

Economics, Politics and African Societies: PPHA 32736

James A. Robinson (Harris School for Public Policy)

Spring 2024, Monday, 3.00-5.20 PM, Keller 0010

This class provides an introduction to and interpretation of Africa's economic and political trajectory over the past 500 years. The emphasis is on economic and political dynamics in the longue durée and trying to understand how Africa fits into the comparative picture. The focus of much research on contemporary Africa is of course on poverty, famine, civil war and the immense economic challenges that the continent has faced since independence. We shall study these and their roots and also many of the political correlates that go along with them, such as the weakness of African states, their corruption and problems of autocracy and democracy. But to get a deeper understanding of these phenomena entails understanding Africa society, how it is organized, why it is organized as it is, and how it has come into collision with global forces in the past 500 years.

My perspective, that will emerge as the course proceeds, is that, though there is a great deal of variation (I will discuss the extent to which it is even useful to talk about "Africa"), one can think of African society as organized around a central principle; "wealth in people". By this I mean that social relations were (and are) more valued than the type of material "things" (houses, land, assets and money) that we typically think of as constituting wealth. To be wealthy meant/means having a lot of social relations, dependents and "people" (in marriage, wives, hence polygamy – though this shows that there is a gendered nature to this it is also true that women were valued as people in ways that was typically not true in western society). This principle is probably the consequences of deeper aspects of African's ontologies and worldviews. I will spend a little bit of time on this (Lecture 3) but will focus more on wealth in people and its consequences. One was for the nature of politics in Africa and for political institutions. The emphasis on people and social relations led to a focus on the autonomy of the local community and the creation of institutions and mechanisms that made it very difficult to centralize political power and threaten autonomy. When more centralized political institutions emerged, they did so in unique ways which preserved the autonomy of the local community. I shall stress the conclusion of the great historian of Central Africa Jan Vansina that "the ability to refuse centralization while maintaining the necessary cohesion among a myriad of autonomous communities has been the most original contribution of western Bantu tradition to the institutional history of the world" (*Paths in the Rainforests*, 1990, p. 237). This led to a remarkable system of independent polities where institutions, particularly economic institutions, were subservient to the broader political imperatives.

Seen from this perspective, that of what Africans were actually trying to achieve, I shall emphasize that Africa, far from being the "failure" portrayed in economics and political science, was actually a success – Africans achieved what they were trying to achieve. There is much to celebrate here and learn from and we will! Unfortunately, however, the institutions they created left Africans vulnerable to the pernicious global forces unleashed by European political and economic expansionism and imperialism in the early modern and modern periods. These forces led to the emergence of the slave trade, colonialism and in the post-colonial period, the Cold War. They foisted on Africans a state system which made no sense

in terms of the history and traditions of African societies. The challenges these phenomena created have led to the economic decline of Africa and the political challenges Africa societies have faced (state collapse, civil war, autocracy). Nevertheless, the future does not have to be like the past and we will see that many of the intrinsic features of African society bode well for the future.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of ignorance about Africa, have a look at this for an example from our own government¹ and a lot of nonsense is written. I will not however linger on this, life is too short, and I will not talk about how confused Hegel or Trevor-Roper were about Africa.² Time to get over that.

The course is not technical and open for Masters Students, undergraduates and doctoral students.

The Teaching assistant is Daniel Sonnenstuhl: d.sonnenstuhl@uchicago.edu

My Office Hours are Wednesday 4.30-6.30 or by appointment.

The main reading for the course will be a book manuscript I am in the process of writing (entitled *Wealth in People*), but I also suggest some key and important additional readings below.

March 18: Lecture 1: Public Policy and Africa. How to Frame the Issues.

Ferguson, James (1994) *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Chapter 9, pp. 251-277.

Casey, Katherine (2023) "Skill versus voice in local development,"

<https://voxdev.org/topic/institutions-political-economy/skill-versus-voice-local-development>

Bandiera, Oriana et al. (2023) "Safe Spaces for Teenage Girls in a Time of Crisis,"

https://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uctpimr/research/ELA_SL.pdf

Boone, Sylvia Ardyn (1990) *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*, Yale University Press.

Rusbridger, Alan (2007) "Can we, together, lift one village out of the Middle Ages?"

<https://www.theguardian.com/katine/2007/oct/20/about>

Henn, Soeren J. and James A. Robinson (2023) "Africa as a Success Story," Unpublished.

Wealth in People, Chapter 1: Introduction.

March 25: Lecture 2: Wealth in People and African Worldviews

Bledsoe, Caroline (1980) *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. Chapter 3 "Wealth in People."

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50849559>

² See Toby Green (2019) *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*, University of Chicago Press.

Berry, Sara (1993) "Chapter 7: Investing in Networks," in her *No Condition in Permanent*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Wealth in People, Chapter 3: Wealth in People.

Tempels, Placide (1959) *Bantu Philosophy*, Chapter 2 Bantu Ontology.

Ashforth, Adam (2005) *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*, Chapter 3 "On living in a world with witches," University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff (2011) "On Personhood: A Perspective from Africa," in their *Theory from the South*, Sun Press.

Ezeh, P-J (2023) "Taboos or *ńsọani* in Okposi," Unpublished, Department of Anthropology, University of Nigeria at Nsukka.

Wealth in People, Chapter 2: African Worldviews.

