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0521566002 - Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa

Frederick Cooper

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This detailed and authoritative volume changes our conceptions of “imperial” and “African” history. Frederick Cooper gathers a vast range of archival sources in French and English to achieve a truly comparative study of colonial policy towards the recruitment, control, and institutionalization of African labor forces from the mid-1930s, when the labor question was first posed, to the late 1950s, when decolonization was well under way.

Professor Cooper explores colonial conceptions of the African worker, and shows how African trade union and political leaders used the new language of social change to claim equal wages, equal benefits, and share of power. This helped to persuade European officials that their post-war project of building a “modern” Africa within the colonial system was both unaffordable and politically impossible. France and Great Britain left the continent, insisting that they had made it possible for Africans to organize wage labor and urban life in the image of industrial societies while abdicating to African elites responsibility for the consequences of the colonial intervention. They left behind the question of how much the new language for discussing social policy corresponded to the lived experience of African workers and their families and how much room for maneuver Africans in government or in social movements had to reorganize work, family, and community in their own ways.

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Decolonization and African Society

The Labor Question in French
and British Africa

Frederick Cooper

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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Preface

My friends and my publisher tell me this is a long book. I think it's too short. It is primarily a book about connections: the ways in which movements among Africans and colonial interventions shaped each other, the relationship of social movements to political struggles in Africa, the interplay between the conceptual schemes of officials and their actions, and the tension of the empire-wide interests and perspectives and the local focus of colonial agents confronting immediate struggles on a daily basis. Focusing on these lines of connection, the book necessarily cannot examine each component part in depth. My analysis recognizes the importance of contexts but does not delve into them; it attempts instead to explain why in a particular moment such movements had a profound impact at the imperial level and how colonial states' efforts to regain the initiative in the 1940s redefined the terrain of struggle, creating new openings and new constraints in which local movements operated in the 1950s. Similarly, a full analysis of the intellectual framework in which labor was discussed in the imperial capitals would require a depth of analysis of metropolitan social movements, social policy, and social science that would make this book even longer. The main concern of this book is how changing structures of ideas both reflected and affected changing struggles in different parts of empire.

This is a book I would not have dared to write until now. I wouldn't have dared to do so had I not already gone through a long period of writing about the social history of a particular African region – the East Coast of Kenya. My coming of age as an African historian in the 1970s occurred at a time when we were anxious to distinguish ourselves from an earlier tradition of “imperial” history and to show how focused on Africa we were. The price of this was that most Africanists of my generation were willing to assume that colonialism could be taken for granted, that we could probe the complexity of African initiatives and responses to outside intrusion without examining the colonial side of this ongoing encounter in similar depth. The success of African historians in showing the importance and integrity of Africa's history now allows a return to

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questions about colonial regimes that acknowledges their complexity and contradictions. But the pendulum should not – and indeed cannot – swing back, for colonial thinking and policies can neither be considered determinant nor independent of the agency of their erstwhile subjects. European policy is as much a response to African initiatives as African “resistance” or “adaptation” is a response to colonial interventions.

It was while doing research on a spatially focused topic – the series of strikes in Mombasa between 1934 and 1947 and the startlingly large impact this had on British thinking and policy – that I became convinced that Mombasa could not be understood simply by studying Mombasa. British rulers could easily have dealt with this city by other means had officials not been thinking in terms of an entire empire. I view colonial apparatuses – not to mention European settlers, missionaries, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals – as not only cut through by uncertainties about their power and disagreements among themselves, but unevenly focused on immediate and long-term concerns, on the local and the imperial.

The risk of any study this broad is that the variety of contexts which both shape and were shaped by colonial regimes disappears into empty acknowledgements of variation and complexity. I have tried to confront this problem by frequent changes of focus, moving from the Ivory Coast in the days of the forced labor debates on francophone Africa to Dakar when taming urban strikers became the issue, to Mombasa or the Copperbelt to talk about stabilization, to the Gold Coast to look at the relief with which British officials greeted Nkrumah’s efforts to discipline the Gold Coast labor movement. In doing so, one not only appreciates the diversity of contexts but the eagerness of many colonial officials, especially at the top of the hierarchy – to act as if that complexity were not there. “African society” emerges as a construct of colonial discourse, unevenly related to different struggles and initiatives. The way such a construct was set against the simplified and sanitized vision the colonial officials had of labor and class in European or “modern” society turns out to be an important aspect of this study, and I have tried to set it against the politics of specific instances. My goal has been neither to recreate the world of colonial bureaucrats nor to unveil the ways in which African workers talked among themselves, but I am interested in what went on at the interface: a limited space of mutual intelligibility and interaction.

