

*Introduction: The renaissance of African economic history*¹

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The articles in this special issue of the *Economic History Review* are concerned with the economic history of Africa. Most of them were presented at a conference on ‘New Frontiers in African Economic History’, held at the Graduate Institute in Geneva in September 2012, with the financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. This meeting, organized by Gareth Austin, brought together many of the rising stars of the new generation of economic historians working on Africa, together with some of the more established scholars in the field. This introductory essay provides some background to the renaissance of African economic history that has taken place in recent years and relates the articles included here to the wider intellectual currents underpinning that rebirth.

Section I traces the cyclical upswings and downswings of the subject over the last half-century or so, while section II stands back to look at both the achievements of this work and the reasons for its relative isolation from the mainstream of economic history. Section III briefly summarizes the articles in the current collection, while section IV explains how they overcome the barriers to integration with the mainstream of economic history. Section V concludes.

I

Although isolated pioneers of African economic history such as McPhee, Bovill, Frankel, de Kiewiet, and Hancock can be found in the first half of the twentieth century, the subject only emerged as a distinct field in the second half.² From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, the subject enjoyed a period of exciting expansion, based on research on new topics interacting with a number of controversies between contending schools of thought.³ Stimulated by the recovery of African independence, and in reaction to the tendencies of both imperial historiography and social science ‘modernization’ theory to treat African societies as lacking indigenous economic dynamism, the initial focus was on the precolonial era, and on Africans’ economic activities during colonial rule, rather than on the actions of colonial governments and European companies.

This raised the question of what conceptual framework to use. One view, given its most elaborate expression by the Substantivist school of Polanyi, whose last book was on the eighteenth-/nineteenth-century kingdom of Dahomey, was that

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² McPhee, *Economic revolution*; Bovill, *Caravans*; Frankel, *Capital investment*; de Kiewiet, *History of South Africa*; Hancock, *Survey*.

³ Dike, *Trade and politics*, is usually taken as marking the start of this phase. The most comprehensive survey is Cooper, ‘Africa and the world economy’.

economic rationality in Africa was essentially a European import.⁴ According to Polanyi and his students, while marketplaces abounded in precolonial economies, as well as in what would soon be called the ‘informal sector’ of twentieth-century economies, prices there were set by ‘reciprocity’ or ‘administration’ rather than by the interaction of supply and demand.⁵ Conversely, the most fundamental outcome of the research of the 1950s to 1970s was the rebuttal of this position, as evidence of price-forming markets and (within the constraints of food security, where applicable) orthodox supply response emerged from the new monographs on foreign and, increasingly, domestic trade. Thus Hopkins’s classic synthesis of West African economic history, in 1973, was framed in the categories of market economics.⁶ West Africa is traditionally seen as having a longer history of intense involvement in the market than the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, though it is difficult to tell how far the apparent difference is a function of the available written sources (which for the precolonial era are denser for West Africa, as a result of the Atlantic trades).⁷

The latter part of the boom in African economic historiography, the 1970s and early 1980s, saw a shift of analytical focus from individual calculus to the structures conditioning economic behaviour. French marxists examined the means by which surpluses were extracted in the pre-capitalist economies of Africa, and how these institutions became ‘articulated’ with capitalism under colonial rule.⁸ Dependency theory, with its contention that Europe had created only a ‘peripheral’ form of capitalism in the continent, one oriented to the export of capital but not to its cumulative re-investment, received wide acceptance on African campuses, especially in an atmosphere of disappointment with the initial fruits of independence.⁹ Dependency theory was in turn subjected to coruscating critique from historically minded economists more impressed with Marx’s view of imperialism as spreading capitalism worldwide, and pointing as evidence to the continuing growth of wage labour.¹⁰ Meanwhile, students of southern and eastern Africa combined the West Africanists’ emphasis on the economic rationality of indigenous farmers with the neo-marxist insistence on the importance of coercive state intervention, to argue that the settler economies of Africa had seen first the emergence of small-scale production for the market, and then its repression as states sought to drive Africans into the labour market, supplying male migrant labour to European employers.¹¹ The outcomes of such intervention were the subject of a debate in the pages of this *Review*.¹² On South Africa itself, the 1970s and 1980s brought an intensification of the liberal-radical controversy on the fundamental issue of the relationship(s) between capitalism and apartheid.¹³ Last, and by now the most influential, of the

⁴ Polanyi, *Dahomey*.

