

## Quasi-states, weak states and the partition of Africa

A. G. HOPKINS

The paths taken by historians and political scientists intersect less frequently than their subject matter might indicate. Both sets of scholars, for example, have a mutual interest in the formation and evolution of the modern state. However, while this interest has made the ‘Westphalian system’ the common currency of exchanges among political scientists, few historians refer to the concept, and some would not recognize it—even at close range and in full sunlight. Practitioners of the two disciplines often pass like ships in the night because they are unaware of another large presence on a parallel course. In an age of intense specialization we readily become separated, like Alfred Marshall’s noncompeting wage groups, from a common body of information. A more formally acceptable justification for discrete enquiries into similar problems lies in the claim that the disciplines have different purposes. The distinction is not, as is still so often said, that historians are interested in the unique and social scientists in the general; it is rather that the analytical issues forming the generalizations that necessarily accompany statements about large issues are of a different order. Political scientists assign significance to the Westphalian system mainly because they wish to generalize about the principles governing the international regime of sovereign states after 1648. Historians, on the other hand, are less interested in testing the merits of realism and its rivals than in charting changing relativities in international relations. Accordingly, they are more likely to set the Westphalian settlement in the context of already evolving state systems and of subsequent changes of equal or greater moment, such as the upheavals caused by the French and American revolutions.

The occasions when political scientists and historians do meet are therefore of considerable interest because they hold out the prospect of realizing mutual gains from inter-disciplinary exchange. Carolyn Warner’s recent article is a particularly good example of the potential for bringing a new perspective to bear on an old subject because it applies concepts of statehood derived from political science to an understanding of the partition of Africa in a way that has not been tried before.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, moreover, Warner has treated the historical literature with a degree of care that commands respect and makes a dialogue between the disciplines possible. Seen in this light, I hope that the comments that follow will be regarded as outlining an alternative approach rather than as launching a direct attack on her thoughtful essay. The aim is to offer a second reading of the material to be placed alongside her own in the hope that gains will arise from both interpretations. A greater degree of dissent on my part is in any case ruled out by the fact that Warner generously cites

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn M. Warner, ‘The Political Economy of “Quasi-Statehood” and the Demise of 19th Century African Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), pp. 233–55.

some of my own work in reaching her conclusions. Outright disagreement would therefore require an auto-critique of suicidal proportions—a prospect that I am not yet ready to contemplate.

### **Quasi-states and Africa**

Warner's article challenges some influential recent views of the emergence of sovereign states by arguing that African polities displayed many of the requisite qualities of statehood in the nineteenth century. They were colonized, not because they lacked the entry qualifications for joining the international community of sovereign states, but because they were victims of European powers which were pursuing expansionist policies for economic gain. Warner begins by reviewing a number of theories of statehood and then illustrates her own analysis with two examples, the Tukulor and the Asante. Since the most prominent of the theories she considers (as expressed in both her title and her citations) is Jackson's concept of quasi-states, it is this that I shall focus on here. Similarly, while both of her examples deserve comment, I shall deal only with the case of Asante. This limitation stems principally from considerations of space, but it also recommends itself because far more information is available on Asante than on any other African state; consequently, competing hypotheses can be tested to an exceptional depth of detail.

Warner's opening summary of the existing historiography is important because it provides a signpost to the provenance of, and hence to the direction taken by, her own contribution. The first of the 'two waves' she identifies, based on the dependency thesis, is also one that is familiar to historians. However, by beginning with the work of Frank and Wallerstein, which had its main impact in the 1970s, Warner offers a truncated view of the relevant literature. In particular, she omits the nationalist historiography that came to prominence in the 1960s, when decolonization ended the credibility of the pro-imperial studies associated with the heyday of empire. The omission is significant because Warner's own case has much in common with the nationalist viewpoint, which held that Africans were far more capable of 'running their own affairs' than prejudiced outsiders had allowed. However, this literature is now seen to have been too indulgent and uncritical in portraying pre-colonial Africa.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, a historian approaches Warner's case on behalf of Asante with some degree of reservation because the necessary link to the nationalist historiography has not been made; in consequence, no defence has been erected against the criticisms it has aroused.

