

COOPER QUESTIONS COLONIALISM

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Frederick Cooper. 2005. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Given that historian Frederick Cooper opens his book *Colonialism in Question* with a discussion of the challenges brought forth by the rise of interdisciplinary interest in colonial studies—not least of which include the grave intellectual pitfalls that come with it—right from the very first pages of the book, readers who are neither historians nor historiographers become acutely aware of the paradoxical nature of their position. On the one hand, interdisciplinary exchange is often celebrated today for its ability to endow ideas with new life and audiences. Yet on the other, as Cooper knowingly warns us, “the basic problem with interdisciplinary scholarship is the same as that within the disciplines: conformism, gatekeeping, [and] conventions [...]” (5) What is more, “one is likely to fall for conventional wisdom in another discipline, miss internal debates, and pick up tidbits without exploring [further]” (6)—all of which creates a serious possibility for diluting and flattening ideas, not enriching them.

With this introduction in mind, any outside

review of such a complex and thoughtful book must necessarily tread lightly. Yet rather than frightening away non-historians, *Colonialism in Question*'s introduction provides a clear and useful demonstration of the incisive approach that Cooper uses throughout the book, effectively drawing in readers with its methodical rigor. First, by questioning a concept as prevalent and accepted as ‘interdisciplinarity’, the introduction launches the first in a string of such critiques, foreshadowing Cooper’s commitment to destabilizing words and ideas that we take most for granted. And second, Cooper’s introduction proves that the difficult questions and issues raised by interdisciplinary dialogue are actually analogous to the very similarly-entangled struggles which constitute history. Rather than advising us to abandon any attempt to relate what seem to be irreconcilable differences among adjoining disciplines—or, even worse, pursue a futile struggle to mash them together into a single whole—Cooper prefers to emphasize how it is precisely these kinds of struggles (like those that he sees in historical processes) that lead to redefinitions of the context for the struggle in the first place.

In short, Cooper’s book is a subtle, thoughtful, and judicious examination of the issues raised by the study of colonialism. Instead of constituting a mere compilation of colonial histories (although the chapters abound with historical examples), or arguing a particular opinion of these histories, *Colonialism in Question* is first and foremost an investigation into the *manners* of undertaking historical work and the *ways* in which the use of histories and concepts (even and

especially by laymen) are inextricably bound to the histories themselves. As we will see, Cooper repeatedly emphasizes the complexity of the topics at hand, refusing to simplify issues for the sake of argument. His understanding of history is decidedly a non-linear one—where historical events repeatedly fail to align themselves to grand axial narratives, and in which the smallest and most prosaic events and concerns continually open and close new paths for future developments. Most importantly, Cooper’s book strongly emphasizes why we—historians and non-historians—should be critically aware of the ways in which we think and discuss historical concepts.

Let us begin by first examining Cooper’s own approach to colonial history, which is unique and lucid in its potential for opening new ways of seeing this history. Frederick Cooper bases his study of colonial history upon a rejection of its two dominant 20th century models: on one side, the vision of colonialism as the inevitable expansion of “progress”, or in other words as the justified authority of a more highly developed people over one that is less highly developed, and on the other side, the vision of colonialism as a destructive totalitarianism that crushed the richness of local idiosyncrasies. (Needless to say, the latter view has unseated the former in the realm of acceptable discourse.) However, both of these approaches, as we will see, are based upon the same mistaken assumption: the idea of colonialism as a *one-way* process, or an outwardly-directed movement *from* one bounded entity *towards* another. Both essentially simplify very long and complex histories into an abstract caricature: the

condition of “authority spread outward from a civilizational center.” (158)

Yet even within today’s widespread acceptance of the unjustifiable nature of colonial power, another mistaken dichotomy repeats the futile opposition of the older one: between those who argue that colonialism corresponded to a precisely delineatable moment in history, from which humans have now been freed thanks to their progressive enlightenment, and those who argue that colonialism never truly ended, and that its tyrannical authority is now equally everywhere. Once again, Cooper insists that both sides of this argument fail to take into account the complexity of the dynamic processes that constitute history. To reduce colonialism to a determined moment in time (usually 1492-1970s) and place (primarily the European colonies) is to ignore forms of empire that not only existed over various spans of time—up to thousands of years ago—but also existed throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. On the other hand, to label colonialism as merely a unique name for an unjustified authority that still exists everywhere today is not only to deny a very real and sudden conceptual change that, about fifty years ago, caused empires to become unacceptable as a form of political power, but also to dilute the specificity of colonialism to such a point that, by using it to describe everything, it effectively describes nothing. According to Cooper, it is possible to constitute serious histories of colonial pasts without either seeing them as a solely negative moment in history or belittling their authoritarian crimes. At the same time, constructing colonial histories with illusions of global human progress or,

