



BERLIN – DAKAR – PARIS:
STUDYING FRENCH AFRICA IN BERLIN
FREDERICK COOPER

Frederick Cooper is Professor of History at New York University and a specialist in the history of Africa, of colonization and decolonization, and of empires more generally. He previously taught at Harvard University and the University of Michigan and has been a visiting professor at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* and *École Normale Supérieure*. He is the author of a trilogy of books on labor and society in East Africa and more recently of *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (1996); *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (2002); and *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (2005). He is also co-author with Thomas Holt and Rebecca Scott of *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Post-Emanicipation Societies* (2000) and with Jane Burbank of *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (2010), and co-editor with Ann Stoler of *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (1997) and with Randall Packard of *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays in the History and Politics of Knowledge* (1997). – Address: Department of History, New York University, 53 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012-1098, USA. E-mail: fred.cooper@nyu.edu

Between an ideal work environment, the pleasures of Berlin, and the possibilities of endless stimulating conversations with colleagues, Wiko offers a wide range of temptations and no bad choices among them. My fellowship year came at a particularly propitious time. Along with Jane Burbank, I had recently completed a book that was the product of ten years of teaching and reflection and five years of writing, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, published by Princeton University Press just a few

months before our arrival in Berlin. During the many years while the empire project was in gestation, I had been making repeated forays to archives and libraries in France and Senegal, and so arrived in Berlin with an enormous quantity of historical material on my hard drive and a substantial array of photocopied documents as well. Thanks to the good fortune of a six-month fellowship at Wiko's sister (or should I say daughter?) Nantes Institute for Advanced Study in 2009 (in an interval between final draft and page proofs of the empires book), I had managed to write one chapter on the new project, but it had then sat untouched for a year while I was back to my normal teaching duties. So the fellowship at Wiko gave me the chance to recover from one project and get going on another – all in an environment that was congenial and encouraging.

I will say more shortly about my project and how Wiko contributed to its realization, but first a general comment about the intellectual atmosphere of the past year. For some Fellows, close interchange with a small number of other Fellows with closely overlapping interests – allowing for breakthroughs in individual perspectives and projects – has been the most fruitful aspect of a year in this community. For me, it is more what one might call the pleasures of intellectual life. Being among biologists, philosophers, writers, and jurists has been as interesting to me as being among scholars whose orientation is more like my own. At lunches, dinners, parties, and of course the Tuesday colloquia, discussions have been far-ranging and stimulating. I found this experience very rewarding. The closer one gets to the subject on which I am writing, the more people I already know from whom I get ideas and feedback, but the overall intellectual environment of Wiko is unique. What has been most interesting has been conversations that have taken me further afield, to domains about which I would never dare to write a word but that (at age 63) have contributed to my broader education.

The range of endeavors represented at Wiko is thus a particular attraction. That it is broader than the range represented at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, where I have also been a Fellow, might at first seem to pose a problem. How can one get into serious conversation about topics about which one has no prior knowledge? The Stanford Center, by focusing on social sciences (with a modest number of outliers) might seem to offer better opportunities for interaction. I found the reverse to be true. Being among a collection of smart people who were able and interested in explaining what they were doing was more conducive to conversation than the supposed commonalities of social science. This situation has something to do with the excessive polarization that has occurred within American social science, between those who wish

they were theoretical physicists and those who think of themselves as cultural interpreters. But the result has been disciplinary and theoretical orthodoxies that produce relatively closed worlds – each of which has enough reinforcement that its premises are unlikely to be shaken. Perhaps the European intellectual world is more open to general intellectual culture (and the Americans here, after all, were chosen by a European institution), but the specificities of institutional culture may be relevant as well, and Wiko's commitment to putting together intellectual diversity remains invaluable.

I did enjoy one side of being on the edge of other people's projects. The cluster of African historians and anthropologists – Steve Feierman, Nancy Hunt, Julie Livingston, David Kyaddondo and Herbert Muyinda – working together on issues of health and medicine in Africa, as well as the two other Africa specialists, Bahru Zewde and Birgit Meyer, kept reminding me of the variety of perspectives one can bring to a single, but complex continent. Berlin offered additional connections, particularly to African historian Andreas Eckert at the Humboldt University and the talented students and colleagues who work with him.

Let me now describe the project on which I spent most of my time this year: "Citizenship between empire and nation: France and French Africa, 1945–1960." In 1946, France renounced the use of forced labor in its colonies, abolished the hated separate judicial system for indigenous subjects, and then eliminated altogether the demeaning distinction between a French citizen and a French subject, a category that had included most Africans. All inhabitants of the colonies acquired the "quality" of the French citizen, and they had a right that citizens of the metropole did not: to have their civil affairs – marriage, inheritance – regulated under Islamic or "customary" law, not the French civil code. Empires have always conjugated inclusion and differentiation; the post-war empire was claiming that its peoples would be different but equal. How deep were these changes within the conceptual field in which French colonial rule operated? How much opportunity did African political actors have to use the new politics of citizenship in their own ways, perhaps unintended by French political leaders?

