Section 1
Development
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Nation, state and agency: evolving historiographies of African decolonization

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As the title of this volume suggests, scholars of decolonization are increasingly looking at the connected or ‘entangled’ histories of empire and its aftermaths. From this perspective, decolonization was not a discrete process that marked a shift from empire to national independence but a multi-layered, multifaceted phenomenon. While decolonization had particular, specific causes and effects in different African settings, it was also shaped by wider, structural dimensions of empire that may be seen as systemic: the political and economic relationship between imperial ‘core’ and colonial ‘periphery’; the colonial state in terms of its bureaucratic structure; ideologies of governance, ‘development’ and race; and emancipatory narratives of anti-colonial freedom and nationhood. Many of these aspects of empire and decolonization cut across particular imperial or national contexts and point us towards complex chronologies of change.

Looking back at the historiography of decolonization, we are reminded that it has been studied from quite different perspectives, and that this in turn has a strong bearing on the forms of agency that historians of decolonization have placed at the forefront of their analyses. For example, there is a somewhat paradoxical affinity between older accounts of decolonization, which see primary decision-making as taking place in the realm of high politics at the centres of empires, and the newer ‘postcolonial approaches’. In the latter case, whether discussing economic theories of dependence and neocolonialism or cultural histories of European imperialism as an intellectual/cultural matrix, Europeans remain central to the exercise of power, control, change and continuity. When historians
have emphasized African agency this has often (though not always) been within the framework of anti-colonial nationalism.

This is perhaps indicative of the fact that we are revisiting a problem that has concerned historians of empire for a long time: how to write the history of empire – or of decolonizing empires and new states – as a more or less integrated field of study. The focus on the ‘entangled’ nature of imperial aftermaths in this volume suggests that our understanding of when empire ended needs to be questioned and re-examined. The idea that empire continued in alternative forms after formal independence was gained is hardly new, but there is an awful lot more to this idea than was originally intended by protagonists of ‘neocolonialism’. From a contemporary, ‘presentist’ perspective, the arguable failures of the postcolonial state in the formerly colonized world require us to look again at independence and its shortcomings. Recent studies have sought to question the empire/nation binary and re-examine the alternative decolonization paths that were not followed.¹ In addition, historians have begun to pay far greater attention to ongoing postcolonial ‘traumas’ – specifically, cultural, intellectual and political – in former colonial metropoles. In all these respects, the relationship between the formerly colonized world and the European ex-colonial powers remains deeply interwoven.

Imperial designs, metropolitan manoeuvres and moral legacies

The older historiography of British and French decolonization has concerned itself with the question of how and why metropolitan political actors deemed it necessary to wind down their empires, and what this signified. In this sense, it has tended to take a metropolitan, or what is often more critically labelled a ‘Eurocentric’ perspective. The source of explanation for imperial contraction – as with its prior expansion – was to be found in the political and economic sphere of decision-making at the centre of the empire. Even where the focus of study extended to colonized territories, the causal relationship moved from core to periphery. African agency eventually manifests itself in the form of a ‘nationalist consciousness’, whereby colonial elites at the metropolitan centre are able to negotiate a ‘transfer of power’ to newly independent nation states, ordinarily falling within a post-imperial power structure such as the British Commonwealth or the French Communauté of African states. Along the way, empire and decolonization are both
bound up with a moral mission and continue to provoke questions about the legacies of empire.

From its earliest incarnation, imperial history was concerned with the expansion of European empires overseas, and as such the history of the colonized world became coterminous with the expansion of European territories and the incorporation of new lands and peoples into imperial structures of control. European colonization was the integrating force that brought the non-historical peoples of the world into the orbit of history itself. Although decolonization was not yet part of the lexicon of imperial historians, the question of nationalism was not entirely absent from the purview of interwar historians of empire. The end of the First World War had seen the British empire acquire new mandate territories, but also be challenged by a series of shocks arising from the emergence of nationalism in Ireland, Egypt, Iraq and – most importantly – India, as well as a new assertiveness from the dominions, notably Canada. They were writing at a time when imperial control appeared to be increasingly challenged, yet largely retained a confidence in Britain’s ability to direct events and the trajectory of empire regardless of local challenges.

From this broadly liberal perspective, not only was there no existential crisis of British imperialism, there was also a widespread belief in its moral purpose, its ongoing ‘civilizing mission’. Challenges to British rule were natural developments along the road towards a British Commonwealth, which provided the ongoing justification for the British empire itself. Independence, when it came, would mean the steady achievement of ‘free association’, but this freedom was not something that colonized peoples would wrench prematurely from the grasp of an oppressive imperial power; it would be negotiated and given when they proved themselves ready. The focus for these historians of empire was predominantly constitutional. The 1917 Montagu–Chelmsford Declaration on India, and the subsequent 1919 Government of India Act, placed great faith in the possibilities of constitutional reform and gradual democratization. While this spirit of gradualism was to animate much of the interwar historiography on empire, the Second World War forced Britain into a more defensive, self-justificatory position with regard to its empire, and to more explicitly imagine its end. In his 1943 Argument of empire, aimed at US audiences sceptical of Britain’s imperial status and intentions, Keith Hancock claimed that the British empire was the most extensive system of freedom that had ever existed in human history. Within the British empire, he wrote, ‘monarchy grows into democracy, empire grows into Commonwealth, the tradition of a splendid past
is carried forward into an adventurous future’. This was contrasted with what he evocatively labelled a ‘sundered world of snarling nationalisms’.6

Similar interwar positions were also clearly discernible across Britain’s political spectrum, albeit with a much clearer accent on ‘development’ and the socio-economic dimensions of future independence. Following Lord Lugard’s *Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922), the idea of ‘indirect rule’ – whereby local authorities would be preserved and colonial administrations govern through them, envisaging no significant social change along the way – was the paradigm for imperial governance not just for the British but more widely across Africa and beyond. In the interwar research of crucial figures such as Lord Hailey, as well as the large output in both the academic and popular press by Margery Perham on colonial development, we start to see the Lugardian orthodoxy questioned, and the significance of socio-economic change as a prerequisite for future decolonization come to the fore. It has been suggested that this intellectual emphasis on the social and economic underpinnings of ‘detribalization’ as a preparatory move towards independence pre-dates the Second World War in the form of the colonial development secretary in 1938, Malcolm MacDonald. In that year MacDonald asked the summer school on colonial administration at Oxford University: ‘[W]hat is the main purpose of the British Empire?’ He answered that it was

