

Economic History of African Development

Block Seminar (co-taught, interdisciplinary) · English · Master

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This interdisciplinary block seminar — co-taught between economic and social history and a natural-resources / behavioural-economics chair — examines the historical roots of African development through two complementary lenses: natural experiments and critical comparative history. Through case studies and empirical analyses, students learn how historical events have shaped economic outcomes across African countries, and how factors such as colonial borders, resource extraction, and institutional legacies continue to influence development today. The seminar develops a more nuanced lens for evaluating contemporary policy proposals.

Each topic is paired with a paper using a natural experiment to identify the effect of historical events on present-day outcomes; students additionally engage with the historical literature for their topic.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand major debates on the long-run determinants of African development.
 - Read and assess empirical work that uses natural experiments to identify historical causes of contemporary outcomes.
 - Combine quantitative empirical literature with qualitative historical scholarship.
 - Critically evaluate policy proposals against a richer historical record.
 - Practice presentation, discussion moderation, and academic writing in an interdisciplinary setting.
-

TARGET AUDIENCE

Master students from economics, history, and other social sciences with an interest in economic development and some understanding of statistical methods.

TOPICS

Part 1 — Pre-colonial: Effects of the Slave Trade

1. Slave trade and development.

Reading: Warren Whatley, "How the International Slave Trades Underdeveloped Africa," Journal of Economic History 82(2), 2022.

2. Indigenous slavery.

Reading: Bezemer, Bolt & Lensink, "Slavery, Statehood, and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," World Development, 2014.

3. Slave trade and trust.

Reading: Nathan Nunn & Leonard Wantchekon, "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa," American Economic Review 101(7), 2011.

4. The end of the slave trade.

Reading: Fenske & Kala, "1807: Economic Shocks, Conflict and the Slave Trade," Journal of Development Economics, 2017.

Part 2 — Colonial Origins of Development

5. Settler mortality — the initial evidence.

Reading: Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development," *American Economic Review*, 2001.

6. Settler mortality — critique and reply.

Reading: AJR, "Reply," *AER*, 2012; Albouy, "Comment," *AER*, 2012; Assenova & Regele, "Revisiting the Effect of Colonial Institutions," *PLOS ONE*, 2017.

7. Colonial budgeting.

Reading: Élise Huillery, "History Matters: The Long-Term Impact of Colonial Public Investments in French West Africa," *AEJ: Applied Economics*, 2009.

8. Colonial infrastructure.

Reading: Jedwab, Kerby & Moradi, "History, Path Dependence and Development: Evidence from Colonial Railways, Settlers and Cities in Kenya," *Economic Journal*, 2017.

Part 3 — Roots of Conflict

9. Climate and pastoralism.

Reading: McGuirk & Nunn, "Transhumant Pastoralism, Climate Change, and Conflict in Africa."

10. Artificial borders.

Reading: Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, "The Long-Run Effects of the Scramble for Africa," *AER*, 2016.

11. Social organisation.

Reading: Moscona, Nunn & Robinson, "Segmentary Lineage Organization and Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Econometrica*, 2020.

12. Extractive concessions.

Reading: Lowes & Montero, "Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State," 2020.

METHODOLOGICAL FOCUS

Pairing of quantitative empirical scholarship (natural experiments, instrumental variables, regression-based causal inference) with critical historical case studies. Interdisciplinary discussion across economics, history, and social sciences.

ASSESSMENT

Oral presentation followed by moderation of a discussion; written term paper.

FOUNDATIONAL READINGS

- Jared Diamond & James A. Robinson (eds.), *Natural Experiments of History*, Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Thad Dunning, *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences: A Design-Based Approach*.
- Nathan Nunn, "The Importance of History for Economic Development," *Annual Review of Economics* 1, 2009.
- Stelios Michalopoulos & Elias Papaioannou, "Historical Legacies and African Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 58(1), 2020.
- Gareth Austin, "The 'Reversal of Fortune' Thesis and the Compression of History," *Journal of International Development* 20(8), 2008.
- Toby Green, "Africa and Capitalism: Repairing a History of Omission," *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics* 3(2), 2022.

Historical Readings (Parts 1 and 2)

- Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana*, University of Rochester Press, 2004.
- Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells*, University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Historical Readings (Part 3)

- Piers Blaikie, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, Longman, 1985.
- Catherine Boone, *Property and Political Order in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- James C. McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land*, Heinemann / James Currey, 1999.