Africa in the World

Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State

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Africa and Capitalism

Let us start out with Africa's place in the evolution of the world economy. Much writing on wealth and poverty tries to explain Europe's riches by virtue of its supposedly inherent characteristics: the scientific spirit, the Protestant ethic, openness to commerce, or a bent toward incremental technological innovation. Africa has served as a foil for such arguments: cultural predispositions that run against economic rationality, too strong kinship ties, weak notions of personal property, and—with twentieth and twenty-first century variations—a tendency toward personal, tyrannical, anti-entrepreneurial governance.[1]

The question of global economic divergence has been given a scholarly push out of static comparisons by Kenneth Pomeranz, historian of China, and Prasannan Parthasarathi, historian of India.[2] Part of Pomeranz's argument is a sophisticated revival of the Williams thesis. He claims that Britain—and especially its industrial regions—only pulled ahead of China economically around 1800. Britain's overseas empire put together in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was, he insists, critical to the industrial takeoff of the nineteenth. West Indian colonies, employing African slaves, enabled England to profit from complementarities in land and labor: without West Indian sugar supplying a large portion of the calories to workers in the mills, much land and labor in England would have been diverted to growing calorie-rich crops. Had slave-grown cotton from the southern United States not become cheaply available in the early nineteenth century the English textile industry might have had to draw on domestically grown fibers, again with high opportunity costs in land and labor. Pomeranz points to the "exceptional scale of the New World windfall, the exceptionally coercive aspects of colonization and the organization of production there, and the role of global dynamics in ensuring the success of European expansion in the Americas." Chinese empire, he claims, had no such complementarities—it extended over rice- and wheat-producing land that was part of the same system as the region with industrial potential. Within its own configuration of imperial ties and regional economic relations, China's producers (and government) followed perfectly rational strategies and accumulated considerable wealth, but they did not provide the same impetus to industrialization as did the combination of factors that provisioned Britain's version of empire.[3]

That England had a state apparatus capable of enforcing property rights, backing up employers' disciplining of labor, and protecting commerce is also an essential part of the story.[4] The growing capacity of the state in the eighteenth century was in turn conditioned by the imperial nature of that state—its need for fiscal and military resources to extend and maintain its reach into Ireland, the West Indies, North America, and India. Empire was making the British state, not the other way around.

Parthasarathi focuses on another dimension of imperial connections. As of the early eighteenth century, Indian cotton textiles were more desired in world markets than anything Britain could produce, but Britain was able to use its central point in imperial networks to become a relay station between Indian producers and markets. A key link here was, once again, the slave trade: Indian textiles, via Britain, went to Africa to pay for slaves who ended up in the Caribbean helping to grow sugar, enhancing the buying capacity of Euro-Americans, who bought more cloth. British manufacturers were under pressure to innovate to counter Indian dominance of production, and they were aided by a government willing to impose tariffs and other barriers to protect a developing industry. The imperial state—with its navy and its effort to concentrate economic power—was able to enforce the tariffs and commercial regulations (the Navigation Acts) that kept Dutch and other trading competitors at a disadvantage. Yet another dimension of imperial power came into play by the early nineteenth century: British control over India was sufficient to ensure that

Indian industrialists would have no comparable help in keeping up with innovations. India went from industrial exporter to exporter of primary products.

Both explanations posit Britain's divergence as a kind of leapfrog. The Qing and Mughal empires were doing just fine as large-scale land empires, with governments that presided over commercially active societies and collected sufficient revenues to maintain and expand a large imperial apparatus while leaving considerable space to farmers, artisans, manufacturers, and merchants to operate. Britain, in a violently competitive European state system and in need of external resources, did the most advantageous thing it could: build a fiscal-military state, capable of sponsoring and protecting plantations overseas and factories at home. Its particular form of empire-building—militaristically and economically aggressive—came out of a necessity that the other great empires of the time, Qing, Mughal, or Ottoman, did not face. The "divergence" of the British economy reflected both its capacity—coercive, financial, economic—to concentrate resources and its capacity to prevent others from doing so, be it in the form of tariffs and commercial regulations deployed against European competitors, colonial controls in India, or naval power at sea. One might draw a different lesson from one frequently claimed as the source of European economic success and power, that is the miracle of the unfettered market. Rather, the fetters—imposed selectively—helped to produce the market. A relatively strong state was key to Britain's industrial takeoff, as arguably an activist state was to Asian "tigers" in the late twentieth century.[5]

One reason why the arguments of Pomeranz and Parthasarathi have attracted so much attention is that both scholars started out as historians of East and South Asia. They did not come to the project looking for a set of attributes of Britain—or Europe—that made it great. They came from a different direction and sought answers by looking at the shifting places of England, China, and India in interaction across space and by looking at "divergence" as a process, not an attribute—a process shaped by the exercise of imperial power.

What does all this have to say about Africa? Not that Africa, like China or India, stood on the edge of its own industrial development. The value of these arguments is in their focus on relationships, on the different positioning of political entities—kingdoms, empires—in relation to each other across interconnected spatial systems. It would be misleading to assert that there is a normal pattern of economic growth—from which Africa deviates—or to invert the arguments of the Africa-bashers by considering Africa a mere victim. Africa's economic history is not that of continual backwardness, shared poverty, choking overpopulation, or unremitting subservience. Its history is also one of adaptation to difficult ecosystems, of trading systems that linked different producers across long distances. African entrepreneurs adapted—whether for better or for worse—to external demands for their products.

But questions remain about the forms innovation and adaptation have taken and the effects of adaptation, constraint, and resistance on connections to world markets. Much of what Africa is up against today—not least the denigrating terms in which its future is debated—is not a consequence of "failure" so much as of the partial success of a large number of its people in responding to—or staving off—efforts at economic domination, from within and abroad.

