The difficulty of examining ‘postcolonial Africa’ in relation to ‘colonial Africa’ is the complexity of what lies in between. Decolonization was not simply a moment dividing a neat ‘before’ from a clear ‘after’, but a process. The possibilities and constraints of the ‘after’ were shaped not only by the fact of colonialism, but by the process by which it was challenged, by the responses of the colonial state to those challenges, and by hopes, fears, and traumas unleashed in the course of struggle. Just after independence, historians and political scientists looked back on recent African history as a build-up to independence: everything Africans did became part of the rise of African nationalism and the quest for a state that was truly African. Decades later, intellectuals had become disillusioned, and everything in the colonial past was now looked at as an explanation of why independence was a failure, why either the trauma of colonization or something deep in African culture prevented its people from achieving democratic polities. At the present time, postcolonial theory tends to posit a very general coloniality, located somewhere between 1492 and the 1960s, which gave rise to an equally general postcoloniality. The path between the two is easily reduced to an inevitability, missing the paths not taken, the choices made, the constraints that appeared amidst the openings.¹

Both views subordinate the past to the future and by doing so may misread the future as badly as they misread the past. My goal in this chapter is to look at a crucial period in African history, the decade and a half after World War II in a more dynamic fashion, to look at possibilities that opened up and possibilities that shut down. In the aftermath of war, the two most powerful colonial powers, Britain and France, needed both to expand the economic utility of their African territories and to reinforce the legitimacy of holding colonies to a world in which such claims were becoming increasingly con-

¹ For an extended discussion of the relationship of colonial and postcolonial studies to the study of colonial history, see Cooper 2005. As stimulating a book as Achille Mbembe’s On the postcolony (2001) is, it moves too easily from a notion of colonialism focused on the concept of commandement to a generic ‘postcolony’.
tested. For both economic and political reasons, colonized people could no longer be regarded as passive subjects. If they were to remain in the imperial polity, the basis of their belonging would have to be taken seriously: as active contributors to economic development, as people with legitimate interests in raising their standard of living and levels of education, and as participants in political institutions. The political possibilities that the postwar situation opened up were something that the French had tried to contain within narrow boundaries and the British to dismiss altogether – the colonized population as citizens of an imperial polity. If citizens have obligations to a political unit, they also have rights and they make claims. But – and here my argument differs from nationalist historiography – the claims made in the name of citizenship focused not only on would-be nations but on actual empires.

The citizenship idea was crucial to a lively period of African politics. But citizenship was not the only framework within which Africans mobilized and acted politically. The danger posed by other forms of collective action that seemed to lie outside the realm of politics as Europeans saw it – and which they could condescendingly label as ‘primitive’ or ‘atavistic’ or as demagogic or revolutionary – put colonial authorities in a bind. Hoping to encourage politics inside the familiar channels of parties and legislative elections – and fearing that Africans might not stay there – they had to ensure that making claims within those channels would to a significant extent pay off. The power of such claims threatened French and British governments with having to pay the bill: even if administrations could contain anticolonial movements and local rebellions, they would be faced with demands for social and economic resources in the same language with which France and Britain asserted the legitimacy of imperial rule.

Later, the possibility of an active, claim-making citizenry would threaten African political leaders themselves, who understood very well the force of the political movements they were trying to ride to power. In most newly independent African countries, political elites felt the temptation to shut down the possibilities that had opened in previous years. This view of African history between 1945 and, say, 1965, is a tragic one: of a democratic opening giving way to antidemocratic closures. But it is not a story of inevitability, for neither African culture nor the trauma of colonization prevented Africans, for a time, from acting as citizens. The possibility remains.

The sub-Saharan Africa that became independent since 1957 was indeed an Africa of nation-states, small, economically weak, but with the institutions and the international status of sovereignty. Yet that was not the Africa that most

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2 I have limited discussion to these instances for reasons of space and because these experiences seriously affected the options of other actors, but the catastrophic decolonization of the Belgian Congo and the late and violent decolonization of Portuguese Africa complicate the picture.
African leaders looked to in 1945. Their scope was broader than that, in some cases – especially Anglophone Africa – with a strong pan-Africanist orientation, looking toward the liberation of people of colour throughout the world, but not necessarily with a clear idea of what kind of institutions that would entail. Francophone Africans in late 1945 were preparing for a major effort to bring pressure on French legislators to rewrite the constitution of the new Fourth Republic in a way that provided meaningful citizenship in a Greater France to the people of the colonies. Aimé Césaire was claiming that West Indian colonies should become integral departments of the French Republic. Algerians were divided, some already pushing for independence, while others focused on the humiliating French law that insisted Muslims give up their civil status under Islamic law in order to become French citizens. Meanwhile, in both Francophone and Anglophone Africa, people were involved in all sorts of political activities with a more immediate focus – politics of chieftaincies and other localized communities in some cases, labour issues in others, attempts to change the terms of trade of exports in still others.

If colonial subjects at the end of the war were not focusing on the nation-state as the object of mobilization, British and French officials were not thinking about giving up empire, certainly not within a time span of less than a generation. Empire was in some ways more essential than ever. Damaged economically by World War II, both powers saw in their colonies the only real hope of earning hard currency via the sale of tropical products for dollars. Both powers recognized that the legitimacy of empire was now a more salient and delicate question than it had been before.

But the rules of the game in Africa itself were already coming undone. Just before the war Britain had confronted labour unrest that erupted simultaneously in Africa and the West Indies in the form of waves of strikes and urban riots. The colonial rulers of Africa could not do what they had done before, that is, treat them as ‘tribal’ uprisings and deal with them by concentrating forces at the local level, hoping to push Africans back into the kind of political cage that Mahmood Mamdani (1996) describes as ‘decentralized despotisms’. They were empire-wide issues and had to be confronted as such.

