

Book Review/Critique de livre

Agony In Nation-State Building/ Agonie dans construction de la nation

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A Review of

Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960

Frederick Cooper,

Princeton, 493pp, 2014, ISBN 978-0-691-16131-0

“Can we devise the means to reconcile aspiration to equality and democracy with the diversity of humanity?”, asks Frederick Cooper at the end of this impressive 493-page narrative of debates on citizenship, empire, sovereignty and nationality, all critical determining issues of a defining historical epoch, and which, can be neatly summed up as attempts at nation-state building, in the dying days of empire and colony in French Africa. Every now and then [in time], we are presented with possibilities to confront the thorny issues [of the time]; how we utilize such possibilities, is, in a way, a factor of many variables. Whether or not the outcome is a logical extension of the choice made or unintended consequence of such a choice (with its own logic), is judged by history. And in this book are the essentials of this reasoning. The question posed by Frederick Cooper is one that philosophers would relish; so also political scientists and indeed social theorists. It fits excellently into a discourse, mostly at an abstract level, beloved by these scholars. While, of course the question came at the end of the narrative, I would love to second guess Cooper that if it has been the question around which the book revolved, it would have been engaged by him in a similar manner that led to the question being begged; that is, not at the abstract level. And here, for me, lies the strength of this worthy piece. One is tempted to ask whether it is Cooper’s craft as a political/labour historian or Cooper, the Africanist scholar with sensitivity to the sensibilities of the context of the political actors in his study that made him go the route of narrative in explicating such abstract notions as citizenship, nationality, empire, state and sovereignty or is it both?

We get a hint of the answer to this question in the very first paragraph of the Preface with a statement that reads like a disclaimer, in a way:

“This is a book about politics, in two senses. First, it is about politics as the art of individuals and organizations getting people to do things they did not think they wanted to do, about how the entry of different people into political debate changed the frameworks in which politics took place. It is a book about citizenship, nation, empire, state, and sovereignty, but it is not about political theory in a formal sense. It is about how these concepts were deployed- and queried and transformed – in the course of political action”.

Surely as a book on the listed concepts, a reader will be forgiven for expecting definitions, if not at the outset, then, somewhere in the body of the text, given that this is the standard in most of such books; but explicating these concepts in the course of engaging or telling the story of the debates about them by some political actors, in a particular epoch in the mid-20th century, renders to the reader the difficulties of pinning the concepts down, generally, and, in particular contexts. Just as much; Cooper rightly notes the salience of what people “actually said, wrote, and did, not the supposedly immanent logics of preidentified types of political regimes”. This, in relation to the familiar concepts “the colonial” or “the post colonial”, the latter, pretty much in circulation again since the past ten years or more.

The standard narrative of the demise of empires constructed in the mid to late nineteenth century and the emergence of nation states from them in the period starting a decade after the Second World War to a decade and a few years in the mid-20th century is one of nationalists up in arms against apologists and defenders of empire, subsequently resulting in sovereign nation states in which subjects became citizens. It is generally a narrative of a goal achieved: nationalists set themselves the goal of a fully independent nation state with equal rights to all who belong in it as citizens. This would hardly be said to be far from the truth: yet, it is a fact that, in many cases, the post-colonial set up was scarcely the goal intended by some of these nationalists; we notice this in a number of countries, in particular, French West Africa. Frederick Cooper draws us to this point, taking us back to the debates of the period before political independence in French Africa, which in a very significant way, injects an informed understanding into the rather simplistic discussion of the recent events in two French-speaking West African countries - Côte d’Ivoire (the Gbagbo-Ouattara standoff) and Mali (the waving of the flags to welcome Francois Hollande as hero following the French troops’ campaign to protect 6000 French citizens from the heavily armed and heavily mobile Malian insurgents reaching the city of Mopti and later Bamako, the capital).

The immediate post-Second World War period revealed, among many other things, what I would call ‘internal wound’. In France, this ‘wound’ in form of the defeat of France by Nazi Germany, was so deep that ‘amputation’ was inevitable: colonies had to go. But the psychological process of amputation is never short of anxiety. What will become of French West Africa when it goes? Cooper tells us that leading African activists “began to insist that territories should become internally self-governing, but still belong to a larger more inclusive unit that would remain French. Empire would become federation or confederation and the once-dominated colonies – Senegal, Dahomey, Niger – would become equal partners with European France”. “Give and take”, Cooper calls it but more having one’s cake and eating it. This applies to the European French and the French West African leaders, for they both wanted a “route out of empire”, a new political form “that would preserve some kind of assemblage while giving a degree of autonomy to the former colonial territories.” Well, didn’t the British have their commonwealth? Though, different; but similar, in spirit, in some ways. What we have with the French is breathtaking ingenuity: being French, but with a difference – *French with an African accent*, and indeed, *French with a very European accent*, so to say. Very clear in this regard was the two sides’ notion of federalism: So, how did they proceed?

