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Frederick Cooper

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Redefining Africa's Place
in the World

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Out of Empire Redefining Africa's Place in the World¹

What is most important and hardest to grasp in understanding how colonial empires in Africa came to an end in the decades after World War II is the acute uncertainty of the post-war moment, in Europe as well as in Africa. It is easy to read back the story of these years as the inevitable advent of the nation-state. That is how the world began to look in the 1960s, as over 40 African states acquired their seats in the UN, their flags, their postal stamps. But few people – in Africa as well as in Europe – anticipated or even desired such an outcome in 1945. In this talk, I

¹ This talk brings together past and current research on political and labor history in French and British Africa, including that for a book I am now completing on citizenship in France and French Africa, 1945-60. For further development of the themes of this talk and for the documentation on which it is based, see my *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); “From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion? France’s Ambiguous Post-War Trajectory,” in: Charles Tshimanga-Kashama, Didier Gondola & Peter Bloom, eds., *Frenchness and the Africa Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 91-119; “Alternatives to Nationalism in French West Africa, 1945-60,” in: Marc Frey & Jost Dülfer, eds., *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 110-37. For discussion of conceptual problems in the study of decolonization and empire, see my *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and “Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of African History* 49 (2008): 167-96, as well as Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

hope to recapture some of the uncertainty of those times, when people realized the world was about to change but did not know in what direction it would move.

Unlike in the aftermath of World War I, the European winners were almost as devastated as the losers. Most important, Japan had gained control of Dutch Indonesia, French Indochina, British Malaya, and the American Philippines. Not only were notions of the invincibility of the white race overturned, but France and the Netherlands had in effect to recolonize their valuable southeast Asian colonies. Nationalist movements under Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno immediately moved into the vacuum. France and the Netherlands were in the end unable to reestablish themselves in Indochina and Indonesia. Nor were the British in a position to renege on their promises to Indian nationalists, as they had after World War I; India would become independent in 1947.

Just as important was the shifting situation in western Europe itself – the end of the conflict for dominance that dated to the fall of the Roman empire. Charlemagne, Charles V, Napoleon, and Hitler had tried to make empires on Rome's scale, defeated by the resources of other empires. After 1945, France, Germany, and Britain no longer had to fear each other's dominance. The two real winners of World War II were the US and the USSR – which would continue imperial rivalries in new forms. Germany and Japan, defeated as empires, were able to flourish as nation-states. They did not fear another empire would monopolize resources or markets. The idea of world markets distributing resources around the world made more sense as the big empires were cut down to size, an arrangement which suited the US quite well and to which the USSR posed a radical alternative.

The initial reaction of France and Britain to their loss of Asian empires was not to give up on empire, but to make more of their African colonies. They realized they not only had to get serious at long last about developing their resources, but they also had to find a renewed basis of legitimacy. They sought to meet both ends by embracing the notion of development – more exports to save the franc and the pound by selling African raw materials to the US and elsewhere, and promotion of a higher standard of living for Africans. Africans would be given more political voice, but not too much or too rapidly. The British government abandoned “indirect rule” in favor of “local government,” now seeking to coopt the educated Africans whom they had previously looked down upon as not representative of authentic African values. The French government took a step that the British never even considered – allowing a small number of Africans, elected in a limited franchise, to take seats in the legislature in Paris, where they would participate, as a minority, in enacting laws, including the writing of a new constitution for France.

The most radical political statement out of Africa came from the Pan-African Conference at Manchester in 1945, the successor to a series of pan-African conferences beginning in 1900, led by people of African descent from the Caribbean and United States but with an increasing role of Africans. It tried to seize the moment. Its resolutions were an indictment of colonialism – for its racist practices and ideologies, for exploitation, for denial of political voice. They pointed out the “democratic nature of the indigenous institutions of the peoples of West Africa.” They called for following the principles of the Atlantic Charter, rights of free speech and assembly, for the end of racially discriminatory practices and most powerfully for the right

to vote and “for the right of colonial peoples to control their own destiny.” The last word of the resolutions was “Unite!” What the re-solution did not make clear is what the unit in which Africans should elect their own governments should be. Territories, as defined by colonial borders? Africa as a whole? West Africa? French or British Africa?

