



Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present

Frederick Cooper

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Frederick Cooper's 2019 *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* is an important introduction to an exploration of the dynamic history and politics of the modern state of Africa. Cooper is an American historian specialising in African history, primarily colonisation and decolonisation (NYU, 2019). Within the historiography of Africa, *Africa Since 1940* is a response to both the frequent dichotomisation of African history into colonialism and post-colonialism, and the broad generalisations that are usually made. Rather, Cooper's methodology focuses on tracking the social and political complexities of African history whilst connecting events and finding a balance of information that is digestible for the reader. Therefore, after providing a summary of the book, this review will analyse three processes Cooper uses to comprehensively explain the process of events that resulted in modern Africa; historical processes, African agency, and the prevalence of diversity across the continent. This analysis will draw the conclusion that Cooper is able to discuss a complex society in a way that comprehensively introduces the reader to African history and politics without losing the complexity.

African Since 1940 examines modern African history and politics across a nearly sixty-year period. In order for such an extensive history to be manageable, Cooper splits his book into two parts, connected by an interlude. However, his book can ultimately be broken down into three core components: decolonisation, developmentalism, and the

gatekeeper state concept. Rather than analysing colonisation, Cooper begins his book by looking at decolonisation; the push by Africans for independence, Europe's attempts to maintain control, and the subsequent processes and negotiations between colonisers and colonies to achieve African independence. Part of Europe's attempts to maintain control was a shift from control to developmentalism which was then implemented by African states and the broader international world. Cooper particularly focuses on the economic development of states from 1945 to 2018. This is an extensive section of his book, due to both the time period and many examples he uses, but by discussing the difference between growth and development it allows him to introduce the gatekeeper state notion. A concept developed by Cooper, a gatekeeper state is when a country's ruler controls the access to the international markets and then distributes the profits, often to their own benefit. Cooper ultimately concludes that this phenomenon is responsible for the crises of modern African states.

It is important to note that, while distinctive, decolonisation, developmentalism and the gatekeeper state overlap and interact with each other. This is due to Cooper's methodology of examining history as a process, a vital concept to understand his book as a whole. Cooper immediately alludes to the significance of historical processes with the title *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. It encapsulates his perspective and highlights

how important historical processes are in understanding African society. Firstly, by beginning his analysis in 1940, Cooper challenges the practice of dividing African history into colonial and post-colonial with a clear dividing point. Instead, he considers such a practice as oversimplified and “too neat” (p. 6). The decolonisation process itself, and its consequences, are important moments in history and are vital in understanding the events that follow and the present state of Africa. This is encapsulated in the subtitle “the past of the present” which helps convey Cooper’s idea that the present is formed by a complex history with a trajectory that is anything but simple. This approach is important because too often the dynamics of African history and politics are disregarded which adds to the continual dismissal of Africa’s significance by Western society (Fisher, 2018, p. 3).

Cooper’s overarching analytical progression from decolonisation to developmentalism to the gatekeeper state is dependent on the trajectory of what came before. For instance, whilst *Africa Since 1940* is primarily separated into decolonisation in the first section and developmentalism and the gatekeeper state in the second, Cooper first introduces developmentalism within his analysis of decolonisation. This is because developmentalism was initially a European response to the African push for independence in an attempt to maintain control. He repeatedly examines developmentalism during decolonisation in a way that conveys that the two are intertwined. Similarly, when Cooper goes on to examine developmentalism and the economic development of states, he introduces the gatekeeper state concept early. It was necessary for him to do so as it aided his explanation to why growth was recorded in many states but there was no real societal development. Instead, the structure of the gatekeeper state kept profits in the hands of the elite rather than investing in public development and institutions. Cooper does go on to more specifically analyse the gatekeeper state, however it was necessary for him to first explore it in conjunction with developmentalism as the gatekeeper state would not exist or manifest as it does without it. Indeed, the gatekeeper state is even closely interconnected with decolonisation. During the colonial period, the European powers acted as the gatekeeper state by controlling all access to international markets and profiting themselves. The rapid and disorganised decolonisation process, that often did not involve establishing viable state govern-

ments or structures, left the legacy of the gatekeeper state that many African rulers maintained. While Cooper does discuss historical processes throughout *Africa Since 1940*, the significance of what he is saying is most significant after reading the entire book. The reader is able to reflect on the book as a whole and clearly comprehend the connections that Cooper is making.

Furthermore, Cooper consistently highlights African agency, a concept often ignored in international relations and even in African scholarship. The very nature of international relations, particularly the classical theories Realism and Liberalism, tends to focus on the actions of powerful states, of which African states are not considered to be (Fisher, 2018, p. 2). Consequently, even significant events in African history such as decolonisation and developmentalism are often viewed through the actions of larger Western powers (even if these are negatively regarded). Cooper, however, looks at the actions of African states and individuals throughout *Africa Since 1940*, analysing their reasoning, actions, and consequences. For example, the causes and processes of decolonisation are often considered in relation to broader events such as the failing of the British Empire and the liberal post-World War Two with a focus on human rights and “sovereign rights and self-government” (The Atlantic Charter, 1941). These were important, relevant events to decolonisation but to a greater extent, where the African independence movements capitalised on this climate and advocated for self-governance. Perhaps one of the most evident examples was Guinea’s independence in 1958. While other French African colonies were negotiating semi-self-governance with France, under leader Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea voted for immediate independence after strong nationalist movements.

