

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

By Frederick COOPER

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. xvi + 493 pp.

ISBN: 978-0691161310 (Hardback)

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doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12773/arwh.2015.3.1.161>

For a long time in modern international history, there has been an orthodox belief in a smooth and inevitable mid-twentieth century transition from empire to nation-state across the former colonial world. The latest book by Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*, calls this seriously into question. One of the key figures in Cooper's study, Leopold Senghor, who was to become the first leader of independent Senegal in 1960, at one time regarded nationalism as an "illness." Cooper starts from this basis to explore the change from formal French empire to independent West African nation-state not as "an event, not a moment, but a process" (p. 4).

At the heart of this book are debates about citizenship conducted in France and in French West Africa, which describe an effort to reconcile the universal ("French" citizenship) with the particular ("African" cultures). A number of remarkable West African intellectuals engaged with the French in a quest for imperial citizenship to try to close the gap of inequality that existed between metropole and colony ("vertical solidarity") as well as to promote African inter-association ("horizontal solidarity"). The notion of imperial citizenship defined in this way, Cooper notes, "both assumed the history of colonization and transcended it" (p. 9). Federalism, the basic form of the new relationship envisaged by both African and French leaders, represented a flexible, negotiable effort to preserve a valuable unity while also granting desired autonomy.

The book is exhaustively researched, the fruit of archival work conducted in France and Senegal and written over a number of years. In addition to government papers and publications, newspapers and magazines (African and French), legal treatises, and other primary documentation, Cooper also engages with recent secondary literature on empire and citizenship both within and separate from the post-war Franco-African context.

The book is organized chronologically and begins with the French constitutional debates at the end of the Second World War. Chapter 1 looks at African leaders' involvement in these debates over the place of empire and imperial subjects in the post-war French republican imaginary. In these often thrilling encounters we are introduced to figures that will recur through the book, including Senghor. Senghor understood that France's purpose after the war should be to fashion itself anew by turning to the empire that had so faithfully stood by its republican ideals during the war. Crucially, he grasped the world in terms of "complex, divisible and transformable" sovereignties, not as "abstract" and "equivalent" nations (p. 38). This insight provided him, as it did other African leaders of the time, with great intellectual flexibility in responding creatively to the tumultuous shifts and transformations of those years.

Senghor, however, was also no stooge of the colonialists. When the French politician Edouard Herriot claimed during these debates that if, as was being mooted, "all people of overseas France were to join in the normal activities of the citizen, then—taking account of the numbers involved—'France will thus become the colony of its former colonies' . . . Senghor jumped up to reply, 'This is racism!'" (p. 105).

In Chapters 3 and 4 Cooper considers claims made for African political and social citizenship within the French Union and in French West Africa, respectively. For many of the people involved in these debates, including many African leaders, both colonialism *and* nationalism represented unwanted and outdated models that were to be avoided. By Africans, Cooper is not only talking about bourgeois landowners but about socialists

and even communists who were interested in the idea of a progressive empire. Chapter 5 considers the significance of the loi-cadre (framework law) of 1956, which although criticized for “balkanizing” Africa was an arrangement that neither extinguished the African federal dream nor inaugurated decolonization. Even at this late moment the cherished contemporary narratives of nationalism and decolonization had not yet been realized; indeed, the first French West African independence party only issued its manifesto in September 1957.

The great strength of *Citizenship between Empire and Nation* is that Cooper has so thoroughly documented the political emphasis towards forms of federation in these years that, by the latter half of the book, the burden of explanation lies in showing how nationalism could have become a desirable, if not necessarily attractive, alternative. The reasons for the change include the negative impact of the war in Algeria (“the elephant in the conference room” [p. 308]); metropolitan disenchantment with French colonial rule; political wrangling over the inclusion of an independence clause in the new “federal” constitution of 1958; the independence of other West African states such as Guinea, Togo and Cameroon; and electoral politics creating new demands and power struggles in African territories. Although decolonization did finally arrive in Senegal, Mali, and other parts of West Africa in 1960, it was an unwanted decolonization. Africans gained sovereignty but only at the expense of a common citizenship.

The book is a highly enjoyable intellectual ride. The focus is largely on the cut and thrust of political debate, and while Cooper is aware of and respects other discourses of politics his is a justifiably “top-down” perspective, focusing not merely on “political discourse” but on the people and groups who could affect “political outcomes.” It is also a classic example of the application of historical imagination to try to prize open contemporary categories of understanding. The over-theorized switch from empire to nation-state, presumed as normal and inevitable, here becomes one path opted for among many—and then only with great reluctance, and after exhausting all the others.

Exploring a work of historical political imagination also requires a leap in the reader's imagination. Trained as we are to associate empire with the unequal and outdated, the idea of it leading organically to a flexible and responsive arrangement such as federation takes some getting used to. Also, an explanation of certain recurring themes, such as social Catholic ideas, would have been useful in helping to understand how these were applied and adapted by various people in the story. Lastly, while a section devoted to comparing the subject of the book with intellectual debates about the British Commonwealth and other post-imperial federative schemes would probably be stretching an already substantial and thorough book, it would nonetheless have been very welcome.