Africa's human geography—relatively low population, varied landscapes—provided many places to hide and few in which to build regimes of exploitation. The would-be king or the would-be employer of labor could attract or coerce followers—hence the high population densities near the Niger River or the East African lakes going back several centuries—but their efforts were constrained by the danger that organized groups of kinsmen could move elsewhere to establish their communities.[6] It was difficult for an elite to entrench itself by monopolizing control of land; doing so would have risked an exodus of would-be subjects and followers, whose service in many capacities—fighting, raising children, working—was the most valued resource. Land was hardly there for the taking, but access to it was in general mediated through kinship and village-level structures.[7]

For a would-be king or dominant class, enrichment via escalated exploitation of local people was a dangerous endeavor. Bringing in outsiders—slaves for example—was a more attractive option and a major factor in both Sahelian Africa and the coastal kingdoms of West Africa. Even in this regard, elites had to be careful. Studies of African slavery show how wary slaveowners were of locally born slaves, who had the connections and knowledge to organize collective flight or resistance. In most contexts, African slaveowners preferred to reproduce a slave labor force by integrating older or second-generation slaves and raiding for or buying new ones.[8]

The "exit" option, as Albert Hirschman calls it, was thus relatively open in much of Africa—including the near-hinterland of much of the Atlantic coast as well as the Sahel. Exit was a social possibility, resting on the strength and flexibility of kinship networks and other forms of affiliation. Exit of course changes the terms of other options—"loyalty" and "voice" in Hirschman's schema.[9] Not all parts of the world had such a viable exit option: geographic closures, higher population densities, and the relative weakness of corporate kinship groups made other regions more vulnerable to the exactions of would-be kings or would-be exploiters. Africa had a long history of statebuilding, but even as kinship groups in such situations were made to pay tribute, contribute fighting men, or agree to marriages that allowed the king to expand his lineage, the lineages could make kings accommodate to them and accept checks on authority.

Such considerations can help us understand the early interactions of West Africans with the first Europeans—from the Portuguese kingdom—who came to their shores in search of gold and slaves in the fifteenth century. At that time, coastal Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau were at the fringes of the great Mali empire. This empire (see Chapter 2) covered a vast area, and its power was based both on its coercive capacity and its ability to give local elites in many areas an interest in accommodation, thanks to its situation on the critical nodal points connecting the Sahelian region with North Africa across the Sahara desert.

These routes were of great importance, not just for the economic connections they forged between Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and the greater Mediterranean, but for their cultural and political impact.[10] As one would expect, Mali's rulers did not exercise tight control over its component parts, and it did not impose its own cultural patterns on all its subjects. Its elite was Muslim, and Islam often flourished in spaces crisscrossed by trade routes, and particularly among merchant diasporas. Mandinka traders spread from Mali across vast spaces of West Africa, including to the gold mines south of the Empire's center, but also to the southwest. Their presence gave rise to cosmopolitan communities, familiar with trade, operating in an ambiguous field where the power of kings was at times to be respected, at times to be kept at a distance.

Trade in slaves was part of what made these networks work. The strength of the economic system was not in the intensiveness with which slaves or anyone else could be exploited, but in the connections across space that elites could manage, networks forged out of trust reinforced by Islam as well as by interest. Toby Green argues that the experience of people in the Senegambia-Guinea region with such forms of commercial interaction in the Sahel and across the Sahara enabled them to adapt quickly and profitably to the arrival of Portuguese traders.[11]

The "Portuguese" presence in coastal West Africa derived from an equally particular route. Green points to the role of "new Christians," Portuguese Jews who were forced to convert in the early sixteenth century and then dispersed. A group of them established themselves in the Cabo Verde islands, seeking to trade in a variety of commodities and grow crops in a favorable tropical climate. The Cabo Verde traders developed a particular sort of community and a particular sort of trading system, adaptable to making contact in diverse environments and to forming commercial relationships with people who were not like themselves. Hardly intent on any world-spanning project of empire-building, they nonetheless put together connections that eventually gave rise, for a time, to a Portuguese-dominated network linking Africa, Iberia, and the New World. And out of the commodities that interested the Cabo Verde merchants the one that led to the most important breakthrough was slaves.

The early European presence in West Africa was far from potent; traders stuck to their enclaves—or offshore vessels—and made their deals. Green argues that cosmopolitan communities with many mixed-race and more culturally mixed people carrying on business developed around such enclaves. Networks expanded beyond those of the Cabo Verde traders and the Mandinka diaspora with whom they made contact in ports along the coast. None of the actors—the first generations of African and Portuguese traders included—could know what was going on at the other side of the Atlantic and how much the patterns that grew out of their experience would, over time, have fateful consequences. It was only later, as back-and-forth contact across the Atlantic developed, that traders, some of slave descent, came to know the nature of the system they had helped to create. By the seventeenth century, many of the most important traders in the West African ports—trading in a variety of commodities as well as slaves—were "Luso-African," most often the product of Portuguese-African sexual liaisons, although some Africans also acquired the linguistic and cultural skills to become part of such communities.[12]

The interest of these West African elites in managing connections with the external world helps to explain the continuities of the slave trade and the variations that developed as it extended to other regions of Africa. G. Ugo Nwokeji, writing on the Bay of Biafra, and John Thornton and Linda Hayward on West Central Africa also call attention to the interface of African and European networks that created a spiral of involvement, regional militarization, and in some places the creation of Creole Atlantic societies.[13] Adaptation also took the form of a variety of currencies that Jane Guyer describes as "interface" systems that facilitated Atlantic commerce.[14]

Together, we see a range of adaptations to the demand for slaves: from centralized kingdoms with the top-down authority that were strengthened by slave trading, to the Aro of southeastern Nigeria who could adapt profitably to the demand for slaves through a more network-like mechanism, to kingdoms of West Central Africa where connections and alliances with Portuguese enveloped the region in conflict and produced large numbers of slaves. The latter case, especially in Angola, entailed the most direct involvement of Europeans in slave catching, but they had to work through alliances with African leaders, who were themselves in the process of constructing rival polities. When Dutch slavers entered the picture, the overlap of two European powers and different African polities fighting for power and for slaves gave rise to an unstable situation—devastating for thousands of people caught up in the conflicts. Whether a state could, in a sustainable manner, establish its power over a region, raid for slaves beyond its borders, and commercialize slaves captured by others in the region or whether multi-sided conflict and instability reigned, slaves were being captured and sent to ports, where European slaving vessels came by and made their deals.