conversely, with visions of inevitable human evilness, are equally just as flawed. Instead of choosing between these unproductive oppositional stances, all of which oversimplify the large and complex histories of colonial empires, Frederick Cooper emphasizes how the dynamic *processes* of colonial histories shaped and changed these histories in ways that could not have been predicted from the start. Against the idea of colonialism as a one-way force—of Europeans spreading their supposed ‘essence’ and rules throughout the world, destroying whatever lay in their path—Cooper offers a different model of scholarship: the study of how both the colonists and the colonized shaped each other through the frictions and boundaries that were constantly at play. Rather than a world of hard power and limits, this view emphasizes the working process of gradual redefinitions and the ways in which common everyday processes, located in ever-unique contexts and situations, constantly bring into question the forces involved, eventually shifting the grounds of the debate under its very feet. As such, Frederick Cooper’s historical approach is first and foremost an appeal for a synchronic study of historical events—ever open to their endless developmental possibilities—and a critique of the widespread tendency to use history as a support for substantiating decontextualized, ubiquitous concepts.

The first fallacy that many researchers of colonial studies—whether historians or not, and regardless of which side of the debates they find themselves on—blindly support is the mistaken idea of colonial empires as constituting outwardly expansions of a nation extending itself over oth-

ers. “Empires,” says Cooper, “should not be reduced to national polities projecting their power beyond their borders.” (11) Indeed, no nation can conquer numerous others without fundamentally changing itself; nor was it possible for any to smoothly assimilate others into a pre-existing system. Cooper demonstrates how the very development of a colonial presence fundamentally changed the colonizers themselves, putting them in unprecedented situations and forcing them to rethink their prevailing practices. Therefore, it would be a mistake to conflate the nation before its colonial conquests and the one after them as one and the same. Rather than extending their people and customs over new territory, most empires grew in an inconsistent and leap-frog manner, and in many cases were uninterested with changing or completely replacing local cultures and powers as long as these acknowledged the colonial authority. Instead of an extension outwards from the colonial capital, Cooper defines the prevailing trend in colonialism as the creation and definition of a “space of empire”, or a terrain constituted of connections and routes—*not* a national identity. Just as “post-revolutionary France [...] cannot be understood as a nation-state pushing into colonies external to it” (22), and “what made an empire British was defined both by metropolitans and provincials” (172), so too the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of the Americas “were not, indeed could not have been, an extension of national power.” (163)

Furthermore, many empires with the ability to deploy colonizing practices obtained it (and simultaneously created themselves) through the formation of

unusual combinations and alliances. For example, “The Spanish Empire wasn’t entirely Spanish and certainly not national; it was a ‘cosmopolitan conglomerate.’ [...] it extended over, but hardly integrated, much of central and eastern Europe, Burgundy, modern Holland and Belgium, Castile, Aragon, parts of Italy, and the conquered territories of the New World; [...] Its emperor—a native French speaker—had to learn Castilian Spanish on the job. [...] The navy was Genoese and scholars were trained in Italy.” (164)

In addition to this understanding, in Cooper’s opinion it is just as important to reject any over-simplified dichotomy between a clearly-defined colonizer and a clearly-defined colonized. As any thorough examination of history reveals, the separation between the two was never quite as clearly cut; instead, it was constantly debated and decided upon. “The distinction between colonizer and colonized,” writes Cooper, “rather than being self-evident, had to be continually reproduced, which led colonial regimes to pay inordinate attention to relatively small categories of people on crucial fault lines: racially mixed children, colonizers who ‘went native’ [...]” (49) The truth is that the shifting constitutions of settler groups, local elites, slaves, and immigrants repeatedly changed the givens at hand, engaging interactions that progressively lead to new situations—and thus subsequently to different groups and interactions, so on and so forth.

As a matter of fact, the relationships between the many different groups involved in empires (and their positions with respect to the empire itself) were

not only very complex but also in continual upheaval. In some situations, colonial powers would leave existing social structures largely intact, willing to merely benefit from a part of the profits made by the local ruling class. Alternatively, colonial powers would sometimes ally themselves with the merchant classes of the conquered territory, as both would work to unseat the local elites. Of course, colonization also instigated the migration of people from one part of the empire to another, which only further complicated affiliations as well as distinctions between colonizers and colonized, especially as immigrant populations on both sides produced new generations. These situations, and countless others, often coexisted within the same empire—in both time and space. Yet it is important to qualify these statements by emphasizing that such developments certainly did not lead to a loss of all boundaries and distinctions between groups—history and social study would strongly counter such a claim. Instead, the key point here is that these movements forced all actors to continually question and define themselves in relation to the others, and thus, inevitably, to change. In Cooper’s words, “colonizer and colonized are themselves far from immutable constructs, and such categories had to be reproduced by specific actions.” (17)

