A Brief Historiography of African Economic History

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1 Abstract

The paper recalls the long history of colonial exclusion of African perspectives from economic history. The struggle for the recognition of local perspectives is not only part of the fight for democracy, but essential precondition for science to overcome power related distortions of truth.

2 A brief historiography of African economic history

African economic history is a new field dating back to the mid-20th century.[1] The field emerged as a "response to the colonial denigration of the

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African past and claims by colonialists that they had brought civilization to the continent, which, hitherto, had neither history nor any achievements", observes Mlambo (2018: 14). Austin and Broadberry (2014: 893) support that: "Stimulated by the recovery of African independence, and in reaction to the tendencies of both imperial historiography and social science *modernization theory*," which treated "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."

Hegel gave a series of lectures on the "philosophy of world history" in 1822, 1828 and 1830 at the University of Berlin. In Hegelian philosophy, historical constructions had geographic boundaries moving from East to West, and the South was not included. Central to his postulates was the idea of "absolute spirit" and "reason" embodied in "real beings" found only in that geographic location (see, Hegel 1956). Hugh Trevor-Roper, a British historian, polemically expressed in a series of lecturers he delivered at the University of Sussex in the Uinted Kingdom as late as 1963. Trevor-Roper claimed that: "[T]here is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness. And darkness is not a subject for history."[2]

Giving rise to African economic history in the 1950s and 1960s, Africanist economic historians responded to the Polanyanian "substantivists" school, which claimed that Africans engaged in reciprocal exchanges and had no sense of "market rationality" before European encounter (see, Austin 2008). Accordingly, they dug into the archives to proof that markets long existed in Africa before colonialism. Three major intellectual figures (Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Marx Weber) shaped the discussion while three major theoretical approaches dominated the field, namely; neoclassical traditions, dependency theory and Marxist paradigms (Mlambo 2018; Zeleza 1993).

Relying on deductive abstract models, the neoclassical tradition sought to cast universal, "timeless" and space agnostic economic laws to analyse African economies. The newer tradition disassociated itself with classical political economy questions of economic growth and emancipation, concentrating instead on marginalist analysis of markets, scarcity and resource allocation. The dependency school was born as a critique of neoclassical traditions. It became popular in the 1970s as a moral and economic critique of the "global world system", which privileged the North at the expense of the South (ibid.) Dike (1956) and Hopkins (1973) were amongst the pioneering

[2] As cited in: `https://davidderrick.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/there-is-no-african-history/`, [accessed 01 February 2015].

works of this tradition in Africa. Hopkins deployed the "vent-for-surplus" theory to advance that colonialism catalysed African peasant production in the early years of colonialism. Coined by Smith, the "vent" (opening) thesis was revised by Hla Myint in the 1950s to advance that international trade created an "opening" to mobile abundant land and labour resources for agricultural production in West Africa (Myint 1958).

Drawing on the 1970s dependency school (with its variants of underdevelopment theory, unequal exchange, and world systems theory) scholars such as Emmanuel Wallenstein, Andre Gunder Frank, and others, devoted their attention to the unequal global terms of trade. Walter Rodney produced his seminal manifesto on the flipside of development, "underdevelopment": *How Europe Under Developed Africa* (1972). He explored the unequal structure of global terms of trade, showing how the "core/centre" (the North) exploited the "periphery" (the South).

The same year, Samir Amin (1972: 503-524) published his influential paper: *Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa – Origins and Contemporary Forms*. Following colonial patterns of economic exploitation, Amin divided Africa into three major regions; "African of the colonial trade economy" (West Africa), "Africa of the concession-owing companies" (the Congo River basin) and "African of the labour reserve" (east and southern Africa, and following Amin's analogy Lesotho and South Africa would fall in the third category). The dependency school had little to say about the internal dynamics of African economies before their integration into the unequal global system, thus, relegated the African forms of economic activity and organisation.

Though it became popular in the seventies, the dependency school drew from the works of the Argentinean development economist Raùl Prebisch and German-British heterodox development economist, Hans Singer. In development economics, their work is popularly referred to as the "Prebisch-Singer Thesis" due to similar conclusions that they reached separately. The thesis advanced that there was an existence of unequal terms of trade between the North and the South, which emanated from price disparities in raw material and manufactured goods. These terms of trade privileged more industrialised countries of the North (Shaw 2002; Di Marco 1972).

Beyond academia, Prebisch was a policymaker and economic diplomat accredited with having setup a Statistics Office and the Central Bank of Argentina. In 1948, he became the director of the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA). He used this position to advance his ideas on economic structuralism, inward development, import-substitution industrialization and regional integrations as antidotes to unequal terms of trade (ibid.).

Singer's interest in economics was inspired by Joseph Schumpeter and Arthur Spiethoff's series of lectures that he attended at Bonn, Germany. Following the rise of Adolf Hitler, he fled to the UK in 1933. It was at Cambridge that Keynes took him in as a PhD student after Schumpeter vouched for him. In 1947, he joined the newly established Economic Department of the UN and was a director of the Economic Division of the UN's Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and director of the UN Research for Social Development (UNRISD). Making his contribution to the "Prebisch-Singer Thesis", he produced an essay: *Post-War Price Relations between Under-Developed and Industrialised Countries*, which covered the period between 1876 and 1948 (ibid.).

Claiming theoretical sophistication over the other two paradigms, Marxists traditions attacked the neoclassical school and dependency theorists for their simplistic reductionist proclivities and overindulgence on the terms of exchange, respectively, while paying less attention to the relations of production and class struggle. Marxists paid attention to how various economic systems developed, functioned and changed over space and time using their dominant analytical tools of their trade; dialectical and historical materialism. They advanced that various modes of production can co-exist (see, Mlambo 2018; Zeleza 1993).

During the 1970s, the French-led Marxists' modes of production debates were also in full swing, exploring the (dis)articulation of "capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production" in Africa (see, Newbury 1985: 38-45). In southern Africa, Harold Wolpe (1972) explored how capitalism created a cheap labour system through selective destruction and preservation of various elements of the pre-capitalist modes of production to maintain a cheap labour system in the region through segregation and apartheid.

African economic history declined in the North from the 1970s but continued to be vibrant in African universities, albeit, less featured in North-based journals. This lack of visibility stemmed from the shift to Cliometrics (also known as the new economic history or econometric history). The new approach applied quantitative methods and economic theory to the study of economic history. With the shift, the study of economic history tilted in favour of economics departments (Green and Nyambara 2015).

Cliometrics emerged in the Uinted States in the late 1950s with close association to the works of Douglass North, Herbert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, and others. Advances in computer technologies made it possible to use large quantitative data sets amongst economists to measure economic development (Mlambo 2018; Hopkins 2011). It was only a matter of time before it found itself in Africa starting with the anthropometry works of Moradi (2009), Eltis (1982), and others, and more recently with the works of Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (2002). These US-based scholars made a name for themselves through their "Reversal of Fortune" theory, through which they argued that areas that were richer and densely populated in 1500 had become poor by 1995, and those poor and sparsely populated, had become wealthier owing to extractive colonial institutions (ibid.).

The new approach has been widely criticized for being ahistorical; relying on flawed data to reach simplistic conclusions and by compressing history to account for present developments based on what happened centuries ago (Mlambo 2018, Hopkins 2011; Austin 2011). Austin (2008: 1021) aptly observed that: "Methodologically, the RF (Reversal of Fortunes) writings have demonstrated the value of a very long-term perspective on the origins of the current world distribution of income. I have suggested that their overall approach may be capable of modification to take account of the roles of the colonised in making their own history."

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