The second, 'revisionist' wave that Warner identifies is not one that historians would readily recognize, though of course it may well be a valid grouping for the purposes of political science. Citations covering such diverse contributions as those by Gallagher and Robinson, Doyle, Jackson, North, Spruyt, Kahler, and Warren seem too far removed from the detail of the case to support the claim that 'the presence of colonies rather than sovereign states in much of Africa can be primarily

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, A.O. Adeoye, 'Understanding the Crisis in Modern Nigerian Historiography', *History in Africa*, 19 (1992), pp. 1–11; Finn Fuglestad, 'The Trevor Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History', *History in Africa*, 19 (1992), pp. 309–26.

attributed to the weakness of the political regimes which arose there in the period up to and including the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Of the scholars cited, only Gallagher and Robinson have undertaken any serious work on Africa during the period in question, and that appears, not in the article cited, but in their subsequent book, which Warner does not use.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, as Warner sets out to question a 'broad consensus' about state-building in pre-colonial Africa, historians might feel some hesitation about accepting the significance of the consensus, and possibly even its existence too. As I shall indicate in dealing with Asante, the historiography has now moved on. Just as African polities have ceased to be regarded as being primitive, in the sense once assumed by a now defunct generation of imperial historians, so too they are no longer seen as miniature or embryonic versions of European nation states, as nationalist historians were too readily inclined to suppose.<sup>5</sup> The problem, as conceived by historians, is to understand how the internal development and aspirations of these states, in all their diversity, intersected with those of Europe. The key to this issue lies not in showing, as Warner seeks to do,<sup>6</sup> that African states were not as weak as they have been portrayed by some writers, for Wilks and others have long raised our awareness of the scale and complexity of a range of indigenous polities, but in exploring why the informal relations that had supported several centuries of exchange between Europe and Africa broke down in the late nineteenth century.

Warner's criticism of the 'revisionists' is directed particularly at Jackson's concept of quasi-states, which, she suggests, provides a poor fit with the reality of African statehood in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Warner's argument, as should be clear by now, is that African states were much stronger and more 'state-like' than the theory of quasi-states would allow: they were well able to 'sustain and promote commerce', and their collapse stemmed not from internal 'weaknesses' but from the assertive policies of the European powers.<sup>8</sup> However, Warner's use of Jackson's concept in this context is open to question. Jackson was concerned, above all, to characterize the states that emerged in the Third World in association with the process of decolonization after 1945; he used the term 'quasi-state' to refer specifically to those circumstances and that period. It is true that, in adopting Jackson's concept, Warner states openly that she will not deal with his analysis of the contemporary world but only with his arguments about nineteenth-century state systems.<sup>9</sup> Again, however, Jackson was very explicit in distinguishing between quasi-states and weak states: the former came into being after World War II as a result of a change in the rules governing international relations; the latter have existed throughout history.<sup>10</sup> Quasi-states possess negative sovereignty in being protected from external intrusions; weak states have to fend for themselves.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Jackson was consistent in apply-

<sup>3</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', p. 234, and fns. 3–5.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> See Warner's remarks in her opening paragraph about African polities being engaged in 'much the same process' as European states: 'Political Economy', p. 233.

<sup>6</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', p. 235.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: International Relations, Sovereignty and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', p. 235, and the exposition of Jackson on p. 236.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236, n. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, *Quasi-States*, pp. 22–3, 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29, 48.

ing this distinction to the partition of Africa, which he analysed as a conflict between ‘powerful intruding mechanized states and weak undeveloped African societies....’<sup>12</sup> As he also observed, contemporary thinking on the subject distinguished between ‘advanced’ and ‘native’ forms of sovereignty, and allowed ‘civilized’ states to intervene in the affairs of ‘barbarous nations’ in order to improve them.<sup>13</sup> Jackson’s argument, then, is about the role of strong states in taking over weak ones in accordance with the rules of the game prevailing in the nineteenth century. Conceptually, it is hard to see how his analysis of weak states can be refuted by the claim that they were not quasi-states because that possibility is excluded by the way the terms of the debate have been defined.