Economic and social policy also had to be reframed. The colonial administrations of both Britain and France had in the 1920s and 1930s considered amending the old colonial doctrine that each colony should pay for itself by instituting development plans that would use metropolitan funds to improve the long-term productivity and economic integration of the colonies. Both plans were rejected, in the name of the old doctrine of budgetary self-sufficiency and also for fear within colonial provincial administrations that too much economic initiative would upset the delicate relationship of the colonial rulers to the traditionalist authority structures on which they depended. Those ideas too would come under assault during and after the war.
The shifting political situations and positions of the postwar decade posed problems of analysis for scholars at the time and thereafter. During the period of decolonization in the 1950s and early 1960s, most scholars – and African political leaders themselves – were eager to assimilate them to European patterns. They thought or at least hoped that educated African elites would turn European ideals into African realities: elections and legitimate governments eager to participate in the world political order and the world economy. A new wave of scholarship dismissed such views as elitist and found in Africa diverse popular movements within different idioms: some to heal the land of the damage done to particular forms of community by the ravages of colonization, some to build new forms of solidarity among workers or peasants, and some to follow a messianic route to the making of a new Africa. Both schools can point to important examples. What I emphasize here is the dynamic in which different types of political mobilization intersected with colonial strategies that were themselves in flux. The threat of some kinds of politics pushed colonial regimes further down other paths than they would have liked to go, until those regimes lost control of the political process.\footnote{For a discussion of different approaches to decolonization and an interpretation of the timing and process, see the introduction to Cooper 1996a, and 2005:chapter 2.}

It was on political territory that France and Britain thought they could control their effort at reshaping colonialism for a postwar world unravelled. Colonial regimes did not lose their will or capacity to repress rebellions in Sub-Saharan Africa: the British in Mau Mau or the French in Madagascar and Cameroon are cases in point, and the seemingly paradigmatic case of Algeria – as recent scholarship has demonstrated – was more of a political than a military defeat for the French government (Joseph 1977; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Connelly 2002). But they did operate in the shadow of revolutions in Indonesia and Indochina and of the negotiated but conflict-ridden decolonization of India.

The initial reaction in Africa of both British and French governments was to deepen commitments rather than to end them: to forge a development-oriented colonialism that would allow for colonies to contribute more effectively to the recovery of imperial economies, while raising the standard of living of the colonized, sustaining a slow and carefully controlled evolution toward fuller participation of Africans in political affairs, whether at the territorial or the imperial level. It was a project that turned out to be vulnerable in its own terms, and that is why focusing on the politics of citizenship reveals a great deal about how France and Britain convinced themselves that they could and had to give up empire. The claims that were being made upon colonial regimes in terms of citizenship were certainly for political voice, but they were also quite material – about wages, benefits, access to public services
on a nonracial basis, for education and health services equivalent to those 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 revealed that people working within the ideology and institutions of empire could make empire unsustainable.

The escalation of claim-making in the 1940s was framed within two sorts of discourse, both of which were the terms on which Britain and France based their postwar legitimacy and which guided postwar policy: ideas of development and citizenship. They were no less radical for their relationship to colonial ideology – basic issues of social justice, poverty, and equality have been on the table ever since. For Britain and France, devolving power to nation-states became an acceptable alternative to their other real choice, making empire into a unit in which citizenship and development were credible notions. That in turn implied facing the voting publics of the metropoles with demands for political equality and an equivalent standard of living. Nevertheless, development and citizenship have not entirely been pushed into national containers – the notions of global citizenship and global development will not quite go away.

The French case

General Charles de Gaulle, speaking in Normandy on 16 June 1946, asserted that here ‘on the soil of the ancestors the State reappeared’. After the nightmare of the defeat of 1940, the French state would now reestablish ‘national unity and imperial unity’. This dualism recurred throughout the speech: the state would ‘assemble all the forces of la patrie and the French Union’; the new constitution would then be argued over by concerned ‘French people and the peoples of the French Union’; the state would unite behind it ‘all the Empire and all of France’.4

The awkward pairing of nation and Union makes clear that the French state was not the French nation, and the nation was not the state. The state was differentiated, but the President, the legislature, and the judiciary presided over a complex combination of nonequivalent components – characteristic of empires throughout history. There was the Republic – what De Gaulle also called the nation or la patrie, recently augmented by the inclusion of former ‘old colonies’ as departments equivalent to those of the metropole. Algerian territory was also considered part of the Republic, but its people were divided into Muslims and non-Muslims, whose terms of participation

4 Speech at Bayeux, 16-6-1946, reprinted in Documents élaboration constitution1987, I:3-7.
were unequal and highly contested. Then came the ‘Overseas Territories’, as colonies were renamed after the war, and finally the associated states (formerly protectorates, like Morocco and parts of Indochina). France, in 1946, was not a nation-state, but an empire-state.

Between 1946 and 1962, French leaders tried a series of organizational initiatives to preserve the polity as a unitary but differentiated entity. As the 1946 constitution was being written, the structure of the French Union was the focus of long debate, and in 1958, the French Community, as the polity was renamed, was again a compelling issue, this time in the shadow of the Algerian war. The components of the Union and later the Community would be governed in different ways, but everyone in them would be a citizen, not exactly the same as a citizen of the French Republic but with equivalent rights; just what this would mean and the power of institutions at each level of territorial aggregation was what the heated debates were all about.

Equally important, the imperial entity was also crucial to the people and movements outside Europe who challenged the French government in this period. Secession and creating new nations were one strand of opposition politics, but not the only one.

