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 to this simple truth: 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 cause. Colonialism, the Cold War, climate change, ethnic warfare, the chilling off of technology — they all rank high on the list of factors that were perpetually present on the continent in the last century. But underneath all these, many scholars have long argued that the answers to two of the most nagging questions about Africa — how do we fix it? And how to prevent it? — you have to go much farther back in time. All the way to African slavery.

So what is the link? Proving it is another story. 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 he wants to know. In a study sure to stir controversy over the legacy of the African slave trade, 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 sensibly helped to cause the other.

It's a sweeping, ambitious assertion of slavery's historic importance.

It is also a work of risky estimates and serious statistical gymnastics. Somewhere, Nunn had to account for some 17 million slaves by their various 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 African economies in the last 600 years. Nunn, a 38-year-old Harvard economist, says his calculations account for all of these.

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Francie Latour is an associate editor at Wall Street magazine. She worked as a Globe reporter from 1996 to 2003.
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An advisor 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. "African politics is poor because of what was done to Africa, but it will not improve because few Africans think. I don't think (growth) comes from knowing that somebody else did something. I think the social sciences and institutions are coming. It comes from a very small number of very bright people who manage to form knowledge into goods and services. That should be the precondition of Africa at the end of the century," said Juma.

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