

Ideas

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RAYMOND VERDAGEUR/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

SHACKLED TO THE PAST

New research from a Harvard scholar suggests that Africa's economic woes may have their roots in the slave trade
BY FRANCIE LATOUR

TO SOME DEVELOPMENT economists, the world can be boiled down this simply: There are rich countries that keep getting richer, and there are poor countries that seem destined to grow poorer. And then, there is Africa.

For every symptom of Africa's relentless underdevelopment, there is a theory about its root causes. Colonialism, the Cold War, climate change, ethnic warfare, the choking off of technology — they all rank high on the list of ills and crimes perpetrated on this continent in the last century. But underneath all those, many scholars have long sensed that to answer the two most nagging questions about Africa — How do we fix it? And how did it break? — you have to go much farther back in time. All the way to African slavery.

Sensing it is one thing. Proving it is another. Could there be a direct, quantifiable link between the African countries most ravaged by slavery and those that are the most underdeveloped today? And if there were such a link, could it be measured?

A young Harvard economist named Nathan Nunn believes there is, and believes he has. In a study sure to stir controversy over the legacy of the African slave trades, Nunn argues that the African countries with the biggest slave exports are by and large the countries with the lowest incomes now (based on per capita gross domestic product in 2000). That relationship, he contends, is no coincidence. One actually helped to cause the other.

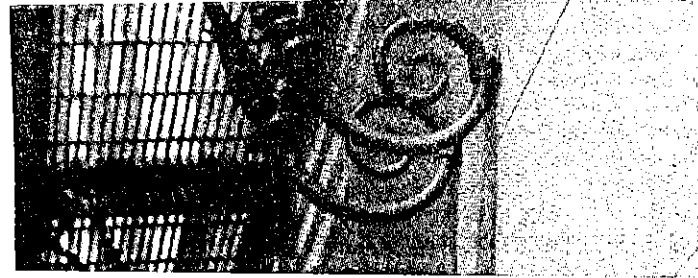
It's a sweeping, ambitious recasting of slavery's horrific commerce. It is also a work of risky estimates and serious statistical gymnastics. Somehow, Nunn had to account for some 17 million slaves by their ethnic origins — a task some historians say can't accurately be done, but that Nunn nonetheless undertook, mining slavery data compiled over decades by other scholars. He also had to prove that his findings of cause and effect weren't polluted by a long list of variables that seem likely to have affected Africa's economies in the last 600 years. Nunn, a 33-year-

AFRICA, D3

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Critical Faculties | Mark Oppenheimer
**The philosopher
kinomaker**





A 19th-century depiction of a slave raid from the Illustrated London News.

GETTY IMAGES

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN H. RAYNOR FROM THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, 1849

old assistant professor, didn't shy away from this either, devising ways to control for everything from climate to natural resources to geography to Islamic influence to a country's particular brand of colonialism.

Bottom line, Nunn argues, if you were an African country that had the most people sold into slavery between 1400 and 1900, then you are likely one of the African countries holding the shortest end of the economic stick today. Depending on whom you ask, it's a claim that is either groundbreaking or wildly premature.

"I don't even know of something comparable that's previously been done," said Stephen O'Connell, who teaches economics at Swarthmore College and cowrote a seminal, two-volume tome on Africa's political economy in the modern era. "There's no question this is going to draw a lot of attention and a lot of study to figure out how strong this evidence is."

Scholars have debated the nature of slavery's economic imprint for decades, with many passionately convinced that it explains Africa's modern predicament. But those passions, O'Connell said, have not been backed up by hard numbers.

Nunn's research, published in February's Quarterly Journal of Economics and in other papers, leaves some important questions unanswered. He doesn't say exactly *how* the capture of large numbers of slaves from certain countries caused their underdevelopment today — but he makes some compelling guesses. Those guesses could have implications at a time when Western nations are being pressed like never before to finally do right by Africa, and the continent has gone into pop-culture overdrive. (Bob Geldof and Bono, meet Oprah, Angelina, Madonna, Don Cheadle, and George Clooney.)

Research already strongly suggests that the raiding of Africans by Africans triggered deep ethnic splits, wide-scale corruption, and a collapse of state systems. But if the countries identified by Nunn as having the biggest slave exports experienced a kind of nuclear dose of this, and his initial testing indicates they did, his theory might offer some road maps for development. For one, it seems to support arguments long held in some development camps that the best use of foreign aid dollars lies not in conventional relief efforts — the food drops and water wells and antimalarial nets — but in long-term investments to rebuild economic and political institutions.