My decision to make this a comparative study of French and British Africa – after over a decade of work on anglophone East Africa – was a result of my wanting to open up questions about colonialism that went beyond the particularities of any one empire. It is obviously not a full comparative study, but the comparison is I think a suggestive one.

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Among French colonies, my focus is almost exclusively on French West Africa – considered at the time the more “advanced” of the regions – while among British Africa, I emphasize in various contexts Kenya, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Northern Rhodesia. Parallel studies of Belgian and Portuguese empires would be extremely valuable, and I give some attention to the efforts of these and other powers after World War II to develop a consensus around the conception of “standards” for social policy just as they had tried to forge a consensus around the idea of “free” labor earlier in the colonial era. Both among and within the different institutions concerned with these issues, major differences of opinion developed, and my aim is not to look for a single “colonial conception of labor” as to follow the disputes and fault lines, to see how differences within power structures were pried open by people outside, to see how partial consensus emerged and laid the basis for further conflict.

Studying these questions makes it clear how complex it would be to study all the effects of policy shifts: how the lives of workers and their families actually changed in the 1940s and 1950s. Such questions are already being studied, by, among others, graduate students at the University of Michigan: Timothy Scarnecchia’s completed dissertation on housing and gender in post-war Harare, Lisa Lindsay’s dissertation (in the writing stage) on railway workers and their families in Nigeria, and Martha Baker’s research (now beginning) on retirement in Kenya. A new generation of Senegalese scholars, whom I have been fortunate to get to know, will be writing new histories carefully rooted in a regional context, and a preliminary indication of what they are uncovering can be found in the masters theses of Mor Sene, Oumar Guèye, and others. I have already learned much from these students. My own contribution is set out in the hope not only that others will add to it but that they will take its ideas in directions I never would have thought of.

Translations from the French are the author’s, and I have tried to simplify esoteric colonial terminology. Colonies are referred to by their names during the era in question. I call the top administrators of individual French territories “governors” even though in part of the period they were called “lieutenant-governors,” and the head of the French West African Federation is called the governor-general even though in some contexts he was called the high commissioner. There are some inconsistencies in citations to Public Record Office material, since the classification numbers of some series changed in the midst of research, but the reader can convert old numbers to new using the file lists at the archives.

In moving toward an anglophone-francophone comparison, I had a lot to learn and in so doing I have acquired a wide range of debts.

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Boubacar Barry, Mamadou Diouf, Babacar Fall, and Mohamed Mbodj deserve much of the credit for whatever grasp I have acquired of the context in which labor and politics were played out in Senegal. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch generously helped me in France. The archivists at the Archives Nationales du Sénégal – particularly the Director, Saliou Mbaye – and at the Archives Nationales – Section Outre-Mer (before and after its move from Paris to Aix-en-Provence) helped me learn the ropes. Babacar Fall of the Ecole Normale Supérieure of the Université Cheikh Anta Diop and several of his students – who joined me in a workshop in Dakar in 1994 on the oral history of the recent Senegalese past – included me in interviews with participants in the processes described here. A special word of thanks to Mor Sene, Aminata Diena, Oumar Guèye, and Alioune Ba for their work on these interviews.

A principle risk of writing a long book is the burden one imposes on one's colleagues in asking them to read it: I am grateful for the comments of Mamadou Diouf, Laura Downs, Myron Echenberg, Lisa Lindsay, John Lonsdale, and Luise White on drafts that were even longer than the final version. Working with Ann Stoler on another project about colonialism has taught me much of value to this endeavor, and she gave me a helpful reading of the introduction. Jane Burbank has helped me to see that the empires of Western Europe were part of a broader spectrum of imperial conquests and imperial systems and that the categories of capitalism and colonialism must be used with specificity; her reading of the introduction to this manuscript and various papers related to it have provided insight as well as encouragement.