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\text{[t]he gradual spread of freedom amongst all His Majesty’s subjects, in whatever part of the earth they live… The spread of freedom in British countries overseas is a slow – sometimes a painful – evolutionary process [which had already resulted in the dominions evolving as ‘completely free’ and ‘fully sovereign nations’]}\ldots \text{The same spirit guides our administration of the colonial empire. Even amongst the most backward races of Africa, our main effort is to teach those peoples to stand always a little more securely on their own feet.7}
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Bringing freedom as national independence onto the horizon for colonial Africa was something of an innovation in official circles. What is more striking, though, is the deep structural similarities of teleological thinking across the political and academic spectrum in Britain at this time. Empire was not a purely instrumental project, but a moral one directed from the centre.89

In historical scholarship, the transfer of power model – in which ‘imperial design’ explains not only empire’s expansion but also its dénouement – held currency for some time, particularly for the generation that
lived through the Second World War. For those on the left or centre-left, the imperial development and modernization efforts of the immediate post-war Labour government under Clement Attlee were matters of political and intellectual interest, a practical approach to social and economic change at home and in the empire. The more sympathetic readings speak of what is described as a ‘conscious effort’ on the part of the British ‘to contain, if possible to collaborate with, and ultimately to transfer power to the accelerating force of African nationalism’. Accounts of this moment of post-war modernization could also be highly personal, bound up as it was with the hopes and aspirations of a generation of soldiers, scholars and reformers who struggled together and believed in the project of a ‘new Jerusalem’. Echoes of this are to be found in Ronald Robinson’s confident account of the role of Sir Andrew Cohen (permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office alongside the Secretary of State, Arthur Creech Jones, and a key architect of Labour’s plans for colonial reform) as the ‘pro-consul of African nationalism’. Robinson wrote openly that Andrew Cohen was a friend, and he had in fact worked under Cohen as a research officer in the African Studies Branch of the British Colonial Office from 1947 to 1950, and later as chairman of the Cambridge conferences on development from 1961. These historiographical positions have been very much revised by more contemporary studies, but again we see the persistence – across the political spectrum, across interwar and post-war periods and well into the age of decolonization itself – of a Whiggish teleological view of empire as a pax Britannica and decolonization as a benevolent British-led project, whether constitutional or socio-economic, or both. Directed from the centre, featuring very little African agency at all, decolonization meant the flowering of empire’s liberal, progressive seed.

If the historiography of French Africa’s decolonization has been overshadowed by the more dramatic and violent confrontations in French Indochina and Algeria, there was nonetheless a palpable French belief in a pragmatic ‘managed decolonization’ in sub-Saharan Africa – structurally similar though not identical to the British vision – that manifested in the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and the creation of the French Union in 1946, leading to the Communauté of African states in 1958. As has been noted elsewhere, this gave rise to ‘the stereotype of a more or less orderly transfer of power from Dakar to the Congo, formulated by stages and implemented without grave incident between 1956 and 1960’. The French counterpart to Britain’s ‘Whig’ view of empire’s end was neatly summarized in 1946 by Léon Blum, the prime minister, who spoke of ‘our republican doctrine’, in which ‘colonial possession only reaches its final
goal and is justified the day it ceases, that is, the day when a colonized people has been given the capacity to live and to govern itself.\textsuperscript{36}

That said, the idea of a French \textit{mission civilisatrice} to match the civilizing mission of the \textit{pax Britannica} was not always taken seriously by scholars of French imperialism. In 1960 Henri Brunschwig wrote that, while the ‘humanitarian’ angle was important for the British and their empire, in France it was post-1870 nationalism that provided the primary explanations for imperial expansion and legitimation.\textsuperscript{17} Early efforts to explore the concept more fully – particularly to examine its cultural dimensions – can be seen emerging, especially in the anglophone literature on the French empire, by the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} More recently a rich and varied literature has developed, much of it seeking to understand African perspectives. For example, Alice Conklin’s 1997 book \textit{A mission to civilize: the republican idea of empire in France and West Africa} offers a nuanced African perspective on the implementation of the Parisian policy debates explored in Raymond Betts’ classic 1961 study, \textit{Assimilation and association in French colonial theory, 1890–1914}.\textsuperscript{19} The role of religion has been a strong influence in the French historiography, helping to link together different understandings of how civilization was conceived and to stress the importance of the missionary element in realizing these visions.\textsuperscript{20} In the late nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, education was another vector for communicating the mission of the French state.\textsuperscript{21} In the interwar period we can see something of a shift in the civilizing mission away from a belief in the potential of assimilation towards a different type of cultural engagement. For example, Gary Wilder’s \textit{The French imperial nation-state: negritude and colonial humanism between the two world wars} picks up the problem of how race brushed up against humanist and rationalist justifications for the limiting of assimilation in the French colonial state.\textsuperscript{22}

If the entire \textit{idée coloniale} has now been subjected to severe historiographical criticism, it retains a certain salience in terms of postcolonial memory and the way in which the history of empire and decolonization is debated in France today.\textsuperscript{23} Much new debate centres on the teaching of empire and decolonization within schools. A 2005 law designed to ‘show the nation’s recognition of the national contribution of France’s repatriate population’ was the consequence of intense lobbying on the part of France’s population of so-called pieds noirs, those citizens who trace their ancestry to the settler population in colonial Algeria. More commonly known as the law on the memory of colonialism, its fourth article called for school curricula to stress ‘the positive role of the French presence overseas’ and therefore of France’s colonial history. It eventually
provoked a fierce backlash and subsequently led the then president, Jacques Chirac, to rescind the law. Debates about imperial legacies have also crystallized around the idea of republicanism, and specifically the way that postcolonialism has clashed with ideas of neo-republicanism.

In Britain, public debate about empire is often unhelpfully reduced to a ‘balance sheet’ approach. New work on the violent repression of the Mau Mau Rebellion, as well as the high-profile court case of the Mau Mau plaintiffs against the British government, led to the discovery of a very significant cache of ‘lost’ or ‘migrated’ decolonization archives, increasing public awareness of some of the brutalities of decolonization. Overall, however, the types of historians who are widely read by the public at large, as well as the media debates that this type of work encourages, tend to produce a ‘for’ or ‘against’ approach that dramatically reduces the complexity of colonialism. In these public debates, non-European agency has almost no role to play: only the deeds of colonizers feature, and most apparently still believe that, ‘on balance’, the British empire was a ‘good thing’ and its decolonization a largely benign or even benevolent process. The legacy of earlier historians, who believed so fully in Britain’s benevolent imperial mission, still seems to resonate within public opinion. Even within the academy, questions of Eurocentrism, the failure to account for colonized agency, the lack of attention to colonial violence and the inability or unwillingness of some historians to take account of the prevalence of race within imperial discourse and governance remain some of the most contentious issues in the historiography of empire and decolonization.