Nunn's work also draws attention to the sensitive issue of apologies, reparations, debt relief, and the question of just how much the United States and Europe owe African countries that were at the epicenter of the slave trades. After all, he is drawing a straight line between the past actions of Western nations and Africa's ongoing suffering: Without the slave trades, according to Nunn, 72 percent of Africa's income gap with the rest of the world would not exist today.

In one sense, Nunn is an heir to Walter Rodney, the late Pan-African scholar who famously linked slavery to Africa's modern crisis. But Rodney was a Black Power activist who inspired riots after he was banned from entering Jamaica. Nunn, on the other hand, is the product of the small Canadian town of Vanderhoof, British Columbia (pop. 4,500). Self-deprecating almost to a fault, he doesn't exactly fit the profile of someone inclined to drop academic bombs, about slavery or anything else. Yet he has managed to wade deep into slavery's treacherous, emotional waters.

As a graduate student at the University of Toronto, Nunn pored over studies that tied late 19th- and early 20th-century colonialism to Africa's underdevelopment today. But that colonial period, often called the "Mad Scramble for Africa," lasted 75 years. Slavery went on for centuries. That got Nunn thinking. "It just seemed like the slave trade was more penetrating than colonial rule, and it was worth looking at empirically," he said.

By Nunn's rankings, Africa's biggest economic losers now, and biggest slave exporters then, include Angola, Togo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Conversely, the nations least touched by slavery, and significantly less poor, include Mauritius, Tunisia, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa.

The numbers don't always line up perfectly, as with Rwanda. By Nunn's calculations, Rwanda had some of the lowest slave exports, but it also ranked among the lowest for GDP income in 2000, and its recent history of genocidal conflict hardly qualifies it as a model for development. (Under its first democratically elected president, Rwanda has begun to grow rapidly since 2003, becoming a kind of showcase for the potential for economic recovery after genocide.)

But Nunn can live with the outliers: In statistics, he said, there are always exceptions. "Nothing perfectly explains one thing."

How much error is acceptable in a study of this scope is a matter Nunn is likely to hear about from students of slavery's history. His theories rely on centuries-old data, or others' estimates

of centuries-old data, that are incomplete and, in some cases, scholar say, terribly unreliable.

David Eltis, a history professor at Emory University and a leading scholar of the slave trades, said that the territory staked out by Nunn is intriguing. But engaging in some estimating of his own, he said Nunn's scholarship is premature by about 20 to 30 years. "I'm not saying he's wrong," said Eltis. "What I'm saying is I don't find the argument proven in any sense."

Nunn concedes that he is "an outsider" to the sprawling, scattered data sets he has compiled. And it's fair to say that his methods are not for the statistically faint of heart. For one, he has to map slave populations onto countries that did not exist during slavery; most of present-day Africa's boundaries were drawn much later, under colonialism. Nunn also has to contend with multiple slave trades. In reality, there were four distinct slave trades operating in Africa between 1400 and 1900, the trans-Atlantic slave trade being the most infamous and penetrating.

Luckily for Nunn, counting the total number of exported slaves was actually the easy part. Thanks to a massive, pioneering database project known as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, it is now possible to track slaves shipped on about 82 percent of trans-Atlantic voyages attempted, and Nunn has mined this data. The database has some gaps, and Nunn's sources for the three other slave trades are sketchier, but for the most part Nunn can reasonably clear this hurdle. It's the next step that is potentially laden with huge errors: Nunn needs to know what proportion of the slaves on those voyages came from the coastal countries that shipped them off, and what proportion originally came from other inland countries. That is risky business, because it involves trying to categorize slaves by some 200 different ethnic identities.

Nunn does his level best, drawing on slavery's many paper trails — plantation inventories, slave registers, runaway notices, church and notary documents, and birth, marriage, court, prison, and death records — that noted slaves' ethnic markings or ethnically based surnames. It's Nunn's contention that slave traders had a vested interest in making sure these kinds of records were accurate, because the economic stakes of slavery were so high. "From the point of view of Europe and the colonies, slaves were valuable commodities," Nunn said. "So much so that the records for slaves from that time are much, much better than records for free people."

But not everyone buys this theory, including Eltis, who knows a thing or two about the slave trades: He is the lead architect behind the slave trade database so central to Nunn's claims.

"I just don't think the data are there at the moment to allow an accurate assessment of where slaves originated," Eltis said. "What slave owners wanted was labor. The actual ethnic designation of slaves was secondary."

There is, however, one rule that slavery has always obeyed, be it Roman, Egyptian, or African: Human labor always flows from poorer areas to richer areas. If the countries hit hardest by slavery are poorer now, Eltis said, they likely were poorer before slavery even began. (In his paper, Nunn raises and discounts this theory.)