The seventh chapter of *Colonialism in Question*, which focuses on the history of labor strikes in post-war French West Africa, serves as a vivid demonstration of how difficult it is to fully distinguish between the colonizers and the colonized. By creating worker’s unions emulated on mainland French labor unions, and

even forming official bonds with them, African unions instigated a series of developments that eventually put the entire system of French colonization into question—even though this had not been their original intention. This story illustrates well the complexity of colonial practices, as clear lines of opposition were not only difficult to draw at any given time but were also shifting. By striking for better wages and benefits in the late 1940’s, West African workers may appear to have been countering colonial dominion. Yet, as Cooper recounts, this was not really the case. The African unions were in fact acknowledging their membership in the French Union, using its very idea as the basis upon which they could ask for rights similar to those of their mainland counterparts. In Cooper’s words, “[t]hat movement’s strength was not so much an implacable opposition to everything that smacked of French colonialism, but instead an engagement with it—the molding of postwar French rhetoric into a language of claims, plunging into the details of French models of labor agreements in order to claim benefits for colonized people.” (213)

Meanwhile, although the colonial government was not immediately willing to give in to the unions’ costly demands, it in part recognized that by forming unions like those of their French counterparts, African workers were not only substantiating the colonial system, but were furthermore organizing themselves in a way that made it possible for the colonial government to deal with them on familiar grounds. Indeed, “The administration could not counter directly the argument for equality [...] because officials hoped that Af-

ricans might, after all, act in the manner expected of industrial men.” (214) When we compound these facts with the large variety of African unions present, each with its changing alliances amongst each other, with mainland French unions, and with the colonial government—in addition to the fact that previously-existing African sustenance networks allowed the strikes to go on for much longer than any mainland strikes ever could have—we obtain a complex and unique situation that refuses the idea of colonizer and colonized as fully opposed to one another and fully separate. In short, “the effectiveness of the strike”, says Cooper, “lay less in the stark confrontation of subaltern and colonial power than in the ability of the strikers to widen fissures *within* the institutions and ideology of postwar colonialism.” (218)

As a result of this volatile situation—charged with potential, yet never violent, as not a drop of blood was shed—all participants got more than they bargained for, as eventually history “brought both sides of the colonial divide to a place where neither, in the mid 1940’s, had wanted to go”: independence. (204) In the space of less than ten years, African strikes that had meant to reinforce the prevalence of French ideals and rights throughout French colonies precipitated the creation of independent states. Cooper repeatedly emphasizes that in this case the result should be seen less as the successful ‘liberation’ of colonized territories from an over-bearing host than a refusal on the part of mainland (not local) French authorities to pay for the cost of universal French rights. In any case, this story proves that colonizer and colonized

distinctions could never be taken for granted. They not only changed through time, but were furthermore developed on the ground, enmeshed within the changing everyday needs and practices of the actors involved.

Another common fallacy in thinking about colonialism, and closely tied to the previous ones, is the idea that empires ruled completely over their conquered territories, deploying their power in an unequivocal manner. Cooper warns us that “[e]ven though we need to recognize the long-term importance of empire in modern history, we should not get carried away with the power of empires”, or the “conception of empire as a totalizing power.” (200) Careful historical analysis reveals instead that on countless occasions empires did not exert as much power as they could have, and that even when they did it was greatly uneven and temporary.

Rather than corroborating our image of colonial powers as immense totalitarian infrastructures of control, Cooper reveals how in most case empires were actually made of very brittle, unstable, and makeshift political constructions, ones which were continually attempting to adapt to the changes that they themselves were causing: “in practice a great deal of improvisation, contestation, and uncertainty.” (173) In certain cases, imperial authorities were worried that the exertion of too much power upon the colonized would disrupt economic patterns, of which they were getting a share. In other cases, imperial authorities would at times largely ignore the ruling of certain colonized lands, distracted by issues at home or in

other parts of the empire.