Let me back up to take a longer view of empire in France after the Revolution. The idea of dividing the population of imperial 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 theoretically available but in practice withheld. 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, the originaires had the ‘qualities’ of citizenship, and – unlike the case in Algeria – did not have to give up Islamic civil status in order to enjoy these qualities. When France needed more from its empire, it held out the possibility of a fuller citizenship – it did so when Britain and Spain threatened French possessions in the Caribbean in 1794 and again in the cataclysm of World War I (Dubois 2000; James 1963). In the latter case, Blaise Diagne, deputy from Senegal, used France’s need for people from its empires to pay the blood tax to convince France to concede a fuller citizenship to the originaires and to make it easier for other Africans who served in the war to gain access to citizenship rights.

Citizenship proved to be an appealing notion to many Africans and a potentially costly one to the French state. 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 check the citizenship process and propagate an alternative...
Decolonization and citizenship

myth: the empire as the gathering together of different cultures and nationalities, under an imperial umbrella that guaranteed peace and the ability to preserve distinct cultures and traditions. In Africa, chiefs were given an official blessing as the embodiments of authentic authority (Conklin 1998; Lebovics 1992; Thompson 2000). Interwar imperial 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 of people from different parts of the empire, among Vietnamese and North Africa workers, for example, as well as intellectuals like Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, who challenged imperial authority within the space of empire.

The situation changed again after World War II. A new international climate was part of the story: the revolutionary process unleashed in Indonesia and Indochina as colonial regimes tried to reclaim colonies taken over by the Japanese and the importance of ‘self-determination’ to the legitimacy of the Allied cause against the German, Italian, and Japanese versions of empire gave a new immediacy to the possibility that empires could come to an end. At the same time, France – like Great Britain – needed to make more effective use of imperial resources to reestablish their economic viability. The French state at last took a firm position favouring inclusion over differentiation, hoping to make ‘France one and indivisible’ the sole focus of political action. In May 1946, all subjects were declared to be citizens, regardless of civil status regime. The special and invidious judicial system for subjects was abolished. Forced labour was declared illegal. Ambitious programmes of economic development and education – refused funding in the 1920s and 1930s – were at last put in place. The Empire was renamed the French Union and the 1946 Constitution, which colonial deputies helped to write, specified the relationship of its component parts.  

5 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’.  

6 See the Journal officiel of the Assemblée Nationale Constituante, April-May, August-September 1946, for exhaustive discussions on the constitution.

6 Archives du Sénégal, Dakar, 17G 152, AOF, Directeur Général des Affaires Politiques, Administratives et Sociales (Berlan), note, July 46. The preamble to the Constitution stated, ‘France forms, with the overseas peoples, a Union founded on equality of rights and duties, without distinction of race or religion. The French Union is composed of nations and people who come together and coordinate their resources and their efforts to develop their respective civilizations, to improve their well being and assure their security.’ Yet as juridical commentators soon pointed out, the preamble could be read as a ‘view of the future’, not a description of a current reality (Rolland and Lampué 1952:76-7).
Making French citizenship into something meaningful had long been a focus of political activists in French colonies. Now they had possibilities to make good on such demands. The law abolishing forced labour was introduced to the legislature by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, deputy from the Côte d’Ivoire. The citizenship law bore the name of Lamine Guèye of Senegal. Léopold Senghor, the other deputy of Senegal, became an eloquent spokesman for a point of view that emphasized African membership in an ‘imperial community’, both to assert a place for African culture within a broader conception of human civilizations and to insist that the specific benefits of citizenship be applied equally to all people under French authority. In addition, the organization in 1946 of a political party in French Africa crossing the lines of territories, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, turned the geography of imperial control – the organization of individual colonies into larger, centralized units of administration – into a large-scale challenge to French power. The tactical cooperation of the RDA with the French Communist Party until 1950 was another dimension (Morgenthau 1964).

The state’s attempt to maintain the French Union as a singular but differentiated polity was too little, too late in Algeria – where settlers continued to use their own citizenship rights to prevent Muslims from exercising theirs – but in Sub-Saharan Africa political mobilization within the framework of French citizenship proved just as dangerous as national liberation movements (Connelly 2002). 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.

My own previous research concentrated on how the labour movement used this framework to make material advances. The demand for ‘equal pay for equal work’ emerged in 1946 as the key slogan of the labour movement in the Senegalese general strike. The strike was more than an industrial action: part work stoppage extending from dockworkers to civil servants, part a movement of the urban population as a whole, which gathered in a daily mass meeting to coordinate action. The rhetoric of strike leaders at these meetings evoked both imperial patriotism that turned into a claim

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Senghor 1945. Senghor, born in the countryside of Senegal, followed a path through the school system and the patronage of his teachers and officials who noted his high intellectual achievement to university in France, to a reputation as one of the leading poets in the French language, to a role in a movement of intellectuals, Négritude, aimed at emphasizing Africa’s distinct but important role in global civilization, and to a political role that included election to the French legislature in 1945 and eventually becoming the first president of Senegal in 1960.
of belonging – a reminder that ‘blacks had defended the Mother Country, now they would defend their soil, where they do not want to be considered strangers’ – and proletarian internationalism, ‘the growing development of the working class in organization and consciousness [that] permits it to play a decisive role as the motor and guide of all proletarian forces of French West Africa’. But concretely, the strike focused on obtaining for the lowest paid African workers similar minimum wages and salary scales to those paid to workers from European France and for civil servants of all ranks the same benefits that Europeans enjoyed. In negotiations, union leaders turned around the development idea by which French officials were justifying their role: ‘Your goal is to elevate us to your level; without the means, we will never succeed.’

Strikers did not get equal wages, but they did force officials to apply the metropolitan system of negotiations and wage setting and the basic French framework of collective bargaining agreements to Africa. The 1948-1949 railroad strike deepened the conviction of French officials that they could only manage labour disputes if they followed a strategy based on their experience of class conflict in Europe, a strategy that would hopefully contain and channel demands (Cooper 1990, 1996b). The labour 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 labour 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 many 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 a material significance – workers were demanding equivalent conditions to those of workers from European France. The labour movement won the 40-hour week, collective bargaining rights, and paid vacations. It turned its attention to claiming family allowances – already won in the public sector – and got them extended to wage workers in the private sector in 1956.

