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The Role of Biased Historiography in Justifying the Continuation of the Great Divergence

Studying African history in the period of 1800 to the present is a story of economic and political exploitation that engendered the Great Divergence of today, a bifurcation of the world that gave rise to characterizations of First World/Third World, Global North/Global South, and developed/developing. In order to understand the roots of this bifurcation, it is imperative to begin the historical examination in the 15th and 16th centuries. During this time period, the comparative development levels between Europe and Africa were far more equal than they stand today, but a few critical advantages possessed by the Europeans at the outset of their trade with Africa allowed for the gradual development of dependent economic relations that laid the groundwork for colonialism, the ultimate determinant in bringing about the Great Divergence. Though (neo)colonial representations of African history may insinuate that Europeans are inherently or had always been superior to Africans, this paper seeks to highlight how a few advantages possessed by Europeans in the 15th and 16th centuries brought about not only the Great Divergence of development, but also a divergence in historiography that justified the continuation of such global inequality.

In his historical polemic, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney argues that the present condition of comparative development between Europe and Africa is the result of European exploitation (Rodney). Although Rodney certainly inculpates European colonialism as the determining factor in disparate development, his comparison of the two continents prior to/around 1500 disputes the assumption that European superiority was inevitable, but rather the result of a confluence of minor European advantages that allowed for the creation and deepening of dependent economic relationships. The four centuries of Afro-European trade prior to

colonialism allowed for European colonialism and thus constitute the roots of African underdevelopment, and Rodney identifies a few connected factors which allowed the Europeans to structure such trading relationships to their advantage from the outset (Rodney). First, Rodney argues that the feudalist and budding capitalist socio-economic organization in Europe just prior to the 15th century—compared to the predominance of communalism in African societies at the time—incentivized Europeans to seek resources and trade with the rest of the world, especially the internationalization of the Atlantic trade. Due to such economic incentives, the ocean became the relevant sphere for Europeans, stimulating the advancement of shipbuilding technology which eventually allowed them to reach the African continent via the Atlantic coast. Because African societies did not possess the same economic incentives to embark on trade routes with Europe at the time, African boats—unlike European ships—could not travel on the Atlantic Ocean, thus effectively allowing Europeans to control access to the sea and consequently trade with Europe. Such unequal access to the ocean and trade transformed African societies into economic satellites, meaning Africans became dependent on what Europeans wanted to buy and sell, including captives. (Rodney)

Stemming from the aforementioned inequality in access to the trans-Atlantic trade, Rodney asserts that Europeans manipulated Africans' trade desires and political divisions to ensure the export of African captives, which further contributed to disparate levels of economic development. In addition to incentivizing Africans to provide captives via offering prized European goods in return (e.g., textiles), Rodney highlights that the numerous political divisions between small African societies allowed European slave traders to pit such societies against each other, engendering warlike activities and kidnapping that provided a steady supply of captives, while drastically harming the economic viability of African societies (Rodney). Although the

Europeans were able to reinvest the economic gains attributed to the exploitation of slaves, African societies were reoriented away from agriculture and industry due to the loss of laborers (which made them no longer economically viable) and toward the short-term incentives of slave hunting instead. This reorientation deepened economic dependency on Europeans since domestic industry and agricultural advancement was stunted, setting the stage for the eased arrival of colonialism. For example, without the economic dependency established in the pre-colonial period, Europeans would not have been able to manipulate certain Africans (e.g., askaris, porters) into facilitating colonial conquest. Above all, Rodney's thesis highlights that a few European advantages allowed them to dominate the Atlantic trade in Africa, exemplifying the critical role of economic dependency in laying the groundwork for the extreme exploitation under colonialism—which was not possible before these unequal trade relations were established—and thus effecting the Great Divergence in economic development (Rodney).

