

Gareth Austin**Reciprocal comparison and African history: tackling conceptual Eurocentrism in the study of Africa's economic past****Article (Published version)
(Refereed)****Original citation:**

Austin, Gareth (2007) Reciprocal comparison and African history: tackling conceptual Eurocentrism in the study of Africa's economic past. [African studies review](#), 50 (3). pp. 1-28

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Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past

Gareth Austin

Abstract: This article argues for constructive responses to the dominance, in the analysis of African economic history, of concepts derived from Western experience. It reviews the existing responses of this kind, highlighting the fact that some of the most influential ideas applied to African economies, past and present, have been coined in the context not of Europe or North America but rather of other relatively poor regions formerly under European colonial rule. These “Third World” contributions have been enriching for African studies, though they have been duly criticized in African contexts, in accordance with the usual scholarly pattern. It is argued here that the main requirement for overcoming conceptual Eurocentrism in African history, in the interests of a more genuinely “general” social science and “global” history, is reciprocal comparison of Africa and other continents—or, more precisely, of specific areas within Africa with counterparts elsewhere. Pioneering examples of such comparisons are reviewed and, to illustrate the possibilities, a set of propositions is put forward from African history that may be useful for specialists on other parts of the world. The article concludes with suggestions for ways in which Africanists can best pursue the project of reciprocal comparison, and with a plea for us to be more intellectually ambitious.

This article considers how Africanists, of various disciplines, can best respond to the continuing “conceptual Eurocentrism” in the study of African history: the reliance on analytical tools derived from reflections on European or, by extension, “Western” experience. At African studies seminars it is often remarked, and lamented, that one or another theory adopted by

African Studies Review, Volume 50, Number 3 (December 2007), pp. 1–28

Gareth Austin is a reader in economic history at the London School of Economics.

He is the author of *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807—1956* (University of Rochester Press, 2005). He is working on a study of African economic development over the very long term, and with Kaoru Sugihara on a co-edited volume on labor-intensive industrialization in global history.

researchers on sub-Saharan Africa has been borrowed from the conceptual toolkit of scholars working on Europe or North America. What is worse, for historical understanding everywhere, is that this flow has not been reciprocated. Florence Bernault has summarized the situation starkly:

Aujourd'hui pas plus qu'hier, le continent [l'Afrique] ne parvient à s'imposer comme un foyer producteur de normes épistémologiques. Les concepts continuent de s'y imposer dans le seul sens nord-sud: c'est à qui brandira son Foucault, Gramsci ou Weber (Marx ayant temporairement disparu de la circulation) pour décortiquer l'histoire sub-saharienne, mais l'aller-retour fonctionne mal ou pas du tout. (Bernault 2001:128)¹

Conceptual Eurocentrism exists at different levels of abstraction. Besides the elaborate explanatory and/or interpretive theories, there are specific tools of analysis which may be heuristically useful even to scholars unconvinced by the master frameworks to which they are linked (but upon which they are not necessarily dependent). Most basic to the working historian, for instance, are the received expectations about historical sequences. Whether it is the evolution of the nation-state or of intensive agricultural technology, what economists would call the “stylized facts” of Western history have influenced the questions historians of Africa have asked and the ways they have formulated their answers. This tendency, to be sure, is much less predominant than it once was: nation-states and agricultural technology are, indeed, two examples of subject areas that today display a growing historiographical autonomy—a point to which we will return. More generally, while no overarching social science theory with potentially universal claims has yet stemmed from Africa, the first half century of widespread professional scholarship on Africa has seen Africanists establish critical distance, and a degree of conceptual autonomy, from imported preconceptions, at least at the lower levels of abstraction.² The main intention here is to examine, and contribute to, the next step: the formulation or identification of propositions from the study of Africa that demand critical appraisal in other geographical and historical settings.

To focus the general theme, the article will concentrate on economic history, in a broad sense. This is appropriate for an interdisciplinary readership because the study of Africa's economic past remains a multidisciplinary activity, involving anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists as well as economists, historians, and archaeologists. Also, the issues raised by the case of economic history are pertinent for the discussion of conceptual Eurocentrism in other branches of African history and in other disciplines. The article is intended to stimulate such broader debate.

This article has four main sections. The first section introduces conceptual Eurocentrism in the recent literature on African economic historiography, focusing on the most influential paradigm of the era: rational-choice political economy. The second section highlights the fact that Africanists'

formulations in the study of economic development have also been informed by ideas based on the history of other regions of the “Third World,” notably concepts put forward by economists who themselves came from these regions. This diversification of intellectual imports, which can be expected to grow, is much to be welcomed. However, though India, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean are for Africanists probably more promising, for both geographical and historical reasons, than Europe or North America as sources of comparable experience, it will be emphasized here that “Third World models” have suffered much the same process of critical erosion within African studies as have “Western models.” The third section presents the core of the argument. It begins by asking exactly in what ways conceptual Eurocentrism does and does not matter for the project of increasing our understanding of African history. It goes on to argue that the best response that Africanist historians can make to the theorizing that offers “general” models from European experiences is not to reject the project of generalization, but to work toward more genuine generalizations through properly comparative historical research. Such research needs to be informed by Kenneth Pomeranz’s principle of “reciprocal comparison,” in the sense of “viewing both sides of the comparison as ‘deviations’ when seen through the expectations of the other, rather than leaving one as always the norm” (Pomeranz 2000:8; see also Wong 1997). This procedure entails putting “Europe in the African mirror” (Fenoaltea 1999) as well as the so-familiar other way round. The remainder of the section reflects on the existing attempts to forge such “reciprocal comparisons:” by scholars who, though few in number, range across anthropology, archaeology, and history. The final section attempts to illustrate the possibilities for increasing the contributions of Africanists to comparative history and theory by drawing from Africa’s economic history several propositions that may assist in a better understanding of the development of other parts of the world. Thus they are intended to contribute to a much more two-way exchange of ideas between Africanists and other specialists than we have seen so far.