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8 See police reports on meetings in Archives du Sénégal, K 328 (26), Renseignements, 11-1-1946.
One can make similar arguments about demands for education and veterans’ pensions (Chafer 2002; Mann 2003:375).

The French state was caught between the radicalism of anticolonial movements, which by 1954 had already resulted in the loss of Indochina and the start of a war in Algeria, and the demands of labour unions and political organizations. 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. An influential report on the modernization of colonial territories in 1953 warned of the danger that the process might result in the ‘exhaustion of the Metropole’.11 A French minister in 1956 put it bluntly: citizenship had come to mean ‘equality in wages, equality in labour legislation, in social security benefits, equality in family allowances, in brief, equality in standard of living’.12 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 Algeria.

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 for whom comparison with French citizens was a remote issue, and assertions of ‘African unity’ against the humiliations of French colonialism counted for more. Even some of the leaders who had begun their careers by emphasizing the vanguard role of the proletariat and the demand for equality for all citizen-workers of imperial France moved to a position that emphasized instead the distinct personality and quest for unity of Africans. As Sékou Touré insisted, ‘Although the classes of metropolitan and European populations battle and oppose each other, nothing separates the diverse African social classes’. Such arguments divided the labour movement into those who stuck by the rhetoric of ‘class’ and ‘equality’ and those who preached ‘African unity’. The top leaders – more and more interested in electoral office – took the movement in the latter direction despite misgivings from the rank and file.13

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13 Archives du Sénégal, K 421 (165), Senegal, Sûreté, Renseignements, 21-2-1956, 21G 215, Governor, Dahomey, to High Commissioner, 22-1-1957, reporting on the conference of the Union Générale des Travailleurs de l’Afrique Noire. These debates are discussed at length in Cooper.
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 (Atlan 1997). The first elections in French Africa under the new law, in 1957, 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 taxpaying 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.

Criticism of territorialization came from civil servants’ unions who realized that the territorial treasury would be much less able to meet their pay claims than the French one and from Senghor, who realized that territorialization would imply ‘balkanization’ – the division of Africa into units too small to challenge European states. But the resources transferred to the governments elected after the passage of the territorialization legislation were real – and a strong incentive for political leaders to focus their efforts on their own territories. The reality of territorialization, however, was that it destroyed precisely what the French Union was intended to make invincible: the notion that France was the only unit in which real power was vested and toward which aspirations could be directed. Territorialization was – although no official admitted it at the time – the decisive step toward decolonization (Cooper 1996a:Chapter 11).

If imperial citizenship was too much citizenship for France, it was too imperial for many Africans, a humiliation for some who saw the French reference point held up before them. Such issues produced vigorous debate. People later termed ‘fathers of the nation’, such as Senghor and Houphouët-Boigny, were among the most notable for continuing to assert French citizenship, while Sékou Touré, most dramatically, shifted from a position of demanding equality within the French Union to one that specifically repudiated such demands in favour of national assertion. If in 1946, the idea of national independence was to French leaders anathema and the politics of citizenship a game they were willing to play, by 1956 the costs of social and economic equivalence had become so threatening that the alternative of claims to national autonomy was greeted by French officials with relief.

The 1956 measures made a few gestures in the direction of federalism,
which Senghor and others had espoused, but it represented a different vision of decolonization, one focused on a territorially narrow version of sovereignty. Senghor’s leading political ally in Senegal, Mamadou Dia, expressed his ‘profound and sad conviction of committing one of those major historical errors that can inflect the destiny of a people [...]. In spite of us, West Africa was balkanized, cut into fragments.’ He and Senghor tried to revive federalist politics across Francophone West Africa, but they soon learned that the interests that the first generation of African rulers had in the territorial units turned over to them were so strong and the fear of another politician with another base poaching on this territory were so great that the possibility of alternative modes of political organization were lost. French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, the two federations through which France had administered Africa, were marginalized and disappeared altogether with the coming of independence in 1960. Senghor’s fears of ‘balkanization’ came true – including the failure of his own brief but valiant attempt to unite Senegal and Mali.15 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. They would be brittle states, whose rulers were well aware of how few resources they commanded and the dangers that social movements would put demands on them that they could not meet.

British Africa

By 1939, officials in London decided that an imperial problem – the eruption of strikes and riots among the downtrodden of empire in both Africa and the West Indies – needed an imperial solution. They looked to the concept of ‘development’. For the first time, metropolitan funding would be directed not just to projects of immediate economic utility to the metropole but to improving infrastructure and services. 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, considerable attention 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

14 Archives du Sénégal, VP 93, Discours d’ouverture du President Mamadou Dia au premier séminaire national d’études pour les responsables politiques, parlementaires, gouvernementaux, 26-10-1959, ‘sur la construction nationale’.
15 The recent opening of the archives of the federal government of Mali (in the Archives du Sénégal, fonds FM) allows historians to see how much effort went into this experiment in federalism. I have begun to work on these sources. For now, see Foltz 1965.
Development and Welfare Act (Cooper 1996a).

But the problem would not fit entirely into the development framework, for labour 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’ although in some places, such as the Copperbelt, it was less a policy than acceptance of the fact that Africans had come to live as well as work, that women as well as men were living in cities and rural chiefs and elders could no longer control family and gender relations (Ferguson 1999). The colonial state was becoming 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.16 As recent work in social history has shown, 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 division of African economies into sectors each of which had its own political and social requirements (Lindsay 2003).