Unlike Rodney, Robert Harms' *Africa in Global History* lacks a grand narrative, yet Harms' chapters offer specific descriptions that supplement the main factors identified as crucial to contributing to the arrival of European colonialism in Africa and thus the Great Divergence in economic development today. Harms' emphasis on the international commercial facilitation and amassing of wealth that the Sahel and Swahili Coast regions undertook in the centuries before significant European contact gives credence to Rodney's assertion that economic development on the African continent was not significantly behind that of Europe at the time (Harms). Though Harms' descriptions of the social, political, and economic organization of these societies seems to contradict Rodney's broadstroking of African society as communal, the underscoring of the preeminence of controlling trade routes for economic and political domination in pre-colonial African societies lends support to Rodney's thesis. In his assessments of the empires of Ghana,

Mali, and Songhay, Harms asserts that their economic and political power was entirely dependent on the control of trade routes and trading towns, and that when such control of the trade was lost to other political entities, the empires collapsed. This description strengthens Rodney's argument that the source of European dominance in Africa was control of trade routes, specifically access to the Atlantic Ocean (Harms)

Harms provides further coalescence to Rodney's argument by asserting that the economic power of European traders—specifically slave traders—was enormous since they were the gatekeepers to the global economy, as only European ships were capable of traversing the rough waters necessary to access the Atlantic coast of Africa. As a result of this economic gatekeeping, Harms notes that there was a reorientation of African economies toward slave hunting and away from agricultural and industrial advancement, meaning that the luxury goods required for patronage could only be provided through trade with Europeans. Followed by trade in products such as ivory (with similar negative effects), European economic penetration of the African continent deepened, so that by the Berlin Conference, there were few parts of Africa that were not economically exposed, and consequently dependent, on European trade (Harms). Though both Rodney and Harms outline the role of unequal trade relations in bringing about colonialism, and in later chapters outline how colonialism ultimately brought about the Great Divergence in economic development, UNESCO's *General History of Africa* project focuses on how the domination stemming from colonialism allowed for a domination in the writing of history, which was effectively used to justify the continuation of unequal global economic structures.

Written in response to the injustice and inaccuracies that stem from colonial-era African historiography, the first few chapters of the *General History of Africa Vol. 1* do not explain the

origins of the Great Divergence, but rather identify the necessity of rewriting such history in order to undercut the continued existence of such global inequality (Ki-Zerbo). The volume's authors argue that as a result of the Eurocentrism that was concurrent with colonialism, African history has been relatively unknown and distorted. Buoyed by the racism imbued in colonially-altered historiography, Africans are often viewed as being objects of history rather than subjects, whose sole contribution to the world has been their supposedly rightful domination (Ki-Zerbo). Such a depiction of African history tends to justify continued European exploitation of the African continent as the rightful progression of global events, whereas an objective rewriting of African history questions the origins and logic behind the Great Divergence (Ki-Zerbo). Even though rewriting and learning a more objective history of Africa will not automatically close the enormous gaps of wealth and development that resulted from centuries of European exploitation, such an undertaking is the necessary first step toward debunking the 'rationality' and justification of the (neo)colonial mindset, which allows the such global inequality to continue.

While not explicitly stated in the *General History of Africa Vol. 1*, synthesizing its stated imperative with the accounts offered by Rodney and Harms demonstrates the consequential relationship between the Great Divergence in economic development and historiography. As a result of the relatively minor European advantages that facilitated the economic and eventually political domination of Europe over Africa, the European writers of history were able to present the unequal and exploitative global structures as natural and justified, such as by proclaiming the superiority of Europeans/the white race, thereby allowing such global injustice to continue. Such an identification of historiographical injustice emphasizes the importance of studying how history is presented if one seeks to alter the global inequalities that continue to plague the world today (Ki-Zerbo). If one were to accept the colonial-era depictions of African history, there

would be no imperative to alter the global structures that continue to bifurcate the world between developed and developing. However, by understanding the biased motivations of writing history, one can come to understand that European domination has not been the entire story of human civilization or due to some inherent superiority, but rather a consequence of a few minor advantages that have, through exploitation, exacerbated the divergence ever since. Rewriting history in order to reflect the aforementioned realities and factors outlined by Rodney and Harms is no panacea to the significant divergence that exists in the world today, but doing away with the Eurocentric view of history is a necessary first step in attempting to mend that gap.

Bibliography

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