### **Asante in the nineteenth century**

Empirically, however, there is still a good deal of scope for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of African states and their relevance to the partition of the continent. Here, Jackson undoubtedly exposes rather more of his flank than is perhaps wise when in the company of predatory academics. His summary of the character of African societies at points comes dangerously close to Trevor-Roper’s notorious judgment that African history was the unrewarding story of the gyration of barbarous tribes.<sup>14</sup> Warner is surely correct to claim that Jackson underestimated the elements of ‘empirical statehood’ exhibited by a number of polities in West Africa in the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> However, adjusting for this criticism means only that these states were not as weak as Jackson supposed. The really important question, which Warner appropriately goes on to ask, is just how strong and cohesive they were on the eve of partition. It is at this point that her enquiry engages with African history to ascertain whether indigenous states were brought down by their own failings or by the determined actions of European powers.<sup>16</sup>

Warner uses a range of studies in her assessment of Asante, but she bases her interpretation principally on Ivor Wilks’s monumental work, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*.<sup>17</sup> The choice is entirely appropriate because Wilks has done more than any other scholar to reconstruct the history of Asante from the eighteenth century onwards. It is thanks to Wilks that we know as much as we do about the scale, structure and centralizing ability of Asante as manifested in its bureaucracy, government trading organizations, legal system, communications network, currency, army, foreign policy and diplomatic corps, and its ability to manipulate an official ideology.<sup>18</sup> Since Wilks began publishing his research on Asante in the 1960s, no

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70, and the citation of Mill’s classic text on p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67–71. See, too, H.R. Trevor Roper, ‘The Past and the Present: History and Sociology’, *Past & Present*, 42 (1969), pp. 3–17, and the appraisal by Fuglestad, ‘The Trevor Roper Trap’.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, ‘Political Economy’, pp. 236–7, 247–8, 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). However, she does not use the second edition (1989) or the new material contained in Wilks’s *Forests of Gold* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> For a longer, but still inadequate summary of Wilks’s research achievement see A.G. Hopkins, ‘Asante and the Victorians: Transition and Partition on the Gold Coast’, in Roy Bridges (ed.), *Imperialism, Decolonisation and African History: Essays in Honour of John Hargreaves* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 25–64.

historian would consider referring to the state as being 'tribal', if by that is meant primitive or simple, or some combination of the two. If political scientists have described Asante in those terms, as Warner suggests,<sup>19</sup> then they are at least forty years out of date. However, Wilks's celebrated study has itself been subject to some revisionist thinking, stimulated partly by his own achievements and partly by the reaction to the nationalist school of history referred to earlier. It has been claimed, for example, that his work is 'fatally wrong-headed and misconceived', principally because it is 'an archetypal product of the nationalist era'.<sup>20</sup> Warner pays insufficient attention to this more recent body of literature. She notes, briefly, that McCaskie has challenged some of Wilks's interpretations, but comments that his criticism 'leaves the reader confused'.<sup>21</sup> It is perfectly true that McCaskie's major work is dense and complex, but the basis of his attack on Wilks is clear from the corpus of his writings, and has been supported, independently, by other scholars (notably Arhin and Yarak), whose presentation is perhaps rather more straightforward.<sup>22</sup>

The revisionist case is a varied one and needs more space than is available here. In essence, however, Wilks's critics have emphasized the limitations of Asante power and cast doubt on its status as a modernizing state. The cohesiveness of the state is now seen to have been seriously qualified, both spatially and socially. While the cultural unity of Asante was a reality, the degree of political solidarity was restricted and fragile. The outer tributaries were held in subordination, typically by conquest; the inner provinces could appeal to a tradition of segmentary authority that restrained the power of the centre. The rulers of the federal states of the Asante Union exercised a considerable degree of local autonomy; accordingly, the degree of centralization achieved by the capital, Kumase, depended heavily on calculations made in the provinces about the advantages of integration. Asante began to lose control of dissident provinces, which resented the exactions of the centre, as early as the 1820s, in the aftermath of the abolition of the external slave trade. The losses continued after 1831, when free trade and a more visible British presence offered alternative economic and political opportunities, especially to coastal states, such as the Fante. The trend undoubtedly accelerated after 1874, when Asante was defeated by British troops, but it had begun to manifest itself long before then.

Social divisions found political expression among groups of slaves and commoners, who were largely excluded from state-controlled opportunities for advancement, and among rich families, who were denied the fruits of their success by punitive death duties. Wilks himself had identified some of these dissenting elements, but subsequent work in economic history has added greatly to our understanding of the origin and scale of the challenge to the authority of the state

<sup>19</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', pp. 247–8.

<sup>20</sup> T.C. McCaskie, 'Empire State: Asante and the Historians', *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), pp. 473, 475.