If the French state portrayed its empire as more unified than it was, Britain portrayed its colonies as more decentralized than they were. 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 it would be decades at least, while the actual politicians and labour leaders with whom officials had to deal were almost invariably treated as demagogues or students who had to be taught politics. The transition that was proposed in 1947 was much more limited: from indirect rule to ‘local government’.17 That meant bringing educated people, not just ‘traditional’ elites into the picture, but keeping the focus on local communities, with a weak, partly appointed, legislative council the only check on the power of the governor at the level of the colonial territory.

But the attempt to contain political change within the imperial system quickly proved impossible. The riots that shook the Gold Coast in 1948 signalled that the basic demand for political voice would be directed at the central authority of each colony and at Britain itself. The events began as a consumer boycott, organized by a populist leader of chiefly origin in the

16 This is the central theme of Cooper 1996a.
17 Pearce 1982 is useful here, although he overestimates the importance of new colonial office thinking. A more skeptical view is outlined in Cooper 1996a.
Beyond empire and nation

capital city of Accra, focused on urban consumer’s anger at rising prices and the apparent stranglehold of European commercial firms on imported goods. It took on a new dimension when army veterans staged a march to protest the government’s sorry efforts to insure access to jobs and services to men who had undertaken one of the classic obligations of the citizen by fighting in the Empire’s war. Panicky soldiers fired on the marchers, killing several, and setting off riots and looting that spread across several of the colony’s major towns. The riots put on the table both the substance and the process of politics in a colony: demands for higher wages for workers, higher crop prices for farmers, less restricted commercial opportunities for businessmen, better education, and better health services along with the claim that only full African participation in political institutions could address such issues (Austin 1964).

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 Commonwealth and Great Britain led to the passage of nationality legislation in 1948 which gave people from the dominions rights, such as that of being able to enter the British Isles, that partook of imperial citizenship. Fearing charges that such legislation might be thought to privilege the ‘white’ dominions, Parliament took care to specify that it applied to the people of the colonies. This caused considerable unease when nonwhites, particularly from the West Indies, began arriving in the British Isles in considerable numbers, but officials could not find grounds to deny them access, given the imperial logic that defined them as British (Paul 1997).

What the British did not do was create institutions like those of the French Union, which provided representation in Parliament or in a special empire-wide body, the Assemblée de l’Union Française. The institutional structure of the British Empire 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 anticolonial politics. But these movements, like pan-Africanist organizations that embraced West Indians and African Americans as well as Africans, had trouble translating a politics focused on the common fate of people of colour within the British Empire into concrete institutional demands, especially the kind of politics that provided 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. 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 labour 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 outmanoeuvred, 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 labour unions, farmers’ organizations, and regional power brokers, which he had ridden to his party’s victory in 1951. 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 (Allman 1993; Beckman 1976). But Ghana’s problems were now Nkrumah’s, and one reads in the colonial archives that British officials had a kind of grudging admiration for Nkrumah’s success in repressing the labour 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.

The case of Kenya, notably the central region of that colony, reveals a different, more violent pattern. In that region, a large amount of land had been taken over by white settlers, who became much more attached to the territory than did the officials who rotated in and out of West African colonies, and their farms were also the site of a more tense form of exploitation of African labour than was the case in the Gold Coast, where farmers and farm labour-

\[18\] Nkrumah, from a small ethnic group near the coast, had been educated in the United States, where he experienced first hand a particularly virulent form of racism. His early political activity was in pan-Africanist circles in London, and he was expecting to continue to work along those lines when he found himself in Accra at a delicate moment and seized the initiative in building a militant nationalist movement in the Gold Coast. He began under the shadow of the old-line, respectably middle-class leadership of J.B. Danquah, who like Nkrumah was detained after the 1948 riots, but he broke with Danquah to found a more militant party, the Convention People’s Party, which led the Gold Coast to effective self-government in 1951 and independence in 1957.
ers were both African. After World War II, the settler sector achieved a breakthrough in agricultural prosperity, and that led in turn to the expulsion of African squatters who for decades had some access to land and grazing rights on white-owned farms (in exchange for labour) in favour of more direct and more intense supervision of wage labour. Many of those ex-squatters tried to return to parts of Central Kenya where they had family connections only to find that African farmers were also profiting from a more competitive market for agricultural commodities and were not willing to give the ex-squatters access to land. Nor was employment in cities sufficient to prevent the emergence of a disinherited subproletariat moving between urban and rural misery.

But the conflict that emerged was not a mechanical response to the economic crisis induced by the conflicts accompanying economic ‘development’. The radical movement that emerged in the slums of Nairobi and the countryside of central Kenya was a specifically Gikũyũ movement, invoking the symbols of this ethnic group, looking back beyond the colonial era to a mythicized, purified Kikũyũ past. In 1952 with the assassination of a collaborating Gikũyũ chief, a shadowy movement emerged that eventually took the name of the Land and Freedom Army, but which British officials and settlers referred to as Mau Mau. A few murders of settlers took place, but the number of Africans on the rebel and loyalist sides who were killed or displaced was vastly larger. The guerilla movement emerging in the forests was attacked with ruthless brutality by the British army – especially regular troops brought in from Great Britain – and by Home Guards of loyalist Gikũyũ. The struggle forced a polarization on the region, which many Gikũyũ had long sought to avoid, many having in previous decades worked out a synthesis between Gikũyũ culture and Christianity. The effort at repression became a model ‘counterinsurgency’ operation, entailing the herding of Gikũyũ into camps, the use of harsh interrogation techniques to identify suspects, the forced settlement of people thought not to be too deeply involved in supervised villages, and a large number of executions of people judged guilty of ‘belonging’ to Mau Mau. The rebellion petered out by the mid 1950s, but the camps lasted until the end of the decade. The excesses of the repression in central Kenya – in contrast to the relative restraint in the Gold Coast or even in relation to urban conflict in coastal Kenya – suggests that this movement, by taking a form outside the seemingly ‘modern’ framework of political parties and trade unions, was seen as an affront by British officials convinced of their own sincerity as agents of development as well as a threat to a way of life by the racially conscious white settlers. Only in the early 1960s did British officials reverse themselves, give up on the settlers, accept that a deal had to be made with Kenyans who could be deemed moderate, and devolve power with safeguards to private property
and connections to a British-dominated commercial system.\textsuperscript{19}

Both sides of the pattern influenced 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’.\textsuperscript{20} 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.\textsuperscript{21}

The goal now 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. Officials could only hope that British discourse and practice had framed the question of governance and that ex-colonies would become Western-style nations.