As we have already seen, empires were not so much based upon the smooth extension of a national core, but rather a leap-frogging strategy for defining a zone of exchange. According to Cooper, “[c]olonial states, the British among them, were thin.” (184) Exerting full control over an indigenous population was quite costly, and oftentimes this strategy was implemented only when the empire thought it absolutely necessary, in quick and sudden bursts. Imperial governments concentrated on situations and questions that seemed urgent and/or valuable at the time. Furthermore, the colonists themselves were not always in agreement about the rights and obligations of the colonized, as depending upon the situation some of them would argue for more relaxed or more severe forms of control. Thus, the very role and interests of the imperial power itself were never clear or fixed. Just like the distinction between colonized and colonizers, it was something that shifted over time and depending upon specific contexts. Rather than applying their power evenly, colonists always had a range of possibilities for how to act as colonizers—a range which itself changed as the thoughts and processes of the people involved also changed. So although “[s]truggle was never on level ground, power was not monolithic either.” (25)

Beyond their own doubts and debates about how to deal with and profit from colonies, empires were also quite vulnerable to frictions that they unwittingly catalyzed. To quote Cooper, “[e]mpires were vulnerable to the still powerful in-

digenuous polities around them, to downturns in trading systems they did not fully control, to the vagaries of interempire warfare, and to the possibility—given that their strength was a network focused on Amsterdam or Lisbon—that their own agents or settlers might see an interest in finding a niche in a different part of the overall trading system.” (166) Ironically, it was precisely because of their large size, as well as the networks that they themselves help create, that empires were actually quite fragile.

Therefore, scholars who use “empire as an epithet for any form of power” are deeply misguided. (12) Empires did deploy and develop various forms of power, yet in many cases this power was surprisingly uneven and weak, unable to fully control the territories to which they lay claim. The paradox that emerges is one that is difficult to comprehend—that such huge and potentially powerful entities were at times unwilling and/or unable to shape things as they desired—and as a result, many scholars prefer to ignore it. “That strong imperial states should have found acceptable the exercise of relatively weak power in certain circumstances is so puzzling that many commentators prefer the myths of total exploitation or of modern governmentality to examining a more confusing reality”, says Cooper. (157)

Such a view is important to reflect upon, because it suggests the idea that subordinated entities are never *fully* in a complete position of subordination, and correspondingly that ruling entities are never *fully* in a complete state of authority. To profess such a statement is certainly not to apologize for the horrors that, through-

out history, dominant powers unjustly imposed upon those they dominated. Instead, as we will discuss more lengthily later on, it allows us to bypass the futile opposition between the idea of power as being either inherently ‘good’ or inherently ‘bad’, forcing us to rethink our very conception of power itself. What is more, these insights into the limits of colonial power demonstrate how history provides its own paths for escaping itself.

This discussion leads us to the fourth fallacy about colonialism that Cooper denounces: the idea that colonial powers were trying to implement, or at the very least were harbingers for, a particular global project. As we have just seen, the power that colonial governments could exert was actually quite limited, and many historical examples demonstrate that only rarely did political results on the ground match their desires and expectations: “Europe’s ambivalent conquests [...] made the space of empire into a terrain where concepts were not only imposed but also engaged and contested.” (4) But moreover it is important to recognize that colonial powers neither had any single, clear project to be implemented, nor were they unwittingly the forerunners of one. In Cooper’s opinion, scholars too often amalgamate the history of colonialism with a teleological, universal concept (such as ‘modernism’, ‘capitalism’, or ‘globalization’)—either in support of it or as a critique—and, in doing so, effectively flatten that history’s contradictions and complexities into an unreal abstract narrative.

First of all, it is not true that empires consistently tried to subjugate the colonized

populations under their own rules and beliefs. In any given context, the former simultaneously switched between, on one side, arguing for universal principles that applied to all members of the empire, and on the other, delineating insurmountable differences between certain groups. As we just pointed out, imperial powers were often more concerned about revenue than imposing their way of life upon the colonized. “The best success stories of colonial economies,” recounts Cooper, “such as cocoa production in the Gold Coast or Nigeria” demonstrate how “colonial authorities happily benefited from [African farmers’] efforts without asking too many questions about the producers’ subject positions or how they adapted ‘traditional’ kinship systems to agricultural innovation.” (144)

Indeed, those who argue that empires began (or at least significantly contributed to) a practice of controlling and labeling individuals in order to turn them into manageable subjects are just as mistaken. Once again, historical evidence points to a wide variety of approaches used by colonial powers in addressing the populations of their empire; at times, this approach included a complete disinterest in trying to identify people with respect to mainland standards. For Cooper, “Colonial states did not necessarily want or need to see individual subjects in relation to the state or to classify and enumerate them on various axes.” (143) Just like the other examples that we discussed previously, many different approaches to colonial populations coexisted in both time and space within any one empire.

