Morten Jerven (2015), *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*, London: Zed Books, ISBN 9781783601325, 176 pp.

Over the last couple of years, Morten Jerven has fundamentally changed the way African economic history has come to be assessed. He has challenged the common wisdom on economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, which has been based on long-standing assumptions, accommodated methods of data collection, and unwarranted policy implications.

And although – as he himself acknowledges – his current book is a distilled version of the work of the past five years, it goes beyond the publications that immediately come to mind – for example, *Poor Numbers* or *A Clash of Disciplines? Economists and Historians Approaching the African Past*.[1] The value added lies in Jerven's ability to assemble his former individual findings into a coherent narrative. The book tackles how the misunderstandings surrounding economic growth in Africa are interrelated with an ill-guided search for the historical roots of this growth, a search that has made only meagre attempts to explain empirically observed ups and downs and has utilized constructed statistics. The book's simple message, which is stated at the beginning and can be understood by any interested reader, is that we need to reshape the central research questions about African economic growth and critically engage with the history of that growth in order to understand it correctly. Indeed, Jerven uses language suitable for non-economists and economists alike.

Of the chapters, which are relatively equal in length, the first is the most elaborate. It sets the stage by reviewing the growth literature in detail and by showing the consequences of this literature's misrepresentations – for instance, when the results of the "growth regression industry" are incorrectly applied to policymaking. The focus lies on illustrating the fallacies of the "chronic failure approach," of the search for an African dummy, and of the "subtraction approach" to African experiences and realities. Jerven shows that the widespread assumption that there is an African character flaw in terms of, for instance, institutional corruption and the inefficiency of governments has turned cause-and-effect relationships around. Indeed, it is high time "to bring time and change into the equation" (44) and to recognise that the lack of theory, systematic errors in data sets, and the use of proxies have shaped growth expla-

1 *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013; A Clash of Disciplines? Economists and Historians Approaching the African Past, in: *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 26, 2, 111–124, 2011.

nations such that the economic policies pursued by independent African governments have been incorrectly assessed.

Thus, the growth episodes that Jerven portrays in Chapter 2 have been largely unaccounted for by economists, leading to a nearly total neglect of their transformative potential. The unique historical experiences of African economies have been sidelined in favour of engaging with country-level variations in income, measured by GDP per capita. Although GDP statistics do not go far back in time (and are not tested for meaningfulness), they are nevertheless used to search for the root causes of Africa's "growth failure" in terms of path-dependent processes. This chapter draws heavily on arguments already made in *A Clash of Disciplines?* and supports them with, for example, a table originally compiled for *Poor Numbers*. One might imagine that the clearly visible volatility of rankings of African economies should have moved economists to investigate trajectories of economic growth and change, but this has not happened. Jerven thus illustrates how the neglect of historical evidence, of the context-dependency of economic change, and of the possible contribution of other social sciences in reaching beyond a "history matters" statement still shapes current, deficient interpretations of African economic history. He convincingly demonstrates the dangers of drawing policy implications from results gained through analytical shortcuts.

One of the consequences of taking the easy way out is that the recent swing towards the other extreme – an "Africa rising" euphoria – cannot be theoretically accounted for either. As much as precolonial and recurrent growth, as described in Chapter 3, is not yet understood, those recent growth experiences are not illuminated by insights into how episodes of rapid economic change and accumulation lead to qualitative changes in the organisation of societies and economies. A gap is widening, and Jerven seems to know the way out. But in view of what he has said before, his account of the factors necessary to break free from episodic growth seems an unnecessary retreat into conventional economics. One can, of course, assume that the world market, political conditions, and the prices of factors of production determine the rate of structural change across African economies (88), yet the underlying conditions of Africa's continuing vulnerability and surprising recent resilience still loom in the shadows.

As usual, Jerven is very critical of taking the measurement and application of GDP for granted, and Chapter 4 ultimately looks "beneath the statistical surface" (102), an endeavour the author undertook and accomplished with *Poor Numbers*. Here, detailed elaborations on the impact of, for example, the setting of base years for GDP calculations are nicely linked with questions of data quality, data extrapolation, and the conflict between data reliability and validity.

With the first three passages of the Conclusion, Jerven boldly and lucidly challenges mainstream (development) economics. They outline his proposed agenda for future intellectual efforts on African economic development. Sentences such as "The key to understanding what fails or succeeds lies within the economy in question" (130) or "The solution is to refocus the study of economics on the study of economies" (ibid.) sound programmatic indeed. Whether these calls will suffice to stop development economists from advocating only specific models is doubtful. The incidence of path dependency, sadly, holds for science as well – perhaps even particularly well for economics. But since Jerven finishes with the perspective that "simply by asking questions [...] one can engage critically with mainstream economics" (132), maybe a critical mass of questioners represents a beginning. Jerven has clearly done his homework in securing a critical mass of readers prepared to ask the necessary questions.

■ Ute Rietdorf