The aforementioned ideas about decolonization as a relatively orderly transition, choreographed by metropolitan political elites, were being implicitly challenged by new strands of imperial historiography emerging in the 1960s. Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher’s theory of imperial expansion, initiated in their famous journal article ‘The imperialism of free trade’ (1953) but developed most fully in their book *Africa and the Victorians* (1961), posited the politics of the ‘periphery’ as crucial to the decision-making undertaken by the ‘official mind’ in London (or Paris). By extension, then, decolonization could be interpreted as the consequence of the breakdown of collaborative relationship at the colonial periphery, which in turn shifted the balance of risk and reward for those seeking to prolong the imperial project. Despite the emergence of this ‘peripheral theory’, stressing the contingent and uncertain nature of imperial expansion and hence decline – and bringing a range of collaborators from the colonized periphery into the narrative – the implications for developing a richer sense of colonized agency were arguably stymied.
Robinson and Gallagher still proffered an imperial framework that saw the ultimate decision-making role as lying within Europe’s metropoles. The ‘official mind’ had to react to and take into account different ‘peripheries’, but it was still the main agent of historical change.\textsuperscript{31} Perhaps two generations of historians of Britain’s decolonization have been heavily influenced by Robinson and Gallagher’s concepts and analytical framework. ‘Official mind’, ‘periphery’ and ‘collaboration’ remained crucial categories of analysis. Beyond this, one of the definitive features of this style of scholarship is that the most utilized archives remain those of the former colonial powers, broadening through decolonization to encompass the foreign policy of the United States, the Cold War and international history. The emphasis is on the importance of high politics, strategic rationale and, above all, the decision-making power of politicians and bureaucrats at the imperial centre.

John Darwin, perhaps the pre-eminent historian of British imperialism and decolonization, is a vocal advocate for the ongoing importance of Robinson and Gallagher’s work.\textsuperscript{32} He also happens to be the target of some of the most intense and explosive historiographical criticisms in the field today.\textsuperscript{33} Ironically, Darwin is a staunch defender of the principle that the study of empire and decolonization should not be a morality tale of any kind, left or right, progressive or conservative – an approach that, again, takes inspiration from Robinson and Gallagher. Gallagher in particular offered ‘an ironic, detached, and unsentimental view of the British Empire as a world system’. Empire was ‘not a cause to defend or a grievance to denounce but a passing historical phenomenon’, meaning that ‘the history of empire as Gallagher and Robinson conceived it in the early 1950s was thus already a history for the postcolonial age’.\textsuperscript{34} It is this ‘unsentimental’ approach that provides the title for Bill Schwarz’s review of Darwin’s work, and seemingly also provides the main thrust of his critique. The problem, Darwin’s opponents suggest, is that empire is not a ‘passing historical phenomenon’ but one that is still very much alive. The problem with Darwin’s work, his critics propose – and the reason why he is unable to grasp the significance of empire’s many afterlives – is that he is hostile not only to the explanatory power now commonly accorded to matters of gender and race, but more generally to the conceptual significance attributed to the symbolic systems which give life – in our daily existence; in the work of historical interpretation – not only to gender and race, but to the social world, \textit{tout court}. This marks not merely a professional spat, concerning this or that
approach, a lowly question about the persuasiveness of a preferred methodology. The differences are serious and the stakes are high. In this Darwin is right: the controversy turns on what we can expect history to do.35

Darwin’s contribution to the study of British imperial and decolonization is extraordinary in its range. Yet he is also very clear about what is and what is not important in the study of this history. Of primary explanatory value is the geo-strategic realm, and the decision-making of political elites in Europe’s metropolitan centre. With regard to British decolonization, Darwin is well aware – indeed, he was a leading exponent of the view – that there was a ‘fourth British empire’ after 1945, in which modernizing forces sought to once again reconfigure the terms of imperial collaboration for a new age. Darwin too has discussed at length the ‘late colonial state’ and its historical significance.36 He is well aware that there was more to the story of decolonization after 1945. But as a system – and therein lies the key to Darwin’s historical register – the British empire was essentially broken and in terminal decline after the fall of Singapore in 1942.37

This is the aerial view of decolonization. Imperial history is surveyed from great heights, taking in the grand expanse of Halford Mackinder’s ‘World-Island’ and Robinson and Gallagher’s peripheries, but extending the analytical framework beyond a single core to take into account the broadest geopolitical shifts in modern world history, such as the rise of the United States’ world power, fascism in Europe and Japan, China’s imperial claims and so on.38 But in the plane, narrating the journey with Darwin himself, is an exclusive grouping of imperial grandees: the European, mostly but not exclusively British, political elites who form the centrepiece of Darwin’s story.39 At one level, this seems eminently sensible: if the historical problem that Darwin has set himself revolves around questions of geopolitics and grand imperial strategy, these are the natural historical subjects to discuss it with. The reason why the debate about imperial and decolonization history gets so heated is the implication that this is not merely one way of looking at empire but, in reality, the most important. What Darwin’s critics most object to is the absence of questions about race, violence and identity, and by implication the lack of attention to the historical experiences of those colonized subjects who literally disappear out of view when the empire is seen from such heights.

What the entangled historiography of decolonization suggests, unhappily for Darwin, is that, even when moral views of empire and decolonization are explicitly eschewed, the mere choice of subject
matter and source material raises moral questions once again. Whether we look at interwar historians writing of empire as the steady unfolding of British constitutional liberalism, post-war modernizers and their historian sympathizers accentuating the developmental mission of decolonization, self-justifying politicians writing the history of decolonization as they act it out, popular debates about the legacies of decolonization, or historiographical disagreements concerning the proper focus of imperial and decolonization scholarship in the present, the old questions of Eurocentrism, morality and ‘Who writes history?’ have maintained their relevance.40

From imperial centres to African agency: nationalism and its alternatives

The critique of Eurocentrism is nothing new. It was, in essence, the first objection of anti-colonial nationalists.41 As national independence was mooted, and before a nation itself could be imagined, a national past had to be created. In terms of African history, nationalism, national – or, more broadly, Africanist – historiographies seemed for a time to constitute a major rupture.42 Empire’s end required new interpretations of the African past that would correct the tendency to view metropolitan political actors as the leading protagonists. Nationalism needed to be put centre stage. Nevertheless, the nation as a framework for writing history has proved to be problematic for a whole host of reasons, both political and analytical. For some, the seeds of postcolonial national identity were sown in rocky and unfertile ground. African nationalism was an elite-led phenomenon aimed at the capture of state power, with shallow roots in society. Empirically speaking, the myriad diversity of ethnic, linguistic and religious ties within often arbitrarily constructed borders – essentially the creation of European colonial bargaining – rendered the postcolonial nation unstable and led to civil war, ethnic conflict, forced migration and genocide. At a more theoretical, normative level, the ‘post-colonial’ cultural turn of the 1980s and 1990s encouraged the idea of the nation as a discursive construct, often oppressive in its self-definition. There has since been a challenge to the anti-national orthodoxy, with historians reasserting the broad-based nature of some African nationalisms as well as the greater robustness of the African nation than is sometimes assumed. A different and newer historiographical turn has sought to re-examine and historicize the moment of political decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, asking whether the nation state was the
necessary and inevitable end of empire, and whether historians have sometimes wrongly attributed anti-colonial resistance to the category of ‘nationalism’.