Conceptual Eurocentrism in African Economic Historiography: The Last Quarter Century

Economic history is a good example for the proposition that the theoretical frameworks used by scholars of Africa have mostly been constructed with concepts based on some aspect or other of the historical experiences of “the West” (Zezeza 1993:8). For the first generation of professional specialists in this field, from the later 1950s to the 1970s, this usually meant Western Europe.³ Whether influenced by the categories associated with Karl Marx or Max Weber, Adam Smith or Karl Polanyi, the abstractions were usually underpinned, explicitly or implicitly, by narratives of European history: whether the intention was to identify similar patterns in African history to highlight contrasts, or—in a more open-minded fashion—to test for

either of these. Over the last quarter century the most pervasive theoretical influence on the study of African economies, past and present, has been rational-choice political economy in one form or another, with its focus on problems of making and enforcing contracts in contexts of costly information, to which individuals and societies may—but may not—find solutions through their “choice” of institutions, and the outcomes as they are influenced by the respective political capacities of different groups working to secure their own interests.⁴

In considering the sense in which rational-choice political economy is “Eurocentric” in its intellectual inspiration, it is necessary to enter two qualifications. First, in working through such ideas in relation to specific experiences in Africa, there is often a considerable analytical distance between the paper or book on Africa and any underlying or overarching historical model.⁵ Second, the way in which property rights are generally defined in this literature—as entitlements to use resources in permitted ways—is much broader than the usual Western (especially modern Anglo-American) conception (Eggertsson 1990:33–34). In rational-choice (especially “New Institutional”) accounts, the enjoyment of sole rights over an asset tends to be considered as an attribute of productivity-stimulating property regimes. But it is treated as emerging (or sometimes not emerging) historically, rather than assumed as a defining feature of property (see, e.g., North & Thomas 1973). This broad sense of property is well suited to many contexts in African history (see Austin 2005:9).

Overall, though, it is reasonable to regard the overlapping “New Institutional” principle-agent and public-choice frameworks as redolent of Western history. This can be seen at two levels. One is the historical context—primarily, the mid-twentieth century United States and Britain—in which the founders of rational-choice political economy, Ronald Coase and Oliver Williamson, developed their seminal ideas. Their times and places stimulated such questions as why, in advanced capitalist economies, the firm to a large extent superseded the price mechanism in the organization of production (Coase 1937), while managerial hierarchies within firms superseded market transactions among firms (Williamson 1975, 1985).⁶ This raised further issues, such as the potential for contracting to equalize the private rates of return (i.e., to the parties directly involved in a transaction), and those related to society “as a whole” (i.e., the “external” or “social” costs and benefits of economic activities). How might the full costs of environmental pollution, for example, be paid for within a system of private property rights (Coase 1960)?

The other level is explicit in the more wide-ranging analyses of economic growth and development over time and space that have been offered by rational-choice scholars. With this upward shift in temporal and other scales, the rational-choice approach tends to shed some of the interpretative flexibility evident in micro-studies (see, e.g., Lovejoy & Richardson 1999 and 2004 as a pair, on which more below) and to acquire a very spe-

cific sense of the possible directions of change. To be sure, providing such a sense is precisely one of the jobs of a theory intended to be useful in historical explanation. Among these directions, however, one is seen as uniquely optimal in economic terms: the kind of claim that is much more questionable to historians. In the rational-choice literature the underlying historical model of long-term economic development and growth is the particular path in the evolution of individual property rights that was blazed in England, culminating there in the first industrial revolution, and taken further in the rise of the United States to global economic and political predominance (North & Thomas 1973). In rational-choice accounts this path, or the set of institutions that evolved through it, functions as a model, almost a template, for diffusion to certain countries, particularly those of European settlement. For other countries, including most or all of Africa, it represents the path they were denied (Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2002), but may possibly find, if certain political changes can be engineered so as to deliver the appropriate set of property rights (North 1990; Barro 1997).⁷ The framework avoids rigidly teleological determinism. Practitioners emphasize that unfortunate choices (in terms of economic growth) of institutions have been rather common historically, and for reasons for which full explanations have yet to be offered within the theory (Bates 1995; North 1997, 2005). But the long-term outcomes are conditioned by those choices, in that earlier decisions restrict the scope of later ones (“path-determination” [North 1990]). Thus, in its macro form, rational-choice political economy broadly follows the particular historicist pattern that Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed “first in Europe, then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty 2000:6–9), but—wisely—with a little extra contingency.

Thus, like its predecessors as the dominant paradigms framing the analysis of African economic history, rational-choice political economy can fairly be described as inspired primarily by Western history. At the same time, economic historians of Africa have also made use of concepts that are not at all Eurocentric in the sense used here.

Models from the Third World in African Economic History

While it is evident that the study of African history has to a great extent been framed in concepts originally formulated with reference to Western history, it is essential to make an important qualification: Africanists’ intellectual importations have been more geographically varied, and also more critical and selective, than is usually recognized. Thus some of the historical experiences of the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and recently South Asia have been reflected in models formulated by development economists from these regions. There is also the more ambiguous case, with respect to conceptual Eurocentrism, of Dependency theory, which was originally formulated for Latin America by a European, though drawing in part on the work of the Structuralist school of Latin American trade economists.⁸

Dependency theory—and its offspring, World-Systems theory—inverts for the rest of the world the West’s path of economic development while seeing the two as part of the same process, in which historical agency comes from Europe.⁹ As with concepts based on the experiences of the West, all these models from the “Third World” have been not merely adopted by historians in African contexts, but also critically explored—and often ultimately rejected.

