

Book Reviews

Decolonization and African Society, Frederick Cooper (1996), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, ISBN: 0-521-56251-1 (h/b), 0-521-56600-2 (p/b), 677pp inc index, Price: £55 (h/b), £19.95 (p/b).

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 institutionalisation of African labour forces from the mid-1930s, when the labour question was first posed, to the late 1950s, when decolonisation 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 organise wage labour 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 reorganise work, family, and community in their own ways.

The book contains a wealth of detail, divided into five parts: Part I "The dangers of expansion and the dilemmas of reform" examines the labour question, Part II looks at "Imperial fantasies and colonial crises," Part III "The imagining of a working class," with Part IV "Devolving power and abdicating responsibility." The chapters are well laid out and clearly discussed, each capturing main points through introductory and concluding sections. The notes to the chapters are very detailed and extensive. This is a major contribution, especially valuable as comparative studies of colonial policy between British and French Africa of this detail are rare.

Reviewed by Nigel Hall, Editor of JSDA.