The participation of African elites in such structures was a response to what they could and could not do, what they could and could not control. In this context, it means little to say that Africans were enslaving other Africans. African elites were not acting as Africans—for such a designation only came to have meaning in the context of the Atlantic world itself—but as would-be kings, emperors, or chiefs trying to extend their authority in conditions where individuals and collectivities had alternatives to pursue. To some kings and merchants in the slave trade era, participating in the slave trade made sense because both the obtaining and the disciplining of slave labor occurred externally to their power base. They raided far afield and sold the people they captured, giving up the potential profits of exploiting labor directly along with the risks of doing so.[15] They obtained commodities that elites could distribute to followers, like cloth, iron bars that could be used to make tools and contribute to agricultural and other activities that took place alongside slave trading, and guns that gave temporary advantage to the political elites that had them until their neighbors caught up—leaving a more militarized politics in place.[16] The nefarious connections had complex consequences: one of them was the introduction into Africa of New World crops—cassava, maize—that came to be regarded as African staples and may have contributed to the capacity of growing states to feed a denser population.[17]

The difficulties of African rulers in systematically exploiting their populations *in situ* coincided with one of the ugliest and most central dimensions of Euro-American history from the sixteenth century onward—the voracious appetite for labor in places, notably the Caribbean sugar islands, where indigenous populations had been killed off and where people with choice in the matter did not want to go.[18] Some African rulers and communities refused to sell slaves at various times, but connections have their advantages. Once someone in the region got into the slave-trading business, its capacity to make war and stage raids was increased; the availability of weapons and trade goods—necessary to acquire followers—changed the nature of political competition.[19]

In the nineteenth century, after the European change of heart on the slave trade under the impetus of abolitionist movements, African polities that had profited from such commerce had to make a transition from exporting to using slave labor. The shift was manageable in part because slave-trading kingdoms had never been exclusively slave-trading kingdoms; production and commerce were more complex and varied. Some nineteenth-century societies were quite successful in increasing the productive use of slaves. Faced with the continued problem of escape and the dangers of a slave class building up over generations, most slaveowners cycled captives through the status of slavery and, at least in second or subsequent generations, into positions of lesser subordination, at the cost of terrible slave raiding for new slaves to keep the system going.[20] European buyers of palm oil, cloves, or other African-produced commodities did not, at least for a time, have to ask questions about how the palm oil or cloves that they wanted were produced.

What is really the peculiar institution—despite the success of antislavery ideologues to attach the label the other way around—is capitalism, not just in the sense of commodity markets but above all in the organization of labor. The great divergence of the eighteenth century—in relation to China, India, or Africa—was not just a matter of an imperial state shaping Britain's relation to world markets, but a transformation of labor relations at home.

Here Marx is helpful. He argued that capitalist apologists attribute their success to the benign operations of individual market transactions when it really should be attributed to the malignant exercise of social power. Marx had considerable if grudging respect for capitalism, acknowledging its enormous material successes, but insisting that brutality was not a mere side effect. Capitalism entailed the separation of the majority of producers from the means of production—especially land—what he called primitive accumulation. He attributed the emergence of England as the world's great economic power to the violent extinction of the rights of its people to access to land. Expropriation not only left the majority with no choice but to sell the one asset they had—their labor power—but it left land and factory owners with no choice but to buy it. Capitalism was more successful in the long run than household production, serfdom, or slavery—and one could now add communism—because it compelled property owners to compete each day to hire labor and therefore to employ that labor power as efficiently as everyone else. The slaveowner in need of more income could be more brutal; the peasant could survive from household production if crop markets turned against him. Capitalist and wage-worker were bound together—unequally—in the labor market.[21]

The actual forms of labor that characterized nineteenth-century Europe—let alone the colonies—did not conform to the pure notion of wage labor posited in Marxist theory. A wide range of forms of coercion were important to the recruitment of labor and to the labor process itself, within factories or on fields.[22] But the ambiguous basis of wage labor made it all the more important for elites to represent it as a distinct form of work. And it would be hard to do so if the slave stolen from Africa and laboring under the whip on a Jamaican sugar plantation could not be sharply distinguished from the English worker in a textile mill, who had been driven into the factory by deprivation—by the extinction of forms of tenancy that had given at least some access to land, by the destruction of artisanal privileges, and by the erosion of a more paternalistic model of class relations.

In this sense, the effort of humanitarian activists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth to define the slave trade and slavery as evils helped, whatever those activists' intentions, to define the specificity and acceptability of wage labor. Antislavery activism was not a bourgeois conspiracy, and there were working class activists who sought to tar with the label "wage slavery" the forms of labor subordination characteristic of English factories, but those activists were not the ones who succeeded in framing the slavery question. The act of Parliament of 1833 that finally abolished slavery in the British West Indies represented a conservative version of antislavery—requiring freed slaves to go through a period of "apprenticeship" even though they knew perfectly well how to cut cane—and it was nearly simultaneous with Poor Law legislation in England that made life harsher for the working class in Britain.[23]

This brings us to the point where Marx's Eurocentric point of view led him astray. In his writing on India, Marx predicted that the brutality of British conquest would have effects similar to that of the brutality of primitive accumulation in England: to force Indian upper classes to give up their backward Hindu ways and to exploit their subalterns in proper capitalist fashion.[24] Yet the impact of British power in India was not to undo Indian social structure, but in a selective way to reinforce it. Indian landlords were the key to revenue collection by the state.[25] British writers at the time did not discuss this process in terms of the limits of colonial power or as evidence that distinct paths to the future might emerge; they told a tale of Indian backwardness, much as Africa's twentieth-century economy would be represented as Africans' primitive nature.