Second, it is also untrue that colonial

activities necessarily formed part of any large, abstract, and global trend, as if any such one existed independently of the everyday events of history. One of the most widespread views today incorrectly represents colonialism as the handmaiden of European Essentialism and Rationalism, as if such a dogma had spread outwards from Europe through the practices of colonialism on its way to achieving (for good or for bad) global domination. Indeed, Cooper points out that “[b]ashing the Enlightenment and criticizing modernity have become favorite activities within colonial and postcolonial studies.” (6) Throughout his book, the author repeatedly denounces this approach and the futility of its good-or-bad debate. The facts of history instead reveal that colonialism was never a linear process; nor was it ever directed toward any specific global outcome. To pretend that history was a fast-track for arriving where we believe to find ourselves today (what Cooper disparagingly calls “doing history backwards”) is to ignore the diversity of colonial practices, their doubts, and the significant struggles they entailed—struggles which redefined their contexts and lead to new, different kinds of struggles.

What is more, when confronted with the complexity of history, simplifying notions such as ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’ are unable to hold their own. Cooper dedicates a significant part of his book to taking apart these words and the various ways in which they are used. In his opinion, scholars too often take these concepts for granted, as if they truly existed outside of specific actions and events. Such words are employed to signify total, inescapable

processes that would dictate events on the ground, simplifying history into a smooth and unidirectional narrative which conveniently ignores the details of a more complicated truth. In their most pure and fanatic sense, words like ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’ hint at some kind of force that would have inevitably affected (or would still be inevitably affecting) humans everywhere in a similar manner, like a divine impulsion: “modernization, like globalization, appears in this theory as a process that just happens, something self-propelled.” (97) Of course, such a totalizing and teleological concept is not only absurd, but also belied by the more ambiguous facts of history. To acknowledge recent changes in the social and economic conditions of many populations is one thing; to place all of these under the banner of ‘globalization’ or ‘modernization’—buzzwords we hear so often that we rarely think of questioning their validity as something that *must* be either supported or condemned—is another.

Therefore, in Cooper’s view it is equally just as foolish to decry the ills of ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’ as it is to praise their supposed benefits. By arguing against ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’, many leftist academics today are actually making a crucial mistake: assuming that such processes actually *do* exist. As Cooper points out, “[t]oday, friends and foes of globalization debate ‘its’ effects,” yet “[b]oth assume the reality of such a process.” (92) Moreover, scholars who try to give ‘globalization’ a softer and more elastic meaning by playing up the importance of difference and change (for example by speaking of ‘multiple globalizations’) effectively dilute the term

to such an extent that it no longer means anything. In an attempt to reform and recycle a term whose deepest (essentializing) presuppositions were already flawed to begin with, they merely end up with a contradictory and meaningless word.

To better illustrate the uselessness of such words, let us briefly examine the term ‘globalization’, to which Cooper dedicates the fourth chapter of the book. Today, it is quite common to hear that we live in an epoch which is more global and more connected than any other (to the point where some quip that our world is now “flat”.) The truth of the matter, however, is that global processes have taken place since the dawn of human existence. Even in its most rudimentary forms, civilization already involved travel and exchange. For those who argue that large-scale communications networks truly came into their own only in the twentieth century, Cooper cites numerous examples that prove otherwise, from the Mongolians’ horsebound system of messengers, to the 1791 Haitian revolution, which “showed that in the eighteenth century as much as the twentieth economic processes and political mobilization both crosses oceans.” (98)

From this point of view, colonialism was neither a launching pad of global interconnectivity nor necessarily a promoter of it. Instead, colonial processes merely constituted a mix of particular ways for organizing (opening, closing, and everything in between) interactions across space; ways which changed to the tune of the successive problems catalyzed by the colonial processes themselves. “To study colonization,” says Cooper, “is to study the

reorganization of space, the forging and unforing of linkages; to call it globalization, distorted globalization, or de-globalization is to hold colonization against an abstract standard with little relation to historical processes.” (105)

Just as it is impossible to reduce the contemporary world to the concept of ‘globalization’, it is equally impossible to conflate our present era with the presumed ubiquity of ‘capitalism’. Such a view fails to take into account alternate economic systems that cohabit with capitalist exchanges, fuse with them, or thrive within their gaps. Likewise, nor can the history of empires be systematically linked to the rise of capitalism. Instead, as Cooper’s anecdotes demonstrate, colonial powers were quick to deploy a wide range of economic strategies (or, more precisely, mixes of different strategies) in order to meet the dominant moral and economic imperatives of the time. Even when capitalist practices were implemented to some degree, colonized populations often had little incentive to follow the capitalist rule-book and instead relied upon makeshift measures that satisfied their current needs. In fact, apart from a few notable examples, many colonial enterprises proved to be less profitable than hoped, as resources traced complicated paths on their way back to the empire’s seat. And even those that were profitable did not necessarily succeed because of the implementation of a market economy. For Cooper, “[n]either Lenin’s notion of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism nor the apologists’ notion of colonialism as the agent of development of a forward-moving market economy held up.” (186) So to use colonial history as a way to

either criticize or praise the presumed inevitability of a single capitalist system is to make the same mistake as with globalization and modernization, or in other words to presume the actual existence of such abstract essences.