⁵ Bohannon, ‘Impact of money’; Bohannon and Dalton, ‘Introduction’; Polanyi, *Dahomey*.

⁶ Hopkins, *Economic history of West Africa*; see also Curtin, *Economic change*.

⁷ For a 1970s example, compare Hopkins, *Economic history of West Africa*, and Curtin, *Economic change*, on West Africa with Gray and Birmingham, eds., *Pre-colonial African trade*, on central and eastern Africa.

⁸ Coquery-Vidrovitch, ‘Recherches sur un mode’; Terray, ‘Historical materialism’; Meillassoux, ‘L’esclavage en Afrique’.

⁹ Rodney, *Europe*; Amin, *Neo-colonialism*.

¹⁰ Sender and Smith, *Development of capitalism*.

¹¹ Arrighi, ‘Labour supplies’; Palmer and Parsons, eds., *Roots of rural poverty*.

¹² Mosley, ‘Agricultural development, 1900–60’; idem, ‘Agricultural development: reply’; Choate, ‘Agricultural development’.

¹³ Trapido, ‘South Africa’; Lipton, *Capitalism and apartheid*; Nattrass, ‘Controversies’; Freund, ‘Economic history’.

various theoretical sources of the focus on the structures conditioning individual economic behaviour was New Institutional Economics. This arrived in the study of African economic history through the early work of Bates, an American political scientist.¹⁴

In the late 1980s, the study of African economic history entered a recession which lasted until the early 2000s.¹⁵ Research always continued, for example, on the political economy of the external slave trade, colonial and post-colonial agriculture, and African entrepreneurship, precolonial to the present.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the overall impression is of a decline in the volume of new research in the field, and of economic history being displaced from the centre to the margins of the study and teaching of African history. One reason for the dwindling of new research on Africa's economic past was a general decline in economic history as the divide between history and economics grew, with economics becoming increasingly formal and history shifting attention from material to cultural considerations.¹⁷ Another reason was perhaps that the prevalent 'Afro-pessimism' of the period, related to the poor aggregate economic growth performance of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s, diluted the previous interest in the history of African economic activities.

It is possible to point to a number of developments during the early 2000s which sparked the revival of interest in African economic history. First, although many previous writers had stressed the negative effects of colonialism on African economic development, the issue came more sharply into focus following two key papers by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson. These authors suggested that the parts of the world colonized by Europeans which had been relatively rich (and densely populated) in 1500 ended up relatively poor by 1995, whereas the parts that had been relatively poor in 1500 ended up relatively rich by 1995.¹⁸ They attributed this 'reversal of fortune' to the establishment of different types of institutions in the rich and poor countries. Whereas European colonists tended to establish 'extractive' institutions in the relatively rich and densely populated countries, the relatively poor and sparsely populated colonies attracted settlers who established 'neo-Europes' with strong private property rights and checks on government power. Africa was characterized as relatively rich and densely populated in 1500, thus attracting extractive institutions, including the Atlantic slave trade during the early modern period and extractive forms of colonization such as in King Leopold's Congo in the late nineteenth century. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson had already linked the decision by European colonists to settle or establish extractive institutions to differences in European settler mortality rates.¹⁹ The argument has been much criticized by African economic historians, but it has surely stimulated interest in the field.²⁰

Second, there has been a general growth of interest in global economic history as a result of the lively debate following the publication of Pomeranz's book on the Great Divergence of living standards between Europe and Asia.²¹ Other parts of

¹⁴ Bates, *Essays*; idem, *Beyond the miracle*.

¹⁵ Hopkins, 'New economic history'.