What Britain was not prepared to do was pay the economic and political costs that 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 come to grips with the limits of the transformations that were economically possible, limits that the past record of neglect had made all the tighter. African colonies lacked the physical facilities – transportation and skilled labour – to absorb very much development spending even if Britain were willing to provide it. The labour question was not going away under the stabilization doctrine and labour 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

\textsuperscript{19} The literature on Mau Mau is substantial, but one might begin with two recent books that emphasize the depth of repression (Anderson 2005; Elkins 2005). See also Berman and Lonsdale 1992.

\textsuperscript{20} Public Record Office, London (PRO), CAB 134/1555, Prime Minister’s Minute, 28-1-1957. This review was to be conducted through the Colonial Policy Committee.

\textsuperscript{21} PRO, CPC (57) 30, CAB 134/1556, 5-6, ‘Future constitutional development in the colonies’, Report by the Chairman of the Official Committee on Colonial Policy (Norman Brook), 6-9-1957.
had not much to show for itself in the first half-century of African coloniza-
tion and 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
could not prolong their supposed tutelage:

This is the dilemma with which we are faced: either give independence
too soon and risk disintegration and a breakdown of administration; or to
hang on too long, risk ill-feeling and disturbances, and eventually to leave
bitterness behind, with little hope thereafter at our being able to influence
Nigerian thinking in world affairs on lines we would wish.22

East Africa – where the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya had been put down
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 economy was ‘running rapidly
downhill’; Africans were, in terms of political maturity, ‘far behind even the
West Africans’. 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’.23 Kenya became independent in 1963,
and Jomo Kenyatta, newly released from prison, had to be made over from
violent rebel to the great hope for peace.

The Cabinet reports from 1957 to 1959 overlooked clear evidence of
growth in exports and marketed output, of improved infrastructure and
much expanded schools systems, of better paid workers and newly function-
ing systems of industrial relations in at least some sectors of some colonies.
But the sense of failure has much to do with 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 dissemi-
nated throughout the African continent. The kinship and clientage networks
of Gold Coast or Nigerian cocoa farmers may have been helping to bring

22 PRO, CAB 129/87, Memorandum by Secretary of State, ‘Nigeria’, C 57 (120), 14-5-1957. Len-
nox-Boyd wanted to postpone Nigerian demands for independence as far as possible, but not
resist ‘overtly’ should Nigerian politicians demand independence in 1959.
23 PRO, CAB 129/108, Memorandum for the Cabinet by the Secretary of State for the Colonies,
in record harvests, but they were not what officials meant by development. When British officials were forced to take stock of their progress in the late 1950s, they did not find what they meant by modern society and they tended to interpret its absence as danger. 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 without basis – some of the social and political breakdowns that occurred in the 1960s in Nigeria and elsewhere resemble the predictions of 1957-1959 – but the expectations that Africa had failed to fulfil were those of a fantasy of imperial modernization of the 1940s.

Development had been put forward after the African West Indian disturbances of the late 1930s 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 that 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 with sovereignty responsibility for whatever went wrong.

Decolonization and the making of nation-states

Let us return to the basic question of this chapter: how and why did decolonization – as it unfolded in the two decades after World War II – shape postcolonial possibilities? I see colonialism itself as unstable and uncertain, always caught between strategies of incorporating people more fully into an empire or marking the differentiation and subordination of conquered people. Routine administration required that elites, at least, be given some kind of stake in the imperial system – otherwise bureaucratic and military cost would make colonies a drain on metropolitan resources – but as economic and social situations changed, the need to coopt different categories of people and different kinds of leaders shifted as well. But many Africans – not least of them wage workers – did not fit in the tribal cages into which colonial rulers tried to keep them. The modern African that colonial rulers had once regarded as a dangerous anomaly now had to be encouraged. Officials thought they knew how to do such things – given the experience of European elites in managing cities, workers, education, health, and other social problems in Britain and France. But in the late 1940s and 1950s, Britain and France faced the escala-
tion of demands within a new but still colonial framework that they had themselves put forward. It was the dynamic element that proved the most vulnerable part of empire, and it is no surprise that the breakdown of empire occurred first in the ‘development’-oriented regimes of France and Britain and not in the empire of Portugal. 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 that challenged them.

For colonial officials, the development drive made it possible to imagine Africans as ‘modern’ people, acting in institutions like legislatures and labour unions – something that 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 so that people with expertise and capital could tutor and help those who had neither. 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 that had to be directly controlled to something that painful implementation of which could be passed on to African elites. The main difference was that Europeans could now pass onto Africans responsibility for the consequences of a history in which they had been prime actors.

