

Title—Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History
Author—Frederick Cooper
Year—2005

Categories: Theory, Colonialism, Empire

Place: The World

Time: 1900-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Frederick Cooper's *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* attempts to provide an analysis of the place of colonialism within history and interrogated the concepts often used to discuss it, such as "modernity," "globalization," and "identity." Cooper's focus is on conceptual issues, in particular the use of tools of analysis that emerged from colonial history to study colonial history. He argues that colonial regimes and oppositions to them reshaped the cultural frameworks in which both operated. Cooper is interested in the rise and fall of interest in colonial studies during the second half of the twentieth century.

He begins his book with an overview the changing scholarship on colonial studies from mid-century to now, with Cooper revealing that interest peaked once it was no longer a political issue. The book then goes into a discussion of the key concepts that, according to Cooper, epitomize the current direction of scholarship: in particular, "**identity,**" "**globalization,**" and "**modernity.**" These three terms have problems in their use as analytic categories, often because of their shifting meanings. However, he notes that these terms are important as indigenous categories, used in today's politics and culture. Following his discussion of concepts, Cooper argues against the prevailing narrative of the nation-state and the march to modernity. He concludes with a historical case study demonstrating the ways that all actors within the colonial system operated within an imperial framework.

Cooper posits that the reinvigoration of interest in colonial history is a direct reflection of the growing influence of both anthropology and literature on the discipline of history. He identifies **problems within colonial studies**, including the treatment of sources as unproblematic and the timelessness of colonial modernity. This timelessness leads some scholars to look at colonial history ahistorically. Cooper highlights four problematic modes of looking at history ahistorically: story plucking, leapfrogging legacies, doing history backward, and the epochal fallacy.

Cooper concludes his book by arguing for better attention to be paid to the shifting trajectories of historical interaction when writing histories of colonialism. He highlights what he deems the two most important aspects of historical analysis: the range of possibility and constraint facing political actors at any moment and the different trajectories of possibility and constraint of acting within the time. He warns against falling victim to the modes of viewing history ahistorically and emphasizes the importance of considering the specific context when writing history.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The concept of 'identity' has too many meanings to be accurately used analytically
- Popularity of colonial studies seemed to change in relation to the global prevailing opinion
- Europeans empire fell as other supranational organizations rose