¹⁶ Miller, *Way of death*; Evans and Richardson, 'Hunting for rents'; Likaka, *Rural society*; Bassett, *Peasant cotton revolution*; Forrest, *Advance of African capital*; Wariboko, 'Theory'; Jalloh and Falola, eds., *Black business*.

¹⁷ Hopkins, 'New economic history', p. 157.

¹⁸ Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 'Reversal of fortune'.

¹⁹ Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 'Colonial origins'.

²⁰ Austin, ' "Reversal of fortune" thesis'; Hopkins, 'New economic history'.

²¹ Pomeranz, *Great divergence*.

the world, including Africa, which had been seen as peripheral in an older historiography and therefore not worth studying, could no longer be neglected. An important book by Inikori reinforced these developments, emphasizing the significance of links between Africa and England for the fortunes of both regions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²² It is fitting that this special issue on Africa should follow the previous special issue of the *Economic History Review* on the Great Divergence.²³

Third, after a long period of stagnation or decline, many African economies returned to positive economic growth during the second half of the 1990s, and as this growth continued during the early 2000s, it began to attract wide attention. People started to talk of ‘emerging Africa’ and to look to the past to seek clues about the origins of Africa’s current growth boom.²⁴

The resurgence of research in Sub-Saharan economic history is already too extensive and complicated to be summarized adequately here. To put the articles in this collection in perspective, however, it is worth noting that the new literature has several strands. One is the systematic use of anthropometric techniques to study trends in physical welfare and human capital formation.²⁵ In the preceding generation of research Eltis was a lone pioneer;²⁶ in the present generation, Moradi initiated the use of a familiar source, army records, for a new, quantitative, purpose.²⁷ The anthropometric wave encompasses just some of many recent quantitative contributions. Among these, another that stands out is Frankema’s use of another familiar source, the British colonial *Blue books*, in a way that is unprecedented for the scope of its systematic comparison of levels of taxation across the British Empire.²⁸ This is complemented by Gardner’s more detailed comparison of fiscal policy in the round in two British African colonies.²⁹ Mention should also be made of Frankema and van Waijenburg’s comparison of real wages in the capital cities of British Africa and beyond, in terms of ‘Allen baskets’.³⁰

The big questions of interpretation are also not neglected: the emphasis upon institutions is balanced by Austin’s restatement of the factor endowments perspective on long-run economic change in the sub-continent.³¹ Indeed, the interactions of endowments and institutions continue to be examined critically at different levels of generality, using both quantitative and qualitative sources.³² Meanwhile, the relationship between domestic markets, the obstacles to political centralization, and the growth and decline of the Atlantic slave trade has been the subject of a series of notable papers from Inikori, and a recent volume edited by Law, Schwartz, and Strickrodt.³³ Coming to the twentieth century, one of Acemoglu,

²² Inikori, *Africans and the industrial revolution*.

²³ Broadberry and Hindle, ‘Asia in the Great Divergence’.

²⁴ Go and Page, eds., *Africa at a turning point?*; Radelet, *Emerging Africa*.

²⁵ Moradi, ‘Towards an objective account’; Cogneau and Rouanet, ‘Living conditions’; Austin, Baten, and van Leeuwen, ‘Biological standard of living’; Baten and Fourie, ‘Numeracy of Africans’.

²⁶ See section II.

²⁷ Eltis, ‘Nutritional trends’; idem, ‘Welfare trends’; Moradi, ‘Towards an objective account’.

²⁸ Frankema, ‘Raising revenue’.

²⁹ Gardner, *Taxing colonial Africa*.

³⁰ Frankema and van Waijenburg, ‘Structural impediments’; Allen, *British industrial revolution*.

³¹ Acemoglu and Robinson, ‘Why is Africa poor?’; Austin, ‘Resources, techniques and strategies’; idem, ‘Labour-intensity and manufacturing’.

³² Austin, *Labour, land and capital*; Fenske, ‘Land abundance’.

³³ Inikori, ‘Struggle’; idem, ‘Africa and the globalization process’; idem, ‘Economic impact’; Law, Schwarz, and Strickrodt, eds., *Commercial agriculture*.