<sup>21</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', *ibid.*, n. 72, p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> It would take an excessive amount of space to list all of this work here. Representative studies include: T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Precolonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Larry W. Yarak, *Asante and the Dutch, 1744–1873* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Kwame Arhin, 'Trade, Accumulation and the State in Asante in the Nineteenth Century', *Africa*, LX (1990), pp. 524–37. Additional references are given in Hopkins, 'Asante and the Victorians', pp. 56–64.

in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Doubt has been cast on the degree to which the central government was able to control economic resources; emphasis has been placed instead on the private sector and the extent to which commoners in particular were keen to participate in market-oriented activities associated with 'legitimate' commerce. These activities posed a serious threat to state power because they derived from an external influence, the developing world market, and were outside official control.

The stress placed by Wilks on the modernizing features of the Asante state has also been questioned. His argument that the bureaucratic reforms promoted by Kumase represented a decisive move towards the creation of modern government, in the Weberian sense, has not found favour with subsequent researchers, who have emphasized instead the personal and (in Weber's terms) patrimonial character of Asante's civil and military administrations.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is now clear that Asante remained an essentially military state in both ethos and policy. The purpose of economic policy was to promote the wealth of the state and its leading representatives, not to raise the standard of living of the populace. Individual enterprise was controlled where possible; ideas from the outside world were unwelcome unless they were supportive of official aims. The dispute that led to conflict with Britain in 1874 was partly caused by the assertive policy adopted by the war party in Kumase. Defeat released internal forces that sought to overthrow the authority of Kumase and its policy of central aggrandizement. The struggle that followed hastened the revolt of the provinces, promoted a succession of warlords, and confirmed the bankruptcy of the state. In 1896, when the British entered Kumase and declared a Protectorate over Asante, they were neither dealing with nor creating a quasi-state, but seeking to manage a weak one.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, while it would be difficult to find a historian of Africa who would take seriously the proposition that Asante was in the process of 'self-destructing as "tribal societies" are expected to do after so much European contact ...',<sup>26</sup> it would be equally hard to find one who would endorse the view that, by the late nineteenth century, Asante was a cohesive state well able to 'manage its incorporation into the international economy'.<sup>27</sup> It is at this point that the historian returns to base to consider relativities and chronology. The concept of a weak state implies a condition that is relative both spatially, with regard to other states, and temporally, when judged against the position before and after the moment the assessment is made. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Asante was relatively strong with respect to both local competitors and its European trading partners. However, with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, Asante faced a developing crisis of adaptation to the new requirements of overseas commerce, which created profitable

<sup>23</sup> See especially, Joseph La Torre, 'Wealth Surpasses Everything: An Economic History of Asante, 1750–1874', Ph.D. thesis, UCLA (1978), and Gareth Austin, "'No Elders Were Present": Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807–96', *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), pp. 1–30.

<sup>24</sup> See, in addition to the references in fn. 22 above, Kwame Arhin, 'Asante Military Institutions', *Journal of African Studies*, 7 (1980), pp. 22–30, and Emmanuel Terray, 'Contribution à une étude de l'armée Asante', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 16 (1976), pp. 297–356.

<sup>25</sup> Lack of space has prevented me from discussing the comments made by Warner ('Political Economy', p. 252) on the period 1874–94. For an alternative interpretation see Hopkins, 'Asante and the Victorians', pp. 45–51.

<sup>26</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

opportunities for enterprise outside the public domain and began to shift wealth into the private sector. The outcome was a challenge to the authority of the central government and the rise of centrifugal forces, as the provinces recalculated the advantages of incorporation. The severity of this crisis and its precise timing are, of course, open to discussion, but in principle they ought to be given a prominent place in the discussion of the build-up to partition.<sup>28</sup> In my view, the weight of research now available indicates that, by the time the Asante confronted the British in 1874, the state was far less powerful than it had been earlier in the century. A telling example is provided by the Fante and Krobo states to the south, which had taken advantage of the new trade in 'legitimate' products to increase their wealth and their effective independence from Asante. It seems pejorative to categorize the leaders of such states as a 'quisling class'.<sup>29</sup> Seen from their perspective, they were asserting their own sense of identity and nationality against an alien central power. Such actions were in accord with nineteenth-century doctrines of sovereignty, and were not formally disallowed until the rules of the game changed to accommodate the creation of quasi-states after 1945.