For the leaders of trade unions and other social movements and for the leaders of political parties who were so skilful in turning European fear of disorderly masses into their own quest for power, the experience of the labour and economic contestations of the 1940s and 1950s was a powerful one. The terrain on which these struggles were conducted privileged certain kinds of institutions and 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 labour mobilization just how potentially challenging organized labour 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
Decolonization and citizenship

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.24

The other side of the story of the creation of fragile nation-states in Africa is the transformation of empire-states in Europe into something more national. The same process that 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 in a unity that appeared inviolable and desirable. As both powers gave up their empires, they gave up this imperial view of the world – mediated 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 seeking to restrict it, and France cut off labour immigration in 1974. Some argued that France and Britain should think of themselves as multicultural polities, national but not homogeneous. On the right of the political spectrum, a new kind of racism entered the political arena. If imperial racism implied that colonized subjects had to be held within the polity so as to be useful, and held in a position of inequality, nationalist racism implied exclusion. The racism of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France drew on diehard attitudes of settler and military experience in the Algerian war – now definitively separated from the object of their zealotry – but also on a tradition of ‘little France’ xenophobia – Catholic, antirepublican, and antisemitic – and on the sense of loss of a French community that had probably never existed. One cannot understand Le Pennism simply as an imperial hangover; it emerges out of a national reconfiguration of French politics. Simon Gikandi (1996:71) makes a similar argument about the racism exemplified by Enoch Powell in Great Britain: ‘[I] Enoch Powell in Great Britain: ‘[I]n the imperial period [...] the essence of a British identity was derived from the totality of all the people brought together by empire; in the postimperial period, in contrast, we find a calculated attempt to configure Englishness as exclusionary of its colonial wards’.

24 See the pioneering study of Zolberg 1966.
Meanings of decolonization

Decolonization marked the end of a form of political organization – the empire – which had been of great importance for millennia – and against which the apparent domination of the nation-state appears as a short episode. No one claims to be an empire any more – whereas previous empires were frank and proud in claiming that status – and while issues of domination and inequality are far from over, they go by other names and require other means. Empires were incorporative as well as differentiated; they reproduced distinction as they extended themselves. Today’s powerful states are more concerned to keep people out than take people in, even as they exercise influence and power beyond their borders.

Second, the end of colonial empires raised expectations not only of change in forms of rule but in forms of livelihood. People expected that self-government would matter in their lives. Such aspirations were captured in Frantz Fanon’s famous invocation of the Biblical phrase, ‘The last shall be first’ (1963:30).

The last are not first. And for some, the result is disillusionment. Many commentators insist that decolonization has been incomplete, a failure. For some conservative scholars the failure is attributed to formerly colonized people – they do not have what it takes to live in the modern world. But for others, the failure lies in once dominant parts of the world: global capitalism has continued to marginalize or exploit Africa and Asia so that economic decolonization has proven illusory; European political norms and structures – not least of which is the form of the nation-state itself – insured that in the end new states would end up within a world political system in which they would always lack something necessary for success; cultural imperialism continued the work of colonial civilizing missions.

Such arguments point to central issues that are very much with us. But to put the problem in terms of a transition from colonialism to neocolonialism is misleading on both sides of the transition. To make the claim that decolonization did not change all aspects of life presumes that colonialism determined all those aspects, that it was totalizing. That is not consistent with scholarship on colonial societies, in Africa or elsewhere, which emphasizes that colonial states were limited in their transformative ambitions and capacities. Their frequent brutality was in fact a consequence of the difficulty they had in routinizing control. Important as the consequences of colonial rule were, one cannot single out a ‘colonial effect’ that either continued or ended with decolonization.

25 On misuses of the concept of empire in some contemporary debates, see Cooper 2004.
26 This argument on the nature of colonial situations is developed in Stoler and Cooper 1997.
27 This is one of the problems with the large and growing literature on ‘postcoloniality’. For
Analysis of the dynamics of decolonization, as argued above, should take into account the nature of contestation before, during, and after the process itself. These are much more varied and complicated than a set of practices that can be labelled ‘colonial’ and opposed to another that are labelled ‘national’. In colonial times and postcolonial times, political actors in Africa and Asia tried to use what political resources they had to make claims upon, to find alternatives to, or to oppose directly a colonial regime, which was trying to make use of its own arsenal of strategies, more powerful certainly but far from unlimited. Certainly many if not most leaders of newly independent African countries in the 1960s tried to mark their territory and their policies as in some sense national – national banking institutions, national strategies for development, as well as all the symbols of sovereignty, from postage stamps to United Nations delegations. But national economic or cultural action could not possibly be more purely national than colonial policy could be purely colonial.

Nowhere was this demonstrated more vividly and more tragically than in Algeria within months of its independence, where Fanon’s dream of a liberated nation turned into a nightmare of civil war, with each faction accusing the other of deviating from the path of pure anticolonialism. Indeed, the assertion that there could be such a thing was one factor in rendering the struggles in independent Algeria so acute. The very idea of a national utopia, distinguished from the compromised realities of international politics and trade, turned into a technique of domination by a new elite, making it all the more difficult to address the already daunting task of negotiating with and distancing oneself from former colonial powers and new hegemons on the international scene. It is not just a case of the best being the enemy of the good, but of the insistence on a utopian project of pure nationality becoming a basis for oppression.

So the question of the extent to which decolonization was ‘full’ or ‘real’ needs to be reformulated in the light of the fact that the contents of politics – how claims for economic, social, and cultural resources could be made and responded to – were as important as the structure of politics, whether a polity was part of ‘empire’ or of a ‘nation’, that now claimed to be the ‘state’.

One can think of decolonization as a bounded problem, defined in terms of self-government versus imperial domination. In such terms, nationalist elites could declare the problem over and that their presence at the helm of state constituted victory, regardless of how many people enjoyed the fruits of that victory. And French and British leaders could also declare the problem solved and congratulate themselves on having passed on power, on the institutions created, and the lessons taught – leaving the responsibility references and critique, see Cooper 2005.
for whatever happened next in the hands of someone else.

The alternative is to think of decolonization as unbounded, as a step in a quest toward something else, something whose realization demanded more struggle and which still posited the existence of an enemy, now broadened to include neocolonialism, the intrusions of western culture and western political intrigue, and the dangers of enemies within. The idea of a continuing struggle could be inspiring, but it also could be stifling – when used by a self-serving ruling establishment to enforce discipline and conformity.