Johnson, and Robinson's contributions was to challenge the habit of most development economists working on Africa to treat its economic history as if it began with formal independence from colonial rule.³⁴ Their approach of linking variation in economic performance today to historical events from centuries past has also been taken up by others working on Africa, most notably in Nunn's influential work on the long-term effects of Africa's slave trades.³⁵ Another feature of recent work is the increasing tendency for economic historians to undertake continuous research across the colonial/post-colonial divide.³⁶ Again, business historians have taken advantage of the opening of post-1960 archives to extend the examination of the interactions between foreign (especially British) firms, the British government, and African interest groups into the post-colonial period.³⁷ The end of the apartheid regime in South Africa was followed, eventually, by the appearance of an authoritative new overview of the country's economic history by Feinstein, and then by a flow of new research papers, many of them using econometrics.³⁸

II

Before turning to the articles in the current collection, it is worth commenting on the achievements of the research conducted during the preceding half-century, and on why it remained only partly integrated with the work of economic historians of the West. The basic achievement was to uncover and analyse much more evidence on Africa than had once seemed imaginable, and to document the often critical role of Africans in making their own economic history, even under colonial rule.³⁹ In addition, some specific contributions were potentially important for the comparative and global study of economic history. Four examples may be given in brief. First, whereas North had feared that Polanyi's theory was unfalsifiable, both of them were proved wrong by the economic historiography of West Africa, most clearly by Law, who, following painstaking work to render the scattered price data commensurable, showed that the proposition that prices in precolonial Dahomey were fixed was contradicted by clear evidence of substantial inflation.⁴⁰ Second, it may be argued that the research on the settler colonies of Africa revealed much about the resource and institutional conditions under which government repression of wages might be expected, and the senses in which it might 'work' and not work.⁴¹ Third, the perennial and ubiquitous issue of the effects, if any, of non-economic motives on supply response and innovation, was the subject of a conceptually and methodologically important intervention with respect to the case of the African merchants who introduced cocoa farming into late nineteenth-century Nigeria, near Lagos. At the time of Hopkins's essay, and often since, the comparative debate tended to be polarized between a Landes-style affirmation that culture must matter, and a

³⁴ Manning, 'Prospects', p. 52.

³⁵ Nunn, 'Long-term effects'. But see Austin, ' "Reversal of fortune" thesis', for a critical appraisal of this type of 'compression of history'.

³⁶ As with Green, 'Agrarian populism'.

³⁷ Decker, 'Corporate legitimacy'; Uche, 'Oil'; idem, 'British Petroleum'. The *Business History Review* had a special issue on Africa in spring 2007.

³⁸ Feinstein, *Conquest, discrimination and development*; Fourie and Schirmer, 'Future'; Mariotti, 'Labour markets'.

³⁹ Hill, *Migrant cocoa-farmers*.

⁴⁰ North, 'Markets'; Polanyi, *Dahomey*; Law, 'Posthumous question'.

⁴¹ For example, the works cited above on southern Africa.

Gerschenkronian response that the available evidence was consistent with the view that it need not: that is, that, unless the state intervened, profitable opportunities would be taken, even when the culture discouraged this.⁴² Hopkins took advantage of the fact that the Lagos pioneers kept diaries. He distinguished between the external ‘logic of the situation’ (that a price incentive existed) and the ‘internal’ thinking of the actors, arguing that the former was necessary but insufficient to explain the outcome: a full explanation must account not simply for the fact that the opportunity was taken, but also for the fact that it was taken by one of the merchants who could have taken it, rather than by others. This analysis, illustrated with evidence from early colonial Nigeria, had (and still has) implications potentially valuable for students of entrepreneurship in other continents.⁴³ Finally, the work of Lovejoy and Richardson on the slave trade in neighbouring ports in south-east Nigeria provides an instructive comparison of a hostage system versus government guarantee as methods of stimulating foreign trade by securing the credit given by foreign merchants to their domestic partners.⁴⁴

