

REVIEW ARTICLE

AFRICAN ECONOMIC HISTORY:  
THE FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

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*African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency.* By RALPH AUSTEN. London: James Currey, 1987. Pp. ix+294. £25 (£8.95 paperback).

The appearance of a new text on African economic history is important in its own right, and it also provides an occasion to take stock of the academic capital accumulated by a generation of research in this field. In broad terms the subject has followed, and to some extent has helped to mark out, the contours of modern African studies as a whole: the shift from Eurocentric to 'indigenous' points of view, the adoption of 'bourgeois' and then of radical approaches, the geographical migration of scholarly interest from west to east and then to south Africa, and the recent revival of colonial economic history, albeit of a novel kind.

Against this background, Ralph Austen has attempted two particularly demanding feats of academic athleticism: the marathon task of encompassing what is now a substantial body of literature, running from the distant time when the Yoruba came, as they say, 'out of a hole in the ground' to the present day; and the high vault of interpreting it. The assessment which follows will focus on Austen's new book, but will also append some broader observations on the future of the subject.

Scholars who attempt to synthesize a wide range of material quickly discover that they have a limited number of tools and an infinite array of intractable difficulties. The problem of presentation, for example, invariably involves a choice among imperfect solutions. Austen's solution takes the form of a series of close encounters with the detailed literature. An alternative technique, adopted by Wrigley, relies on high gliding interspersed with occasional swoops to ground level.<sup>1</sup> Wrigley's is the more stylish means of travel for those who have no fear of flying; Austen's committed hand-to-hand combat clears more undergrowth. Indeed, the great strength of this book lies in its careful summaries of numerous, usually self-contained, debates on a range of topics traversing many centuries. Austen's decision to concentrate on sub-Saharan Africa admittedly eases the task of comprehension, but there still remains a weighty body of specialized research published in several languages and scattered, for the most part, in diverse and often obscure journals. The outcome is sometimes a set of long and inconclusive baseline exchanges between liberals and Marxists, but the author proves to be a remarkably even-handed referee, and every page provides evidence that his text is the product of many years of reading and careful reflection.

Austen splits his material into ten chapters prefaced by a brief Introduction which sets out the scope, organization and argument of the book. The Introduction prompts two comments (leaving aside the argument itself, which will be considered later). The first comment concerns Austen's use of the contrast between 'market' and 'structural' approaches to refer to liberal and radical perspectives. Readers

<sup>1</sup> C. C. Wrigley, 'Aspects of economic history', in A. D. Roberts (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vii (Cambridge, 1986), 77–139.

who are familiar with the history of the social sciences will be aware that liberal approaches also consider structures – hence the term ‘structuralism’ has been loaded with bourgeois and other non-Marxist baggage in the past and will no doubt be pressed into service again. The second and related comment is that Austen’s historiographical division has the effect of squeezing out the research inspired by the *Annales* school during the past decade, with the result that recent interest in topics such as climate, disease and demography (and, by extension, the history of women in Africa) receives insufficient coverage.<sup>2</sup> This is the only gap of importance in Austen’s otherwise complete suit of armour. It could be patched by placing the *annalistes* under the structuralist banner, but this would make a ragged, conscript army. The alternative is to have three perspectives and three headings instead of two, but this would probably be unwieldy. Meanwhile, readers need to bear in mind that categorization, which is a necessary tool of synthesis, can distort by omission as well as (more typically) by compression.

Chapter 1 on the ‘dynamics of subsistence’ is only sixteen pages long and is the least satisfactory section of the book. To some extent brevity results from the persistent neglect of this admittedly difficult subject by all schools of thought, and to some extent it reflects Austen’s emphasis, which emerges as the book proceeds, on the international economy. Nevertheless, given the importance which the author himself assigns to the domestic economy, and its prominence in his subtitle, it is disappointing to find that the discussion of the concept of subsistence is very attenuated and that so little use is made of the historical explorations of scholars such as Wilks and Vansina.<sup>3</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 on pre-colonial trade in West and East Africa, on the other hand, provide informative summaries of the existing literature, include a helpful commentary on the application of the notion of ‘plantations’ to Africa, and offer some interesting comparisons between the two regions (which are often treated in isolation), though whether the ‘Sudanic contact economy represents something of an ideal African development pattern’ (p. 48) is open to debate, as no doubt it is intended to be.