The dilemmas of rule in the small, militarily weak and economically fragile countries of Africa were serious, and most resolutions were partial. But the totalizing discourse that posited a dichotomy between true independence and a compromised neocolonialism did not make them easier to resolve. It was too easy for a ruler to portray the moderately prosperous cocoa farmer who might be seen as contributing to the generation of wealth as a comprador, as a mere instrument of colonial extraction. Such a person might well have the resources to pose a political challenge to a ruler, so the accusation was a self-serving one and it passes over serious examination of what positive and negative effects on society as a whole particular forms of economic activities had. Some African intellectuals have drawn attention to the way some oppressive rulers used a discourse of African authenticity – set against the neocolonial enemy – to legitimize their own self-aggrandizement and their failures to build more self-sustaining economic structures (Kabou 1991).

One might pose the alternatives differently: could citizenship in the 1960s and thereafter have been ‘thickened’? Could a population conscious of having mobilized to demand political voice and access to state resources from a colonial regime continue to be mobilized to interact with an independent state? Could such a population demand accountability from their rulers? Could they legitimately demand that the state provide social services and define the space for a national economy? Could they aspire to mobility within a national civil service and a national social system? African states in the early years after independence were not without achievements in the area of social citizenship: the growth of school systems until the 1970s, the decrease in infant mortality, and other large-scale improvements in social welfare reflected the long-delayed intervention of colonial regimes in such domains in their final years of rule and the willingness of independent states to make such projects, for a time, the focus of intensified energy. The degree of seriousness of such efforts varied, as did the degree of success, as well as the extent to which internal conflict sapped these projects, but one should be careful about negative generalizations about Africa as a whole in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Things got much more difficult after that, thanks to the oil shocks and the worldwide depression of demand for tropical products, followed by policies
of international financial institutions that placed the repayment of debt over the improvement of human capacities. The generalized economic crisis compounded the uneven political situations, making it all but impossible even for leaders who were trying to make citizenship socially meaningful to have much to show for their efforts and instead encouraging leaders to emphasize clientelism and repression in their strategies to maintain power, strategies for which resources might actually be found for a time. The end result in most African states has been the collapse of the dreams of the 1950s and 1960s, leaving in place a citizenship that is thin – providing little accountability, few services, a meagre security, using the trappings of sovereignty to gain a degree of leverage among various international and national networks, licit or otherwise.\footnote{The chronology is analysed in Cooper 2002.}

To look at the process of political mobilization in the postwar decade rather than to see it as a moment dividing colonial and postcolonial eras, offers two avenues toward fuller understanding. One is to recognize that alternative visions of the future have existed, have entertained serious support, and might do so again in the future. Africa’s present did not lie at the end of a single trajectory of inevitability. The process of politics indeed entailed thick versions of citizenship: claims to equal wages for workers, fair prices for farmers, access to schools for a bigger part of urban and rural populations, universal suffrage, and participation of women in political life. Not all actors ascribed to the entire list. Early scholarship on decolonization tended to treat such claim-making as part of the story of nationalist challenge to imperialism, but the diverse forms of political mobilizations deserve to be taken seriously in themselves – as collective efforts to turn states from outside impositions into institutions responding to citizens’ demands.

Second, the sequence of processes helps to explain the brittleness of the result. For a time, ‘nationalist’ leaders were able to put together coalitions and find common threads in hostility to colonial administration, but – as Aristide Zolberg argued back in 1966 – the nationalist mobilization was thin. The Nkrumahs, Senghors, and other party leaders of the 1950s had for a time channelled citizen grievances into a political movement, but they found themselves no better able than the colonial regimes to find the resources to meet such demands. What they understood well was the volatility of citizen demands and the danger that failure to meet them would pose to their own regimes. Nkrumah – the pioneer nationalist – was also the pioneer in dismantling labour movements and sapping any autonomy that farmers’ organizations could muster. Sékou Touré followed in his footsteps. New governments were caught up by the same constraints that had made development such a difficult object for colonial states to achieve, only they neither had the external...
resources that colonial states could call on nor the possibility of getting out. The authoritarianism of postcolonial regimes throughout Africa reflected both the narrowness of constraints on social and economic change and the personal experience African leaders had in the kinds of mobilizations that had threatened colonial authority.29

One should not see decolonization as a single event that can be labelled either a success or a failure, the dawn of a new era, or the continuation of an old one. Not all politics in colonies in the 1950s can be reduced to struggles to attain the nation-state, and the issues those struggles raised are still alive. It does not help clarify the political stakes in regard to issues of economic resources and social justice to frame them as a failed or incomplete decolonization: these are ongoing problems whose parameters are being redefined and whose importance remains.

The world is not the same now that empires are gone, just as the takeover of most of Africa seventy to eighty years previously had radical effects on the continent’s people. The political confrontations that turned empire from an ordinary fact into an impossibility are complex and momentous and deserve the kind of scrutiny from different vantage points that the chapters in this volume give them. Decolonization is no less worth pondering for being history – for being something that happened, has had important effects, but is not a singular phenomenon with certain determinant effects.

Many of the issues that arose during this complex process became the subjects of debate in international fora, and some of the most important of them 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 that generalized sovereignty but did not generalize claims for vital economic and social resources. The fact that such claims were made and to such effect should remind us of the continued importance of collective action and of the enormous difficulty that analysing its effects and assessing responsibility for its consequences entails.

29 I have spelled out this argument in more detail in Cooper 2002, emphasizing that what colonial regimes had created was ‘gatekeeper states’ – strong at the nodal point between territory and external world, but with weak mechanisms of control and mobilization within the territory. New rulers were also strongest in capital cities and in communication nodes where they could control external trade and aid and dole out patronage, but they were weak in their ability to reshape social and economic structures.
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