One might have thought that the 1945 conference would represent the vanguard of an African future, given the vulnerability of European powers. It turned out to be the end of an era, not the beginning. The global situation meant that the dynamics of political movements would be shaped not by general opposition to imperialism but by the give and take of political struggle – by concessions by imperial powers and possibilities that opened up, where there seemed a real chance to make claims and perhaps gain power. In this context, the desire for national independence was only one of several possibilities for turning the oppression and humiliation of colonial empire into something else.

But the rules of the game in Africa itself were already coming undone. Britain had confronted just before the war labor unrest that erupted simultaneously in Africa and the West Indies – waves of strikes and urban riots. The rulers of Africa could not do what they had done before – treat them as “tribal” uprisings and deal with them by concentrating forces at the local level. They were empire-wide issues. Beginning in 1940 in the case of Britain and 1946 for France, governments repudiated the old doctrine that colonies should pay for themselves and provided funds for what became the new slogan of post-war colonial rule: development. They hoped to make colonial rule both more legitimate and more productive. This double

attempt at restructuring colonial rule itself contributed to a political process that step-by-step made colonialism unsustainable. A little reform led to new demands, to an escalation of claim-making. These claims were not necessarily for independence, although they certainly were for political voice. They were also quite material – about wages, benefits, access to public services on a non-racial basis, for education and health services equivalent to that available in the metropole. If empire were to be reformed and made into a meaningful unit of participation, then workers, farmers, students, and others might pose a claim on the resources of the empire as a whole. Such claims, I will argue, were as important as national liberation movements in threatening the stability of empire, for they revealed that people working *within* the ideology and institutions of empire could make empire unsustainable. Victory in suppressing insurrection might be as costly as defeat.

The escalation of claim-making in the 1940s was framed within the languages of the imperial powers themselves; they were not the only languages used in politics, but they were the ones that colonial powers were capable of hearing. Eventually devolving power to nation-states would become for Britain and France an acceptable alternative to their other realistic choice: making empire into a unit in which citizenship and development were credible notions, hence exposing the voting and taxpaying publics of the metropolises to demands for political equality and equivalent standard of living.

The French Case

Let me talk first about citizenship, development, and imperialism in the case of France, for the institutional structure of French empire made those issues more explicit.

General Charles de Gaulle, leader of French resistance to the Nazis, and some of his most important followers were convinced immediately after the war that France had to convert empire into some form of federation. As de Gaulle put it in 1946, the “future of 110 million men and women who live under our flag is in an organization of federal form.” De Gaulle’s federalism had a strong France at its center. But Africans like Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal were talking about a federal structure in which former colonies would exercise considerable autonomy and express their own personalities. Between the two conceptions was room for debate – and for alternatives to either colonial rule as it had been practiced and independence for the diverse territories that made up the Empire.

The post-war French government’s willingness to reconfigure empire was expressed in the decision to rename the empire “The French Union” at the end of 1945 and to rename colonies “overseas territories.” But “Overseas France” had other components. The “old colonies” of the Caribbean were promoted by a post-war law to the same administrative status as the departments of mainland France; the protectorates of Morocco, Tunisia, and parts of Indochina were renamed “associated states,” a term which acknowledged that they were sovereign entities, with their own nationalities, over which France exercised power by (coercively imposed) treaties; mandated territories, Togo and Cameroon, were governed like colonies but, with the founding of the United Nations, under a degree of international scrutiny if not supervision; Algeria was considered an integral part of the French Republic,

but its people were divided into citizens, mostly of European origin, and Muslims who had the status of French subject. France, in 1946, was not a nation-state, but a composite polity, an empire-state.

Between 1946 and 1962, French leaders tried to preserve the polity as a single but differentiated entity. During the constitution writing process of 1946, the structure of the French Union was the focus of long debate. The components of the Union would be governed in different ways; everyone in them would become a citizen, but not everyone would be a citizen in the same way. Just what this would mean and the power of institutions at each level of territorial aggregation was the subject of heated debates.