Little of this work was published in general economic history journals. Until a few years ago, the most important outlets for African economic history continued to be the *Journal of African History* and the African Studies series of various book presses. Africanists tended to assume that Europeanists were uninterested in their work. Conversely, economic historians of the West perhaps tended to assume that the source constraints on African economic history were even greater than they actually are, and that the study of African economies was so interwoven with anthropology as to be indecipherable in terms familiar to economic historians, especially those trained in economics.⁴⁵ The occasional articles on Africa that appeared in ‘general’ disciplinary journals sometimes seemed to confirm this impression, as perhaps with an article by the most famous social historian of central Africa, which summarized his more economically relevant findings.⁴⁶

Yet, as indicated above, the economic historiography of Africa already included an increasing number of studies using explicit economic concepts and—though much more rarely—formal models.⁴⁷ There was also a gradual proliferation of quantitative studies, albeit largely using descriptive statistics and mainly reliant on data on foreign trade and government expenditure, including those rare occasions when national accounting was attempted.⁴⁸ The largest database to be constructed in the field so far, on the export of slaves from West and West-Central Africa, was the result of intense research stimulated by controversy following the publication of the first serious attempt at a census of the trade.⁴⁹ On a much smaller scale, Terray initiated what became a collective, though much more intermittent, endeavour to assemble prices for slaves in internal markets in nineteenth-century West Africa.⁵⁰ There was also a notable venture by Eltis into anthropometric history, for the early nineteenth

⁴² Hopkins, ‘Innovation’; Landes, ‘Social attitudes’; Gerschenkron, ‘Social attitudes’.

⁴³ Hopkins, ‘Innovation’.

⁴⁴ Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust’; idem, ‘“This horrid hole”’.

⁴⁵ Manning, ‘Prospects’, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Vansina, ‘Towards a history’.

⁴⁷ For instance, Elliott, ‘Agriculture’.

⁴⁸ Gemery and Hogendorn, *Uncommon market*; Liesegang, Pasch, and Jones, eds., *Figuring*; Szereszewski, *Structural changes*; Manning, *Slavery*.

⁴⁹ Eltis, Halbert, et al., *Voyages*; Curtin, *Atlantic slave trade*.

⁵⁰ Terray, ‘Reflections’; Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Competing markets’; idem, ‘British abolition’; Austin, *Labour, land and capital*, pp. 128–34, 488–90.

century, using the records of West Africans freed from slave ships after British abolition.⁵¹

Still, despite periodic initiatives (for example, Hopkins was in turn an editor of the *Journal of African History* and the *Economic History Review*), the relationship between African economic history and the Western-centred core of the economic history discipline remained an example of the segmentation of the market for knowledge.⁵² The recent resurgence of interest in Africa's economic past has been accompanied by a markedly greater integration of such markets; it is important to pursue this further, though without creating new barriers, for example, between economic history and other branches of African studies.

III

The articles in this collection cover successive periods of African economic history, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the present. They also cover a number of different topics, which it will be convenient to group as follows: (1) population and human capital; (2) national accounting and economic growth; (3) sectoral studies; and (4) trade and finance.

Population and human capital are fundamental building blocks of the economy, determining the size and quality of the labour force. Following a burst of activity in the 1980s, African historical demography went through a quiet period until it was revived by Manning's African population projections for the period 1850–1960.⁵³ The article by Ewout Frankema and Morten Jerven in this collection provides a critical assessment of these estimates, which are characterized as writing history backwards (projecting backwards from a 1950 benchmark) and sideways (using growth rates borrowed from India). Frankema and Jerven raise questions about both the 1950 benchmark and the use of Indian growth rates. After investigating the reliability of population census data in earlier and later years, they argue that the 1950 population benchmark for Africa as a whole needs to be adjusted upwards by about 10 per cent. They also argue that using data on the growth rate of population in India as a basis for projecting backwards from 1950 is likely to be misleading because, in general, India was land-scarce with high population density, in contrast to mostly land-abundant, lightly populated Sub-Saharan Africa. Using population growth rates from south-east Asia, which had similar land–labour ratios to Sub-Saharan Africa, reduces the population in 1850 to two-thirds of the level suggested by Manning. Frankema and Jerven recognize the importance of Manning's study and their work should be seen as calling for further research on Africa's demographic history rather than as producing settled estimates.