Chapter 4 reverts to West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and brings the Europeans into the story. This chapter provides a useful account of the slave and palm oil trades, but it also shows how compression pinches the text at points where the literature is particularly dense or complex. The discussion of the Atlantic slave trade, for example, leaves little scope for illustrative case studies, while the assessment of the transition to legitimate commerce is allowed insufficient space to consider the work of Law, Latham, Northrup and others,<sup>4</sup> and it pushes the author into cryptic judgements which do not always represent the main weight of recent research.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Austen’s categorization is similar to that suggested by the present writer in ‘Africa’s age of improvement’, *History in Africa*, VII (1980), 141–60. A sample of the research undertaken during the 1980s can be found in Margaret Jean Hay, ‘Recent trends in African economic history’, *Dalhousie African Working Papers*, no. 4 (1985).

<sup>3</sup> Ivor Wilks, ‘Land, labour, capital and the forest kingdoms of Asante: a model of early change’, in J. Friedman and M. J. Rowlands (eds.), *The Evolution of Social Systems* (London, 1977), 487–534; Jan Vansina, ‘Towards a history of lost corners in the world’, *Economic History Review*, xxxv (1982), 165–78. See also ‘Contributions to a history of agriculture and fishing in Central Africa’, special issue of *African Economic History*, no. 7 (1979), 1–181.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Law, ‘Royal monopoly and private enterprise in the Atlantic trade: the case of Dahomey’, *J. Afr. Hist.* xviii (1977), 555–77; David Northrup, *Trade Without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-East Nigeria* (Oxford, 1978); A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600–1861: The Economic Impact of the West Upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> On pp. 101–2, for example.

Chapter 5 provides a brief link between pre-colonial and colonial Africa. The author omits an evaluation of partition, and instead opts for a general statement of expansionist tendencies emanating from Europe on the grounds that the explanation of the 'scramble' is to be found in 'the perceptions of total economic policy at the metropolitan centres of European decision-making' (p. 117). However, Austen fails to show that the argument he wishes to establish is inconsistent with the argument he seeks to reject. His conclusion rests on the largely untested assumptions that there was no significant 'crisis of transition' in the nineteenth century and that mercantile pressures were unimportant. An exception is made in the case of southern Africa (which is discussed in a subsequent chapter) because there the extension of colonial frontiers was 'closely linked with local European economic interests' (p. 116), though in the event the author's heavily guarded judgement of this intricate subject leaves the reader with at least one foot in uncertainty (p. 164).

The second half of the book is devoted entirely to the twentieth century. Chapters 6 and 7 divide colonial economies according to two structural categories ('étatist-peasant regimes' and 'regimes of colonial exploitation') which, broadly speaking, echo the analysis of traders' and settlers' frontiers set out nearly fifty years ago by Hancock (whose work, curiously, is not explicitly mentioned by Austen).<sup>6</sup> In employing the term 'peasant', Austen acknowledges the trend of the past decade, though his awareness of its many ambiguities (pp. 137–8) causes him to refer to small-holders as well. Is it now too late to suggest that calling African cultivators 'peasants' prompts misleading comparisons with Europe and also raises problems of definition which, since they have not yet been resolved, are probably beyond resolution? Chapter 6 follows a number of familiar sub-themes, such as the rise of large commercial firms and the expansion of 'peasant' export crops, and momentarily loses sight of the evolution of the colonial economies through two world wars and the world slump, subjects which have stimulated much research recently.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 7 focuses mainly on South Africa, and involves a chronological leap back to the eighteenth century, a heroic attempt to summarize the literature on economic imperialism, and an account of subsequent mining, farming and manufacturing developments.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion that 'the economy of South Africa is neither European nor African, thus neither drawing upon nor providing a model for development anywhere else' (p. 187) would have been more convincing if the author had taken account of comparisons of settler economies of the kind made by Denoon.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 8 deals with decolonization, and it is at this point that the author introduces, by way of background, the world slump and the second world war. This chapter advances an argument about the transfer of power which merits further consideration; some preliminary observations will be made later in this

<sup>6</sup> W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, II, pt. 2 (London, 1942).