The story is rooted in a deeper history – an imperial history. The idea of dividing the population of Greater France into citizens, who had political voice, and subjects, who did not was an attempt to organize the empire as both incorporative and differentiated. The trouble was that the two principles contaminated each other – citizenship was something many people knew about but couldn't have. The French state tried to manipulate this process, but it became a way of posing claims. In 1848, when France finally abolished slavery in its colonies, slaves became citizens rather than members of an intermediate category.

In the Four Communes of Senegal, enclaves on the Atlantic coast that had been French since the 18th century, the “originaires” had some of the attributes of citizenship. From 1848, they had the right to vote in elections, including for the French legislature, but there was a long debate over whether the originaires were “citizens” or “voters.” But when France needed more from its empire, it held out

the possibility of a fuller citizenship – it did this in Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique in 1793-94 and in Senegal in 1914. In the latter, Blaise Diagne, the first black deputy elected to Parliament, used the need France had for soldiers from its empire to get the French legislature to pass a law that reconciled that the originaires were, indeed, citizens.

Citizenship proved to be too appealing a notion. Ex-soldiers could try to make stronger claims for a meaningful form of citizenship. The expansion of claim-making in Senegal, in North Africa, in Indochina, and among colonial students and workers in France was threatening. In the 1920s, the French government tried to propagate an alternative myth to citizenship and assimilation: the empire as the gathering together of different cultures and nationalities, under an imperial umbrella that guaranteed peace and the ability to preserve traditions. In Africa, chiefs were given official blessing as the embodiments of authentic authority. Interwar ideology focused on a representation of France as an imperial entity, presiding over a differentiated population whose cultural distinctiveness could be cherished, while France itself represented a distant beacon of civilization, carefully regulating access to its summits while celebrating the integrity of its components. But Paris in the 1930s was also the site of connections, among Vietnamese and North African workers, for example, as well as intellectuals like Léopold Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, who challenged imperial authority within the space of empire.

In the aftermath of World War II France faced the need for more effective use of imperial resources as well as an international climate where colonialism was being questioned. Revolution threatened in North Africa and

Indochina, the French state leaned toward greater imperial inclusion. In 1945, a few thousand Africans in each territory were allowed to vote for deputies to the legislature, which would also write a new constitution. There were only ten West Africans elected, but their presence was enough to break the rule of silence around such practices as forced labor, abolished in April 1946. And during the debate over the constitution, the deputies walked out when the majority seemed poised to deny them their minimum demands. Their boycott would have denied the constitution any legitimacy in Africa. They forced the majority to accept that citizenship would be extended to everyone overseas; the category of subject was abolished. Overseas citizens, unlike those of European France, did not have to come under the Civil Code in matters of family law; they could keep their “personal status” under Islamic or “customary” law.

Programs of economic development and education – refused funding in the 1920s and 1930s – were at last put in place. The Overseas Ministry’s political bureau told officials in Africa about the significance of the new imperial citizenship: “The legislature wanted to mark the perfect equality of all in public life, but not the perfect identity of the French of the metropole and the overseas French.”

The state’s attempt to maintain the French Union as a singular but differentiated polity was too little, too late in Algeria – where settlers also continued to use their own citizenship rights to prevent Muslims from exercising theirs. In sub-Saharan Africa the situation was more dynamic. What is interesting about the moment is less what the Union and the generalization of citizenship *were* than the possibilities they opened up for making claims. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the logic of imperial citizenship – of

the legal equivalence of all citizens regardless of their status regimes and cultural practices – became the basis for claims to equivalence of an economic and social nature: for equal wages, equal benefits, equal education, equal social services, for an equal standard of living.