In the end, the basic problem that all such approaches share is their common failure to acknowledge that present-day conditions came into being not *already formed*, but rather *through* the twists and turns of history itself. As such, colonialism was not a package that came ready-made with modernization, globalization, and capitalism packed inside of it, but rather a series of struggles that in part lead to conditions which we now identify through those concepts. “Too ready identification of an actual Europe with post-Enlightenment rationality not only leaves out the conflict and uncertainty within that continent’s history,” says Cooper, “but also the extent to which even such constructs as bourgeois equality were not some essence of the West but products of struggle.” (21) For example, the things that we can call ‘modern’ today emerged not out of an invisible force which irreversibly pulled everyone and everything towards a presumed ‘modernism’, but rather they are merely temporary products of struggle. As such, colonialist practices catalyzed a significant part of our present world not in the fact that they were striving (or at the very least helping) to advance a specific project, but rather in that the conflicts they unwittingly engendered shaped not only their own developments but also many of our current preoccupations. To quote Cooper again,

Scholars working within globalization para-

digms differ over whether the present should be considered the latest of a series of globalizations, each more inclusive than the last, or else a global age distinct from a past in which economic and social relations were contained within nation-states or empires and in which interaction took place among such internally coherent units. Both conceptions share the same problem: writing history backwards, taking an idealized version of the “global present” and working backwards to show how everything either led up to it (“proto-globalization”) or how everything, until the arrival of the global age itself, deviated from it. In neither version does one watch history unfold over time, producing dead ends as well as pathways leading somewhere, creating conditions and contingencies in which actors made decisions, mobilized other people, and took actions that both opened and constrained future possibilities. (105)

It is important to point out that deconstructing epoch-making concepts such as ‘globalization’ and ‘modernization’ “is not to say that nothing changes under the sun.” (110) We cannot deny that “the commodity exchange system, forms of production, the modalities of state interventions into societies, capital exchange systems, let alone technologies of communication, have changed enormously.” (110) Rather, the author’s argument is “for precision in specifying how such commodity circuits are constituted, how connections across space are extended and bounded, and how large-scale, long-term processes, such as capitalist development, can be analyzed with due attention to their power, their limitations, and the mechanisms that shape them.” (110-111) Thus, instead of looking for change in *what* exists, and trying to explain it through large, teleological, and abstract concepts that live separately from the material world, Cooper insists that we should study in-

stead the specific changes in *how* things are done within everyday problems and processes. Reducing history to grand narratives only impedes such work.

Finally, we now turn to the fifth misconceptualization of colonialism: the widespread tendency to see it as a bounded and uniform epoch in history, one which was uniformly replaced by a so-called ‘post-colonial’ condition. As we just pointed out, the practices undertaken by colonial powers were never fully new, but can instead be found (albeit in different forms) in other moments in history. “[N]or can either a colonial or postcolonial period be seen as a coherent whole,” writes Cooper, “as if the varied efforts and struggles in which people engaged in different situations always ended up in the same place.” (19) In fact, as all of the previous discussions make evident, colonial practices were both deeply varied and shifting. For all of these reasons, Cooper strongly criticizes scholars who attempt to reify a colonial essence and/or a distinctly-bounded colonial epoch. “We can set out a family description of *empire*, if not a precise definition,” says Cooper (in a phrase that brings to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance”). (26-27)

Just as he questions the usual caricatures of colonial history, the author also questions the existence of any consistent *post-colonial* situation. The disappearance of empires did not necessarily leave both colonists and colonized with a standard legacy that all were forced to confront. Instead, decolonization was a process in and of itself, whose own twists and turns lead to various conditions: “The *process*

of decolonization, not just the heritage of colonialism, shaped the patterns of postcolonial studies.” (230) Once again, rather than emphasizing a *state* or presumed *essence* of post-colonialism (and colonialism), in Cooper’s view the key is to study the processes that unfolded, and how debates and decisions on the ground shaped the context for future ones.