From the 1850s, European travelers to Africa used images of backwardness and violence to describe a continent crying out for European intervention. The slave trade, which European money had done so much to stimulate, became a central image of Africa. David Livingstone's voyages gave publicity to a view of the African—once the Enslaved Victim—as the Enslaving Tyrant.[26] Colonization was now advocated as the only way to save Africans from their own violence and tyranny and to "open"—a favorite metaphor—the continent to the beneficial effects of legitimate commerce. The motives behind colonization were of course more complex and hardly benign. Nevertheless, images of oppression and backwardness were extended from areas where the slave trade was supplying African slaveowners to parts of Africa where slavery was not significant at all. Colonization could be normalized because the colonized could be represented as outside the boundaries of normality.

The impetus behind reformist imperialism barely lasted a couple of decades. Colonial rulers soon found that they could maintain order only by forging alliances with the very elites whose tyranny and economic irrationality they had railed against, and colonialism in most of the continent soon settled for living off the surplus production of peasants, the coercive extraction of valuable raw materials, or the employment of laborers who retained a strong foothold in their villages, lowering their cost but also assuring that they gave only part of their being to the demands of production and export.[27]

European colonizers were profiting from and exacerbating an intersection of possibilities and constraints similar to those that underlay the slave trade—African societies' "extroversion," to use Jean-François Bayart's phrase, their relative resistance to internal exploitation and adaptability to external economic relations.[28] The mediocrity of colonial economies was not a major problem for their rulers when the costs of overseas government were low. World-spanning empires could focus on a few areas with valuable resources, including only those parts of Africa that constituted what a French banker in the 1930s called "useful Africa."[29] The most exploitative of colonial interventions—the actions of concessionary companies to extract resources like rubber or the forced cultivation of cotton in Portuguese Mozambique, Belgian Congo, or French Equatorial Africa—were notable for their brutality, not their capacity for systematic, long-term development of human and natural resources.[30]

The weakness of colonial power made it more violent, not less, but not so certain in its effects. Africans in much of the continent had considerable social resources, and they used mobility, kinship networks, and the ability to move between modes of economic activity to avoid too much dependence on white employers in mines or cities or would-be African capitalists in the countryside. It was mainly in South Africa that a racialized version of Marx's primitive accumulation took shape.

Such a process emerged from South Africa's particular trajectory. Going back to 1652, a white settler population of Dutch and later British origin established itself on the land, extracting rents, labor, and crop shares from African inhabitants, leaving most peasants to keep actual production in their own hands. The discovery of diamonds in 1866 and gold in 1886 escalated the demand for a large labor force. With improved infrastructure, a growing non-farming population, and a government willing to use bureaucracy and coercion to channel workers into wage labor, white farmers had new incentives to tighten control over their land, expel tenants, and employ wage labor in agriculture.[31] Mineowners and the government could make use of a distinct category of people, whites, to supervise African workers on the job, enforce land alienation, and put into play a series of laws—segregated spaces, pass laws that punished Africans in "white" areas when not actually at work, and reinforcement of chieftaincies—to keep a black labor force in its place. Africans sought to find niches in the system, but over time, the combination of power in the hands of government and employers reduced those alternatives.[32]

Elsewhere in Africa there were enclaves of wage labor—the copper mines of the Belgian Congo and the British Rhodesias, the settler farms of Kenya or Côte d'Ivoire—but they drew on migrant labor whose access to land was constrained but not eliminated as it largely was in South Africa. A readily exploitable mining or plantation zone required a much larger labor catchment area around it where alternative sources of cash income were, deliberately or otherwise, limited.

In most of Africa, colonial governments invested little, until after World War II, when they had to confront the consequences of colonial stagnation.[33] The railway map of Africa (next page)—emerging in a time when railroads were both the sign and substance of economic relations—is highly revealing: a small number of railway lines, mostly narrow-gauge, draining limited hinterlands toward port cities, and, outside of South Africa, virtually no lines connecting parts of Africa with each other—this in contrast to India as much as to western and eastern Europe.

British and French rulers began in the 1920s to pretend that their inability to remake Africa was really the success of a policy of conserving African culture and slowly changing it within Africans' allegedly limited capabilities. Their conservative policies were compatible with expanded crop production, as Africans' kinship and personal ties proved capable of responding to market incentives and mobilizing resources.

The most notable African success stories in this regard—cocoa in Gold Coast, Nigeria, and the Côte d'Ivoire—were based on flexible relations of production that cannot be reduced to either "peasant" or "capitalist." The first cocoa bushes came from Swiss missionaries to the Gold Coast in the late nineteenth century, when British power was essentially limited to a few coastal locations. A small number of Africans, living inland from the coast, with little encouragement from British officials, began to cultivate the crop and sell the cocoa that came from pods on the bush. The groups


Rail Networks of
Africa, Europe, and
the Middle East
0 500 1000 miles

that controlled good cocoa land leased or granted it to entrepreneurial strangers, who in turn mobilized kinfolk and others to help them plant trees and subsist until the trees were bearing. Much labor came from migrants or people who formed long-term relations of clientage as from formal wage labor relations. Laborers sought the patronage of the cocoa planter and had some expectations that inserting themselves into the production process might, over time and with the successful manipulation of personal relations, allow them to become planters too.