W. A. Lewis’s famous model of “economic development with unlimited supplies of labour” (Lewis 1954) was presumably inspired not only by his readings of classical political economy and the economic historiography of the British industrial revolution, but also by his own background in the West Indies, a personal tour of Asia, and the literature on contemporary Asian economies.¹⁰ Following Lewis’s article, a generation of economists, encouraged by his distinction between a precapitalist sector with static productivity and a capitalist one in which productivity was advancing, applied the notion of the dual economy to the settler economies of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (see, e.g., Barber 1961). These studies saw an increasingly overpopulated “subsistence” sector as making African labor available to mines and settler farms at wages low enough to permit a high rate of profit for employers, whose reinvestments were expected progressively to modernize the economy as a whole. Hlya Myint complemented Lewis’s analysis of land-scarce economies with a theory of economic growth in land-abundant ones: the “vent-for-surplus” model. Myint’s proposition was that the rapid growth of African export agriculture during the early colonial period in West Africa, and comparable experiences in his own native Burma and other parts of southeast Asia, could be explained by the bringing into production of previously unused supplies of land and labor. The advent or growth of overseas demand thus provided a market for the output of previously idle productive capacity (Myint 1958, 1966:29–40). In the 1960s the Lewis and Myint models may be said to have provided, between them, the standard conceptual framework for the analysis of sub-Saharan economies during the colonial era. In the 1970s Dependency theory arrived in African studies, proximately through a book written by another Caribbean author: Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972).¹¹ Early in the 1980s, Amartya Sen (who, like Lewis, was to win the Nobel Prize for economics) initiated a new trend in intercontinental flows of ideas when he applied his concept of “entitlement theory,” originally derived from the history of famines in colonial India, to the Ethiopian famine of 1972–74, maintaining that famines are best understood not as failures of food supply in aggregate, but rather as the result of people having inadequate rights to food (Sen 1981).

Since then, the influence not only of Sen but of Indian economists in general has grown enormously in the study of less-developed economies, including those in Africa. The continuity of this influence seems assured—almost institutionalized—for the next several years at least, by Kaushik Basu and Debraj Ray’s two excellent advanced textbooks, which compete with

each other for the graduate market (Basu 1997; Ray 1998). Another Indian economist, Deepak Lal, has made a pronounced impact on the policy debate as well as the academic discourse about African economies through both his research with Paul Collier (Collier & Lal 1984, 1986) and his polemical contribution (Lal 1983). Lal has also written extended (and provocative) think pieces on the reasons for the divergent economic fortunes of different regions of the world, which are interesting not least because they challenge (albeit, from a base in a Western university) the dominance of North American, European, and Australian writers in the comparative literature on global economic development (Lal 1998, 2004). Turning from Indian authors to India itself as a model, both economists and political scientists of Africa have been greatly influenced by the concepts of “rent seeking” and “urban bias,” ideas that were formulated in an Indian context, although by Western scholars (Krueger 1974; Lipton 1977). It seems likely that the influence of Asian and perhaps Latin American models in Africanist studies will be greater still in the next generation for several reasons, including (one hopes) the growth of mutual awareness among specialists on different regions and the strong position of Indian scholars among mainstream economic theorists.¹²

Diversity in the sources of ideas to be experimented with in African history is clearly promising in methodological terms. There are also reasons for expecting that histories from Asia or Latin America may be particularly relevant, and potentially informative, for Africanists. The fact that parts of the first two continents, unlike Europe, share latitudes with Africa, matters in the history of agriculture and disease (Diamond 1997). Again, the fact that in most of Africa, as with the majority of Latin America and those parts of Asia that were colonized by Europe—but unlike North America and Australasia—colonialism involved the rule of a minority of European settlers or of a relatively tiny (if ultimately well-armed) foreign administrative elite distinguishes them from North America, Australasia—and, to complicate the comparison—Argentina.¹³

An important note of caution should be added: to say the least, the various intellectual “South-South” importations have run into the usual critical debates that ideas from the “North” have traditionally provoked. The criticisms of Dependency theory are especially well known and will not be rehearsed here.¹⁴ Both the Lewis and Myint models, as they have been applied to African “settler” and “peasant” economies respectively, have been subjected to much criticism by historians.¹⁵ Low real wages in mid-twentieth-century settler economies have been shown to be the result not of demographic or productivity conditions per se, but primarily of state interventions.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the attribution of the “cash crop revolution” in certain nonsettler colonies to the mobilization of previously unused labor time (a “leisure reserve”) has become steadily harder to accept, as evidence has mounted of labor scarcity in the preceding period, and of earlier forms of production having been reduced or abandoned to make way for agricultural

export production (see, e.g., Smith 1976; Tosh 1980; Austin 2005:77–79).

Sen's "entitlement" thesis has so far fared rather better in the Africanist literature, providing one of the sources of inspiration for the series of important studies that have been written on food and famine in the continent, especially since the 1984 Ethiopian famine.¹⁷ But the entitlement thesis has not gone without criticism from Africanists. In particular, David Keen (with reference to his own study of southwestern Sudan in the 1980s) has argued that Sen understates the importance of the politics of famine, thereby presenting the social failures of markets as if they were as impersonal as the weather (Keen 1994). One might add that a feature of the entitlement framework is its extraordinary breadth: food entitlements can extend to an individual's own output, as well as to rights to provision by virtue of the individual's purchasing power, family membership, or eligibility for state aid. While the capaciousness of the framework's categories makes it useful for classifying sources of famine, the fact that it excludes so few possibilities blurs its explanatory power. Further, insofar as Sen's historical accounts emphasize problems of allocation rather than production (Sen 1981), they risk underestimating the difficulties of agricultural production.¹⁸ Finally, while Sen is right to note that historically, trade and transport have often been used to take food from famine-struck areas to ones where more people could afford to pay for it (Sen 1981:93–97), it is hard to envisage a permanent solution to the danger of famine that does not involve more extensive and integrated networks of markets and transport.

Of the other concepts formulated in the context of India and then adopted by Africanists, "rent-seeking" will be discussed later. Michael Lipton's notion of "urban bias" has been attacked in an African context (Jamal & Weeks 1993). It is arguable, however, that it fitted postcolonial tropical Africa better than it did its "native" South Asia, until the 1980s when Structural Adjustment tended to reduce the flow of income from agricultural exporters to the state and thereby—predominately—to the towns (Austin 1996b).¹⁹ This debate needs a sharper sense of period, which historians are equipped to provide.

With all of these concepts, the models and the research they provoked contributed to the accumulation of information and understanding of the issues concerned. However, the importation of "Third World" models is in any case the lesser part of an appropriate response by historians of Africa to conceptual Eurocentrism.