The labor movement used this framework to make quite material advances. The demand for “equal pay for equal work” emerged in 1946 as the key slogan of the labor movement in the Senegalese general strike. Strikers did not get equal wages, but they forced officials to apply the metropolitan system of negotiations and wage setting and the basic French framework of collective bargaining agreements to Africa. The 1947-48 railroad strike that shut down railroads throughout French West Africa for up to five months deepened the conviction of French officials that they could only manage labor disputes based on the experience of class conflict in Europe, which would at least contain and channel demands. The labor officers agreed with the unions that France needed a Code du Travail in order both to guarantee workers certain rights and to specify rules of contestation, but given that any labor code could not be racially discriminatory, the stakes were so high that the debate took six years to resolve, and a West Africa wide general strike of workers was instrumental in giving the code the final push.

In one of the legislative debates on the code, Léopold Senghor remarked: “As you know, Africans now have a mystique of equality. In this domain, as in others, they want the same principles to be applied from the first in the overseas territories as in the metropole.” Senghor’s words had quite material significance – workers were demanding equivalent conditions to those of workers from European France. The labor movement won the

40 hour week, collective bargaining rights, paid vacations. They turned their attention to claiming family allowances – already won in the public sector – and got them extended to wage workers in the private sector in 1956. One can make similar arguments about demands for education and veterans' pensions.

The French archives reveal that officials were, by the mid-1950s, thoroughly fed up with the demands being made upon them in the language of citizenship. The costs of modernizing imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa were high, and the promised transformation of the African economy was proving a more difficult goal than expected. A French minister in 1956 put it bluntly: citizenship had come to mean “equality in wages, equality in labor legislation, in social security benefits, equality in family allowances, in brief, equality in standard of living.” But if the costs of modernizing imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa were high, in Algeria the costs of not modernizing imperialism were even higher. In sub-Saharan Africa, French officials were by 1956 looking for a way to back out of the endless demands of an inclusive imperialism without running into a stone wall that could become a second Algerian war.

Meanwhile, political leaders in French Africa were mobilizing more diverse constituencies, especially as the voter rolls grew larger. The rhetoric of citizenship and equality resonated less with people – peasants, fishermen, pastoralists – for whom comparison with French citizens was a remote issue, and for them assertions of “African unity” against the humiliations of French colonialism counted for more. The labor movement was itself divided between “class” and “African unity,” and the top leaders – more and more interested in electoral office – took the

movement in the latter direction despite misgivings from the rank and file.

French officials were now willing to make considerable concessions to self-government as long as it stopped the cycle of demands. They called their new approach “territorialization.” The new law of 1956 conceded something to the demands of African deputies in Paris: universal suffrage and a structure that gave some recognition to federalism. But the reality was a Faustian bargain.

The first elections under the new law, in 1957, indeed resulted in victories for African political parties in each of the sub-Saharan territories, and those governments had real power over the budget and real patronage to dispense. They offered tangible power and rewards to a political elite. But they also meant that claims on the resources of the empire as a whole were no longer enabled as they had been before. Each government was responsible to its tax-paying electorate. France might provide a narrower range of services and, if it so chose, aid, but the claims of citizens on their state now had to be focused on territorial entities.

Senghor was highly critical of the way the law (which he had supported with reservations) was implemented, and he evoked an analogy to the way in which another empire had come apart: he considered the new structure of territorial government to constitute the “balkanization” of Africa, its division, like that of the breakup of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires into territories too small and too poor to take a prominent place in the world. Senghor kept trying to overcome the setback. He insisted that French West African territories should combine into a federation with a legislature and an executive that would, as a single entity, participate as an equal with European France in a French confederation. But Félix Houphouët-

Boigny of the Côte d'Ivoire opposed the African federation, preferring a direct relationship with France, and other leaders were reluctant to lose the powers and resources they had within their territories to a federation others might dominate.