The Asante had also become weaker in relation to the British, whose stake on the Gold Coast had increased in the course of the nineteenth century. Warner is surely correct to align herself here with the majority view among historians, which holds that the initiative for the partition of Africa lay with the European powers. We are agreed, too, that economic difficulties in the last quarter of the century, allied to mercantile pressure, were important elements in the decision to move inland.<sup>30</sup> However, her argument about the cohesiveness of the Asante state and what would now be called the 'good governance' of its rulers obliges her to place too much weight on the persistence of Britain's forward policy in causing annexation.<sup>31</sup> Cosmopolitan principles and Gladstonian finance favoured the extension of British influence rather than British territory. The search for congenial allies and the complementary limits placed on territorial aggrandizement loaded Britain's representatives in tropical Africa with the thankless task of identifying suitable candidates.<sup>32</sup> Seen from the British perspective, the Asante were given their chance in 1831, following the Treaty of Peace and Free Trade.<sup>33</sup> The experiment proved to be a disappointment, and it was accompanied, as we have seen, by growing internal dissension. By 1874, Britain had still to create an informal empire on the Gold Coast, and had acquired a tangle of troublesome alliances and obligations instead. Even at this late stage, however, it is hard to discern a new spirit of imperialism behind the decision to sanction military action in 1874. Indeed, the British still hoped to be able to work with a reformed Asante state thereafter; it was not until the

<sup>28</sup> On the 'crisis of adaptation' see A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1973), ch. 4, and the volume of essays on this subject edited by Robin Law, *From the Slave Trade to Legitimate Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Warner cites these sources but does not, in my view, give sufficient prominence in her text to the debate over the nineteenth-century transition.

<sup>29</sup> Warner, 'Political Economy', p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> See Hopkins, *Economic History*, ch.4, and for the larger picture, P.J. Cain and A.G.Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London: Longman, 1993), ch.11.

<sup>31</sup> See the quotations in Warner, 'Political Economy', pp. 248, 249, 250, 251.

<sup>32</sup> A.G. Hopkins, 'The New International Order in the Nineteenth Century: Britain's First Development Plan for Africa', in Law, *From the Slave Trade to Legitimate Commerce*, pp. 240–64.

<sup>33</sup> For an evaluation see Hopkins, 'Asante and the Victorians', pp. 35–7, 40, 45.

1890s, following a further breakdown in relationships, that a more assertive policy was adopted.

### **Weak states and quasi-states**

The conclusions reached here are rather different from those drawn by Warner.<sup>34</sup> To begin with, the African states under consideration were weak states not quasi-states. They had elements of empirical statehood, but in the nineteenth-century world they also had to fend for themselves. In the case of Asante, the need to adapt to changes in the international economy following the abolition of the overseas slave trade threw up internal forces that threatened both the resources and the ethos of the state. The ‘penetration of capitalism’ did lead to a political crisis; ‘internal contradictions’ were important in accounting for Asante’s demise.<sup>35</sup> In the first instance, it was not the ‘considerable capacities and wealth’ of African states that ‘goaded’ European traders to seek their downfall so much as their failure, or inability, to establish an informal alliance with modernizing elements within the state who were prepared to cooperate in maintaining an open economy.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, African states were indeed capable of sustaining international commerce, but that is not an issue of debate—at least among historians. The central problem was the nature of the commerce being transacted and, by derivation, the conditions required for efficient production and distribution. The history of Asante in the nineteenth century shows that the state had difficulty in managing the transition from the slave trade to legitimate goods, not least because non-slave exports could be produced and handled by private entrepreneurs in what would now be called the ‘informal sector’. State policy was at variance with the interests of these burgeoning private interests, and this in turn made an accommodation with the British more difficult. Thirdly, while it is certainly true that European pressure groups were keen to realign some property rights, especially by abolishing property in human beings, and to clarify others (such as the rights of creditors over debtors), it is far from clear that they were anxious to dismantle rights that were ‘supportive of capitalism’, as Warner argues.<sup>37</sup> The take-over of Asante was undoubtedly an intrusion on sovereignty, but that is not the same as claiming that it was an assault on capitalist elements within the state. The more plausible alternative is that the incorporation of Asante within the new quasi-state of the Gold Coast released indigenous capitalist forces that had been inhibited by state mercantilism; the most striking result was the creation during the colonial period of the world’s largest cocoa-farming industry.

