Global Politics and Gatekeeper States:
a Historical Approach to the African Crisis

Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940*
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As the title suggests, *Africa since 1940* examines Africa's historical experience since the Second World War, paying particular attention to the critical process of decolonisation, which ended European colonial rule and ushered in the independent African socio-economic and political dispensation. It seeks to bridge the divide between "colonial" and "post-colonial" Africa by focusing on the transitional period of decolonisation in order to identify the difference the collapse of empire made in the light of the inequalities of the world order and "what kinds of processes continued even as governments changed hands" (p 15). Was decolonisation merely an interlude marking a clean break between the European colonial past and the new independent dispensation, or was it a transition from formal colonialism to neo-colonialism?

Cooper argues that the choice is not between continuity and change, because the institutions that post-colonial states inherited from colonialism did not necessarily operate in the manner their colonial creators had intended, as Africans contested, appropriated and adapted such institutions even as the colonial authorities established them. Thus, while it is important to question the degree to which autonomy was possible in the prevailing global socio-economic and political system, it is equally important to acknowledge that the Africans actively sought to shape their own world even under the constraining regime of colonial rule. At the same time, however, colonial rule did bequeath certain characteristics and structures to its successor states that shaped their future in ways that they were unable to control. Consequently, the author argues that by examining the post-Second World War period in its entirety, it is possible to explain the nature of the African crisis "without getting into the sterile debate over whether a colonial 'legacy' or the incompetence of African governments is to blame" (p 6). One may well ask what the characteristics bequeathed to the African independent states by colonial rule, are.

Cooper emphasises the fact that, by the time decolonisation began in the 1950s, the colonial state had failed in its efforts to promote development, thus surrendering not only its failures to the incoming governments, but also a very narrow and export-orientated economic structure. The latter locked the new states in a global system from which they could not easily escape at a time of heightened expectations by the general African population. African states, thus, began their existence hamstrung by inherited structures and an ethos reflecting the colonial state's nature and role as gatekeeper. The colonial state was a gatekeeper state because it depended on extracting revenue through duties levied on goods entering or leaving colonial ports and income derived from granting licences for commercial transactions, amongst other activities, having failed to immerse itself within the African world and to inspire the African population to work with it enthusiastically and willingly. African successor states were, thus, born as gatekeeper states too. They were equally dependent on revenues collected at the gate and, like their colonial predecessors, were

distrustful and terrified of the power of mobilised citizenry – particularly in the face of dwindling economic resources. They therefore sought to silence dissent and attempted to maintain control through patronage, coercion and other strategies.

Thus, Cooper maintains, the history of decolonisation foreclosed a number of possible alternatives, ranging from supra-national federations to Pan-Africanisms, which, at one stage, seemed possible. Instead, it put into place a particular type of state led by a highly insecure leadership. It not only clamped down on dissent and silenced alternative voices, but also promoted a "form of politics that makes an all-or-nothing struggle for inclusion or exclusion to access to state resources conceivable" (p 192). According to Cooper it is this, rather than the often-cited "tribalism", which is the real source of Africa's troubles and which explains tragedies like the genocide in Rwanda and other conflicts on the continent. The African crisis will continue as long as the historical patterns and global conditions that gave rise to gatekeeper states remain fundamentally unaltered.

Africa since 1940 is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the subject by juxtaposing the start of the Rwandan genocide and the momentous South African general election which ushered in the new South Africa, both of which occurred in April 1994. The author points out that notwithstanding the predominant views of the West, the two events did not signify "Africa's two possible fates – either dissolving into 'tribal' or 'ethnic' violence or uniting under a liberal democratic system". He advocates a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the forces that shaped the trajectory of Africa's post-colonial experience. According to him, a sense of history is crucial to understanding Africa's current problems, as "Africa's present did not emerge from an abrupt proclamation of independence but from a long convoluted and still ongoing process". The chapter demonstrates the importance of the past in shaping the present by tracing the histories of Rwanda and South Africa to explain how the former ended up in the tragedy of the genocide and the latter with the miracle of a peaceful, liberal, democratic election in 1994. He also introduces the concept of gatekeeper state and argues for the need to focus on the decolonisation period in order to understand the nature of the African crisis fully.

Chapter 2 examines the aspirations of Africa's diverse populations comprising, *inter alia,* peasants, workers, professionals, husbands, wives and intellectuals, in order to "convey a sense of different possibilities and constraints" and to demonstrate that Africans did not passively accept the roles assigned to them by colonialism, but set their own agendas. They struggled to shape their own worlds and to realise their own dreams. The chapter focuses on developments in peasant agriculture, intellectual debates and interactions epitomised in Pan-Africanism, the National Congress of British West Africa, the West African Student Organisation and others, the influence of such figures as Aime Cesaire, Marcus Garvey and Leopold Senghor on evolving African world views, as well as the role of religion, gender, migrancy and labour militancy. The chapter concludes with an examination of the Second World War's role as a catalyst for a change in perception and approaches of both the coloniser and the colonised.