Population determines the number of people available for work, but the quality of the labour force is affected by the human capital of those people. We have already noted the important new strand in the economic history of Africa that utilizes anthropometric data to make inferences about human capital. However, in their study of settler skills and colonial development, Johan Fourie and Dieter von Fintel shed light on human capital in the Cape Colony by using household level data collected by the Dutch East India Company to examine the productivity of

⁵¹ Eltis, 'Nutritional trends'; idem, 'Welfare trends'.

⁵² Hopkins, 'World Bank in Africa', p. 1473.

⁵³ Manning, 'African population'.

wine-producers from different backgrounds. Using regression analysis, Fourie and von Fintel show that household output per capita was higher among households descended from Huguenot settlers from wine-producing regions of France than in households descended from Huguenot settlers from non-wine-producing regions, after controlling for the effects of inputs of capital, paid labour, and land quality. Non-Huguenot households produced even less wine per capita. The output per capita differences between the different household groups were much less significant in wheat production. This is interpreted by the authors as consistent with the idea that the skills in viticulture required highly specialized knowledge which was transmitted within the family through learning by doing, whereas wheat-growing required only generic skills which were easily transmitted across the whole farming community.

National accounting has become established as the standard framework for studying economic growth in history. The lack of national accounting data on most of Africa during the colonial and pre-colonial periods and doubts about the reliability of official data for the post-colonial period have therefore contributed to an unfortunate neglect of long-run economic growth in Africa.⁵⁴ For the colonial period, Morten Jerven constructs a time series of gross domestic product (GDP) for Ghana, covering the period 1891–1950. Building on prior work by Szereszewski, Jerven projects forward from an 1891 benchmark using a weighted average of annual time series of physical indicators derived largely from colonial sources.⁵⁵ The series derived in this way is then compared with the data from Maddison, who provided pre-1950 estimates of GDP only for three years between 1870 and 1950.⁵⁶ Jerven finds that the two series grow at approximately the same rate between 1891 and 1950, but the new series captures the fluctuations between the benchmark years in a way that Maddison's series, with its three observations over the entire period, simply could not. Put together with the population data, these new estimates are consistent with the picture emerging from other historical national accounting studies of pre-industrial economies, which suggest that the problem of under-development was not so much absence of growth as lack of consistency, with periods of positive growth followed by 'growth reversals', wiping out much of the gain in living standards from the boom years.⁵⁷

Turning to the post-colonial period, Hanaan Marwah creatively uses data from construction surveys to produce a new series for investment in Nigeria between 1976 and 1985. Although it is easy to point to flaws in the official national accounts produced by Africa's post-colonial states, it is all too rare for critics to provide an effective alternative. During this crucial oil-boom period, Nigeria's official national accounts suggest that much of the oil revenue was spent on investment. However, delving into what actually happened to those funds, Marwah finds evidence that much of the money was dissipated in the so-called 'ghost' construction industry, which did not fulfil the contracts entered into. Marwah's series is derived from the records of surviving legitimate construction companies that can be shown from

⁵⁴ Jerven, *Poor numbers*; idem, *Economic growth*.

⁵⁵ Szereszewski, *Structural changes*.

⁵⁶ Maddison, 'Statistics'.

⁵⁷ Jerven, 'African growth recurring'; Prados de la Escosura, 'Output per head'; Broadberry and Gardner, 'African economic growth'. For a greater emphasis on cumulative economic development, broadly defined, see Austin, 'Resources, techniques and strategies'.

official surveys to have actually had the capacity to complete the projects for which they won contracts. The scale of the over-statement of Nigerian investment is huge, typically of the order of 70 per cent. This has important implications for policy, because one of the conclusions drawn from this episode has been that capital investment is not very productive. The national accounts suggested that there had been a large increase in investment, which had apparently not led to much increase in output. However, Marwah's data suggest that the increase in investment was much smaller than previously thought, so the productivity of that investment was correspondingly much greater.