What is remarkable about the cocoa boom of the turn of the twentieth century was that it takes several years for a cocoa bush to reach production, so that the entrepreneurs who took up this crop were both thinking ahead and mobilizing resources—labor, food—in anticipation of deriving an income from the commodity. The story also points to the importance of looking beyond one form—supposedly "western"—of land tenure as the key to innovation and growth. Cocoa production advanced in the absence of freehold ownership, through sharing of rights in productive resources among those with original rights to land, those who added the most productive new resource—cocoa bushes—and kinsmen and clients whose long-term labor might give them access to resources too. This system of land tenure reached a limit of exploitation. Planters could not expand too far, exploit workers too intensely, or constrain others from gaining access to resources because their security of tenure and access to labor depended on connections of community and clientage. Sara Berry describes the outcome as "exploitation without appropriation."[34]

Colonial regimes never quite recognized the significance of this form of economic innovation, even if they enjoyed the export revenue: Africans were not only producing valuable crops, but they were doing so in their own flexible ways. In cocoa-producing regions, some family members could farm, others work for wages, others seek education. But could the very inventiveness and flexibility of these social systems—the obstacles they posed to tyranny and exploitation—have made it more difficult for either Africans or their invaders to perfect patterns of systematic exploitation that underlay capitalist development? Cocoa production seemed to follow a cyclical pattern, constrained both by the need for new resources to maintain the possibility of upward mobility and by the political-economic context in which cocoa production took place. By the 1930s in the Gold Coast, less land was available for new entrants to the cocoa business and a cocoa-growing elite had differentiated itself from the rest of the population, giving rise to social tensions between the large-scale cocoa farmers and the small-scale farmers and agricultural workers.[35] In the 1950s and 1960s, cocoa farmers came into conflict with an African-controlled government now eager to control resources itself. The cocoa farmers reacted by curtailing the renewal of the cocoa bushes, and by the mid-1960s cocoa production in independent Ghana was plummeting. Some years behind the Gold Coast farmers, a similar cycle of extensive expansion followed some decades later by contraction began in western Nigeria, lasting until the 1980s. In this case, growing oil revenues gave rise to so much employment, in the state sector and otherwise, that laborers for a time found more attractive alternatives to the cocoa economy, while the sons of affluent planters found more lucrative opportunities in the state or other businesses.[36] In the Côte d'Ivoire after 1946, the end of forced labor directed toward European farmers gave African farmers a chance to organize labor and production in their own ways, giving rise to what has been called the "Ivorian miracle" that lasted until the bottom fell out of the cocoa market in the 1990s. What distinguished all of these upward cycles was that they involved a relatively large population and promoted linkages to other economic activities. One cannot say the same about the exportation of oil (which demands few workers) or plantation economies dominated by small—often foreign—landowning elites, using cheap and insecure wage labor.[37]

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire were generating considerable wealth through agricultural exports, officials—including specialists in colonial economies—in London and Paris were not always able to recognize that they were onto a good thing, although local officials were more wont to boast of their success. The experts in colonial economy were too steeped in images of African backwardness, too wedded to European-centered models of what systems of production should look like, to understand the alternative pathways forward, let alone their limitations. To take examples from French West Africa, a conference on reviewing plans for development projects was told that "Unfortunately, this agriculture is entirely in the hands of Africans, and for this reason its development will certainly be fairly slow, because it will be necessary to act on the native, to teach him to rationalize his methods, to improve his product. . . ." A governor insisted that one had to press development projects in the face of a population that remained "frozen in anachronistic and archaic concepts and does not see the necessity to participate by a voluntary and reasoned effort in the progress of their country. *On the whole the masses are not yet socially ready to adapt to the norms of a renovated life*."[38] Similarly in Great Britain, the Minister in charge of the Colonial Office and some of his economics staff were specifically calling for an "agricultural revolution" in Africa, without understanding the dynamics of production that were actually taking place.[39]

The interventionist impetus behind these remarks reflected new thinking on the part of British and French governments in the 1940s, including realization that their own contribution to economic growth had been inadequate: minimal construction of railroads, roads, and port facilities, lack of investment in processing of African raw materials or in local manufacturing, miserable living conditions in cities, and meager health and educational facilities. They finally enacted programs—rejected by both governments in the 1920s and 1930s—to use metropolitan funds to improve the infrastructure and social services they deemed necessary to promote economic development.[40] The embrace of the development concept was in part a reaction to disorders that had struck the British (and to a more limited extent French) empires during the late 1930s, during the war, and in the years following World War II. These disorders were concentrated not in the poorest parts of the empires, but in areas where commercial activity and wage workers—and much human misery—were concentrated, in mines, railroads, commercial centers, and ports. "Development" was supposed to make the empires more productive—and thereby aid France and Britain to recover from the war—but also more legitimate.

But development initiatives in the 1950s were circumscribed not only by the economic weaknesses of European powers that they were supposed to overcome—inadequate state finances in particular—and by the poor quality of the colonial infrastructure on which to build, but by a failure of imagination. When colonial regimes after World War II returned to their older transformative zeal, seeking to make Africa more productive and to legitimize their rule by raising its standard of living, they were caught in their brittle dualism of "modern" and "backward" economies. As they began to act as if Africans could be made into regular wage laborers, good farmers, and urban property owners, they contrasted their imagined acultural, asocial, modern African to the backward tribalist—missing the change and innovation that had occurred outside of this imagined polarity.[41]

By now, African workers in ports, mines, and railways were in a position to insist—in a wave of post-war strikes—that they share in economic growth. The very narrowness of colonial transformations in the previous half-century meant that disruption in key transportation nodes or in mines by relatively small numbers of people tied together in networks that colonial police did not understand had a relatively large impact. The sudden increase in investment clogged the narrow channels that regimes controlled.[42] The development effort—intended in part to convince angry workers and peasants that European-directed modernization would improve their standard of living—led instead to more conflict.

African labor movements were actively engaging with the new colonial politics of development. If we are to produce like European workers, they insisted, we should receive equal pay for equal work. Africans coopted into legislative institutions in France turned the argument that French political institutions and culture were the model for Africa into a claim to the entitlements of French citizens.

That was only one side of the politics of the post-war decade; mobilization also took place through a variety of cultural mechanisms, through peasant movements, local healers, kinship group elders, and organizations of women.[43] The protests of the late 1940s and 1950s were effective because of the conjuncture of different forms of political action. Social and political movements did more than force changes in government. In the 1950s they decisively changed international discourse about colonialism, national self-determination, economic development, and Africa.