Where some find Nunn's proposition outlandish, others are bound to see it as courageous. He has attempted to put plot points and statistical weight behind slavery's global aftermath. "That's not kooky," said O'Connell. "It's heroic."

More than ever before, those concerned with Africa are trying to shut the door on decades of failed prescriptions for the continent. Consequently, a new generation of crusading aid workers, think-tank researchers, and celebrity economists in opposing camps all believe passionately that they have the next Big Idea — be they microloans, grain science, a new Marshall Plan, or a massive overhaul of trade policy. Whether Nunn likes it or not, he has stepped into this ongoing war of ideas.

Nunn's research also comes at a time when the most fervent calls for reparations have come and gone, but when international calls for Western apologies for slavery still draw attention. The United States has never apologized for slavery, although five states — Virginia, Maryland, Alabama, North Carolina, and New Jersey — have done so recently, and Congress is poised to consider a resolution of apology this year. With much of the world's trade policy heavily skewed to the West's advantage and Africa's disadvantage, some say apologies carry little if any value. In any case, it remains to be seen whether the United States will ever face the role it played in one of history's worst crimes.

"The question you have to ask is, what would make a country that already knows it participated in the slave trades any more likely to apologize when it hasn't already?" said Ronald Walters,

a professor at the University of Maryland and author of the book "The Price of Racial Reconciliation." "The evidence would have to be bulletproof, and I don't think this study is that strong."

For the moment, Nunn said, he can't say what the implications of his research might be. But his first, tentative steps in that direction are intriguing. Meshing his numbers with those of other scholars, Nunn has found that the countries he identified as having the most slaves taken are also the countries that have the most ethnic fractionalization today. It may well be that the ethnic fault lines driving Africa's worst conflicts have powerful roots in slavery, which required Africans to turn on one another in order to capture one another, severely weakening communal ties and preventing the spread of services like education, health facilities, and access to water across a large population.

The echoes across time are fascinating, and seem undeniable. But many practitioners say that ultimately, looking at Africa's problems through the lens of slavery is self-defeating. Calistus

Juma, a native of Kenya and one of the most influential voices on African economic development, falls squarely into this camp.

"The legacy of slavery cannot be denied, but if you push the argument too far, it becomes a fatalistic argument," said Juma, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "Because you start to say, 'Well, what can we really do? We can't undo the past, and therefore, Africa will always

remain poor.'"

An adviser to African presidents and the UN, Juma has a far more straightforward view of underdevelopment in Africa: Its root causes, he said, lie in the near total lack of technology and technical education for its people.

"I think Africa is poor not because of what was done to Africa, but because of what has not been done," Juma said. "I don't think [growth] comes from knowing that somebody disrupted your societies and institutions centuries ago. It comes from a very conscious effort...to harness intellectual capabilities and transform knowledge into goods and services. That should be the pre-occupation of Africa at the moment."

Juma and Nunn may be working toward an eventual meeting of the minds. The Kenyan sees slavery's lasting scar as a deeply psychological one — an attack on the self-confidence of a continent, and by extension, its human potential. Until that legacy is conquered, Juma said, Africa will not advance.

Nunn, now at work on Chapter 2, has another name for this legacy: He calls it the trust channel. He can't prove it. But using household surveys of Africans over the last seven years known as the Afrobarometer, he is finding that ethnic groups that had the most slaves taken in the past express the most difficulty trusting people within their group, and outside their group. It may be that as it ravaged populations and crippled institutions, the hunting down and handing over of their own kin also robbed them of an innate ability to trust, all the way to the present day.

Measuring this kind of collective feeling, and correlating it to events so far in the past, will likely put Nunn right back on slippery ground. But he doesn't seem to mind. "The idea of the transmission or evolution of trust over generations, and this being affected by these large historic events," Nunn said, "is definitely not mainstream in economics."

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JOIN US FOR A CONFERENCE ON THE ATTRIBUTES OF A SUCCESSFUL AMERICAN PRESIDENT

Massachusetts School of Law will be hosting the conference: *Courting Success or Chasing Failure?: An In-Depth Look at the Attributes of an American President. Must Have for Success on April 26 & 27, 2008.*

The event, which is being filmed by C-Span, will feature discussions of the characteristics that have made presidents successful or unsuccessful throughout our history. Included in the event will be an in-depth discussion by leading historians and political scientists on whether the current slate of presidential candidates possess any of the trademark characteristics that have defined successful commander-in-chiefs throughout American history.

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