In a sense, Marwah's article contributes to a well-established tradition of sectoral studies in African economic history, but now focusing on the previously neglected construction industry, and using new sources and methods to provide an answer. James Fenske also takes a well-defined sectoral approach, also for Nigeria, showing how rubber exports were expanded rapidly during the Second World War 'battle for rubber'. Before the Japanese occupation of south-east Asia, the Colonial Office discouraged the production of rubber in Nigeria, which was seen as undermining British interests in other colonies. However, the situation changed dramatically after the Japanese offensive in south-east Asia beginning in December 1941, and Fenske uses official documents from the British and Nigerian national archives in London and Ibadan to show how the authorities managed to engineer a huge increase in rubber exports from the Benin region. The expansion was encouraged by the carrot of a sharp increase in prices on the London rubber market, but the colonial authorities soon found that smallholders needed other incentives, both positive (for example, the availability of household goods and hardware obtained under Lend/Lease) and negative (for example, regulations allowing provincial governors to order trees or vines that were not being exploited fully to be handed over to other tappers). Although the problems with which officials struggled illustrate the limited capacity of the colonial state, the five-fold increase in exports was nevertheless an impressive achievement.

The article on cocoa farming in Ghana by Gareth Austin is another example of a sectoral study, focusing on the 'vent for surplus' approach to understanding the expansion of cash crop exports. The vent for surplus model explains the ability of a country to realize a sharp increase in staple exports by the substitution of labour for leisure. Idle resources of labour are thus combined with abundant land to permit a rapid expansion of output such as occurred in the Ghanaian cocoa take-off, c.1890–1936. The approach has been applied widely to the cash crop revolution in tropical Africa during the early colonial period, and was used by Szereszewski and Teal for the case of cocoa in Ghana.⁵⁸ Austin supplements the aggregate approach used by previous researchers with a district case study of Amansie in Ashanti, where inputs and factor availability can be estimated more precisely. Austin shows that the scale of labour needed to produce the increase in exports was so large that it could not have come from the mobilization of leisure. He also demonstrates that the extra labour needed for the expansion of cocoa production came from the decline of other lines of export production rather than from any decline in labour inputs for food production. Finally, Austin argues that the switch from other export lines to cocoa production represented a shift

⁵⁸ Szereszewski, *Structural changes*; Teal, 'Export growth'.

towards more productive activities, thus contributing to rising real wages and living standards.⁵⁹ Thus Austin's overall verdict is that Ghana's cocoa take-off should be seen as a productivity breakthrough rather than as a vent for surplus.

Austin's article, with its emphasis on production for export, leads on naturally to the final two articles in the collection, on trade and finance. Earlier quantitative work on African trade during the pre-colonial period has tended to focus on the market for slaves or for the goods that Europeans sold to acquire slaves. By contrast, Klas Ronnbäck examines the market for staple crops using data derived from the accounts of the Royal African Company on prices of palm oil, yams, and corn in 13 locations along the Gold Coast during the period 1699–1760. He uses those series to examine a number of hypotheses about price dynamics, using a simple regression equation where the price of a particular commodity in a particular location at a particular time depends on (1) the deviation of the temperature from a local average in the preceding year; (2) a dummy variable for periods of war; (3) the number of slaves exported; (4) the volume of the commodity purchased by the Royal African Company; and (5) seasonal and year dummies. The most significant variables in explaining the price dynamics are temperature-induced scarcity and wars. Ronnbäck concludes that these markets functioned well, given the context in which they were operating, in line with the earlier findings of Law based on markets in Dahomey.⁶⁰