This book has been written on four generations of computers (8086, 286, 386, 486) and in settings ranging from a dingy dormitory room in Moscow State University to the beautiful Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Besides the archival staffs mentioned above, those at the Public Record Office in London and Rhodes House in Oxford deserve a word of thanks, as do librarians at the Library of Congress, the Hoover Institution, and the University of Michigan and research assistants and support staff at the History Department and Humanities Institute of the University of Michigan, the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. My first research trip devoted to this study occurred (in 1982) when my work on Mombasa was still being written, and I am grateful to the Joint Committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies for supporting this new direction in my research. They also funded my first trip to Senegal in 1986. In between, I was able to do research in England and France in 1984–85 thanks to a Rockefeller

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Humanities Fellowship. Subsequent research in Europe and Senegal benefitted from a Faculty Recognition Award from the University of Michigan. I began writing in the fall of 1987, with the help of a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Center, continued in the aforementioned Moscow dorm room (where the sensory deprivation of late communism focused my concentration and my wife's IREX fellowship proved ample to keep two scholarly projects going), and moved back into bourgeois comfort (and a more collectivist atmosphere) at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1990–91, where the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew Mellon W. Foundation also contributed to my support. I did more revised drafts than I care to count in the interstices of classes and search committees at the University of Michigan. I began a new project (about development and decolonization) at the University of Michigan Humanities Institute while still doing a not-quite-final round of cuts and revisions in 1993–94. I am extremely grateful for all this support over a twelve year period.

Various parts of this project were tried out in the form of lectures and seminar papers at the Program on Comparative Studies of Social Transformations of the University of Michigan, the Davis Center of Princeton University, the Wilson Center and the Center for Advanced Study, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Université de Paris VII, Centre de Recherche et d'Etudes Internationales (Paris), the University of Wisconsin, Howard University, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern University, the Université Cheikh Anta Diop and the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa (Dakar), Institute for Commonwealth Studies and University College (London), the University of Leiden (Netherlands), Queens University (Ontario), University of the Witwatersrand, University of Natal, University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and Kalamazoo College, not to mention various pubs, cafes, and dinner tables. Friends and colleagues from these places may recognize the contributions their questions and comments made to my rethinking earlier formulations; this project has gone on so long I know longer know what ideas came from where. Jane Burbank has been with me throughout this period – in Ann Arbor, Cambridge, Santa Barbara, Oxford, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Dakar, Moscow, and Stanford – and I thank her for sharing these places and those years with me.

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Abbreviations

AMWU	African Mine Workers' Union (Northern Rhodesia)
ANC	African National Congress (Northern Rhodesia)
AWF	African Workers' Federation (Kenya)
BDS	Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (Senegalese political party)
CCTA	Combined Commission for Technical Cooperation in Africa South of the Sahara
CFTC	Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (French Catholic trade union federation)
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail (French and African trade union federation, affiliated to Communist Party)
CGT-FO	Confédération Générale du Travail-Force Ouvrière (French trade union federation that seceded from CGT)
CGTA	Confédération Générale du Travail-Autonomie (Autonomist African trade union federation)
CPP	Convention People's Party (Gold Coast Political Party)
EARC	East Africa Royal Commission
EATUC	East African Trade Union Congress
EMU	European Mineworkers' Union (Northern Rhodesia)
ENFOM	Ecole Nationale de la France Outre-Mer
FEA	French Equatorial Africa (Afrique Equatoriale Française)
FWA	French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française)
GFTU	Ghanaian Federation of Trade Unions
IALC	Inter-African Labour Conference
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (anti-communist global trade union organization)
ILO	International Labour Organization
KAU	Kenya African Union (Kenyan Political Party)
KFL	Kenya Federation of Labour (successor to KFRTU)
KFRTU	Kenya Federation of Registered Trade Unions
MEU	Mine Employees' Union (Gold Coast)
MRP	Mouvement Républicain Populaire (French Social Catholic party)

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PCF	Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party)
PDCI	Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast branch of RDA)
PDG	Parti Démocratique Guinéen (Guinean branch of RDA)
RDA	Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (African political party)
SAA	Société Agricole Africaine (Ivory Coast planters' society)
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (French Socialist Party)
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UGCC	United Gold Coast Convention (Gold Coast political party)
UGTAN	Union Générale des Travailleurs de l'Afrique Noire (autonomist African trade union federation)
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions (communist-affiliated global trade union organization)

Note: For archival file references used in notes, see bibliography. Additional abbreviations used in notes: IT (Inspection du Travail), IGT (Inspection or Inspecteur Général du Travail), AR (Annual Report).

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