Post-war pioneers of an Africanist perspective such as Kenneth Dike and Jacob Ade Ajayi of University College Ibadan were seeking to place far greater emphasis on African agency and to develop African histories that stood apart from a unified ‘imperial framework’. African (as opposed to merely imperial) history developed rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s when historians, in sync with the actual process of political decolonization itself, started to write alternative histories that did not simply portray the history of Africa as the history of the colonial powers. British repression in Kenya and Central Africa, as well as the underwhelming nature of Commonwealth membership, coupled with the brutal and ignominious collapse of the French empire in North Africa, stripped older explanations of credibility and created a potent opportunity to write histories of Africa freed from the clutches of an imperial narrative. Much of this new ‘national’ history aimed to examine the pre-colonial past, not taking European intervention as the beginning of history, and often searching for the pre-colonial roots of an ostensibly authentic identity and nationhood.

The new historiography was interested in African and local sources, including oral sources, which in many ways were the real innovation. In the 1950s scholars outside Africa – perhaps above all Roland Oliver – also did much to shape the nascent discipline of African history. In 1948 the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) appointed Oliver to a lectureship in the ‘tribal history of Africa’, the first of its kind. In collaboration with John Fage, then working in Ghana, Oliver also organized the first international conference on African history, in 1953, at which interdisciplinarity flourished, drawing on linguists, anthropology, archaeology, natural science and oral histories. Oliver and Fage produced the first textbook, *A short history of Africa* (1962), and the following year Oliver edited with Gervase Mathew the first volume of *History of East Africa* (1963). Immanuel Wallerstein, who published his *Africa: the politics of independence* in 1961, as well as Basil Davidson, Jean Suret-Canale and later Shula Marks and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch – among others – sought to develop the historical study of African politics, nationalism and independence, looking from within colonial societies themselves. Much of the direction of travel here saw imperial history fragment into regional and national histories and a far greater emphasis on African initiatives and perspectives, with a palpable concern for politics and agency within colonized societies.
Another early focus on African nationalism came from Henri Grimal’s pioneering comparative study *Decolonization: the British, French, Dutch and Belgian empires, 1919–1963*. First published in French in 1965, and a landmark text in the study of decolonization, it offered a persuasive case for the central role of anti-colonial nationalism in the process of decolonization. Rather than sharing the strong Africanist focus of the early pioneers of Africa history, though, Grimal posited a different theory, one that has had an enduring influence in the historiography of decolonization. Anti-colonial nationalism was driven, Grimal proposed, by the process of colonialism itself and the dissemination of European ideas about nationhood and democracy, these being adopted by elites who then mobilized the masses in the face of increasing resistance to change on the part of the colonial powers. Here the impact of European colonialism on African societies is maintained as an important focus of study, and the role of Europe returns to dominate the scene. In this sense, the historiography of empire and decolonization shared some core assumptions with those emanating from political science via modernization theory, essentially a focus on elite agency that sees that ‘the student of political nationalism is concerned mainly with the attitudes, activities, and status of the nationalist-minded Western-educated elite’. Much writing on nationalism has adopted a similar ‘dissemination’ approach, seeing it as a fundamentally modern political ideology that has its roots either in Enlightenment ideas or in modern socio-economic change – or, indeed, a mixture of both. Either way, ‘Third World’ nationalism has often been seen as essentially ‘derivative’. Grimal’s perspective had important implications, however, for how theories of decolonization would reshape the study of imperial history. Whereas the new nationalist historiography pointed towards separation of nation – or at least region – from the prior imperial focus, Grimal strongly implied that imperial power and national resistance could not be so easily disentangled. A much more current historiography has stretched the chronological range of anti-colonial nationalism as a driver of decolonization to include the role of the First World War. The emphasis here is on interwar anti-colonialism and nationalism as fundamentally elite, intellectual projects – perhaps necessarily so – and hence the scope for including Africa beyond the activities of anti-colonial or pan-African intellectuals in London or Paris is somewhat limited. Nonetheless, the methodological shift away from seeing nationalism as a separate development towards an emphasis on interaction, entanglement and networks of anti-colonialism is clear.

Whether nationalism and the nation were elite-led constructs or not – and the exact nature of any broader-based popular mobilization – remains
a live debate in the historiography of decolonization and postcoloniality. Part of this discussion has focused around the ‘second liberation’ movements in Mozambique, Rhodesia, Guinea-Bissau and beyond, where armed guerrilla movements sought to cooperate with, some say co-opt, peasant movements into overthrowing the last vestiges of formal colonial power in sub-Saharan Africa, and ‘envisaged a different kind of freedom, which would not merely substitute black faces for white ones, but transform the very nature of power itself’. In The wretched of the Earth (1961), Frantz Fanon talked about ‘true’ and ‘false decolonization’, and advocated a deeper, insurrectionary and essentially violent struggle against colonial power that would purge the body politic of the charade of flag independence, what he called the ‘fancy dress parade and the blare of the trumpets’. National movements that were actually in existence offered a ‘bourgeois’ form of decolonization that involved ‘a few reforms at the top, a flag waving’, while ‘down there at the bottom’ there remained ‘an undivided mass, still living in the middle ages, still marking time’.

Earlier Africanist scholars, such as Basil Davidson, had often stressed peasant involvement in national movements. In terms of economic and military resources, Portugal was the weakest of all the European colonial powers in Africa, yet it resisted decolonization for the longest, fighting an anti-insurgency war in Mozambique into the 1970s. The Mozambican context thus gave rise to a large historiography looking at the nature of peasant mobilization, and hence at the form of anti-colonial nationalism that arose after and beyond the earlier wave of elite-led, primarily political movements. Rhodesia too provided a broad canvas for historical writing on later peasant mobilization in the anti-colonial struggle. Social mobilization and social conflict within national movements in the 1950s have now been re-examined through new intellectual perspectives. For example, while telling the story of colonial anti-insurgency in all its horrific brutality, scholars such as David Anderson have gone to great lengths to examine not just the suffering but acts of resistance and rebellion during the ‘Mau Mau’ campaigns of the 1950s. Daniel Branch has taken the Mau Mau story further still. In his book Defeating Mau Mau, creating Kenya, the study of loyalist Kikuyu reveals the enormous complexity of Kenyan social movements and politicization, as well as the extent to which they sought to influence and manipulate each other and colonial authorities in ways that fundamentally challenge the category of ‘nation’ during decolonization.