Toward Better Generalizations: The Method of "Reciprocal Comparison" and African History

Does it actually matter, in terms of their explanatory power, if the concepts used in African history are mostly of exotic, and usually Western, origin? That genuinely general concepts might include some that were originally formulated in a European context has not always been considered a prob-

lem, even from a broadly African nationalist perspective. Consider the first generation of professional writings on African economic history, from the later 1950s to the early 1970s, which conveyed increasing evidence that markets had a more extensive and important precolonial history than had generally been assumed. It seems fair to say that precisely because of the intellectual association of “markets” with Adam Smith and Western economic history and theory, there was a tendency to see this discovery as itself part of the intellectual liberation of Africa. Specifically, it meant liberation from the condescending “colonial” assumption that “economic man” was not indigenous to Africa and that therefore the history of markets in Africa was essentially the story of European economic involvement in the continent (see Hopkins 1980:146–47).

The position taken here is that the fact that an idea was inspired by experience outside Africa does not mean that it is necessarily unhelpful to Africanists. Whether it is or not is an empirical question: to which the answer is often yes. Space permits two instances to be given here, from rational-choice political economy. One is Robert Bates’s argument that kinship relations are influenced by the structure of opportunities (and the related risks) for the formation of capital—the “inherently inter-temporal” factor of production that “links economic decisions over time” (1990:153). This insight helps Bates account for mid-twentieth-century changes in kinship and inheritance within Kikuyu society. Nimi Wariboko has used Williamson’s formulation of the theory of transaction costs (the cost of making and enforcing contracts) to offer a stimulating reinterpretation of the history of the corporate canoe house of the Niger Delta. He argues persuasively that this trading institution was developed in place of the market “as a governance mechanism to safeguard worker-traders and head-traders against the hazards of opportunism,” which otherwise would have arisen from the difficulty of monitoring individual effort and the lack of incentive for head-traders to train workers if they could easily defect to a rival (Wariboko 1998: quote at 169).

In other cases, however, models imported from the West do not seem to work particularly well in African conditions. This inadequacy was the starting point of the debate on “modes of production” that spanned the 1970s in African historiography, from Coquery-Vidrovitch (1969) to Jewsiewicki and Létourneau (1985). When the flow of ideas is only one way, it is in principle less likely that “universal” theories will deliver what they claim. In that sense intellectual Eurocentrism does not constrain the understanding of African (and Asian) history alone; as a distinguished historical demographer of Britain remarked, “ironically, it may be that the understanding of European history has suffered the more” (Wrigley 1987:48).

In this context, the best response to the theorizing that offers “universal” models from European experiences is not to reject “metanarratives” on principle, but rather to work, through properly comparative historical research, to ensure that any “general” framework is worthy of the name. Re-

latedly, to reject comparative analysis on principle, whether on grounds of historiographical exceptionalism or of postmodernist epistemology, would be to surrender much of our intellectual responsibility, as historians and social scientists, to explain as well as to describe.

Specifically, the most informative way of “provincializing Europe” (in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase) (Chakrabarty 2000) is surely to adopt the procedure of “reciprocal comparison”: to ask equally why Europe was not China as well as why China was not Europe, as opposed to the traditional practice of taking Western Europe as the template. By extension, we should ask why both Europe and China were different from Africa, as well as why Africa was different from either. The most meaningful comparisons, as Pomeranz adds, may well be at a more disaggregated level of geography (Pomeranz 2000:7–8).

This project of “reciprocal comparison” would be facilitated by greater integration of African history with that of the rest of the world.²⁰ In this way we and our colleagues specializing on other continents are more likely to see the kind of connections between continents that may lead to theorizing that takes account of both ends of the relationships involved. In this sense Joseph Inikori’s *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (2002) is a landmark, not only because it represents the work of a Europeanist who is himself an African, but also because Inikori highlights the role of the specific demands of African consumers in stimulating technical advances in the British cotton textile industry. Thus while the Atlantic slave trade and African slavery in the Americas are central to the book, Inikori shows that the impact of western Africa on economic change in other parts of the Atlantic world went even beyond that.

Conversely, reciprocal comparison is made harder by a damaging asymmetry: familiarity with at least the basics of European history tends to be expected from specialists on non-Western countries, whereas the converse is not the case.²¹ Responsibility for this situation is not entirely on one side, however. In order for historians of Africa to participate effectively in the project of reciprocal comparison, our conclusions must be accessible to synthesis. This does not mean that there has to be just one sub-Saharan (let alone “African”) model in any particular context. Synthesis does not have to mean the imposition of a false homogeneity. But African history is not likely to be effectively integrated into broader accounts of human history if Africanists cannot identify within African history key patterns of resemblance and difference over space and time. As in the history of any continent, we can expect continued dispute over what those patterns are; as Steven Feierman commented, there are “multiple narratives” on most issues in African history (1993:197), and these exist at the level of both primary and secondary sources. Yet survey articles and overview books can convey to non-Africanists a sense of where the “internal” debates are, and the approximate degree of confidence with which one view may be preferred to another on the evidence currently available.

As it happens, and for good reasons, over the last forty to fifty years historians of Africa have given priority to monographic research (see Manning 2003b:503–4). Because of the immense diversity of experience within the continent, the potential “building blocks” produced by specialist studies can be hard to combine into syntheses of African history that are sensitive to internal variation yet sufficiently definite at a regional or even subregional level to be useful for scholars attempting to formulate world histories or cross-cultural theories. This is one reason why African historical experiences are insufficiently represented in these overarching studies, despite the contributions of Africanists such as Jack Goody, Philip Curtin, and Patrick Manning in helping to pioneer them (Curtin 1984; Goody 1976, 1982, 1996, 2004; Manning 2003a).²² Important though it is to recognize local difference, it is essential not to be disabled by it. Manning rightly insists on the “distinction between exceptionalism (‘you can’t compare your area to mine’) and distinctiveness (‘the difference between your area and mine is...’)” (2003a:156). The monographic foundation is now sufficient to facilitate defensible generalizations about Africa (or major regions of Africa) which can also contribute to the debates about broader historical patterns.

