Africa: Why economists get it wrong, by Morten Jerven. London: Zed Books, 2015. ix + 160 pp. £14.99 (paperback). ISBN 978 1 78360 132 5. £70.00 (hardback). ISBN 978 1 78360 133 2. £14.99 (e-book). ISBN 978 1 78360 135 6.

In this stimulating book, Morten Jerven questions the historicity of development economics as applied to Africa and calls for new attention to the individual experiences of African countries, rather than using case studies as fodder for statistical regressions. The book builds seamlessly from earlier reflections in *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), which revealed the dire inconsistencies in economic data on sub-Saharan African economies. *Africa: Why economists get it wrong* takes the argument to the fields of historiography and contemporary development economics, exposing how poor data has led to a prioritisation of models and ‘law-like statements’ that are ‘fundamentally ahistorical’ (pp. 3, 131). Current treatment of African history by mainstream development economists is scandalous and threatening of the very project of development economics itself.

Jerven’s starting salvo will be familiar to readers of his work: macroeconomists have found it profitable to explain away economic failure in the continent through resort to an African dummy variable that isolates African countries and so increases the explanatory power of global models of economic growth. In what becomes a minor history of African development economics itself, Jerven explains how the trend led to a ‘quest for the African dummy’ (p. 20) by means of identifying independent variables that reveal why growth failed to take place. In this way, Jerven splits African development economics into two generations. The first argued that bad policy caused these failures; the second that ‘initial conditions’ were to blame, such as ‘lack of state legitimacy, lack of social capital and ethnic diversity’ (p. 42). The change in approach occurred around the turn of the millennium, when the continent ceased being a target for good policies and instead became a place of scholarly innovation whereby contemporary differences could be traced to historical episodes and institutional pathology (p. 7). Neither approach appreciates the complexity of upwards and downwards trends in individual country economic growth since the 1960s. Most especially, the second generation—a view that ‘history matters’—treats time and change on its own terms, that is insofar as historical episodes help disentangle ‘initial conditions, income levels, growth rates and causes and effects’ (p. 44). This assumes away the agency of state actors; research pits their challenges to be rooted in factors outside their reach, identifying problems in terms of proxies which they have no say over and are, at best, side-effects to the role of the state (p. 114).

Jerven frames economists as asking if Africa holds ‘some inherent character flaw that keeps it backward and incapable of development’ (p. 1). His answer exposes the underpinnings to this bias and also tackles its opposite: the Africa rising narrative. On both counts experts have failed the continent: ‘It is frustrating that the narratives in African economic development switch from one extreme to the other so swiftly. Of course, the truth lies somewhere between the “miracles” and “tragedies”. We went from “Bottom Billion” to “Africa Rising” within half a decade’ (p. 123). Despite the strength of this criticism, there is a danger that Jerven falls into the same trap he accuses others of. While starting the book with accusations that others ask if the continent is failing through a character flaw, Jerven makes a replica diagnosis in the opposite direction: ‘do economists have a character flaw that makes them incapable of doing good scholarly work on Africa?’ (p. 124). The author caricatures those who caricature, which is not exactly a solution. He deplores that ‘economists have begun writing well-digested and masterfully presented narratives for a popular audience based on papers previously published’, and ‘tend to sacrifice nuance and subtlety for clarity.’ He hopes his book will instead ‘encourage non-economists to read economics more critically’ (p. 131) despite it having fewer pages than Paul Collier’s *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The book provides a history of African development economics through critical examination of the contemporary role of statistical and econometric methods to policy debate on Africa. Nevertheless, there is one further obstacle to Jerven achieving his goal. As appropriately attractive as it has become to criticise free-market orientated economic methodologies following the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, there has also been a deep failure on the academic left that is wholly missed out in Jerven’s account. The current popularity of econometric methods is in part a reaction to the previous acontextual assertions of Marxist paradigms, to which the econometrician stands as offering something that can at least be falsified through evidence. Econometric proxies may only be

indirectly connected to genuine economic change, and may involve a regrettable synchronisation of datasets, but Marxist assertions of class conflict and the stages of history committed an opposite mistake: historical determinism. If contemporary development economics is 'ahistorical', Marxism is acontextual. In accounting for why history has been abandoned, Jerven must do more to explain to readers the previous shortcomings of this alternative paradigm than one sentence on Karl Marx (p. 132). Only then can debate move forward to the author's tantalising suggestion of an alternative paradigm: 'to refocus the study of economics on the study of economies' (p. 130).

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