The people who should have been the success stories of economic growth in this era—the cocoa producers of Western Nigeria or the coffee growers of northern Tanganyika—used their earnings to enhance their importance in their communities, to forge networks of clients and supporters, to invest in marketing independent of the colonial firms, and to fund political parties that supported their interests against the colonial state. Where such routes were blocked, as in Central Kenya or Algeria, violent struggles ensued, and colonial regimes reacted in a way that revealed the brittleness of their own conceptions of Africa. Africans who would not accept the version of modernization on offer were labeled atavistic and dangerous and subjected to fierce repression at the same time that regimes were calmly negotiating with African leaders in the Gold

Coast or French West Africa.[44] In the end, colonial governments realized that the predicable, orderly, and productive Africa that development was supposed to produce was not springing into existence and that their reformism was providing new languages in which aggressive social and political movements could assert themselves. France and Britain began to reassess the costs and benefits of the African colonies as they actually were. The cold calculations have left their traces in the archives: by mid-1950s the accountants in France and Great Britain reported that African colonies did not necessarily pay.[45]

South Africa, from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s, seemed to be moving in a contrary direction. Beset by some of the same forces as French and British Africa, including workers demanding higher wages during World War II and some major employers seeking to create a stable urban working class that would serve its interests, the South African government decided otherwise after the 1948 election. It chose to deepen segregation and maintain a dependent labor force on farms and migrant workers in the gold mines. It escalated repression rather than seek to coopt an African elite. The result was "apartheid." South Africa would sustain racial domination as a *national* project even when it was being formally abandoned as an *imperial* project by the two leading European powers. Racialized capitalism sustained South African industrialization. The edifice began to crack only when South African whites, who felt themselves to be the embodiments of Christian civilization and bourgeois entitlement, began to feel the pinch of global pariah status. Major enterprises ran into difficulties in attracting capital and sought alternative arrangements. The escalation of violence during the 1980s—some of it the result of activists' campaigns to make South Africa "ungovernable," some of it resulting from the tensions within vulnerable and deprived African communities—led South African elites to the realization that racial domination in one country was not sustainable.

In most of Africa what followed colonial rule, some would say, was not independence in any but the most technical sense, but neo-colonialism. The trouble with this reasoning is that it is a simple answer where a good question is in order: what are the ways in which power is exercised over formally sovereign states? What African elites won was sovereignty and little but sovereignty—and that became a card they had to play at home and abroad. Sovereignty meant that the once-colonial concept of development became a national concept—one that could be used for a ruling elite's ends or else by people who saw meager results from government policies to challenge African rulers.

In international circles, the idea of development policy has been attacked from the right—as an impediment to the optimizing operations of free markets—and from the left as an imposition of an unwanted modernity and a project to make Africa safe for global capitalism. But one should be careful about generalizations about a varied process that bridges the moment of independence, from the late 1940s to at least the 1970s. These decades were a time when in a wide range of African countries average life span increased, infant mortality declined, literacy expanded, higher education took off from virtually nothing to something significant. And despite population growth, GNP per capita edged modestly upward in much of Africa. The decline in such figures—particularly social indicators—came later, especially in the 1980s.

Africa was particularly hard hit and particularly slow to recover from the world recession of the mid-1970s that followed a spike in oil prices and a crisis in availability of credit as well as a changed monetary system that produced instability. World recession meant decreased demand for African primary materials, and African states were still dependent on imported manufactured goods and—all the more so because of their efforts at development—on imported petroleum products whose prices were skyrocketing. As government revenue fell, states became more dependent on international financial institutions to pay their debts and meet their most basic import needs. And those institutions were in the thrall of a god that commanded "structural adjustment." In the name of market openness and financial rigor, African states were ordered to cut their budgets, lay off personnel, curtail protection of infant industries, and end the subsidies that enabled many workers to buy consumer goods. If that meant devastating cuts in education and other social services, so be it. In some quarters, structural adjustment was an explicit disavowal of the development project that had animated economic policy since the 1940s.[46]

Arguments about development go round and round, but let me try to put the issue in a long-term historical context. The development concept at one level represented poverty as the eternal backwardness of Africa to be ameliorated by the benevolent injection of western knowledge, markets, and capital. At another level, discussion of poverty eradication made development into a framework for the posing of demands by social and political movements in Africa—and eventually some African governments—for a kind of global social citizenship. Rulers have been criticized for failure to bring about development, even as they used the idea of a "battle for development" to justify their own authoritarian excesses. The very global hierarchy conveyed in this construct implies that the poverty of Mali is an issue in Denmark, just as antislavery ideology made labor conditions in Jamaica or Zanzibar a concern in London, while colonialism and apartheid could be issues in New York or Cambridge.[47]

The central point is that the problem is not one of Africa's aboriginal poverty, but of structures that are Afro-European creations.[48] Some of these are the institutions that have proved adaptive—too adaptive—to changing historical circumstances. Some leaders and their followers responded effectively to the growing market for slaves in the sixteenth century or for slave-produced commodities in the nineteenth century. Others used mobility and kinship ties to escape such predations. Similarly, some Africans used social networks and geographic flexibility to avoid too much dependence on wage labor or too complete subordination to white-dominated states in the colonial era, while others made use of the relatively narrow channels of export economies to obtain a moderate degree of wealth for themselves and their immediate communities.