An essential part of reciprocal comparison is to derive models from Africa and then explore their applicability elsewhere (see Bates et al., 1993). An impressive example is the series of short books in comparative historical sociology written by Jack Goody, who followed his specialist research on northern Ghana by essaying a range of long-term contrasts between sub-Saharan and Eurasian societies and cultures (Goody 1971, 1976, 1982).²³ At the core of his analysis is the proposition that because the plough was much less widely used in sub-Saharan Africa than in Eurasia, agricultural surpluses were much smaller south of the Sahara. From this observation Goody traces contrasts in patterns of state formation and inheritance. With the benefit of more recent research on precolonial economic history, one may question Goody’s basic economic assumption; by clinging to the tradition of regarding food surpluses as the key to economic development, he may underplay other sources of material wealth and related social differentiation.²⁴ Extra-subsistence production was widespread in many precolonial economies, often becoming especially intense in the nineteenth century (see, e.g., Hopkins 1973; Vansina 1978:172–96, 235–43; Eldredge 1993:117–25; Austin 1996a; Reid 2002), and the market was often critical for acquiring some of the means for personal and social self-realization: goods with which to marry, to demonstrate achievement, and to claim status (see, e.g., Terray 1971). I advance these reservations about Goody’s framework here in order to illustrate the fact that there is always scope for debate about each side of a comparison. Indeed, such debates are part of the process by which comparisons are refined and extended.

It is no coincidence that this pioneering attempt to theorize generally “from Africa” should have come from an anthropologist: that is, from the only discipline in which Africa has routinely been an empirical source of

departure or reference in the formulation of concepts. In this tradition, Jane Guyer has addressed her analysis of the commercial culture of West and West-Central Africa to her discipline as a whole. Her argument is particularly relevant to historians because of the suggestion that the prolonged encounter between African traders and European “mercantilism” contributed to the formation (and continual re-formation) of a range of scales of value and types of transaction in informal economic activity (Guyer 2004). These enabled parties to capture “marginal gains,” presumably above the rates of return that would have prevailed in a fully integrated market with a single scale of value. Guyer’s analysis is of comparative significance, especially as it could be applied to regions such as Southeast and South Asia where similarly prolonged encounters took place between European and indigenous patterns of trade.

Meanwhile, within the last quarter century, contemporary African economies have come to be a fruitful source of new thinking in economics generally (Collier 1993). For example, the franc zone has provided an interesting laboratory for economists seeking to understand the implications of the adoption of a single currency by a group of independent (if very unequal) states, and to assess their economic performance compared to similarly endowed neighboring economies with different monetary regimes. It may be added that economists’ work has been enormously valuable for the analysis of postcolonial economic history. However, the almost exclusive concentration of “mainstream” economists of Africa on the very recent past has not only restricted the impact of their work on African economic historiography as a whole, but also denied economists opportunities to learn from earlier periods of African economic history.²⁵ So far the smaller group of heterodox economists working on Africa has had perhaps more influence on historians because these researchers (notably, Sender & Smith 1986) have engaged more fully with, at least, the colonial period, if not the precolonial. Recently, however, the ahistorical tendency among mainstream economists of Africa has been mitigated by increased interest from growth economists generally in very long-term paths and patterns (Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2002, 2005; Helpman 2004, ch. 7). It is to be hoped that this trend will inspire greater interest among economists in what can be learned generically from different periods of African history.

Among historians, Goody’s venture into full-scale comparison from Africa outward has so far attracted few attempts at emulation. It is all too emblematic of the historiographical situation until recently that one of the rare efforts to formulate a model from African historical evidence and then try it out on European history remained unpublished for a decade. Stefano Fenoaltea’s 1988 conference paper, “Europe in the African Mirror” (published in 1999), used the literature on the African side of the Atlantic slave trade to derive a model which he then applied to the history of slavery in Europe during and after the Roman empire. A different kind of “exception that proves the rule” was Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

(1971), which used Evans-Pritchard's study of Azande diviners in the 1930s to conceptualize witchcraft accusations in early modern England (Thomas 1971). This was a pioneering example of reciprocal comparison, which suggested both similarities and differences between the two cases. Yet it was, again, all too representative of its historiographical era in that the Africanist research consulted was ethnographic rather than historical, and the subject matter epitomized Africa at its most exotic.

In encouraging contrast, Dylan Penningroth's *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (2003) draws firmly on African historiography and historically minded ethnography (supplemented by his own primary research in Ghana) to frame his more detailed study in African American history. The book does not attempt to add to the literature that pursues African origins of African American practices. Rather, it is a comparison of slavery and abolition in two contemporaneous societies on opposite sides of the Atlantic: Fantes on the Gold Coast and African Americans in the U.S. South. Specifically, Penningroth uses insights derived from African studies to explore and analyze the interactions between slaves' property claims and the social ties through which they sought to establish those claims. The work thus represents a reversal of the traditional direction of intercontinental flow of models derived from historiography.

There is also a significant contrast to be noted between two excellent papers by historians of Africa published sixteen years apart, both of which examined in the context of specific precolonial African kingdoms the uses and limitations of particular concepts originated by Europeanists. In 1980 Donald Crummey, discussing and evaluating the applicability of "feudalism" to Abyssinia, stopped short of offering lessons from Abyssinia for the theory of feudalism and for historians concerned with feudalism in Europe (or perhaps Japan). Larry Yarak in 1996, applying to Asante (in what is now Ghana) Chris Wickham's formulation of the "tributary" mode of production, ended by urging the benefits for world historians of studying Asante—though without specifying what they might learn (Wickham 1984, 1985). The next step is for historians of Africa, following Goody and Fenoateá, to highlight the broader implications of their findings, contested as they are among themselves.²⁶ An archaeologist has done exactly that: Rod McIntosh, arguing that the ancient cities of the Middle Niger constituted "self-organizing landscapes," clustered but not nucleated, and with no centralized state power, has put forward this model of urbanization without political centralization as potentially relevant to Mesopotamia and other instances of early urbanism (McIntosh 2005).

Among economic historians, Avner Greif has set an example north of the Sahara (on both sides of the medieval Mediterranean) which could be said to challenge sub-Saharan specialists to do likewise: conducting empirical research in specific historical settings, leading to the formulation of models with broader application (Greif 1989, 1997, 2006). Finally, Ralph

Austen ventured from his own research on Africa to essay a reciprocal comparison of the moral economy of witchcraft in early modern Europe and (basically twentieth-century) Africa. He concluded that, broadly, antiwitchcraft beliefs in early modern Europe protected capitalist accumulation, whereas in Africa they opposed it, specifically in that they challenged individual indigenous accumulators (Austen 1993). This intercontinental contrast requires disaggregation, perhaps for Europe but definitely for Africa. For a similar contrast existed within the continent. In colonial Ghana, for example (as Thomas argued for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England), witchcraft accusations within Ghanaian cocoa-farming communities were overwhelmingly directed by relatively wealthy people against members of the “jealous” poor (Field 1960:28, 87; Austin 2003). This illustrates, again, that the results of reciprocal comparison will typically not be undisputed conclusions for each region, but rather richer comparative material for debate.