At the same time, an entirely different historiographical turn has sought to question the naturalness of nations and nationalism as vehicles for anti-colonial dissent. Here, rather than a search for new
ways to look at nationalist mobilization, it is asked whether nations and nationalism were in fact the object of colonized subjects’ political aspirations in the way that we often assume they must have been. In work by Frederick Cooper, a focus on alternatives to national frameworks and ways of thinking that did not see the nation state as inevitable prompts us to reconsider teleological assumptions about the nation in French and British Africa. As Cooper put it quite some time ago, ‘The triumph of independence movements over colonial rule in Asia and Africa is another one of those metanarratives that needs to be rethought.’ He has added that ‘[i]t is only hindsight that makes the territorial state seem like the wave of the future’. In contrast to the older, more African-centric literature on pan-Africanism, the focus here is on plans for federation involving French politicians in Paris, colonial officials in West Africa and a range of African national leaders and civil society groups: concrete political proposals to build upon pan-African ideals. As federated components of the empire came into being – and the 1956 loi cadre made power at the territorial level a reality – rather than treating metropole and colony separately the debates surrounding federal alternatives for a future French West Africa placed them firmly in interaction, being squarely debates about the future of France as well as Africa. Even if it quickly ran into the very difficult problem of how the citizens of these federated parts of the French Union could be equal with the citizens of metropolitan France, what is remarkable in Cooper’s telling of this story is how far West African nationalists wanted to work, for a time, within the confines of a reformed, modernizing French empire. National resistance was a far more nuanced phenomenon than we may have been led to believe.

It has been suggested that, while the visions of French West Africa’s political elites ‘did not centre…on the compartmentalised spatial order that came into being with independence’, elsewhere in Africa ‘nationalist leaders and elites accepted the spatial order colonialism had imposed’. This reflects the current bias in this historiography towards the decolonization of francophone Africa. Nevertheless, what makes the experiments with federations in West Africa potentially all the more interesting for the study of African decolonization is that this ‘federal moment’ was also witnessed in British-controlled territories in central, southern and East Africa. Having carved the Central African Federation (CAF) out of Northern and Southern Rhodesia plus Nyasaland in 1953, some British colonial officials briefly flirted with the idea of formally federating East Africa in the early 1950s. This provoked much anxiety in Uganda, where Buganda sensitivities about their status within the Protectorate
combined with wider concerns about an East African federation, which for them meant domination by the white settlers of Kenya, a spectre made all the more threatening by the now-existing CAF. In Uganda, attitudes towards East African federation remained less enthusiastic than in Kenya and Tanganyika. In all three countries, however, opinion polling in the region suggests an apparent groundswell of public support for federation. Nyerere’s offer of June 1960 to delay Tanganyika’s independence so that, together with Kenya and Uganda, a federation could be achieved – combined with the Nairobi Declaration of June 1953, in which Obote, Kenyatta and Nyerere ostensibly committed their nations to federation – suggests that the ‘wind of change’ may have been blowing in different directions; not simply towards national self-determination as the achievement of nation-statehood. Yet, as Samuel Moyn has pointed out in a penetrating review essay, if that is so, then why did the nation state ultimately achieve its universal triumph? 

Decolonizing states in Africa and beyond were faced with the challenge of multiple and competing sovereignties. In Uganda, the Buganda contested the legitimacy of the political unit created by the British Protectorate. In Kenya, loyalty among denizens of the Kenyan coast to the Sultan of Zanzibar clashed with efforts to create a unitary Kenyan nation, as did the Somali orientation of the shifta in Kenya’s north. As Emma Hunter has argued, Tanganyika’s United Nations trust territory status created ambiguities between British sovereignty and international jurisdiction. Across the continent, concrete proposals for statehood were imbricated in wider debates about African identity and fear of ‘balkanization’ – a word used explicitly and frequently in both West and East Africa. Although the federal tendency worked to accommodate and stabilize regional, ethnic and linguistic divisions belying national unity, arguably it was not in spite of but because of these divisions that the model of sovereign, unitary nation-statehood won out.

In Africa, as elsewhere in the decolonizing world, even while recognizing the artifice of the nation state, the ‘Westphalian’ model of statehood offered a ‘principle of unity’ that drew together ‘the multiplicity of powers within the political realm’. This arguably served to concretize a direct link between anti-colonialism and the achievement of nation-statehood, with nationalism offering a catch-all solution within which all grievances against the colonial state could be mobilized to achieve independence. This reminds us, then, of the importance of the international dimensions determining the shape of sovereignty and the move to nation-statehood in the 1950s and 1960s, which Ryan Irwin and others have pointed to in a renewed historiographical focus on Africa’s
decolonization in international perspective. National frameworks could mask internal divisions in Africa, offering nationalist elites a way to rapidly integrate themselves into a liberal international order that also offered benefits for Western powers such as Britain, France and the United States in the context of the Cold War.

In some senses this appears to make decolonization a relatively contained phenomenon, rapid in its conclusion. In 1955 UN membership constituted seventy-six sovereign nation states, but only seven of these were formerly colonized states. By 1965, though, UN membership had risen to 117 countries, the vast majority of these new nation states having been created through decolonization, which had accelerated rapidly after the independence of Ghana and Malaya in 1957. In line with the debates about federation in the 1950s, however, this international perspective also emphasizes African agency, telling a story of how African (and Asian) states manipulated and shaped debates about nationhood in an international context from the late 1950s into the 1960s. Even if Erez Manela’s ‘Wilsonian moment’ may not have been a moment for Africa, the post-war national moment saw sub-Saharan Africans vigorously assert ideas about race, pan-Africanism, statehood, equality and modernization in a new world in which the ‘subjection of peoples to alien subjugation’ ran against the UN Charter and could be deemed the very cause of international and interracial conflict.