<sup>7</sup> 'World War I and Africa', Special issue of the *J. Afr. Hist.* xix (1978), 1–130; Marc Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique: contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en A.O.F. (1914–1919)* (Paris, 1982); 'Francophone Africa and the Depression of the 1930s', special issue of *African Economic History*, no. 4 (1977), pp. 103–76; 'L'Afrique et la crise de 1930', special issue of the *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, LXIII (1976), 375–779; David Killingray and Richard Rathbone (eds), *Africa and the Second World War* (London, 1986); UNESCO, *Africa and the Second World War* (Paris, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> A valuable overview of recent economic developments is now available: Francis Wilson, 'Southern Africa', in Michael Crowder (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, VIII c. 1940–c. 1975 (Cambridge, 1984), 251–330.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Denoon, *Settler Capitalism: The Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere* (Oxford, 1983).

essay, when Austen's general interpretation of African economic history is discussed. The final historical chapter provides a valuable account of the period since decolonization, and centres on four case studies of Ghana, Tanzania, Ivory Coast and Kenya. Perhaps the most helpful brief comment which can be made on these chapters is that they need to be read with Fieldhouse's recent book, which covers much the same ground but in greater detail and from a different perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Austen interprets this huge swathe of African history as a 'doubly paradoxical process: development linked to risk; and dependency linked to marginality' (p. 5). The ensuing explanation of these twin propositions errs on the side of brevity and leaves them with an opaque quality which remains throughout the book. Indeed, Austen's commendable clarity of expression falters only when he seeks to connect general propositions to particular segments of his text. At these points the prose becomes more ponderous, though it never descends to the underworld of pseudo-scientific jargon, and the author's customary incisiveness is blunted by an excessive willingness to embrace paradoxes and contradictions.

The first part of the argument may provide preliminary guidance for uninitiated readers, but is too obvious to be helpful to specialists. The idea that development is linked to risk is a truism which economists have made operational by devising concepts such as specialization and opportunity cost. By these and other means the concept of risk can be mobilized effectively for purposes of broad historical analysis. Austen, however, does not take this further step, and the result is that risk is left as an unrefined idea which is suspended too far above the detailed historical literature to engage with it. Austen's usage also adopts the evolutionist assumption that risk increases with the passage of time. This is a defensible view, but it needs an explicit defence, and in particular it glosses over the fact that 'subsistence economies', however defined, are also full of risk. Specialization can be seen as an attempt to reduce some risks while accepting others in the expectation of increasing returns. This is surely one plausible way of looking at the historical links between domestic and international sectors of the economy.

The second part of Austen's thesis suggests that, as integration with the outside world has increased, the continent has accounted for a steadily diminishing share of an expanding international economy (p. 5). This part of the interpretation may appear to be an uncontroversial illustration of the consequences of exposure to risk, but in fact it raises important problems of both proof and inference. Given the fragmentary nature of the data, and the skimpy evidence offered (e.g. on p. 36), readers should pause before accepting Austen's conclusion that Africa had become 'marginalized' by the end of the nineteenth century (pp. 102, 109). However, if they are persuaded, they should then give careful consideration to the relationship between 'marginalization' and Africa's development prospects. Although Austen does not embrace the dependency thesis, he does imply that marginality is an unhealthy deviation, if not from a norm then from a preferred trajectory. This, again, is an arguable case, but Austen leaves it to flap in the wind instead of tying it down. Against this view, it can be held that, from the perspective of economic development, Africa's share of world trade matters less than the absolute totals of marketed output, within as well as outside the continent.

Austen's assumptions about the declining significance of Africa in the world economy since the nineteenth century rest very largely on the statistical data in Table A4 of the Appendix (pp. 277–80). This evidence is used to establish the paradox of European partition at a moment of declining importance (p. 146), to explain decolonization (p. 198), and to sustain some wide generalizations about

<sup>10</sup> D. K. Fieldhouse, *Black Africa, 1945–1980: Economic Decolonization and Arrested Development* (London, 1986).

both the present and the past (pp. 270–1). There are a number of serious problems with the data base, notably the exclusion of capital flows and invisibles, and uncertainty about whether currency values are current or constant. However, even assuming that the data base approximates to reality, it is still difficult to see that Austen's evidence bears out his thesis. The proportions of trade (as well as the absolute values) between Britain and Africa and between France and Africa show a secular *increase*, which suggests that commercial ties between centre and periphery were strengthened following the extension of colonial rule. Slight variations around this trend can be certainly found, but it would surely be unwise to erect a large explanatory structure upon them. It is only towards the very end of the colonial era that the trend is clearly reversed. It may be that 'marginalization' is now taking place, but it is too early to be confident that this conclusion will hold in the longer term. On the other hand, it is possible (and is certainly true in a number of cases) that the decline of colonial ties is a symptom more of diversification than of marginalization.