It is important to note that African agency happened in conjunction with other states, and within an international system largely beyond their control. Cooper emphasises this as African agency. As previously mentioned, France was heavily involved in how and when many of its colonies reached independence, and even more broadly was able to dissuade broader ideals such as Pan-Africanism that would further reduce France’s presence in the continent. Similarly, according to Cooper, African states have played an important role in the manifestation of developmentalism with early rulers focusing on development-

ism as a mean to establish their new states. However, the international system also prevented significant growth and elevation of African states in the global order. For example, the Bretton Woods Institutions' policies and loan requirements at times prevented independent states from implementing their own policies and structures to enhance their growth. It is important that Cooper emphasises this balance of influence and action between African and non-African states as it closely related to his understanding of historical processes. No action by any player occurs in isolation but reacts to and with the actions taken by others. This is particularly clear in his exploration of the gatekeeper state. Not only is it a consequence of decolonisation and developmentalism, but it is similarly an outcome of the structures and systems left behind by the colonisers and how the new African states and leaders worked with them.

Finally, Cooper ended his book focusing on the broader role of Africans in their historiography and the international world. For example, African art and literature are being used as a mean to debate decolonisation and African culture, and the roles of African states that have played in international organisations such as the UN and UNESCO. This was an ingenious way to end his work as it encourages readers to go beyond traditional materials and to take a new outlook for future studies.

Cooper further distinguishes himself from the traditional Western study of Africa through challenging the homogenising stereotypes of Africa and each states' experiences. He specifically refers to articles in *The Economist* and *The New York Times*; "Hopeless Africa" (2000), "Africa Rising" (2011), and "Africa Rising? Africa Reeling" may be the more fitting slogan these days' (2016). Cooper critiques these articles for having a linear understanding of Africa, as opposed to his tendencies toward historical processes, and also for what he calls "false generalisations" (p. 291). In contrast to these articles, throughout *Africa Since 1940*, Cooper emphasises that there are "divergences as well as... convergences of historical patterns" (p. 292). Thus, while he examines broader historical and political patterns across the continent — decolonisation, developmentalism, and the gatekeeper state — Cooper consistently draws examples from various states and analyses their similarities and differences in depth. Considering that Africa is an extremely diverse

continent with various states, peoples, cultures, and policies this is a considerably more logical stance. However, Cooper only explicitly outlines this process and its reasoning in the final chapter. The balance between patterns and subtleties is integral to understand how he structures his arguments and how the reader responds. As such, the explanation would sit well within his introduction, particularly alongside his explanation of the importance of historical processes as it similarly challenges the genre's norm. Furthermore, Cooper wrote the book "within...the genre of a textbook" as an introduction to the subject for those who have little prior knowledge (p. xviii). Therefore, an initial explanation of the divergences across the continent would have established a strong introduction to the topic and provided the reader with a greater understanding of Cooper's methodology and the purpose of in-depth and technical examples.

However, Cooper does ultimately have a very strong introduction which is due to a masterful use of examples. He opens with a comparative discussion on two events in 1994; the first democratic election in South Africa at the end of the apartheid, and the Rwanda genocide. These are perhaps the most well-known events in modern African history. Therefore, the reader is immediately engaged in a familiar subject. Cooper goes on to compare the actual history of each state that follows with what would be the most expected historical progression to follow such significant events. For example, South Africa has maintained democratic elections as may be expected. Yet the level of democracy is questionable due to the absence of any challenging opposition and in-party corruption. Through this analysis of a well-known event, Cooper is able to explain that no event is a historical turning point and instead there is a complex and ambiguous trajectory. He extends this process of analysis in his book to the whole of Africa in the colonial/post-colonial era. By doing so first through a digestible example, Cooper's whole book becomes more accessible for his audience.

However, there are instances in *Africa Since 1940* where Cooper's extensive use of examples takes away its main arguments and structure. Cooper ultimately did write his book as an introduction while exploring complex concepts. Therefore, for readers to understand his ideas, they should be clear and, at times, concise. Thus, when Cooper uses multiple in-depth examples, some that agree

with and some that contrast his argument, it is possible to confuse the reader and take away from his overarching argument. For example, in his fourth chapter while exploring various decolonisation processes and concepts discussed by colonial and African powers, specifically the colonisers' analysis of costs and profits of independence processes and manifestations. Amongst this discussion, Cooper dives into the different independence movements and manifestation discussions amongst French colonies. This concluded that France opened up some options and closed others such as Pan-Africanism. However, in an initial reading, this connection is not abundantly clear due to both the suddenness of the examples and the depth which takes the example away from his overarching point. Ultimately, Cooper does use examples well to emphasise his argument and the diversity of the continent. The depth and technicality of the examples just require more focus, particularly for beginners in African scholarship.

Ultimately, Cooper has written a book that tackles the huge task of introducing the reader to modern African history and politics. Through his specific methodology, Cooper does so successfully and without falling into the generalising patterns prevalent in much African scholarship. He examines key events as part of a historical process, intertwined with the past and influencing the

future. He is also able to successfully balance African agency while recognising the limitations imposed by international structures and states. Finally, Cooper makes the reader aware that while there are processes and structures that create patterns across society, each state is unique which is also important to understand each case individually. While at times the book can be overly technical and detailed for a novice of the subject, the book as a whole comprehensively covers an important part of African history that will enable a greater understanding for future studies in the genre.

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