Reviews

Morten Jerven. *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*. London: Zed Books, 2015. 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-78360-132-5, $21.95 (paper).

In *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*, Morten Jerven takes aim at the dominant perspective presented in economics research on economic growth in Africa. This view, primarily emerging out of the academic subdiscipline of developmental economics but then repeated across both the disciplinary journals and more widely read popular publications, such as *The Economist*, is that African economies have shifted from hopelessly lacking the ability to expand their economies in any consistent and sustainable way to veritable miracles that lead the world in economic growth. In this clear and readable critique, Jerven shows how both views are flawed, both in terms of the data and analytical perspective they bring to this research. He argues that less ahistorical methods with a more nuanced understanding of GDP should be used to examine growth on the continent.

The first part of the book examines the standard story in the development literature of the failure of growth Africa. This consensus, based on available GPD data from countries in sub-Saharan Africa and standard regression analysis popular in econometrics, is that for the most part these countries have historically experienced near permanent stagnation. This "stylized fact" has remained stubbornly in place despite problems in the data. In attempting to discern why GDP growth is different in Africa as compared with much of the rest of the world, Jerven argues that researchers assume there must be variables that can explain this "fact" rather than question whether the story of permanent stagnation is itself accurate. Researchers often bypass important variation across countries, and either compress history or even ignore it altogether in presenting possible explanations. The more recent growth in these economies over the past twenty years has been similarly dissociated from history, appearing as an underexplained phenomenon in the literature.

In Chapter 3, he uses data on African economies to present an alternative perspective. Rather than a history of nearly permanent failure, with badly run regimes dampening economic growth until recently, Jerven's study of GDP statistics over a longer time frame shows that

https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2017.49 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the story of economic growth on the continent is more complicated. There is evidence of substantial growth in the years leading up to decolonization, as well as growth following independence and into the 1970s. The worldwide economic shocks of that decade do appear to have greatly slowed economic growth, and the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s often worsened the situation rather than alleviated it. Changes in world commodity markets and the health of the global economy led to renewed growth in the past one to two decades, however. Thus the lesson that should have been learned is not that there is something fundamentally flawed in the way African countries operate but rather that there are differential factors that either encourage or inhibit growth, and that in this sense African economies are no different from those on other continents.

The second part of the book critiques the use of GDP as a measure of economic growth. In earlier chapters, Jerven discusses how the use of a single measure oversimplifies the issue of economic prosperity as it ignores other issues, such as inequality or quality of life that are differentially related to GDP across countries. Chapter 4 additionally details the different ways that the measurement of GDP is affected by politics within countries. Adding to his previous work on this subject, Jerven points out that measurements at different times in particular countries show that much of the economy can remain unaccounted for, or that GDP estimates are instead wrongly inflated due to faulty estimates of the extent of the informal economy. Consequently, international agencies statistics often do not agree with each other, and researchers conclusions will vary depending on which set of statistics they use.

This critique is important. This is not merely an academic debate, pitting historians and others against economists. Instead, what is at stake here is the content of policy on how to shape these economies. International and national decision-making bodies rely on the consensus emerging out of development economics, and thus the claims made about how growth occurs have important impacts on people's lives. Jerven's argument about the problems in this literature—treating Africa as a single case with each country as data points, and using problematic data to test assumptions—is well demonstrated. He convincingly demonstrates that policy would be better informed with a more complete understanding of a country's history rather than utilizing a one-size-fits-all explanation for economic development across the continent. This is an important argument for development researchers to understand.

That said, the critiques offered in the book do appear to contradict each other. The general lesson of remembering that data are the outcome of social and political processes is crucial, and it is very problematic for any social scientists to believe that cross-national data are easily comparable and "true." The call for more national level studies of economies and research that incorporates a more nuanced understanding of national statistics is difficult to argue against. The issue, however, is what is to be done when one wants to actually compare across countries, which is crucial for formulating policy regarding economic development. The answer for Jerven, despite the argument against using them, is to incorporate national GDP statistics to get as full a picture as possible. These statistics form the core of his critique in Chapter 3—that growth did occur in these economies, just generally in periods ignored by mainstream developmental economics. If other researchers had incorporated better data over longer periods of time, would their analytical approach be appropriate? Or, would the problems Jerven discusses regarding GDP statistics make such an analysis incapable of helping policy makers? This is the crucial question that remains unmodeled in this book: How should researchers proceed in doing comparative work? While it is, of course, important to examine economies in particular, the necessity of comparative research remains.

Matthew McKeever
Haverford College
E-mail: mmckeever@haverford.edu

doi:10.1017/eso.2017.49

Published online February 26, 2018

Andrew Paxman. *Jenkins of Mexico: How a Southern Farm Boy Became a Mexican Magnate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 509 pp. ISBN 9780190455743 0190455748, $35 (cloth), $18 (paper), $23 (e-book).

As the title in English suggests, this book maps how a boy from rural Tennessee ran-away with his fiancée, Mary, to become one of the most influential and richest people in Mexico. Paxman argues that William Oscar Jenkins (1878–1963), the grandson of the "founding father of Lutheranism" in Tennessee (14), was the personification of the Protestant work ethic, reaching the top echelon of the Mexican business elite while living austerely. Financial and political success, however, took a great toll on his family life. Only one daughter raised a stable family of her own. The other children were arguably unhappy; unable to stay in long-term relationships; and addicted to alcohol, narcotics, or both. Mary died alone surrounded by the grandeur of a Beverley Hills mansion.