Some Lessons from African Experience for the Comparative Study of Long-Term Economic Development

The purpose of this final section is to present, necessarily briefly, a series of specific propositions derived from work done in various disciplines on sub-Saharan economic history that are relevant for the study of long-term economic development in other parts of the world and thus may be important both for historians of those regions and for theoreticians. It must be emphasized that the list is far from comprehensive, and readers will have additional and alternative offerings. I will start with agriculture and move via property rights and social relations of production to economic rent, and on to private-order versus state institutions for “governing the market.”²⁷

From the research of various scholars, notably John Sutton in archaeology, it is clear that in sub-Saharan Africa, before and in many cases during and after the colonial period, there was no strong or necessary correlation between agricultural intensification (increase in the quantity of labor and/or capital applied per unit of land) and overall productivity (i.e., “total factor productivity,” the ratio of output to the totality of inputs). Thus intensive agriculture was not necessarily more advanced; and though it was old south of the Sahara, over the centuries it showed no clear tendency to spread (Sutton 1984; see also Hopkins 1973:36). This finding, now familiar to Africanists, has the potential to lead specialists on other regions to reconsider their assumptions about what is normal in agricultural development, thereby challenging the reliance on intellectual templates derived from Western experience. Such a challenge has already been made for the history of the rice economies of East Asia, which over several centuries avoided a Malthusian outcome by finding new, productive uses for unskilled labor in paddy rice cultivation. Thus East Asia did not follow the Western trajectory from labor to capital intensity in agriculture. Rather, it pursued an alternative

form of intensification, based on labor rather than capital (Bray 1986). The predominant sub-Saharan pattern, of mostly land-extensive agriculture, was different again.

Further, it is increasingly clear from historical research using a variety of methods that the importation of new crops and/or crop varieties was the major source of improvement in African farmers' productivity and welfare over the long term (Schoenbrun 1998; Miller 1988:19–21; Chrétien 2003:63–65; McCann 2005; Austin, forthcoming), at least until the introduction of mechanized transport. These exotic cultigens seem to have come overwhelmingly from latitudes similar to those within which they were adopted in Africa, rather than from farther north. There are lessons for the global history of agriculture here: lessons amplified by the fact that, as Judith Carney has demonstrated, the flow of cultigens was not all one way (Carney 2001). To all this can be linked the studies of indigenous knowledge in African agriculture. Evidence that African farmers often knew more than their foreign instructors about what would work (Richards 1985:55–56, 70; Austin 1996c; Fairhead & Leach 1996) is not only significant to issues of history and policy in Africa, but also provides a comparator for research on the relationship between agricultural experts (members of the literate elite, often employed by the state) and farmers elsewhere. An interesting question is how far the best-practice techniques of agriculture in imperial China, which were expressed in a tradition of agricultural treatises, some of which were exported to Thailand and Vietnam (Deng 1993:134), were actually suited to the land-abundant conditions of mainland southeast Asia, as opposed to the relatively land-scarce settings in which they had been developed.

Like most of southeast Asia until the twentieth century, most of sub-Saharan Africa was for much of its history land-abundant and short of both labor and capital. Therefore, the region has a specific significance in the context of Kaoru Sugihara's stimulating distinction between a "labor-intensive" path of economic development (in manufacturing as well as agriculture, and over several centuries) in East Asia, and the capital-intensive approach associated with the West (Sugihara 2000). Africa was different from both (Austin, forthcoming). African evidence should enable us to understand better why an abundance of cultivable land in relation to population may facilitate rapid, long-term economic growth in some contexts, while in others, arguably, it leads to technical and institutional responses that hinder or limit such growth.

Recent attempts by rational-choice institutionalists in economics to explain (in David Landes's phrase) "why some [nations] are so rich and some so poor" (Landes 1998) have re-emphasized the importance of secure property rights—meaning, individual property rights in land and capital—for economic development. But these accounts, even when seeking to explain change over several centuries (as in the work of Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson [2001, 2002]), have tended implicitly

to equate property with possession of land and other material assets. Reflection on the importance of slavery and slave trading within and from Africa reminds us that it is anachronistic to equate “property” as a genus with the particular species with which it is identified today (Austin 2005, 2006).

Relatedly, African historical experience may lead us to reject the view, suggested by E. L. Jones and taken as axiomatic in the work of some influential liberal economists, that rent-seeking and economic growth have been opposites in the emergence of the modern world (Jones 1988; Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson 2001, 2002). “Economic rent” is the surplus of income over opportunity cost. Thus it is the difference between the return actually obtained for the supply of a resource and the minimum return necessary to elicit the supply of the resource in its current use (see Coase 1988:163).²⁸ Under perfect market conditions all factors (labor, land, and capital) would receive their respective marginal products, so the actual return would equal the opportunity cost and therefore no economic rent would exist. Economic rents arise from departures from such conditions. In this framework, slavery and slave trading are a clear case of the extraction of such rents: obtaining labor power at below the market value that laborers would obtain if they were free to hire out their own services. But it would be an anachronistic indulgence of the liberal-economic mind to deny that slavery and slave trading made at least some contribution to the economic development of Britain, the United States, and indeed parts of West Africa after 1807, when the export of slaves was diminishing but the internal use of slaves was rising (Inikori 2002; Austin 2002).