The most detailed illustration of the way in which marginalization is said to have affected the course of African history is given in Chapter 8, where it is contended that decolonization occurred at a moment when Africa's significance in the international economy was diminishing. However, Austen's quantitative data, which consist of estimates for the whole of Africa for 1948, 1952 and 1960, do not have the refinement needed to make this delicate causal connection. Indeed, the evidence is capable of supporting a contrary view, namely that African colonies were *appreciating* assets at the time of independence.<sup>11</sup> But even if Austen's argument about marginalization turns out, with better statistical underpinning, to be correct, a question mark remains about the link between the declining importance of Africa and decolonization. In the case of France the most influential interpretation is not that colonial ties became unimportant but that they became unprofitable, which is a very different statement.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the British colonies Austen's thesis appears to underplay both the role of nationalist forces and the determination of successive governments to hold on to empire in Africa, at least down to the Suez crisis of 1956.<sup>13</sup> There was undoubtedly a shift in patterns of trade in the post-war era and some disillusion with grandiose development projects too, but these manifested themselves after other forces impelling decolonization had made their appearance. By the time that Britain and France had realized that political realities pointed to decolonization, it was too late to plan neo-colonialism. Nevertheless, Africa continued to be valued, and its worth was recognized in strategies which the ex-colonial powers deployed, with mixed success, to maintain their presence in independent Africa while shedding the costs (and the opprobrium) of running empires in the second half of the twentieth century.

Few luxuries can match the delicious indulgence of criticism. It is much easier to destroy than to construct and much more tempting too, for criticism can readily convey the pleasing self-deception that the critic could have produced a finer work than the author had he deigned to do so. A book of wide compass inevitably has flaws: Austen's study adopts a somewhat antique approach to African history which gives excessive emphasis to international trade, under-represents the domestic economy, and does not do justice to some of the most recent historio-

<sup>11</sup> Fieldhouse, *Black Africa*, 231–2.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme française* (Paris, 1984) emphasizes how sectoral changes in the French economy, combined with the increasing costs of maintaining political control in the 1950s, brought about a reappraisal of the means of defending French interests in the colonies.

<sup>13</sup> A valuable recent survey is J. D. Hargreaves, *Decolonization in Africa* (London, 1988).



graphical trends, while its general interpretation rests on a data base which is too fragmentary for the weight it has to carry. But Austen should not be left, as Hazlitt said that Charles Lamb left his friends, 'suspended in strong acid' until they next met. In this case, immersion would be a sentence so unjust as to appal even a hanging judge. Austen deserves every credit for wrestling with a mighty subject which has defeated others in the past and will claim more victims in the future.<sup>14</sup> He has provided a thorough and valuable survey of the literature and added reflections of his own which may prove to be far more durable than those offered here. Above all, this is an honest book, not one written to catch a trend or a promotion. Austen has thought long and hard about his evidence and his judgements before committing them to publication; no scholar can do more. In these ways he has helped the subject forward and placed all of us, specialists and non-specialists alike, in his debt.

To predict future trends in African economic history is by no means easy.<sup>15</sup> The outlook for basic research in this field of study is bleak in both Africa and Britain as a result of financial constraints imposed in the one case by necessity and in the other by choice.<sup>16</sup> Research into the subject in the immediate future will mostly be undertaken elsewhere, notably in the United States and France. Consequently, futurologists wishing to refine their predictions will need to examine the cultural and political motives for funding research on Africa in these two countries.