My book focuses on "imperial citizenship", a form of citizenship not linked to a nation-state. In 1945, political leaders in France and those in French West Africa both claimed that they wanted to end colonialism, but neither thought that the former colonies – renamed overseas territories – would or should become independent nation-states. Political action and conflict over the next 15 years revolved around competing versions of a state – renamed the French Union in 1946, the French Community in 1958 – that would

be either decentralized, federal, or confederal. The government exercised extreme violence to keep such an entity together – witness, for example, Vietnam 1946–54, Madagascar 1947, Algeria 1954–62. But it also sought to make being French meaningful to the “citizens of 1946”, while worrying that European French people would be overwhelmed by their more numerous compatriots overseas, whose degree of “evolution” was frequently questioned and whose dangerousness was often invoked. The government confronted social and political movements in Africa – trade unions, veterans associations, students – that claimed not only political rights and a voice in running their own territories, but also equality of wages, education, and medical services – in short the standard of living enjoyed by the citizens of European France. Empire, citizenship, and the welfare state soon proved a costly combination.

African politicians, meanwhile, were trying to articulate both their claims to equality as citizens and the distinct “personality” of each territory. But where in Africa did the “nation” lie? Some identified with the “petite patrie” – Senegal, Dahomey, Côte d’Ivoire, and other individual territories – and others, like Léopold Senghor, with an “African” nation that could stand alongside a “European” one. This argument remained unresolved as the government of Charles de Gaulle wondered after 1958 whether the French Community included not just a common citizenship, but also a single nationality – the French one – or multiple nationalities.

Both European and African France ended up spawning independent nation-states in 1960, something no major political actor in European France or French West Africa had sought 15 years earlier. Even as the French government decided that turning empire into a federation or confederation of equal citizens was too expensive and too difficult to sustain politically, it decided that it liked the idea of confederation for itself. Sovereign prerogatives would not be shared with the people who had long ago been forcefully incorporated into France, but with other Europeans. By the 1970s, France, with its European partners, was striving to keep out the children of the people it had once tried to keep in.

Coming to Wiko with one chapter drafted, I was able to write drafts of the other four substantive chapters plus the introduction and conclusion. These chapters are based on a large variety of sources and putting it all together takes concentration. Having large blocks of time available was what made it possible to get as much written – several hundred pages – as I did. Blessedly, I had few other writing commitments and although I prepared quite a number of conference papers, I was free to concentrate most of my time and effort on the book manuscript. It will need considerable revision – and most im-

portant: cutting – and hopefully such tasks will be easier to accomplish while teaching than writing original text is.

Being located in Berlin, I was able to meet colleagues, attend conferences, and give lectures without spending a lot of time in airplanes. The cluster of educational institutions in Berlin is of course very impressive, and I took quite full advantage of the opportunity to talk both about Jane and my empires book and my current citizenship project. Berlin conferences included one on law and modernization at Humboldt University, another on human rights at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam, and one on labor and the life cycle at the Internationales Geisteswissenschaftliches Kolleg (IGK) at Humboldt University. Jane and I talked to this last group about our empires book, and I also gave talks at the Falling Walls Conference, the Frankreich-Zentrum of the Freie Universität, the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung, and Sebastian Conrad's History seminar at the FU. Along with other Wiko Africanists, I participated in a discussion of projects that are ongoing at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) and another discussion of research projects by advanced students in African history hosted by Wiko. A bit further afield, Jane and I presented our book at the University of Leipzig, and I gave talks at universities in Göttingen and Bremen. And beyond Germany, we gave empires talks in Madrid and Barcelona, and I gave citizenship talks at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich (ETH), at the University of Basel, and at Oxford University. I also gave papers at conferences in London, Dublin, and Lisbon. The biggest event, in terms of audience and anxiety level, was presenting the annual Marc Bloch lecture at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris this June. And the most enjoyable was my Wiko presentation on the citizenship project.

Then there is Berlin – opera, symphonic music (there are many fine orchestras around the world, and then there is the Berlin Philharmonic), chamber music, bicycle rides in the Grunewald and along the Spree, Saturday mornings at the Winterfeldtplatz market, the great museums, and the cafes and beer gardens. Most pleasurable was the time spent with other Fellows and staff members at Wiko. Both social interactions and a supportive work environment are the consequences of a staff that, in all the component parts of the institution, is notable not just for its high degree of professionalism, but for warmth and thoughtfulness as well. To the staff at Wiko, I am deeply grateful.