Advocates of new national histories, such as Kenneth Dike, were actively involved in the process of decolonization through asserting a national story separate from that of Europe. Even when European imperialism was brought back into the picture, there was widespread agreement that anti-colonial nationalism was a key part of the decolonization picture, whether because of the dissemination of ideas from Europe, socio-economic processes of change, elite mobilization or more complicated patterns of popular mobilization. And the latest move to question the naturalness and inevitability of the nation state has already been called into question: an important new book by Michael Goebel addresses the question of alternatives to the nation, chronologically reframing nationalism in the interwar as well as post-war periods once again, and positing the ‘various discourses envisaging a postcolonial world as competing or mutually complementary strands of nationalism, not as federalisms or regionalisms versus nationalism’. Goebel’s assertion is that, even if ‘the nations that interwar anti-imperialist’s imagined did not always coincide with the postcolonial states emerging in the 20 years after 1945’, this alone is ‘not a good enough reason not to treat these discourses as nationalist’.
Whether nationalism must necessarily be such a large-tent phenomenon, so that anti-colonialism once again finds its proper resting place in the post-war nation state, remains a moot point. It is likely that the historiographical debate over the place of nations and nationalism in Africa’s decolonization will continue for some time. Even now, the ongoing debate about nationalism and the nation state during post-war decolonization is yet another reminder that the field continues to surprise us with its vibrancy, with fresh questions and perspectives being churned up from the seabed of empires’ ends as each new wave of critical thought crashes in.

The colonial and postcolonial state

Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the area of the colonial state, in its late manifestations and its postcolonial legacies. The penetration of the colonial state into colonized societies – whether through taxation, the policing of labour unrest, surveillance, anti-insurgency or ostensibly more benign ‘development’ schemes – was itself a driving force of nationalist consciousness. But the historiographical focus on the state – distinct from, though historically and analytically connected to, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism – has brought into view a range of other important questions. The early Fanonist critique of an elite-led ‘false decolonization’, in which very little changed – and, crucially, core elements of the state and economy carried over in the transition from colonial to postcolonial periods – has evolved through various forms of analysis and criticism of the postcolonial state from within Africa itself. A different historiography, more imperial in its focus, has sought to bring the late colonial state into analytical perspective as something that marked both colonizer and colonized. Fanon’s position would feed into postcolonialism, a mode of critical enquiry citing knowledge itself as a form of colonial power and control. Initially theoretical, concentrating on the sometimes overly abstract idea of discourse, one can detect the influence of this mode of enquiry in the new historiography of decolonization that advances a more empirical social history of ideas, seeking to elucidate the ways in which colonial knowledge was reified in state practice and social organizations that bridged the late colonial and colonial periods, for example through the field of ‘development’. This has meant looking not only at the composition and support base for national movements but also at the nature of the state inherited from the colonial power.
Economic explanations for imperial expansion were prominent throughout the twentieth century, and as early as 1957 an economic explanation for decolonization was being offered by Paul Baran in his seminal *The political economy of growth*. Baran argued that, whereas empires had previously been advantageous to the fortunes of international capitalism, after 1945, and increasingly into the 1950s, the politics of imperialism and the interests of international capitalism were at loggerheads. Where multinational businesses felt that they were well placed to work with new nationalist leaders, the intransigence of colonial rulers was likely to create anti-foreigner and anti-capitalist extremism that would play into the hands of the communist world. For this reason, European imperial powers were under huge pressure to facilitate a swift political decolonization, enabling the capitalists to carry on with business as usual, under new arrangements. The emergence of ideas based around ‘dependency’ or the neo-colonialism of markets and international organizations drew heavily on neo-Marxism and on the politics of the Cold War context out of which they emerged. Andre Gunder Frank’s highly influential *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967) provided a great deal of the theoretical apparatus for work on other parts of the Third World.

A classic example for the African context is Walter Rodney’s 1973 *How Europe underdeveloped Africa, a longue durée* perspective on colonial exploitation leading right through to the postcolonial persistence of dependency. From a different political perspective, Ronald Robinson and Roger Louis’ important article on ‘The imperialism of decolonization’ stressed the role of the United States, particularly through collaborations with Great Britain, in pursuing informal empire after decolonization as a means of fighting the Cold War. Broad ideas of dependency and ‘neocolonialism’ continued to resonate throughout the developing world, particularly in Africa and Latin America, through the 1980s and well into the 1990s. Opposition to the ‘Washington Consensus’ on neoliberal state reform, thought to be imposed on Africa via the ‘structural adjustment’ plans of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, became a rallying cry. In terms of decolonization scholarship, one of the few historians to engage in a careful rebuttal of the arguments advanced by the dependency theorists was David Fieldhouse, who argued that, in fact, the emphasis on commodity exports in sub-Saharan Africa after independence was, first, ‘not necessarily fatal to economic development’ and, moreover, explanations for underdevelopment should place far more emphasis on the policies adopted by the new rulers of Africa, on the way these were carried out and, above all, on the political systems evolved
to support the ruling elites’. Within the field of history, the economics of decolonization as it affected Africa remains an area of enquiry that is arguably in need of expansion, though the literature on the metropolitain economic dimensions of decolonization has been more thoroughly explored. A current contribution to the historiography has in fact subjected the whole idea of neo-colonialism to scrutiny, suggesting that, in East Africa at least, the claim that colonial structures of power remained in place after decolonization because former colonial powers had willed it to be so is too simplistic.

To bring the dispute about neo-colonialism full circle, the critique of the postcolonial state has actually extended far beyond the realm of the economy to include, in some cases, calls for the establishment of a ‘new trusteeship’ to rescue the supposedly ‘failed’ African postcolonial state from itself. This debate probably reached its most heated point in the mid-1990s, in the context of strong disagreement about the bearing of structural adjustment in Africa. Perhaps the most controversial figure at that time was Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan-born author of many works in history and political science, who by the 1990s held a professorship in the humanities at Binghamton University, New York. Mazrui’s interventions in the press calling for the ‘benign colonization’ of Africa by African hegemons (a Pax Africana) drew predictable outrage from many quarters, but were in fact provocative expressions of a wider anxiety about the viability of the African state. Attention has also been focused on the African state from the fields of political science and international relations, less out of a concern for African welfare than from a fear of the African ‘failed state’ being a seedbed of international terrorism. An early proponent of this thesis was Robert Jackson, who termed the African postcolonial state a ‘quasi-state’, which could survive only because the ‘precipitous decolonization’ in Africa had been facilitated by an international state system whose legal principles worked against the maintenance of domestic jurisdiction on the part of colonial powers, and hence encouraged a rapid decolonization process. The upshot, Jackson argued, was that ex-colonial states had been ‘internationally enfranchised’ with ‘juridical statehood’, but many of them have not ‘been authorised and empowered domestically and consequently lack the institutional features of sovereign states, as also defined by classical international law’.