In summary, instead of upholding the flat and caricatural story of one population taking over another, followed by the latter heroically fighting off their captors, Cooper presents us with a much more nuanced and ambiguous view. Empires were not formed through the radiation of a national entity outwards into the world, and nor could the separation between colonized and colonizers ever be fully established. In addition, not only were the powers of imperial governments relatively limited, but furthermore any implementation of power was never defined by any clear project or conceptual package. Therefore, colonialism was important not so much in the idea that one population was “subjugated” by another, or in the “status” of it having happened, but rather in the way in which its developments reshaped all the parties involved. Colonialism was less a thing, an ‘-ism’, than a multitude of specific actions that continually triggered and retriggered change.

All of the ambiguities that we discussed can be traced back a more general paradox: the idea of engaging an ‘outside’ while attempting to maintain some kind of ‘inside’. As Cooper describes, this paradox can be found throughout colonial dealings:

...colonial rulers needed to co-opt old elites and generate new collaborators, but such ties might soften the colonizer-colonized distinction and strengthen the indigenous social and cultural practices colonial ideology was trying to denigrate; rulers hoped at times to profit from indigenous trade networks and productive systems without fostering the autonomy of indigenous economic elites; they need to raise levels of exploitation without fostering rebellion or undermining local authorities vital to the maintenance of order. (28)

Therefore, “[e]ach colonial state had to manage a particularly complex set of contradictions.” (51) This is precisely one of the reasons why studying colonial history is so valuable today. Although empires may no longer be present in the contemporary world, the important questions posed by the cohabitation of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ certainly still are. Rather than trying to resolve these questions or find a final solution for them, Frederick Cooper suggests that it is studying the changing ways in which we confront these that can offer a way out. Indeed, “[w]here to find a balance between the poles of incorporation (the empire’s claim that its subjects belonged within the empire) and differentiation (the empire’s claim that different subjects should be governed differently) was a matter of dispute and shifting strategies.” (154) Perhaps by examining the appearingly-contradictory yet practical ways in which members of empires addressed these questions, we can eventually reformulate them in a completely different way.

Another paradox inherent to colonial empires, which is closely tied to the first, is the inability for some of the strongest political structures that the world has ever seen to fully control their activities

and their outcome. Cooper calls this “the central paradox of the history of colonialism: the limits faced by the colonizing powers with the seemingly greatest capacity to act and the fullest confidence in their own transformative power.” (183) Empires, Cooper says, had “long arms and weak fingers.” (197) In other words, they stretched immense distances and possessed a tremendous capacity for precipitating new conditions and situations, yet at the same time were marked by a striking inability to realize their ambitions and to control the effects of their power. This paradox brings up some important questions about the nature of power and its limits, which we will discuss again at the end of this essay.

Most importantly, it is crucial to keep in mind that “imperial systems were shaped as they developed”, defined not by some inner essence but rather by the very processes that they provoked. (165) Instead of conquering the world in a regular and foreseen fashion, empires basically invented themselves on the job: “The confrontations that ensued had consequences that neither rulers nor ruled could anticipate, and produced lines of political connection more varied and complex than a dichotomy of superior and subaltern or the horizontal affinity characteristic of nationalism.” (201) This means that all members of empires, including their colonized populations, effectively participated in their construction.

Therefore, rather than focusing on the status of colonialism, or an abstract condition of authority, Cooper insists that we see “the complex way in which Europe was made from its colonies and how the

very categories by which we understand the colonies’ past and the ex-colonies’ future were shaped by the process of colonization.” (3) As we will discuss once again in the conclusion of this essay, this conception of history provides a model in which radical change comes from within the very structures that attempt to keep it at bay. The study of colonial history can now be seen as being less about the limits posed by authoritarian regimes than the possibilities for change that they unwittingly give birth to. As Cooper’s book effectively demonstrates, “both the makers of empire and the leaders of social movements operated within an imperial framework and by using that framework changed it.” (12)

To conclude, let us briefly reflect upon some of the most profound ideas that historians and non-historians alike can carry away from Frederick Cooper’s book. Why does the examination of colonial history carry so much importance for all fields of study? The answer, in my opinion, can be found in two twin directions of study, that of *limits* and that of *power*.

First, investigations of colonial history clearly underscore the value of considering the nature of boundaries. As the examples we discussed previously made clear, limits simply cannot be taken for granted as static elements. Instead, they are constantly created and re-created through everyday processes. In fact, our very idea of what constitutes a limit is also subject to change, as its questions are continually being reframed. At the same time, we must also acknowledge that even though boundaries may not exist in the manner in which we usually think of them (hard

and unambiguous), this is not to say that no boundaries exist. All of us are perfectly acquainted with, even in the most prosaic of practical terms, the difference between an opening and a closing. To pretend that all limits can fade away, that the world can be merely speed, freedom, and hybridity, is not only to deceive oneself but also to pose serious risks to intellectual endeavors (as the work of philosopher Paul Virilio warns us).