African evidence is also relevant to the discussion of the dynamics of rent-seeking. Indeed, Bates’s influential work of the early 1980s on Africa was the main source of the idea, formalized later by Kevin Murphy, Andrei Schleifer, and Robert Vishny, that rent-seeking is self-perpetuating (with increasing returns to scale for a while) and that a rent-seeking equilibrium is likely to be stable (Bates 1981; Murphy et al. 1991).²⁹ There is evidence for this phenomenon in tropical Africa in the period (especially the immediate twenty years or so) before the adoption of Structural Adjustment, during which the agricultural export producers of most sub-Saharan countries were subjected to very high rates of implicit taxation via the marketing board system and, often more importantly and pentially, through overvalued, nonconvertible currencies. Yet contrary to the theory, in the early to mid-1980s, the rent-seeking equilibrium (if that is what it was) proved unstable: some thirty African countries shifted (to varying degrees) from administrative to market means of resource allocation when they adopted Structural Adjustment programs. By so doing, almost by definition, they reduced the level of economic rents.³⁰ Murphy et al. deserve credit for drawing on African evidence in their pursuit of an economic generalization. A more extended consideration of contemporary African history, however, suggests an empirical conclusion opposite to the one they drew. Nor would it be safe to assume that the adoption of Structural Adjustment was a mere capitula-

tion to outside pressure. A key pressure behind governments' decisions to reform—however reluctantly and often partially—was the widespread phenomenon of what was, in effect, a producers' revolt: farmers were selling to parallel markets rather than through taxable channels (see, e.g., Azarya & Chazan 1987). This made the “equilibrium” less attractive domestically even to its beneficiaries (who were few and becoming fewer) and less defensible in the face of external carrots and sticks (Austin 1996b).

Finally, the state is often considered to be an indispensable contributor to long-term economic development, including, as emphasized by Douglass North, for the provision of an institutional framework facilitating market growth (North 1990). Yet in the much-quoted words of John Lonsdale, “the most distinctively African contribution to human history could be said to have been precisely the civilized art of living fairly peaceably together *not* in states” (1981:139). A question that deserves much thought and new research is what the precolonial African mix of different levels of political centralization, with many areas being “stateless,” tells us about the global significance of states in economic development. John Peel commented for West Africa (but the point is applicable much more widely) that “the most segmentary peoples and the most centralized states share[d] the same technological, ecological and physical conditions of existence” (Peel 1987:108; see also Horton 1985). Whether this means that states had no effect at macro-level on the economic growth of precolonial societies requires more investigation, but this is probably more difficult to document than the effects of specific institutions at the micro-level of a particular activity in a specific place. Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson have provided an illuminating example of the latter kind of study through their research on the rival slave-exporting ports of Bonny and Old Calabar. In one article they documented the role of a hostage system in facilitating contracts between African sellers and European buyers of slaves at Old Calabar (Lovejoy & Richardson 1999). However, their subsequent paper on Bonny shows that the system there, by which the local ruler regulated the trade and ensured that bargains were kept, was more successful commercially: Bonny steadily outdistanced its competitor in terms of the volume of the gruesome trade that it conducted (Lovejoy & Richardson 2004). This comparison, framed as it is in principal-agent terms, should be illuminating for geographically wider debates within and beyond the rational-choice framework. For historians of Africa and elsewhere, it elucidates the broad theoretical and historical debate about the characteristics and implications of private and state arrangements with respect to commerce.

Reflections

Historians of Africa have long experimented with concepts derived from the history of Europe: both overarching paradigms and more specific notions about the paths and patterns of change. For analytical purposes the

danger with this procedure arises when models are *only* imported, and when they are imported from only one part of the world. This article has confirmed the continuing overall dominance of ideas from the West in shaping the study (from various disciplinary angles) of the economic past of sub-Saharan Africa. This observation needs to be qualified by recognition that some of the most influential ideas applied to African economies, past and present, have been coined in the context not of Europe or North America but rather of other relatively poor, formerly colonized regions: specifically India, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Although these “Third World” models have been duly criticized in African contexts, they have also been enriching for African studies. The main requirement for overcoming conceptual Eurocentrism in African history, however, is reciprocal comparison of Africa and other continents (or, often better, specific places within Africa with counterparts elsewhere). We have seen that in economic history and closely related disciplines there have been few major scholarly attempts at reciprocal comparison involving Africa. But the exceptions are of high quality, and there are encouraging signs that the method is becoming more widely used. To that end, the previous section put forward an illustrative set of propositions, based on African economic history, which may be useful for specialists on other parts of the world.

If Africa’s history is to become fully recognized as a source of illumination into the human condition, or more precisely into human experience, we who study it (in our various disciplines) need to raise our sights. Alongside the task of recognizing the specificity of much of our material is the need to explore the ways in which African histories provide parallels, models, or illuminating contrasts with other histories. We should not be shy about sharing the results of this exploration—both findings and suggestions—with specialists on other continents, and with comparativists and theoreticians. We have long accepted the duty to disseminate the results of Africanist scholarship to students and the public. But, some pioneers excepted, we could try harder to communicate our conclusions to fellow academics: to insist on the principle that comparison be reciprocal, and to provide our share of the tools required to implement it.

Highlighting findings from African history that might illuminate other contexts, as briefly exemplified in the previous section, is a basic requirement of this overall endeavor. The accretion of case studies and propositions should facilitate the work of the rare Europeanist or Americanist who seeks to view his or her continent of specialization “in an African mirror.” With changing attitudes, such scholars may be less unusual in future. Equally, such accretion will assist Africanists who seek to theorize from Africa outward. However, the formulation of discrete, empirically grounded propositions is unlikely to be sufficient to give African histories their proper place within social science. It is important also to pay attention to terminology, for felicitous terms can travel more easily than the specifics of the research that inspired them. This is exemplified by Keith Hart’s phrase “informal

sector" (Hart 1973), surely the most widely diffused economic category to have originated in African studies. And, as Goody's work illustrates, the task of attempting new generalizations from an African research base is as valuable as it is difficult. Conceptual Eurocentrism continues to operate at a range of levels of abstraction. Ultimately, reciprocal comparison needs to supersede it on all those levels.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the AEGIS European Conference on African Studies, London, June 2005; the International Congress of Historical Sciences, Sydney, July 2005; the History and Economic Development Group, London, February 2006; the African Studies Center, Stanford University, April 2006; and to a meeting of the Japan Society of African Studies, Kansai University, July 2006. I am very grateful to the organizers and participants, and for very helpful comments by Jane Guyer and Sean Redding.