While Jackson and others point the finger of blame towards the legacy of decolonization in the realm of international law, others have argued for a process of ‘second independence’, which takes into consideration the international realm but seeks to combine this with historical particularity and specificity in its search for solutions to the problems of
the African state. According to Eghosa Osaghae, ‘second independence’ is a popular movement from below that calls for decentralized, sometimes federal forms of government that can meet the development needs of African people. As Paul Ekeh has put it, second independence – or what he calls ‘second liberation’ – is not about the violent guerrilla wars of the 1970s but ‘about gaining democratic rights from post-independence domestic tyrants’, which must be done by developing ‘a sharp focus on the behavior of the state, especially in its uses of the public domain and its interaction with the institutions of civil society’. For Africa, then, the debate about the postcolonial state hinges not simply on the colonial legacy but, equally, on the nature of postcolonial political participation, pointing us yet again to the interconnectedness of past and present when seeking to reimagine new future trajectories of political and economic development.

Despite the ongoing conceptual and political resonance of ‘dependency’, ‘neo-colonialism’, ‘failed’ or ‘quasi’ states, Osaghae’s point about popular participation and interaction with the state reminds us once more of the importance of placing agency – or, put simply, just ‘people’ – centre stage; this is something that, arguably, historians are more prone to doing than their political science and international relations counterparts. Mahmood Mamdani’s Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism (1996), for example, utilizes the concept of the ‘bifurcated’ colonial state, split between the direct rule of administrative colonial cities and towns and the decentralized, indirect rule of the rural areas. The legacy for Africa has been rural power structures that were not broken but, rather, further ‘Africanized’ and that maintained their coercive capabilities vis-à-vis rural labour. As such, questions of civil society, political leadership and collective action have become central to the analysis. Frederick Cooper’s influential Decolonization and African society, published in the same year, shows how African workers and trade unionists interacted with and hence shaped French and British schemes for colonial modernization. Cooper posits the idea of colonial states as ‘gatekeeper’ states, which had ‘weak instruments for entering into the social and cultural realm over which they presided, but…stood astride the intersection of the colonial territory and the outside world’. The implications of this were that Africans under colonial rule sought ways to circumvent the colonial state’s control of access to the world beyond its borders. At the same time, anti-colonial nationalist elites were aware that the power they were inheriting was limited, and indeed the reality was that ‘the postcolonial gatekeeper state, lacking the external coercive capacity of its predecessor, was a vulnerable state,
not a strong one’. As a consequence, ruling elites after decolonization have tended to utilize methods of patronage and coercion in order to maintain control of ‘the gate’. In a political version of the economic ‘resource curse’, in which efforts to seize control of single or very limited economic resources such as mineral wealth or oil tend to lead to corruption and dictatorship, the gatekeeper state is vulnerable for the simple reason that anyone who seizes control of it must stay in power. No one can afford to lose control, because there are no avenues for wealth or other loci for power other than controlling the gate. Cooper suggests that the gatekeeper state concept helps us to look at the post-war era in its entirety, enabling us ‘to explain the succession of crises that colonial and postcolonial states faced, without getting into a sterile debate over whether a colonial “legacy” or the incompetence of African governments is to blame’. The overarching point is that contextualized political action, fundamentally a problem of structure and agency, has shaped Africa after decolonization in ways that require more subtle forms of analysis than the ‘culpability quest’ that has sometimes seemed to predominate in the older literature. Social, economic, political and cultural structures in postcolonial Africa are neither imported nor indigenous, but have developed through the interaction of the said structures with African agents at all social levels, and in particular contexts.

The idea of the African state as a bridge between colonies and ‘the outside world’ takes us back to a historiography of the colonial and postcolonial state in which there is an alternative line of investigation: recentring the realm of imperial politics towards an emphasis on the impact of the state for both the colonizer and the colonized. Here, the debate does not ignore the role of the colonial state in Africa; far from it. Instead, it seeks to keep both colony and metropole in the same framework of analysis, and, in so doing, also points towards the ways in which the late colonial state in Africa had commonalities with colonial states elsewhere. As discussed above, historians have argued that the whole project of late colonial ‘modernization’ gave impetus to processes of social change that in turn increased demands for decolonization. At the same time, what Anthony Low and John Lonsdale famously termed the ‘second colonial occupation’ also gave rise to a new impetus for colonial economic development, science, technology and modernization schemes that would have ramifications for the colonial powers themselves, and indeed for newly emerging international institutions. The concept of the late colonial state therefore points not just to the politics of decolonization in the newly emerging nation state itself but also to the imaginings of continued
colonial rule, in modified form, on the part of the politicians and policy-makers in imperial centres after 1945.97

In Martin Shipway’s comparative study of decolonization, the late colonial state – particularly in Africa – plays a central part in revealing connections between the late colonial and decolonizing experiences of Britain and France. Thinking about the view from London or Paris, Shipway argues that, even before the material and ideological shifts effected by the Second World War, colonial powers were having to work far harder to maintain the imperial equilibrium as they ‘confronted the deeper continuities of imperial instability, or of resistance or challenge to colonial rule, or contemplated the sort of policy reforms which were to become commonplace after 1945’. What is brought sharply into relief is the fact that any ideological division between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ in Europe after 1945 was simply false: both groups were intent on preserving empire ‘in some shape or form’ in order to at least ‘manage the process of colonial change over the medium to long term’.98 The added advantage of Shipway’s emphasis on the late colonial state is that it provides another framework for thinking about agency from the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized. The evolving nature of the late colonial state’s adaptation, contestation and rejection explicitly involved the colonized not simply as an undivided nationalist ‘mass’, represented by a handful of elite leaders, but a delineated range of actors and groups interacting with colonial powers, and each other, as the postcolonial state entered into view.99 On the other side of the spectrum, the project of late colonialism, varied as it was, required ongoing commitment from metropolitan actors that raises yet again the importance of decolonization – and often specifically African decolonization – in which British and French academics, intellectuals, policy-makers and administrators continued to see themselves as having a major role to play.100