As might be expected from the self-appointed beholders of ‘civilization’, the French elite, it was an idea that was never well received. But was there any choice, especially at that material time in history? Probably not. Cooper helps us out here: “The citizenship that French West Africans were claiming in the postwar years was not that of a nation-state, but an imperial citizenship – in a composite political entity, built by conquest, governed in a way that had subordinated and degenerated its subjects but which was, activists asserted, to be transferred into a structure that would ensure the rights and cultural integrity of all citizens. Such a conception both assumed the history of colonization and transcended it.” In as much as both sides wanted to have their cake and eat it, they expressed ‘fear’: the French fear their civilization being set at a par to the African civilization, whereas, the Africans fear a loss of security. The dynamic process by which African leaders inserted themselves, successfully by 1946, into the debate “over the place of empire in the new Republic and used that place to insist on a new vision of citizenship” is the story Cooper provides in Chapter one. In this chapter, the reader is led gently into Cooper’s powerful evocative story of the African political elite of that period.

The enabling factor of the “insertion” was the Second World War, the aftermath of which was uncertainty. France has to be ‘re-born’ following its spectacular capitulation to Nazi Germany and subsequent liberation by the Allied forces, including, however much it is less sung, French West Africans. Cooper reminds us that throughout the Third Republic 1871-1940, prior to the epoch of his focus, the republican principles espoused since the Revolution by France was violated in the colonies – citizenship was denied in the colony to those colonized. Should one be surprised that citizenship was not extended to the colonized? We would, perhaps, not be forgiven if we did; for,

it is not in the make-up of domination to have the dominated be extended same and equal rights by the dominating group. Hardly are the dominated considered favorably in the scheme of things. "Governing different people differently was what imperial system did", logically extending "us and them" as in many other things. The civilizing mission of empire building and colonial rule however much it was about imposition of values, beliefs and norms and practices of the imperial and colonizing power, rights, itself, a key value, remained an essential (enjoyed in the metropolis), that was not to be 'imposed' and extended to the colonized. Colonial officers and settlers were so wedded to this that they resisted concerns of some well-meaning legislators about its denial to the people of the colony. Cooper writes: "The Popular Front also considered applying to French West Africa some of the social legislation including the forty-hour week and the expansion of trade union rights – it had been implemented in the metropole but local officials and business interests pushed back, insisting that Africans were too backward to benefit from such provisions. Even limited initiatives disappeared along with the Popular Front in 1938."

Be that as it may, what shaped the debate were events in two of the colonies – Indochina and Algeria - Cooper tells us. These events made "some to conclude that French control had to become rigorous and others to emphasize the need to make overseas subjects feel included in an imperial community. Sub-Saharan French Africa, where conflict seemed muted, offered an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of imperial inclusion. In the early postwar years, however, most members of the government wanted to approach the restricting of empire in a comprehensive way, as a re-configuring of all its parts." But, it seems, of greater importance, was the debate in what appeared to be a consensus to keep the empire in whatever form. P.O. Lapie's vision of the post1945 Empire seemed to set the tone and was to be so in almost two decades. This vision was simply turning the empire into a federation. Cooper quotes from Lapie who argued that it was imperative that "France brings the colonies into a French federal system, following in this respect the international movement toward federation that is particularly well illustrated by the British Empire, Soviet Russia, and, in one form or another, by North America and China." Cooper notes that this federal idea sprang from a notion of empire as something more complex than a dichotomy of metropole and colonies to have more "initiative" and "autonomy" while Paris would still exercise a measure of "control". Lapie might have had this reconfigured idea of French empire into a federal system with France in control, but this never meant extending to the people in the colonies what obtained in the metropole because as Cooper, quoting him, points out to the reader, "it is appropriate to have natives evolve in the mindset of their own institutions by choosing and developing those which over many years will lead native societies little by little to a status in which they are capable of understanding what we consider wisdom, because we practice it".

One thing for sure, this book is an archeology of lived experience of a people as they attempted to shape their lives and as others attempted to shape them.

But what do we gain at the end of the excavation? In my view, it would hardly be wrong to suggest that Cooper's narrative of the complexity of the debate by these political elites – European French and French West Africans, if we are allowed this category – is among many other things, an *anatomy* of citizenship, empire, nation-state, sovereignty that renders these concepts as hardly fixed; we end up with a knowledge of history and circumstance as significant, very much so, in making sense of concepts. If this point was to be pushed to its logical conclusion, it would amount to saying that these concepts are *relative*. A contentious point? Perhaps; but it is a point we make informed by the book. The French political elite (De Gaulle) championed federalism, which was similarly argued for by the French West African politicians. We see in their understanding of federalism, a concept relative to the period. We see also nation-states as 'provinces' of empire and empire as a complex polity, less hierarchical, more integrative. The idea of concepts as hardly fixed might probably not have a wide appeal but it would seem to imply a lesser propensity to impose values held by one group of people over others and perhaps, contribute to pushing us to "devise the means to reconcile aspirations to equality and *democracy* (italics mine) with the diversity of humanity".