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Notes

1. "As ever the continent [Africa] is unable to impose itself as a source of epistemological norms. Concepts continue to impose themselves only from north to south: one brandishes Foucault, Gramsci or Weber (Marx having temporarily disappeared from circulation) to dissect sub-Saharan history, but the return exercise works badly or not at all."
2. An exception to the claim that no overarching social science theory with potentially universal claims has yet stemmed from Africa might be World-Systems theory, on the grounds that Immanuel Wallerstein was originally an Africanist (e.g., Wallerstein 1976). But the framework he developed built very much on Dependency theory (of which more below). Afrocentricity, going back to Cheik Anta Diop, is undoubtedly of African origin; but (as is also almost true of World Systems) it is hard to see that it has much influence on the categories and questions with which empirical historical research is conducted in sub-Saharan Africa today. For a sense of the state of play, see Farias (2004).
3. The fullest survey of this generation of literature is Cooper (1981).
4. As a diverse range of leading examples, see Bates (1981, 1983, 1989, 1990); Ensminger (1992); Evans and Richardson (1995); Firmin-Sellers (1996); Herbst (2000); Lovejoy and Richardson (1999, 2004); Lowenberg and Kaempfer (1998); Wariboko (1998). For a general critique see Leys (1996). Some of the shrewdest criticism has come from Bates himself (1995). For a historian's attempt to test the value of the approach in a specific long-term context, see Austin (2005).
5. This adaptation to, and consideration in, historical context is even more evident in the strategic bargaining approaches of Alence (1990–91) and Boone (2003).

6. Firms are popularly associated with markets, but Coase drew attention to the paradox that firms, in a sense, replace the market: instead of the individuals engaged in an industry buying and selling the services and other products between themselves, the firm allocates its resources internally by command. Williamson asked why, for example, an automobile manufacturer might want to take over the company that supplied it with parts, thereby extending the displacement of the price mechanism by managerial hierarchy.
7. For a summary in largely nontechnical language of the first part of the argument, see Acemoglu et al. (2005:407–21).
8. For a succinct critical survey see Brewer (1990:161–99).
9. I refer to the original formulations of World-Systems theory (with hyphen) by Immanuel Wallerstein, e.g., with particular reference to Africa (Wallerstein 1976). More recently Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills (1993) have argued that the present “World System” (no hyphen) is at least five thousand years old, and hence by no means specifically European in origin.
10. See Robert Tignor’s excellent intellectual biography of Lewis, which highlights his African interests and involvements (Tignor 2006).
11. Followed by Samir Amin’s series of works, e.g. Amin (1976).
12. A valuable contribution—now awaiting follow-up—was Cooper et al. (1993).
13. This broad but imperfect contrast continues to stimulate important contributions to the debate about the determinants of long-term economic development. See Acemoglu et al. (2001, 2002, 2005) and the discussion, pertinent for Africanists, about why postcolonial economic performance differed so much between North America and Latin America (Engerman & Sokoloff 1997; Coatsworth 1998; North, Summerhill, & Weingast 2000; Grafe & Irigoien 2006).
14. Particularly searching were the criticisms from authors writing in the tradition of Marx’s analysis of the economic effects of capitalist imperialism in the colonies: Brenner (1977); Warren (1980); Smith (1980); Sender and Smith (1986).
15. In the case of the Lewis model, it should be noted that its application to Africa was not the author’s own work. In his famous article he noted that the premise of the model did not apply to all underdeveloped countries: “there is an acute shortage of male labour in some parts of Africa” (1954:140): for example Ghana (1954:143; 1953:3).
16. The classic historical critique of the Lewis model in an African setting was Arrighi (1970). The basic point summarized above is accepted even in subsequent work, which has shown that state policy was not quite as successful or as sustained as Arrighi thought in driving Africans out of the produce market and into the labor market (see, e.g., Mosley 1983).
17. For a conceptual overview see Devereux (1993). A notable historical contribution was Megan Vaughan’s study of the 1949 famine in Malawi (Vaughan 1987). For a pioneering historical study that shifts attention from crisis to “normal” hunger, see Destombes (2006).
18. This, implicitly, was the line taken by Platteau, in a chapter in a volume co-edited by Sen (Platteau 1995).
19. The classic exposition of urban bias in Africa was Bates (1981), which necessarily concerned the period before Structural Adjustment. On India, see Byres (1979).
20. Some of the complications of this are discussed in Vaughan (2006).

21. Relatedly, “Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate” (Chakrabarty 2000:28; see also Bernault 2001:128).
22. There is another, more unfortunate reason: those few excellent syntheses of African history—or of major regions or themes within the field—that do exist have been neglected by some among even the most distinguished of historians with global ambitions. Even the great Fernand Braudel penned a chapter on “Black Africa” that can hardly be said to have done justice to even the most obvious contributions available at the time he wrote, or to the expertise accessible to him from Africanist scholars in Paris (Braudel 1979). For critical reflections on Braudel’s account see Feierman (1993:171–78). More recently, David S. Landes, in his best-selling *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (1998), cites some of the key works published on sub-Saharan economic history over the last half century, but shows little sign of having allowed them to affect his conclusions. In contrast, the comparative and historical sociologist W. C. Runciman (1995) illustrates how key readings on African history *can* be mobilized effectively within a geographically broader analysis.
23. The work of the Danish economist Ester Boserup on agricultural intensification, its gender implications, and related issues is also a classic of intercontinental comparison. But it owed more to her experience in Asia than in Africa, and her references to the latter are mostly to what for her was contemporary Africa, rather than African history (Boserup 1965, 1970).
24. In a different geographical context the archaeologist Andrew Sherratt insisted persuasively on the primacy of luxuries as against staples (e.g., Sherratt 1995).
25. Twenty years ago Manning highlighted the tendency of development economists working on Africa to take 1960 as their empirical and analytical entry point (Manning 1987). This observation is almost as true today, though there are several papers in progress that take a longer view.
26. For a reading of Asante history that puts much more emphasis than Yarak does on the centrality of slavery and other forms of coerced labor, especially in the nineteenth century, see Austin (2005).
27. To adopt a phrase from Wade (1990).
28. For an exposition of the concept of economic rent, followed by an application to African history, see Evans and Richardson (1995).
29. Bates discreetly revised his interpretation in the light of subsequent events, especially Structural Adjustment: Bates (1991).
30. The broader question of the economic effects of Structural Adjustment is beyond the scope of this article.