa as a whole, West Africa, French or British Africa or even of the entire diaspora. (p. 60)

The third chapter, "Africa and the Nation-State," argues that as late as 1960, "most leaders in French West Africa were still seeking alternatives to both colonialism rule and what they feared would be the powerlessness of small, impoverished nation-states." (p. 66) Here Cooper shines as a historian, as he succinctly tells a tale of how the possibility of a united French West Africa was derailed by the challenge of sustaining horizontal ties between different African states, while also maintaining vertical links between capitals such as Dakar and Paris. Cooper pines after the lost dream of a Federation, which would have tied French and African intellectuals, workers and elites into a common struggle. However in his conclusion, Cooper admits how difficult this dream would have been to accomplish. For instance Cooper writes, "African states do not make history as they might wish. They exist in the world. Not surprisingly, the rulers of many African states have seen less advantage in cooperating with each other – Senghor's horizontal solidarity – than in cultivating vertical relationships with richer states." (p. 99) These very asymmetries in the world economy have made it hard for African polities

⁶ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014) p 15 and 100.

from the 15th century opening of the Atlantic coast to the present to exercise solidarity in the face of immediate pressures. At the same time the ready-made availability of categories such as Africa, Ghana, and Senegal in economic and political discourse made it hard at independence for even the best-intentioned and farsighted leaders to transcend the allure of the territorial nation-state.

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