Chapter 3 focuses on "political imagination, constraint and conflict in the post-war decade", while Chapter 4 analyses the collapse of European empires and the aftermath thereof. Pointing out that the French and British Empires in Africa collapsed "not

because of an all-out assault from a clearly defined colonised people, but because the imperial system broke apart at its internal cracks" (p 66), the chapter provides the book's central argument that the decolonisation that occurred in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s foisted on the successor states certain distinct characteristics that shaped their future development. It traces how the developmental state model which the successor states inherited from colonialism made modest economic progress in improving the quality of life of the people, until the drastic oil price increase in 1973. The latter derailed the   post-colonial development project and flung African states into the hands of international financial institutions and their structural adjustment programmes (SAPS), which had further deleterious effects on African economies and societies. The erosion of the economic base of the post-colonial states made them more amenable to pressures for reform from both outside and within their borders, hence the experiments in guided democracy embarked upon in some parts of the continent from the 1990s onwards.

Chapters 5 covers social and economic change in independent Africa since 1945. It explores the missed opportunities and the various attempts made by post-colonial states to promote economic growth through, for instance, import substitution industrialisation (ISI) strategies, the modest accomplishments in the 1960s, and the impact of the economic meltdown from the 1970s onwards. It concludes with an examination of the politics of Africa's international debt and the "blame game" that characterises the debate about the African crisis as people seek to find out what went wrong.   In its turn, Chapter 6 traces the process and consequences of late decolonisation in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

In Chapter 7, Cooper returns to the theme of the gatekeeper state, highlighting its characteristics in Africa, its dangers and its *modus operandi*. He examines how, by foreclosing alternatives that seemed possible at the time, decolonisation locked Africa into a pattern which has progressively narrowed both the political and economic space, and to which the continent is bound until a considerable change in the global political economy takes place. He concludes by discussing how, for a long time, African writers and commentators had recognised the failure of the dreams that had been ignited at independence and pointed to this failure in their writings.

The book ends as it begins with a return to the case studies of Rwanda and South Africa in April 1994, in order to make the point that the African crisis is a more complex phenomenon than simply a manifestation of the so-called intractable problem of tribalism. Cooper argues that the gatekeeper state, which is at the core of the post-colonial African crisis "is neither a choice made by current political actors nor an automatic response to a given situation in terms of the world economy or the global systems of states. Such states ... are the product of an historical process" (p 196). Chapter 8 concludes with a recommendation on the way forward.

Africa since 1940 is a very well-written book which presents its arguments forcefully and clearly. Its author says that it is targeted at "readers, students and others who seek an introduction to the subject and who are not presumed to have prior knowledge of it" (p xi).   The density of the material, the historical detail provided and the assumptions underpinning the arguments, however, presuppose more on the readers' part than just a basic acquaintance with African history and the debates surrounding it.

With respect to Cooper's claim that it is possible to explain the African crisis without, in his words, "getting into the sterile debate over whether a colonial 'legacy' or the incompetence of African governments is to blame", it is not clear how that can be avoided, especially when, in the very next sentence, he seems to validate at least part of the argument that he is so anxious to dismiss. The sentence reads: "Africa's present did not emerge from an abrupt proclamation of independence but from a long, convoluted and still ongoing process" (p 6), a major part of which was the European colonial episode. Indeed, if as the book cogently argues, the post-colonial gatekeeper state is modelled on its colonial predecessor (which in fact gave birth to it), how can the colonial legacy not be important in understanding the post-colonial African dispensation? As he himself eloquently demonstrates, Belgian rule entrenched and fanned ethnic antagonism in Rwanda though its policies of initially preferring and promoting the Hutu, but then rejecting them in favour of the Tutsi, thus creating an unhealthy climate that unscrupulous politicians of the post-colonial gatekeeper state could easily exploit in order to get one ethnic group to butcher another. Is it possible to understand the Rwandan genocide without appreciating the role that colonialism played in creating an environment in which this horror could occur?

Similarly, by suggesting that the performance of African leaders is not central to understanding the African crisis, is the author not by implication exonerating African governments from blame for incompetence and for the unfortunate choices that they have consistently made since independence? Admittedly, the global system has been unequal and the choices available to the African ruling elites limited, but were the genocidal policies of Mengistu of Ethiopia, the bloody dictatorship of Idi Amin in Uganda, the self-serving policies of Mobutu or Mugabe's recent policies that have turned one of Africa's most promising economies into a basket case not critical to the development and exacerbation of the African crisis? Even if we accept the argument that "when the colonial empires fell apart, African leaders also faced the temptation to strengthen their control of narrow channels rather than widen and deepen forms of connections across space", what still remains to be explained is why the leaders chose to succumb to such temptations when they could have chosen different approaches. Indeed, as the author admits, while gatekeeper states by nature have certain unhealthy predilections, "sequences of decisions which human beings need not have made are responsible for turning tension into civil war or systematic murder", as happened in Rwanda (p 192). The point being made here is that, while Cooper's central argument (namely that the type of decolonisation that unfolded in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, produced a particular type of post-colonial governmental system that contributed to the rise and perseverance of the African crisis) is valid, the role of the colonial legacy and the political and economic strategies the leaders opted for are part of the story of how Africa finds itself in the mess that it is in.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, *Africa since 1940* is a lucidly argued, well-illustrated and well-produced book that makes an important and pertinent contribution to African studies. It will be a useful addition to the libraries of those interested in understanding the African continent and its people and the way in which scholars continuously strive to understand the forces that have shaped its history.

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