In the end only, the French Soudan and Mali could agree to federate. Mali negotiated its independence from France, while intending to remain part of a French Community of independent states. Sékou Touré, alone of French African leaders, refused the terms Charles de Gaulle offered for remaining in the Community, and his Guinea became independent in 1958, ironically breaking up the African unity Sékou Touré had long advocated. Other states did not want to be left behind Mali, and in the summer of 1960, all the territories of French West Africa became independent. The Mali federation soon broke up over rivalries between Senghor and the leader of the Soudan, Modibo Keita. In that way, the French empire in Africa broke up into a series of small nation-states that no major leader had wanted in 1945, that only Guinea had embraced in 1958, and that Senghor and others feared would not be viable in a highly unequal world.

Senghor's fears of "balkanization" came true. The new states of francophone Africa would remain divided and would have great difficulty in putting together resources to transform their economies or respond to the demands of workers and peasants. Their rulers were well aware of how few resources they commanded and the danger that social movements would put demands on them which they could not meet.

British Africa

Between 1935 and 1938, a series of strikes and riots erupted in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and other British territories in the Caribbean. A strike spread from minetown to minetown in Northern Rhodesia, and strikes took place in other colonies of British Africa. By 1939, officials in London decided that an imperial problem needed an imperial solution, and they looked to the concept of “development.” For the first time, funding would be directed not just to projects of immediate economic utility but to improving infrastructure and services.

The war heightened Britain’s sense of its dependence on its empire – for soldiers, for resources, for products sellable for hard currency. After the war, the era of colonial development began in earnest: projects to jump-start production in key domains, state efforts to provide housing and other vital urban services, new resources devoted to education, and above all an insistence that each colony enact a plan for the systematic development of its infrastructure, services, and production, with the promise of funding under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act.

But the problem would not fit entirely into the development framework, for labor in the key communications nodes and in mines posed a specific set of problems. By the late 1940s, the British were rejecting their old policy of encouraging back and forth migration between workplace and village and their insistence that Africans might work but could not truly be workers. The new policy went under the name of “stabilization.” In fact, Africans in some places, such as the Copperbelt, had for some time been “stabilizing” themselves, coming to cities to live as

well as work. Women as well as men were moving to cities and rural chiefs and elders could no longer control gender relations. The colonial state was now proclaiming itself to be the architect of an African working class, paid enough to live with families in the city, encouraged to separate from a rural Africa now seen as backward, giving rise to a new generation of workers and homemakers acculturated to urban life, organized into trade unions that could provide coherence and predictability to industrial relations. The vision of a neatly bounded working class – and the notion of male breadwinner/female homemaker – could not be realized in practice, but even the attempt contributed to the fragmentation of African economies, a division into sectors each of which had its own political and social requirements.

If French leaders portrayed their empire as more unified than it was, Britain portrayed its as more decentralized than it was. The ruling fiction was that each colony would progress through stages of increasing self-government, following the pathway of Canada and New Zealand, and other members of the “white” Commonwealth. But the timetable was not specified, and most officials thought the transition would take decades, if not generations. The transition that was proposed in 1947 was limited: from indirect rule to “local government.” That meant bringing educated people, not just “traditional” elites into local councils, with a weak, partly appointed, legislative council the only check on the power of the governor at the level of the colonial territory.

Where Britain seemed to differ most clearly from France was in regard to the notion of citizenship: indeed, the citizenship construct was weak in Britain, for all were subjects of the King or Queen. But after the war, Britain

reconfigured the relationship of British nationality to imperial membership in a new way that was not so sharply distinguished. After the war, a reinvigorated sense of the need to insure continued relations of the Commonwealth and Great Britain led to the Nationality Act of 1948 which gave people from the Dominions rights, such as that of being able to enter the British Isles, that in effect created an imperial citizenship. Conscious of the need to make the empire appear more inclusive and fearing charges of racism, Parliament applied the act to people of the colonies – who, after all, could have no nationality other than British – as well as to those of the Dominions. Considerable unease ensued in Britain when non-whites, particularly from the West Indies, began arriving in the British Isles, but officials could not find grounds to deny them access, given the imperial logic which defined them as British.