What this history has produced are "gatekeeper states."[49] Gatekeeper states, like colonial states, are strong at the nodal point where local society meets external economy, dependent on manipulating revenues and patronage possibilities deriving from that point, including foreign aid and commercial deals. They are also vulnerable to challenges to control of the node. Not only were they subject to coups or attempts to gain control of resources independent of the state, but they also feared a politics of citizenship that might challenge the vertical mechanisms of control—from patrons to clients to regional or ethnic power brokers—that gatekeeping fostered. Such fears were realistic. Gatekeeping elites risked being challenged by armed networks seeking a way around the gate: the civil war in Angola in the 1990s, with the state controlling oil revenues and the rebels controlling diamonds, is a classic case. Violent conflict in turn was a blow to economic and social development and an inducement to enroll young men in predatory networks of clientage.[50]

Gatekeeping would not be a viable strategy but for the extreme asymmetry in economic relations between Africa and the industrial countries. Certain individuals and groups, on both sides, have a vested interest in keeping things as they are—to make their deals, to monopolize key resources, to profit from the private provision of services that are in most countries public. When the international financial organizations in the 1980s argued that they could reduce "rent seeking" by governmental elites by shrinking the state, gatekeeping elites were likely to shrink public services—notably education and public health—rather than their rents, and privatization did not necessarily imply competition.[51]

The clearest exception to gatekeeping strategies by African rulers is South Africa, where the effects of the long process of creating racialized capitalism has left in place industry, wage-labor agriculture, and a working class. The big question is whether there is enough work for the working class. Unemployment is crushingly high. The affluent elite—and a good portion of the middle class—are no longer exclusively white, and the fact that one can be rich without being in power is an element in political stability. South Africa has changed dramatically since the end of apartheid, but it remains one of the most unequal societies in the world.[52]

Looking back, the very experience of mobilization against colonialism in the late 1940s and 1950s—in which labor unions, farmers' organizations, and student associations had made claims to a place in the political arena and a share in resources—made elites wary that such ideas could be turned against them, and they were conscious of how limited their resources were to meet such demands. Development was too important as a source of manipulable patronage resources and as a symbol of the state's gatekeeper power to be allowed to take a course toward private accumulation or toward letting trade unions, farmers' associations, and other organizations independent of the state take the initiative. Colonial governments had learned to live with the limitations of their power to remake Africa. Their more interventionist efforts at the beginning and at the end of their period of rule fell short, and the new African governments had fewer means than their imperial predecessors.

What can this rapid excursion through African economic history since the fifteenth century tell us about Africa's present situation? One of the most influential attempts to answer such a question comes from Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, whose work has the virtue of turning the culturalist explanation for Africa's lag in economic development into an institutionalist one. Africa suffers from bad institutions, they argue, and those institutions are a consequence of the history of the slave trade and colonialism, not just African culture or institutions rooted in Africa's earlier past.[53] But there are problems with this approach. One is that the institutional argument presumes that Europe is in the only model for economic growth, so one should take European institutions—such as private property in land—and then treat any deviation from them as the explanation for why another place lags behind. But what if there is more than one route forward, as Asianists have been arguing? A second problem is that the institutional argument hinges on showing that the differential impact across the African continent of, say, the slave trade can be shown to correlate with unevenness in patterns of economic growth in the present, without looking at historical processes in sequence.[54] Finally there is the question of defining what one is trying to explain. Here, the economic historian Morten Jerven has made an insightful intervention: generalizing about lack of growth is not the issue. Jerven points out that different parts of Africa have had a series of spurts, in which economic growth has been strong by world standards. He cites parts of West Africa in the era of the slave trade, the cocoa boom in West Africa in the colonial era, and the export boom of the 1950s and 1960s, plus—more ambiguously—the recent revival of exports. The 1980s, however, were a time of severe contraction.[55]

This observation gives us a different focus—on unevenness, in spatial, social, and political terms. What can historical analysis tell us about particular forms of asymmetrical connections and their consequences? The transactions between the seller of slaves and the final buyer linked people who had their own interests, networks, and conceptions. It was also at the point of connection that colonial regimes exercised most authority, unable as they most often were to effectively control—let alone economically transform—the countryside. Making connections was not just a matter of coercion, but of the creation of incentives for elites in specific areas to deploy the human resources they had to get what they could. A world-spanning empire—or for that matter transnational corporations—could write off regions of less interest or leave them to supply low-cost labor. It was not, for example, only the paucity of French investment in infrastructure in colonial West Africa but its uneven distribution that is echoed in highly unequal distribution of economic resources today.[56] Such structures were quite effective—at low cost to the state—at adapting to certain world market incentives, but vulnerable both to market fluctuations and to challenges of other social formations or other sources of patronage.

Africa has proved both adaptable to some forms of interaction and resilient in the face of others. Africans live with the consequences of both their adaptation to external markets, foreign conquest, and the narrow channels of colonial and post-colonial economies and with the ability of many of them to maintain access to land and to avoid total submergence in a wage labor system. Would many of them be better off—as the working classes of Europe eventually were—if the triumph of capitalism in Africa had been more complete, if their subjection to overseas settlers and extractive industries was more thorough, if the grandiose projects of colonial and independent regimes had been more successful—at whatever human cost? Perhaps—or perhaps not. In any case, the multiple sites of European empire and later the mobility of transnational corporations meant that imperial powers did not have to succeed in subjugating all the world—they could be selective. And the complex adaptations of forms of production and exchange that Africans have in fact made have not produced universal immiseration but a more mixed and shifting record.

One of Jerven's main growth spurts, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, occurred at a time when many governments, colonial and national, were spending more than before or since on education, health, and—for wage workers at least—the rudiments of a welfare state, including wages intended to support a family, pensions, housing, and medical care. In the subsequent period, when African countries were forced to dismantle such social spending and follow market-oriented policies, the growth record was worse.[57]

One cannot say that African leaders generally succeeded in meeting their frequently stated goal after independence of economic autonomy. Some of them, however, did quite well by other criteria—enriching themselves and staying in power. Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon for 40 years and passed the presidency to his son or Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who ruled Côte d'Ivoire for 33 years, are cases in point. The gatekeeper state could be modestly development-oriented in policy and consequences, but the measures intended to shrink it had the perverse effect of undermining the development without ending the gatekeeping. Here lies the crux of the matter: the vast divergence in the world economy means leaders are behaving quite rationally in thinking it better to control a small pie than to follow "experts' " recipies for how, in the long-run, to make the pie bigger. Gatekeeping has fostered both self-aggrandizing rulers and violent conflict over the gate, with even more dire results.

