

Emmanuel Akyeampong, Robert H. Bates, Nathan Nunn, and James A. Robinson (eds) (2014), *Africa's Development in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ISBN 9781107041158 (hardback), 9781107691209 (paperback), 539 pp.

In this collective volume, influential economists, historians, and political scientists set themselves the task of explaining why Africa diverged from the path of economic growth pioneered in Europe. Is this interdisciplinary effort a meeting of the minds or a dialogue of the deaf? A bit of both. The book makes clear not only the importance of a long-term perspective on development but also the limits of methodologies so far deployed. The volume does not answer the fundamental question it poses.

In a lucid introduction, the four editors set out diverse approaches that have been taken to finding the “roots of Africa’s underdevelopment,” deciding when Africa diverged from economic pathways parallel to those of Europe, and analysing the causes and consequences of the routes taken. Then follow 16 chapters, occupying more than 480 pages, each of which makes its point with varying degrees of success and relatively few references to the others. The editors refer to – but neither they nor any author take up – Morten Jerven’s argument that what needs to be explained is not Africa’s history of slow growth, but why Africa experienced impressive growth spurts that were not sustained, a reformulation that points to questions specific in time and place rather than to what characteristic of “Africa” or what event (the slave trade or colonialism) sealed its fate.¹ Why “Africa” should be the object requiring explanation is not always clear, when the continent is neither homogeneous nor unconnected to the rest of the world.

That Africa’s economic history shows the importance of “path dependence” is widely acknowledged by economists and political scientists here and elsewhere; historians call this “history.” The notion of a path should imply that one follows the path along its entire length, but this volume is not able to escape the widespread tendency to leapfrog: to find, for instance, in the slave trade, at its peak in the eighteenth century, the cause of Africa’s twenty-first century malaise. That presumes rather than explains continuity. Some authors assert, with rather perfunctory argumentation, that colonial regimes froze African political structures and attitudes in place, although they do not agree over whether what

1 Morten Jerven (2010), African Economic Growth Recurring: An Economic History Perspective on African Growth Episodes, 1690–2010, in: *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 25, 127–154.

they froze was local communities or the centralised power of slave-trading kingdoms.

Jean-Philippe Platteau thinks African culture (apparently there is such a thing) was too egalitarian to foster economic initiative and risk-taking. Warren Whatley thinks that African polities became too “absolutist” over the course of the slave trade to allow entrepreneurs to exercise initiative. In a quite different vein, Linda Heywood richly describes a time in the history of an African kingdom when a complex creole culture, adapting to African and European influences, fostered urban development, noting without explanation that these developments proved short-lived – perhaps one of Jerven’s growth spurts. Joseph Inikori and Patrick Manning come closest to seeing Africa and Europe diverging not because of intrinsic attributes of each but because of different positions in a singular process that produced plantation slavery and industrialisation in one and escalation of enslavement in the other. Richard Reid, Gareth Austen, and William G. Clarence-Smith try to fill in the blanks between the slave trade and the present by suggesting that there were both opportunities and limitations for entrepreneurs and states in late-nineteenth-century Africa that were foreclosed by colonisation. Ayodeji Olukoju looks at colonial-era entrepreneurs and cites a Lagos newspaper from 1919 asking why Yoruba entrepreneurs were “frittering away” (209) their well-earned capital. These contributions suggest a more conjunctural approach than that suggested by those who see everything as determined by the slave trade or unchanging African culture.

The economists in this collection have read history and anthropology, but not necessarily in an historical way. They like to use the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and the Murdock *Ethnographic Atlas*, both of which are compilations of colonial-era ethnography, providing a view of “traditional” societies as timeless and ethnic boundaries as fixed. Even Platteau, who uses more up-to-date ethnographic sources, treats them as timeless and determinant. He tells Africans that they should turn to monotheistic religions, “escape from community loyalty,” and undertake “tie-severing migrations” (180, 188), apparently unaware that all of this is already part of African history. Robert Bates thinks that counting the number of states in precolonial Africa means something independent of any other information about these states, and then leaps to conclusions about the effects of “imperial peace.” Nathan Nunn deploys a sophisticated quantitative apparatus to make the rather obvious argument that education advanced the most in places that had the most schools, and his efforts to find variations within this pattern are weakened by his reliance on HRAF and Murdock’s maps. He believes he can tell us the

impact of mission education without drawing on the rich literature on what missions actually did and what Africans made of their mission education. As clarified by some of the more thoughtful contributors, such as Manning, population figures for most of African history are backward extrapolations from recent census data, making it hard to use such data to demonstrate historical trends in a non-tautological manner. The reader is left wondering if these sources are used mainly because they are there and can be manipulated in elegant ways.

There is much to be learned and more to be debated in these 16 chapters (not all of which can be discussed in this short review) that reveal different perspectives on the economic history of Africa. This collection reveals the gap between the questions that scholars want to answer and the means they have to answer them. Some chapters betray a methodological myopia, a self-confirming mode of analysis whose relation to historical experience is questionable. In other chapters, a more fine-grained sense of how things worked at particular times and in particular places does not translate into a systematic examination of how and why the economic energy and creativity evident in Africa's growth spurts did not translate into repeated cycles of innovation and growth. This book does more to demonstrate the need for a dialogue of the disciplines than to exhibit the fruits of such a dialogue.

■ Frederick Cooper