Therefore, we must neither take limits—including the limits of our knowledge and the limits of our disciplines—as solid and certain, nor as inexistent. Boundaries are simultaneously more complex, fleeting, and powerful than we could ever imagine, a fact which forces us to reconsider our very understanding of them. Through *Colonialism in Question*, Cooper makes a strong case for rethinking how we understand limits, how we create them, how we deal with them, and how they exist in time. What is more, history demonstrates that limits and connections are fundamentally intertwined, instead of being opposed to one another at opposite ends of a gradient. Since all changes come with their own limits, Cooper pertinently asks “[w]hat are the limits and mechanisms of ongoing changes? And above all, can we develop a differentiated vocabulary that encourages thinking about connections and their limits?” (112) The idea that all connections necessarily have their limits and that limits inherently come with connections is one that could have great repercussions in all realms of thought. Second, colonial histories obviously address important questions regarding the nature of power. As we mentioned numerous times, “[f]or all the emphasis on

the military, technological, bureaucratic, and cultural power of the latest round of empire-builders, the story of empires is still a story of limits.” (190) Historical analysis of colonialism makes evident that, contrary to popular belief, all forms of power necessarily come with limits. Power is never certain, nor lasting, nor insurmountable. Instead, Cooper demonstrates to us that power is fundamentally *spatial* and *chronological*, very much entangled within the real world (“[t]o study colonization *is* to study the reorganization of space”). (105) Thus, contrary to our common perception of power as existing on a scale ranging from the powerless to the powerful, in truth power can never be total.

Furthermore, it is impossible to rely upon a simplified notion of power as being inherently bad or inherently good. Nor can power be conceived as existing in only one form; once again, colonial history attests to the many different forms of power. All of these ideas point to the fact that power actually comes with the very tools to deflect and denature itself. Indeed, Cooper asks us to consider “...the importance of thinking precisely and historically about the vulnerability of structures of power and the possibilities of political mobilization across space, but also about possibilities of change in the future.” (203). As such, change comes from within, not without.

Cooper’s book also repeatedly illustrates how historical concepts, even those of laymen, play an important role in the constitution of history, and how these are continually re-appropriated and redefined by various groups for various purposes. As

we discussed, concepts of history are not just academic and analytic tools that are applied onto situations, but rather fundamentally embedded within the historical situations themselves—within very real actions and events undertaken by various agents. Cooper’s ambition is “to advocate a historical practice sensitive to the different ways people frame the relationship of past, present, and future, an understanding of the situations and conjunctures that enable and disable particular representations, and a focus on process and causation in the past and on choice, political organization, responsibility, and accountability in the future.” (149) Thus the conceptual implication of entities that are not necessarily ‘in power’ nonetheless introduces them within the power structure itself. Even when addressed by laymen, historical concepts play a role in opening and closing future possibilities for power.

This view highlights the large responsibility of all humans in shaping future possibilities. In opposition to the widespread belief that those who are not in power play only minor roles in influencing developments, the facts of history prove that the truth is precisely the contrary—or in other words that the greatest changes emerge from the most humble proceedings. Too often today, Cooper laments, “[w]e lose the power of their example to remind us that our own moral and political choices, made in the face of the ambivalences and complications of our present situation, will have consequences in the future.” (25) This attitude ignores how quickly and unexpectedly the most radical changes can come about:

The most important fact about empires is that they are gone. A once ordinary part of political life became a political impossibility. Thinking about how this came about allows us to appreciate the limits of power at its most extensive, the ability of people to find niches and fissures within systems of control and constraint, the conservatism of the most progress-oriented states, and the adaptability of supposedly traditional people. (203)

Although forms of empire may have disappeared from the Earth, there is no doubt that forms of power have not. One of our greatest mistakes is to believe that power is total, and that it can take on only one or a handful of forms. As such, it has become a widespread tendency to not only yield to forces of power that are encountered—which is after all an understandable reaction—but moreover to submit *intellectually* to current conceptions of power as if these were inevitable—which is in itself a grave and unforgivable reaction.

In the end, Cooper’s book makes a strong case for the idea of historical openness and the responsibility of all our ideas and actions. “Inequality of power, even extreme inequality, persists in other forms and with other names. Those forms too will become objects of mobilization across space and difference, and perhaps what is ordinary today will become politically impossible tomorrow.” (203) Rather than giving into the idea of a ubiquitous, inevitable ‘capitalism’ and ‘nationalism’ that would forever limit the framework of our lives, or critiquing these as if they actually existed in and of themselves, Frederick Cooper reminds us that in fact the tools to escape and recreate our current world already lie within it.