It was unthinkable – in contrast to France – that people from the colonies would sit in Parliament. This institutional structure pushed African politicians to concentrate more on the individual territory. Before the war, the cross-territorial connections among African elites, particularly those from West Africa, and above all the presence in London of students and militants from all the colonies had given a pan-Empire orientation to anti-colonial politics. But these movements, like pan-Africanist organizations that embraced West Indians and African Americans as well as Africans, had trouble translating diasporic politics into concrete institutional demands, especially the kind of politics that provided institutional rewards to followers.

After the war, the British attempt to expand political participation but confine it to local arenas quickly failed, as national political parties organized themselves in each

territory and began to demand that legislative councils have a majority of elected members and that they be given real power. And the demands were not simply for voice, but for higher wages for workers, higher crop prices for farmers, less restricted commercial opportunities for businessmen, better education, better health services.

The pioneering movement was that of the Gold Coast, where leading politicians, including Kwame Nkrumah, used the occasion of the 1948 riots to claim that only an African government could address the problems of people of the territory and only it could hope to contain the potential for disorder. The roots of politics in the Gold Coast were varied, from a relatively well-organized labor movement, to moderately prosperous cocoa farmers, to urban youth available for mobilization. Nkrumah was able to straddle a fine line of mobilizing diverse supporters, posing a radical demand for independence, and yet positioning himself as the only possible way of finding a constitutional, peaceful solution to the tension he had helped to channel. When his party, the Convention People's Party, won a legislative election in 1951, at a time when Nkrumah was in prison, the British government had to admit it was outmaneuvered, that its attempt to find a manipulable middle had failed, and that Nkrumah was indeed the only alternative to disorder.

Nkrumah would soon learn that the quest of diverse people for improvements in their daily lives was only contingently hitched to his *national* cause. As leader of a self-governing territory moving toward independence, he moved to repress the kinds of social movements, from labor unions, farmers' organizations, and regional power-brokers, that he had ridden to his party's victory in 1951. His followers beat back the biggest challenge – one that

used similar language to that of nationalists to claim an Asante nation – defined by a great pre-colonial kingdom rather than by the boundaries of the British Gold Coast. When the Gold Coast became independent in 1957 (changing its name to Ghana), national autonomy could be celebrated, but its basis was already in question. But those were now Nkrumah’s problems, and one reads in the colonial archives that British officials had a kind of grudging admiration for Nkrumah’s success in repressing the labor movement – they wished they could have done such a good job themselves. Nkrumah was being reconstructed in British ideology from the dangerous demagogue to the Man of Moderation and Modernization.

In Nigeria as well as in the Gold Coast, the government feared the fusion of radical politicians and trade unions in a demand for fundamental economic change as well as political voice. Such patterns became the model for other colonies: fear of radicals made once radical alternatives look more moderate. In 1957, Prime Minister MacMillan commissioned a cost-benefit analysis that would “estimate of the balance of advantage, taking all these considerations into account, of losing or keeping each particular territory.” The conclusions of the study were mixed:

Although damage could certainly be done by the premature grant of independence, the economic dangers to the United Kingdom of deferring the grant of independence for her own selfish interests after the country is politically and economically ripe for independence would be far greater than any dangers resulting from an act of independence negotiated in an atmosphere of goodwill such as has been the case with Ghana and the Federation of Malaya. Meanwhile, during the period when we can still exercise control in any territory, it is most important to take every step open to us to ensure, as far as we can, that British

standards and methods of business and administration permeate the whole life of the territory.

The best that officials could hope for, in such an analysis, was not to keep colonies in the empire, but to keep them tied to a British way of life – something British colonial policy before the war had been intent on keeping Africans away from. The empire could not, in these circumstances, risk offending the sensibilities of its one-time subjects, whose goodwill would hopefully keep ex-colonies in the Commonwealth and the Sterling Area.