I turn, finally, to some of the broader inter-disciplinary connections noted at the outset of this essay. I have argued that Jackson’s concept of quasi-states does not apply to the Asante, or indeed to other African states at the time of partition. I have adopted instead Jackson’s alternative by referring to weak states. This notion conceals, though barely, a whole bag of diverse tricks that cannot be unpacked here. However, it is worth noting that historians are now trying to categorize types of

<sup>34</sup> ‘Political Economy’, pp. 254–5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.



state in Africa in the nineteenth century in an attempt to recognize variety without also abandoning hope of arriving at supportable generalizations. This is an ambitious undertaking that needs an input from political science, and therefore holds out the prospect of co-operative research. With regard to the contemporary implications of Jackson's thesis, I agree with Warner that Jackson may well have exaggerated the novelty of quasi-states in the period after 1945. Applying his own criteria, it is possible to trace the deliberate creation of protected buffer states and of other 'artificial' states through the centuries. In recent times, instances can be found in the peace settlement following World War I, and before then, as Warner observes, in the formation of colonies, which is why I have referred to the Gold Coast (but not to Asante) as a quasi-state. However, while this extension of Jackson's argument involves some modification of the heavy emphasis he placed on the novelty of the period following World War II, it does not otherwise damage the concept or indeed alter the fact that there was a marked shift in international relations after 1945.<sup>38</sup> A more direct challenge to Jackson might arise from the experience of the 1990s, which suggests that, with the end of the Cold War, the great powers may be less willing to uphold quasi-states and more inclined to allow weak states to take their place. If this turns out to be the case, it would limit the future applicability of the concept of quasi-states, but not destroy its particular value for understanding international relations in the second half of the twentieth century.

Current discussion of contemporary Africa also prompts reflections that might appeal to both historians and political scientists. In the nineteenth century the British were engaged in an early experiment in what today would be termed structural adjustment. As the world bankers of the time, the British took the lead in safeguarding overseas investments and in creating complementary, 'like-minded' allies. Among many other measures, this policy involved attacking the state monopolies and protective tariffs of prospective trading partners, and encouraging them to put in place appropriate institutional supports for international commerce. The Asante experienced this pressure after 1807; when the government did not conform, it felt the weight of Britain's displeasure. Then, as today, 'getting prices right' had profound political implications because it reduced the resources and patronage of the state. More recently, and not entirely coincidentally, the World Bank has deployed a new slogan: 'bringing the state back in'. In practice, this amounts to a renewed invitation to dominant groups within quasi-states to compete for control of public resources. This strategy endorses the politics of redistribution, whereby regions and ethnic groups engage in intense battles, sometimes literally, to capture the commanding heights of government so that they can secure the resources needed to reward their long line of expectant followers. This development marks a further departure from the aspirations that accompanied the new 'nation' states at the time they gained their independence, though it may well have recreated, or possibly even perpetuated, the politics of the pre-colonial world.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Political scientists (including Jackson himself) have already considered the applicability of the concept in the period following the end of the Cold War. See Leonardo A. Villalon and Phillip A. Huxtable (eds.), *The African State at a Critical Juncture Between Disintegration and Reconfiguration* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), especially chs. 3, 6, 8 and (for an optimistic view of the Ghanaian case) 11; Robert H. Jackson, 'Juridical Statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Journal of International Affairs*, 46 (1992), pp. 1–16.

<sup>39</sup> This position has been given renewed credibility by Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993).

On this view, Asante leaders of the nineteenth century would readily recognize the predatory politics of today. They might be surprised to find how quickly their conquerors were themselves unseated, but they would surely appreciate the irony that, even during the colonial interlude, the rule of the white chiefs of West Africa depended heavily on their ability to nurture indigenous political networks. Connections between the past and the present provide a reminder that differences between quasi-states and weak states are consistent with sizeable similarities in the substance of politics. More ambitiously, such connections offer one way, among others, of reconsidering the political history of the continent. The moment is opportune because political history, like economic history, has been pushed to the sidelines in recent years by other trends, notably postmodernism. When the classic problems re-emerge, there will be an unmatched opportunity for historians and political scientists to co-operate in seeking to understand the evolution (and devolution) of the state in Africa.