It is also difficult to see what new intellectual currents will wash over African studies during the next decade. After liberalism, dependency theory, Marxism and the *annalistes*, Africa seems to have been thoroughly colonized by every major brand of thought derived from Western intellectual traditions. This is not the place to rehearse the case for an 'African point of view', still less to consider its content. One way forward, however, is by reintegrating the various political, economic and social sub-specialisms which have emerged from the study of African history. Pleas for integration can easily become recipes for grand tautologies, as the answers to historical questions expand to match steadily widening definitions of the problem. The vogue for 'political economy', which reached its high point during the 1970s, was not entirely free from this beguiling tendency. But there is a case for putting grappling irons on segments of the literature which have drifted apart during the past twenty-five years. One of several possibilities is to reconsider the links between resources and state power in Africa – a theme which is touched but not explored by available research on trade and politics.<sup>17</sup>

To say what ought to be undertaken in the specific case of economic history is somewhat easier. The greatest single omission from the existing literature remains the lack of knowledge about the pre-colonial rural economy. To some extent this is because the subject is still at an elementary stage of development. Nevertheless, it is disappointing to find that so little has been done, after a generation of research, to fill this enormous gap. It is said (so many times that it has come to be received wisdom) that 'market models' ignore production. Yet there is no reason why the market perspective cannot be used to trace output to its source. Indeed, it might

<sup>14</sup> Peter Wickens, *Africa, 1880–1980: An Economic History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1986) adopts a strictly narrative, chronological approach which offers less to discuss – and less to criticize.

<sup>15</sup> For an earlier attempt see A. G. Hopkins, 'Clio-antics: a horoscope for African economic history', in Christopher Fyfe (ed.), *African Studies Since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson* (London, 1976), 31–48.

<sup>16</sup> A. G. Hopkins, 'From Hayter to Parker: African economic history at Birmingham University, 1964–86', *African Affairs*, LXXXVI (1987), 93–102.

<sup>17</sup> One possible approach is sketched in A. G. Hopkins, 'The World Bank in Africa: a historical perspective', *World Development*, XIV (1986), 1473–87.

be claimed that a number of signposts are already in place should researchers choose to follow them.<sup>18</sup> Marxist influences have undoubtedly directed attention towards the 'productive base' of society. Unfortunately, much of the energy expended on this theme has been devoted, especially in the 1970s, to a form of materialist theology which has distanced itself from empirical Marxism and placed the subject it purported to study beyond the reach of the ordinary lay historian. It would be naive to think that ideological boundaries will be overcome by a common interest in empiricism. But it ought not to be naive to presume that all schools of thought should now seek to demonstrate their explanatory prowess in the course of recovering as much as possible of Africa's rural past.

## APPENDIX

### ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF PRE-PUBLICATION REPORTS

Like other recent publications on Africa from the admirable firm of James Currey, Ralph Austen's new book carries on its back cover extracts from pre-publication reports, which have also been used in advance publicity. This is a growing and no doubt well-intentioned marketing tactic among publishers, and objections to it may be regarded as being narrowly pedantic. However, since the practice is designed to bestow academic credentials, it ought not to pass without academic scrutiny.

The implied suggestion is that quotations selected from pre-publication reports and printed on the covers of new books are merely anticipations of reviews. The claim is honest in intent, but it is nevertheless open to criticism. The quotations in question are extracted from readers' commissioned reports on manuscripts at various stages before publication. These reports are designed to help the publisher's commercial calculations and to assist the author's progress towards a publishable text. Sometimes they are based on only part of the manuscript; but even when they cover the whole script (as is usually the case) favourable conclusions are often accompanied by recommendations about improving the final work. The result is likely to balance frank academic comments with the enthusiasm of a specialist who hopes that his subject will maintain its quota of publications. Quotations of favourable extracts may or may not represent the balance of the report, and may or may not refer to the published version of the manuscript.

Reports for publishers are not reviews, though they have some of the features of reviews. Reviews are based on the published text, they can be read in full, and quoted extracts can be checked against the whole. Neither publishers nor authors should try to anticipate, however intelligently, judgements which ought properly to be made after publication and not before. To treat readers' reports as if they were reviews is to confuse private and public domains, and to risk misleading those who, supposedly, are to be informed. The end is worthy, but the means involves a threat to academic standards which is not less significant for being subtle and for appearing to be trivial.

<sup>18</sup> A final indulgence: A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London and New York, 4th impression, 1988).