What Britain was not prepared to do was pay the economic and political costs which such a transformation implied. Officials had long feared that the Colonial Development and Welfare Act would become a colonial “dole,” and by the mid-1950s they had learned the limits of economic development which the past record of neglect had made all the tighter: African colonies lacked the physical facilities – transportation and skilled labor – to absorb very much development spending even if Britain were willing to provide it. The labor question was not going away under the stabilization doctrine and labor costs moved upward in the most development-related sectors without providing the breakthroughs in production that had been sought. The Colonial Office in effect admitted that the supposed mission of “preparing” Africans to live a British-style life was not succeeding in its final phase. The Colonial Secretary said of Nigeria in 1957 that there was danger of “the country disintegrating,” of “administrative chaos,” of “corrupt, inept and opportunist rule.” But the British were caught between their fear of chaos if they left and violence if they stayed.

East Africa – where the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya had been put down quite brutally only a couple of years earlier – was considered in worse shape, but the same course was followed. With Nigeria gaining independence in 1960, Tanganyika followed in 1961, Uganda in 1962. The Colonial Secretary told the Cabinet in 1962 that officials throughout Kenya believed “(i) that the rate of advance to independence ... was too rapid, (ii) they could think of no way in which it could now be slowed down.” The hope – as a decade earlier in the Gold Coast – was that a “moderate” wing of the Kenya African National Union could be split from the “men of violence and of communist contact.” The danger of delay was “provoking a violent African reaction.” Kenya became independent in 1963, and Kenyatta, newly released from prison, had to be made over from violent rebel to the great hope for peace.

The pessimism of the Cabinet reports from 1957-59 overlook clear evidence of growth in exports and marketed output, of improved infrastructure and much expanded school systems, of better paid workers and newly functioning systems of industrial relations in at least some sectors of some colonies – all of which British officials boasted of in other contexts. But the sense of loss of control reflected the way the problem was framed in the first place: a single idea of “development” bringing together the raising of African standards of living and the reconstruction of the British economy, of “responsible” trade unions and respectable politicians, of “scientific” ideas – applied by knowledgeable experts – of public health and agronomy disseminated throughout the African continent. The kinship and clientage networks of Gold Coast or Nigerian cocoa farmers may have been helping to bring in record harvests, but they were not what officials had in

mind. The “scientific” approach to social change provided a vision, a highly ethnocentric one, of an endpoint for social change, but little notion of how one got from the complex social situations found in Africa in the 1940s to that ideal “modern” society. When British officials were forced to take stock of their progress in the late 1950s, they saw frustration with the course of development and danger of unrest directed at British rule, British settlers, and British commercial interests. But African politicians – by virtue of the very insistence of British officials that they had to prove their popular mandates – made their connections with African society as it actually was, with all its particularisms and conflicting forms of affinity. Top officials often read this as demagoguery, corruption, and divisiveness. Such observations were not entirely without basis, but the expectations which Africa had failed to fulfill were those of a fantasy of imperial modernization of the 1940s.

Development had been put forward as an antidote to disorder. Instead, the increased tempo of change in an era of expanding markets and social engineering – from the intensified production at the expense of squatters on farms in Central Kenya to the heavy-handed interventions of agricultural experts in soil conservation projects – helped to bring about conflicts which strained the ability of the forces of order to contain. British perceptions about the preparedness of colonies for independence became irrelevant: sovereignty was what they were going to get, and responsibility for whatever went wrong, no matter how deep its historical roots.

What Kind of Decolonization?

Let us return to the basic question posed in this talk: How and why did Africa end up with the form of decolonization it got, in the form of small nation-states that had not been the goal of French West African political movements, lacking the resources and the commitment for economic and social change that social movements in both British and French Africa had sought alongside political voice? Britain and France had got themselves into a cycle of escalating demands within the very forms they used to articulate their own hegemony. It was the dynamic element that proved the most vulnerable part of empire, not its most rigid, and it is no surprise that the breakdown of empire occurred first in the colonies of France and Britain, which had hoped to see a more participatory form of imperialism, and not in the empire of Portugal, which did not.