One area of interest that draws out the ways in which the colonial state had local, as well as comparative or even transnational, dimensions lies in the study of colonial violence and coercion. The previously discussed historiography on Mau Mau has been an important driver in this area, as has the vast literature on French colonial violence, particularly in Algeria.101 Yet colonial violence cannot be reduced to large-scale massacres or brutal acts of violence that captured international media attention. In fact, the everyday, banal nature of colonial violence is crucial to our understanding of colonialism and decolonization. The colonial state’s capacity to police and control colonial populations at the local level was, as is now widely understood, heavily dependent on indigenous collaborators.102 This is turn shaped the politics of intra- and inter-ethnic
violence that has been a marked legacy in the postcolonial era. Violence and coercion arose too in the context of the political economy that was fundamental to the daily workings of colonialism – indeed, that was arguably central to its rationale. For example, historians have explored the ambivalent effects of colonial taxation as a means of coercing natives into the labour force or to produce certain kinds of cash crops. As Ann Laura Stoler has made us aware, albeit from a South-East Asian angle, the repression of anti-colonial resistance often involved a blurring of the lines between political agitation, economic grievance and criminality, which brought labour relations very much to the forefront of the minds of colonial administrators and their police powers. Martin Thomas’ recent seminal work on *Violence and colonial order* places great emphasis on the centrality of political economy to our understanding of how the colonial state reacted to and evolved its approaches to coercion, with the control and policing of labour unrest being central to this development. Thomas’ work also makes a major contribution to a decolonization historiography that is comparative and transnational in its perspective. While going to great lengths to detail spatial and temporal specificity, Thomas borrows from more sociological and theoretical approaches to develop a cross-imperial comparison taking in British, French and Belgian policing regimes, revealing some of the ‘distinctively colonial types of repression as written in the very formation of colonial states’. New work is now being done in an area of decolonization historiography that explores not just empire – or colony-specific case studies – but also the broader networks of knowledge and practice that offer another linkage between the late colonial, decolonization and postcolonial periods. Here we also see, either implicitly or explicitly, the legacies of postcolonialism’s theoretical innovations at play, with an emphasis on the longevity of colonial ‘power-knowledge’ and the need to move beyond formal, flag independence to look at deeper processes of decolonizing in the realm of culture and intellect as well as the postcolonial state. At the level of Foucauldian discourse, the postcolonial turn has had a major sway in studies of the postcolonial state in Africa and the limits of decolonization as manifested in the legacies of international influence and control. James Ferguson’s *The anti-politics machine* (1990) was a major interdisciplinary contribution, focused on the ‘depoliticizing’ effects of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’ discourses in Lesotho that substituted technocratic perspectives for the views of those actually being governed. In general terms, however, particularly when they operated most clearly as a form of theoretical, moral or literary critique of broad, abstract categories such as ‘the imperial’, ‘Europe’ or ‘the West’,
the openings offered by the postcolonial turn have also arguably obscured and closed down some areas of investigation. As Stephen Howe put it in a typically trenchant critique, some of what emerged from postcolonialism, particularly in the 1990s, appeared to abandon the idea that colonialism was at its core ‘a juridical relationship between the state and territory; one in which the colonizing state took complete power over the government of the territory which it had annexed.’ Others, such as Achille Mbembe, have articulated similar concerns about the abandonment of the political in favour of the discursive. As Andrew Zimmermann has put it, historians can sometimes be too keen to resist Eurocentrism by an exploration of the European racist discourses that inform it, rather than the non-European histories that Eurocentrism obscures.

Much of the best literature now operates as a form of social-intellectual history, what might be termed a social history of ideas, in which the abstract notion of discourse is supplemented by a more concrete investigation of how forms of knowledge were developed and deployed in particular institutional or social contexts. This can be seen in the important work on both anglophone and francophone Africa of Christophe Bonneuil, which homes in on the crucial role of scientific thought in the processes of development that marked the late colonial and postcolonial state and ‘played a central role in the making of this development regime and its maintenance after decolonization’. In recent years a very large literature focusing on decolonization and the legacies of empire has centred on these problems of development and scientific knowledge, again demonstrating the possibilities of studying the decolonization and postcolonial condition of Africa by drawing on the insights of postcolonialism and using a wider lens that seeks to incorporate international and transnational perspectives as well as the older metropole–colony perspective. The focus on science and development in Africa’s decolonization has provided strong empirical grounds for such investigations. A new interest in the history of humanitarianism seeks to understand the shifting relationship of non-governmental humanitarian organizations in relation to colonial power and authority as well as the challenges of operating in newly sovereign postcolonial Africa.

What is clear, then, is that, from many different angles, there is an enduring and in fact renewed interest in and emphasis on the nature of the state during and after African decolonization. Whereas many African historians have long asserted the importance of the state, and indeed the related concept of ‘political economy’, this is a move that constitutes something of a departure in terms of the ‘New Imperial History’, which has often tended to focus on questions of discourse and identity.
Richard Price, a social historian of Britain who, along with many others of a similar generation and early training, took the ‘imperial turn’ in the 1990s, has pointed to the renewed vigour in the study of the history of the British empire and its decolonization, particularly in the wake of the ‘linguistic turn’ and its emphasis on culture; but he has also asked: ‘Is it possible to write a history of Empire without considering political economy or without some notion of the state as a historical actor in the imperial process?’

Integration and new orientations

There are now very many ways of thinking and writing about the history of African decolonization that point to a welcome openness and pluralism in the current historiographical climate, as well as new possibilities for ‘unity’ in terms of former imperial, postcolonial, regional and national historiographies engaging fruitfully with each other. The early incarnation of postcolonialism as a form of critique grounded predominantly in literary studies and high, abstract theory has largely passed. Amidst this ecumenicalism, it is clear that in the wake of the postcolonial turn there is renewed interest in questions of politics and economics, which engages with the concept of discourse but seeks a strong empirical basis upon which to investigate and identify the complex, multi-layered ways in which decolonization reshaped the lives of Africans. This means, for example, rethinking the terms under which the nation or national political unit came into being. Understanding these processes of imagining, adopting, adapting and contesting requires us to link social and cultural history to the business of the state and international politics. In fact, the colonial and postcolonial state offers an integrating analytical framework for a whole range of historical problems from the practice of politics and African agency, nationalism and its alternatives: control and coercion, territory and sovereignty, networks of knowledge and the enduring question of the moral legacies of empire.

What is also clear is that decolonization is not simply about the end of empire as an event – even a prolonged one – that implies a more or less discrete historical object of study. In this sense, decolonization should not be seen as a point at which empire ceased to be important in the world, nor as the moment when nations recovered their autonomy from the shell of imperial domination. This is also a critique of triumphalist narratives, whether on the part of self-congratulatory former colonial powers or anti-colonial nationalist elites. As colonized
and colonizer are brought back into the same analytical framework, those binaries are broken down. Decolonization ceases to be a teleological triumph, and is instead a messy, contingent, uneven and unresolved process of change in which our understanding of what happened in the past enables and constrains our sense of possible futures. Decolonization might thus be seen as a point at which certain aspects of a world shaped by empire fell away, while others continued and some morphed into new forms of power, exchange, integration and fragmentation. In adopting an anti-teleological approach such as this, we offer ourselves the intellectual space to examine the unrealized potentialities of decolonization beyond the ‘empire–nation dichotomy’ and to imagine the possibility of alternative forms of sovereignty – and hence of Africa’s political future.¹¹⁹