The final article, by Leigh Gardner, examines links between trade and finance in the context of claims that colonial currency regimes promoted the interests of the imperial powers at the expense of colonial development. Perhaps surprisingly, previous writers on this topic have failed to examine the experience of African countries such as Liberia and Ethiopia, which remained independent. Gardner shows that, far from retaining monetary independence, Liberia experienced a rapid depreciation of its own currency during the late nineteenth century, as a result of weak fiscal institutions. This led to the adoption of sterling as a medium of exchange and store of value, which had the initial effect of making it easier for Liberians to service sterling-denominated debt and purchase imports from Britain. However, as economic relations between the US and Liberia grew in importance, instability in the pound–dollar exchange rate created difficulties, which were ultimately solved in 1943 by the official adoption of the US dollar rather than the pound. The story of Liberia suggests that, even in the absence of formal colonial rule, new states in Africa faced serious constraints on their monetary independence.

IV

While the favourable developments outlined in section I created an opportunity for a revival of African economic history, they did not guarantee it, and the vitality of the renaissance owes much to the hard work and creativity of the scholars in the field. One common feature of the new work has been its adoption of a 'global economic history' rather than a regional 'African studies' perspective. As noted above, earlier work on Africa often seemed impenetrable to economic historians of other regions because of the way it was written to appeal to a group of scholars united by an

⁵⁹ Frankema and van Waijenburg, 'Structural impediments'.

⁶⁰ Law, 'Computing domestic prices'.

interest in Africa, but straddling many disciplines, some of whose practitioners were quite suspicious of economics. The global perspective is most obviously visible in the article by Frankema and Jerven, which draws on population trends in other regions to make inferences about likely trends in different parts of Africa. However, it can equally be found in articles such as Gardner's study of the choice of currency in Liberia, or Jerven's construction of a GDP series for Ghana, which helps to fill an important gap in global economic statistics. While care is taken in all these articles to highlight the local differences and idiosyncrasies necessary to understand the significance of the question being studied, they are written in a style that can be read and understood by economic historians of other regions.

A second common feature of the articles is their explicit use of economic analysis. This is far from new in African economic history, but it has been unusual for it to be applied across a whole collection of articles. Examples here range from Austin's evaluation of the vent for surplus model in the context of Ghanaian cocoa farming to Jerven's use of national accounting methods to study economic growth in Ghana and Fourie and von Fintel's use of ideas from human capital theory to shed light on productivity differences in the Cape Colony.

Related to the more widespread use of economics, a third feature of the new work has been its more systematic use of quantitative methods. Notwithstanding the exceptions noted above in sections I and II, until recently the majority of work on African economic history made at best only limited or illustrative use of numbers. By contrast, all of the articles here include the systematic presentation of time series, often painstakingly recovered from archival sources and processed into a consistent dataset. In addition, some of the articles include more formal quantitative analysis, such as the use of regression analysis by Ronnbäck to assess the impact of variables such as climate and conflicts on the prices of staple crops in pre-colonial West Africa or by Fourie and von Fintel to investigate the effect of different settler groups on the productivity of households producing wine after controlling for inputs of capital, paid labour, and land quality.

A fourth feature worth highlighting in the renaissance of African economic history is the creative use of previously neglected sources and/or the treatment of previously neglected topics. Both are exemplified in Marwah's ingenious use of data from Nigerian construction surveys to assess the scale of 'ghost construction' included in the official investment statistics, with important implications for the productivity of investment. Fenske examines the neglected case of Nigerian rubber production during the Second World War in ways that illuminate colonial state capacity, and its limits. Gardner's article moves beyond the usual focus on colonial Africa to consider the neglected case of Liberia, which remained independent.

V

Last, but not least, it is worth noting that this is the first time that a major international economic history journal has devoted so much space to Africa. Indeed, both before and during the decline of the new research in the subject from the late 1980s, there were very few articles on African economic history in the major journals at all. Even over the last decade, during the early stages of the renaissance in African economic history, relatively few papers have been published

in the top economic history journals.⁶¹ That seems to be changing now, and with more articles of the quality on display in this collection now in progress, this trend looks set to continue.

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⁶¹ Fourie and Gardner, 'Internationalization of economic history'.

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