This is my first point then: that it is the dynamics of struggle that shape its course. My second is that the attempt at “modernizing” colonialism did not systematically modernize the social order, but reframed struggles in unintended ways, for both colonial powers and the social and political movements which challenged them. For colonial officials, the development drive made it possible to imagine Africans as “modern” people, acting in institutions like legislatures and labor unions – something which made no sense in the “tribal” conception of Africa that predominated before the war. At first, development seemed like an excuse to stay around longer. But the costs of tutelage, investment, and the containment of disorder or revolution turned out to be something neither France nor Great Britain wanted to pay. The modernization argument instead proved useful in convincing enough of the political elite at home that African territories could become self-

governing, that they could be brought enough into the world economy and international institutions, that they would have an interest in further interaction and cooperation, and that European norms really were universalistic aspirations that Africans themselves would seek to emulate. The development process went from something which had to be directly controlled to something whose painful implementation could be passed on to African elites. From now on, whatever went wrong in Africa after independence would be the fault of Africans.

For the leaders of trade unions and other social movements and for the leaders of political parties who were so skillful in turning European fear of disorderly masses into their own quest for power, the experience of the labor and economic contestations of the 1940s and 1950s was also a powerful one. The terrain on which these struggles were conducted privileged certain kinds of institutions and certain attitudes toward them: the idea that society could be managed and engineered, that a strong state should enter into the realm of family life and social organization, was one side. The other was that demands put forward in the name of citizenship and development could be powerful. The first generation of African rulers, Kwame Nkrumah leading the way in Ghana and Sékou Touré in Guinea, knew from having profited from labor mobilization just how potentially challenging organized labor could be. They turned out to be the pioneers in destroying the autonomy of trade unions – likewise with independent farmers' organizations, with students' organizations, and so on. The closing off of debate and political action in so many newly independent African states cannot simply be attributed to a legacy of authoritarianism from colonial rule, but also to its opposite – to direct experience with the

mobilization of civil society, which however partial it had been, was enough to challenge states with many more resources than the new ones of Africa. African states soon turned out to be brittle states: assertive of their power over society and dismissive of civil action that attempted to influence power.

And a final point. The same process which made countries like “Ghana” or “Senegal” national also made Britain and France national. Before the 1960s, they had to think like empires, that is as polities that at the same time were incorporative and differentiated and unequal. Empires could try to manipulate the balance of incorporation and differentiation, as France did in generalizing citizenship in 1946 or Britain did with the Nationality Act of 1948 – hoping in both cases on tying people into a polity, as unity appeared inviolable and desirable. As both powers gave up their empires, they gave up this imperial view of the world – softened by foreign aid regimes and efforts to play power games in former colonies. But the end of empire fostered a distinctly national conception of Britain or France – and notably of what their populations were supposed to look like. In the 1950s, immigration into France or Britain was both useful and a right – something that made sense in a logic of empire. This pattern persisted for a time after decolonization, but by the 1960s Britain was looking to restrict it and France cut off labor immigration in 1974. By then, Britain and France were trying to keep out the children of people they had once tried to keep in. In this sense, the world order was being remade from the perspective of both colonizers and colonizing, making the nation-state into a norm that for the first time was generalized.

I have told the story of these years not as a heroic struggle for national independence that led to triumph but as a story of overlapping struggles, heroic and mundane, that did not so much turn the power of colonial regimes upside down as break open the fissures within such regimes. The decolonization era did indeed erase colonial empires from the repertoire of legitimate political organization and they brought into debate a range of international fora issues that remain there. The inequality between workers and farmers in different parts of the world and the crying need for access to basic resources faced by people in former colonies are no nearer an end than they were in the 1950s; perhaps they are farther away. The issues have not quite disappeared into formally independent sovereignties, even if they are no longer issues of empire. But for a time the raising of such issues shook the foundation of two of the world's most powerful colonial empires. The way that they did so and the ways in which imperial powers responded to them shaped a particular sort of decolonization – one which generalized sovereignty but did not generalize claims for vital economic and social resources. But the fact that such claims were made and to such effect should remind us of the continued importance of collective action. They should remind us too that actions have consequences, not always what their authors intended, not always ones for which the key actors are willing to take responsibility. And finally the story should remind us of the diversity of forms that political imagination has taken in the past and might take in the future.