Additional Sources:

For an interesting perspective on how Africa is different see

Bohannon, Laura (1966) "Shakespeare in the Bush," *Natural History*,

http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/editors_pick/1966_08-09_pick.html

April 1: Lecture 3: "Stateless" Societies and States

Afigbo, Adiele E. (2005) "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo," in Toyin Falola ed. *Nigerian History, Politics, and Affairs: The Collected Essays of Adiele Afigbo*, Africa World Press.

Bohannon, Paul (1958) "Extra-processual Events in Tiv Political Institutions," *American Anthropologist*, 60, 1-12.

Lewis, Ioan (1961) *A Pastoral Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press. Chapters 1 and 7.

Southall, Aidan (1956) *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination*, Cambridge: W. Heffer. Chapters 8 and 9.

Newbury, David S. (1982) "Clan Alterations and Political Centralization on Ijwi Island, Zaire, ca. 1780 - ca. 1840," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 87-88 pp. 441-454.

Sahlins, Marshall (2018) "The atemporal dimensions of history: In the old Kongo Kingdom, for example," Chapter 3 of *On Kings* by David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, Chicago: Hau Books.

Wealth in People, Chapter 4: Authority with African Characteristics.

April 8: Lecture 4: Regimes and their Economies

Busia, Kofi A. (1951) *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, London: Oxford University Press. Chapter 2.

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff (2011) "Figuring Democracy: An Anthropological Take on African Political Modernities," in their *Theory from the South*, Paradigm Publishers.

Karlström, Mikael (1996) "Imagining Democracy: Political Culture and Democratisation in Buganda," *Africa*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (1996), pp. 485-505.

Wealth in People, Chapter 4: Authority with African Characteristics.

Bohannon, Laura and Paul Bohannon (1968) *Tiv Economy*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press. Chapters 5, 6, and 16.

Miers, Suzanne and Igor Kopytoff eds. (1977) *Slavery In Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Chapter 1.

Douglas, Mary (1962) "Lele economy compared with the Bushong: a study of economic backwardness," in *Markets in Africa*, ed. by Paul Bohannon and George Dalton, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Wealth in People, Chapter 5: Prosperity: What if Adam Smith had been African?

April 15: Lecture 5: Some Economic History: Roots of African Poverty

Austen, Ralph A. and Daniel Headrick (1983) "The Role of Technology in the African past," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3-4, pp. 163-184.

Law, Robin (1980) "Wheeled Transport in Pre-Colonial West Africa," *Africa*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 249-262

Nunn, Nathan (2008) "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123 (1): 139--176.

Nunn, Nathan and Leonard Wantchekon (2011) "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa," *American Economic Review*, 101 (7): 3221-3252.

Wealth in People, Chapter 6: The Beating of the Rain.

Settler Colonies

Feinstein, Charles H. (2005) *An Economic History of South Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 3, 4, 7.

Lundahl, Mats (1982) "The Rationale of Apartheid," *American Economic Review*, 72, 5, 1169-1179.

Heldring, Leander and James A. Robinson (2018) "Colonialism and Economic Development in Africa," in Carol Lancaster and Nicolas Van de Walle eds. *Handbook on the Politics of Development*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Non-Settler Colonies

Mamdani, Mahmood (1996) *Citizen and Subject: Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

Bolt, Jutta, Leigh Gardner, Jennifer Kohler, Jack Paine and James A. Robinson (2022) "African Political Institutions and the Impact of Colonialism," NBER Working Paper # 30582.

Wealth in People, Chapter 7: The Breaking of the Rocks.

April 22: Mid-term examination.

April 29: Lecture 6: Brave New World: Post-colonial economic decline and the case of the Congo

Bates, Robert H. (1981) *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Killick, Tony (1978) *Development Economics in Action*, London: Heinemann. Chapter 9 “The State as Entrepreneur.”

Richards, Paul (1996) *Fighting for the Rainforest*, Oxford: James Currey. Chapters 1 and 2.

Young, Crawford (1965) *Politics in Congo: Decolonization and Independence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapters 12 and 13.

Turner, Thomas and Crawford Young (1985) *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Chapter 6 “The Patrimonial State and Personal Rule, Chapter 10 “Zairianization and Radicalization: Anatomy of a Disaster”.

Robinson, James A. (2023) “Tax Aversion and the Social Contract in Africa,” *Journal of African Economies*, 32, Issue Supplement_1, i33–i56.

Wealth in People, Chapter 8: Slouching towards Bethlehem

May 6: Lecture 7: Creating Post-Colonial Political Orders: Botswana, Somaliland and Rwanda.

Schapera, Isaac (1940) “The Political Organization of the Ngwato of Bechuanaland Protectorate,” in M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard eds. *African Political Systems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Prunier, Gérard (2021) *The Country That Does Not Exist: A History of Somaliland*, New York: Hurst.

Heldring, Leander and James A. Robinson (2023) “Problematizing State Capacity: The Rwandan Case,” *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 19, 3, 401-425.

Wealth in People, Chapter 8: Slouching towards Bethlehem

May 13: Lecture 8: May 6: Lecture 7: Africa in World History.

Wealth in People, Chapter 9: Africa in World History.

Henn, Soeren J. and James A. Robinson (2023) “Africa’s Latent Assets,” *Journal of African Economies*, 32, Issue Supplement_1, i9–i32.

Wealth in People, Chapter 10: African Futures.