For people at the bottom—or even the middle—of the hierarchy, seeking a patron is often a more hopeful strategy than organizing collectively among the poor or playing by the rules of a "formal" economy. And African entrepreneurs have a long history of developing linkages and adapting methods of economic interaction to the situation at hand.

The past ten years are considered by some observers to be a period of progress, when some African countries have experienced growth rates higher than the world average. For the first time since the 1970s, overall poverty rates for the region have declined.[58] Once again, the record is mixed. Jerven's growth-spurt model is probably what fits best. The expansion is heavily based on extractive industry, fueled by the sharp increase in demand for raw materials from China and India. Mines—and especially oil platforms—"work in enclaves that are more or less cut off from the societies in which they exist."[59] That Angolan exports, largely oil, have shot upward does not mean that most Angolans have benefitted. Botswana and Ghana offer more hope, with considerable uncertainty over how profound and durable the changes are. Telecommunications has been another growth area, and the advent of the cell phone has made a real difference for African consumers, even more so for those favored investors who could get government franchises. The cell phone not only frees users from the limited, unreliable, and expensive network of land lines, but provides a divisible resource, something people of modest income can pay for bit by bit. In cities like Dakar, there are armies of young men in the streets selling phone cards, evidence of adaptability to a market niche, but also a sign of the desperation of such people for the meager income street selling will get them.

Some areas of Africa—northern Mali, Somalia, and the region along the new Sudan-Southern Sudan border—are mired in conflict that undermines the well-being of large numbers of people. Others, like Sierra Leone, are slowly recovering. Whether we are likely to see radical, sustained, or generalized transformation out of this growth spurt remains unclear.[60]

If we wish to look forward, we can make a few simple points. The economic problems and vulnerabilities of Africa are not intrinsic characteristics of the continent, but consequences of a Euro-African history, of patterns established by both positive responses to the possibilities of interaction and by resistance to submergence in colonial economies. It is doubtful that solutions can be found without questioning global structures of economic power as well as Africa's supposed deviations from preset norms.

The idea that the current resources of all African countries—Mali and Chad as well as the Congo or Nigeria—are adequate to provide the infrastructure for twenty-first century economic development is implausible. Some dimensions of development are best handled on a small scale, others not. One study suggests that in average districts of former French West Africa 14 percent of households have electricity, 11 percent private water supply, 15 percent gas or electricity for cooking, and variation among districts is very large, so that many parts of the region are considerably worse off than the averages suggest.[61] One does not improve infrastructure like this without large investment, and one does not produce a skilled labor force or attract industry in such conditions. Building a country-wide health service or quality secondary education for an entire population is not likely to happen unaided in impoverished countries and is not likely to be sustained when export-led booms come to an end. For all the now-familiar problems of foreign aid, we should ask what use it is to consider it "foreign" when the histories of Africa and of the rest of the world have been intertwined for so long.

The one-size-fits-all solutions for Africa's problems that have come from outside and inside do not have a strong track record.[62] The "magic of the market" touted in the 1980s proved not very magical. So-called African socialism and experiments with economic nationalism—import substitution industrialization, state corporations, collective farms or forced villagization—have gone badly too. But perhaps the peasant cocoa farmers of southern Ghana or the market women of West Africa have lessons to teach us. Recently, experiments in Niger of intercropping trees and food crops have produced more positive results than decades of imposed policies of defining forest reserves and clearing bush for farms elsewhere.[63]

African forms of land tenure—which have produced both flexibility and tensions—have shown themselves quite capable of fostering agricultural development. If one followed the logic of taking institutions that have seemed conducive to economic growth in Europe as models for what Africans should do, one might be tempted to say that Africans need to make land into an alienable commodity and create an open market in land, including the possibility of selling land, in whatever size chunks, to foreigners. In fact, several African countries—including Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Sudan—have alienated enormous parcels of land to Brazilian, Indian, and Korean enterprises, without clear indication of what the impact of such sales will be on Africans' future farming possibilities, on the availability and cost of food, and on labor conditions. Knowledgeable observers fear, with good reason, that deeper impoverishment is a more likely outcome of such processes than economic takeoff. Some countries that have alienated huge plots for the export of food crops are themselves recipients of food aid.[64]

A great deal is left unexamined if Africa is understood as everything Europe pretended not to be. Can we see the openings—admitting their limitations—that particular systems of production or specific marketing networks provide, without falling into the false dichotomy of free market and closed state? Perhaps in positing "Africa" as the problem, we are looking both too broadly and too narrowly: too narrowly to see the long history that linked the peoples inhabiting the African continent to the expansion of capitalism, too broadly to see the different ways in which production and commerce across that space have actually worked.

To think of a backward Africa against a modern world or a benign Africa against a hostile world does not get us far. No part of the world has had or can hope to have a self-contained existence, any more than markets function outside of the relationships out of which they were constructed. Africa and Europe shaped each other, but not through symmetrical processes. The world today does not consist of equivalent nation-states any more than the "world market" consists of equivalent actors. To see an Africa, Asia, or Europe whose economic "performance" can be compared with each other obscures both the historical mechanisms through which such entities were imagined and constituted and the nature of international connections today. Unequal struggle is the reality faced today as well as in the past.

Africans, individually and collectively, through networks, kingdoms, local communities, and nation-states, have adapted well—sometimes frighteningly well—to the possibilities that external linkages presented, but they have also made it difficult for kings, colonizers, and capitalists to subordinate them. Adaptation and resistance have had their consequences not only in Africa's economic vulnerability, but in the way it is talked about. One might nonetheless ask not only about how African polities can conform to the institutional structure set up by others, but how international financial institutions or European and American policies of subsidizing agriculture and setting tariffs, credit mechanisms, and rules governing commerce and investment can be altered to benefit the poorest of poor states. One might ask how countries with few material and organizational resources within their borders can be helped to make the necessary investments in education and health and develop the institutional capacity to regulate labor conditions and commercial transactions without which social progress and economic advance will not be achieved in the future. The problem with thinking of Africa as peculiar and other places as normal is that such questions do not get asked.