A New Economic History for Africa

Economic Growth, Living Standards and State Formation since the 19th Century

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Avanti Economic Historians! Thus sounded the call from Patrick Manning in 1987, but only for the economic history of Africa almost to disappear as an academic practice. The study of material change became distinctly unfashionable in African history circles, and economists largely confined their studies to the post-colonial period (Manning 1987, Hopkins 1986). This has recently changed, and African economic history is experiencing a renaissance (Broadberry and Austin, 2014). One the disciplines early and central contributors, A. G. Hopkins, coined the new surge of literature on material change in African economies the 'New Economic History of Africa' (Hopkins, 2010).

According to Hopkins, this new literature had appeared largely unbeknownst to historians, and originated in North American economics departments. This was thanks in part to some seminal papers that succeeded in shifting the focus in development economics from associating growth and policy and drawing attention towards the historical causes of wealth and poverty among nations (Acemoglu and Robinson 2010, Ray 2010).

Some ink has already been spilt on whether this 'new economic history for Africa' is conceptually and methodologically coherent with the 'old economic history' of Africa and particularly on whether the new contributions should be called 'causal history' (Fenske 2011) or whether the methods result in what Austin called 'a compression of history' (Austin 2009). It is however, beyond doubt that the seminal papers published more than a decade ago has had an impact on the sheer amount of empirical work done in African economic history in recent times.

Concurrently, Africa has moved from being depicted as the 'hopeless continent' to being described as the hopeful continent that is on the rise (Jerven, 2015). In turn, there is an increasing demand for knowledge on the material history of change in Africa. Focus is shifting from explaining chronic growth failure in the so called 'Bottom Billion' (Collier, 2007), towards research that can shed light on the role of states in fostering industrial change, and situating the current period of economic growth, or 'Africa Rising', in the history of economic growth in African economies.

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The contribution of this short paper is to take stock of the many empirical contributions over the past decade. A wealth of new historical data have been unearthed, collated and organized – a lot of it from colonial archives, but also from other sources such as military files recording the heights of soldier recruits, trading companies recording prices and wages. The new estimates of levels and trends in wages, growth, living standards and taxes has to date been presented in a piecemeal fashion. This book takes up the challenge to synthesize the new knowledge, and assess how this decade of research has challenged and refined those big research questions posed a decade or more ago.

One of the central arguments is that when the colonial period is connected to the postcolonial period it fundamentally changes how the economic history of the 20th century Africa is told. In previous analytical models the post-colonial period has been treated as an 'outcome', and a dismal one, whereas the colonial or the pre-colonial period, or an event in this historical periods has featured as a cause of this outcome. Particularly in terms of poverty and growth, but this also evident in taxation measures, the aggregate pattern is a long period of growth, sometimes since the 1890s and into the 1970s. A failure in the 1980s, followed by two decades of expansion since the late 1990s. Thus, it seems increasingly so that the post-colonial growth failure has taken up undue space in explanations of African economic development.

A new description of growth and development since the 19th century underlines the need for new analytics. The terms from John Iliffe and his study of poverty in Africa (1989). He spoke of conjunctural and structural causes of poverty. The former being the one that caused a sudden change in poverty because of events – failed harvests, disease etc. Whereas structural changes in poverty were changes in the political economy, such as property rights regimes or institutions of taxation. The analysis of trends in economic growth, taxation and living standards seek to identify the relative importance of these types of factors, and thereby return to assessing the relative importance of 'policy' versus 'shocks', in order to explain recurring growth in African economic history (Jerven 2011).

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