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# The Role of Africans in the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1650: Modern Africanist Historiography and the World-Systems Paradigm

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JOHN K. THORNTON

Recent Africanist historiography has brought into question the trends of scholarship pertaining to Africa's role in the world economy during the Columbian era (roughly 1450-1650). New research on the African economy of this period tends to discredit the model known as the world-systems or underdevelopment paradigm. This model has contributed to the interpretation of Africa as victimized by a powerful, more technologically advanced European economy and has stressed the perceived underdeveloped nature of Africa's economic system. Since the late 1960s, historians of Africa during the Columbian era have adopted the world-systems or underdevelopment paradigm as their dominating theory. This was made famous by scholars such as André Gunder Frank<sup>1</sup> and Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>2</sup> The paradigm is often radical and is frequently described as Marxist, as was Walter Rodney's pioneering work.<sup>3</sup> The adoption of world-systems by less radical

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<sup>1</sup> André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969) and *World Accumulation, 1492-1789* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 2 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974-1978).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Rodney, *West Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Historical Association of Tanzania Paper, no. 2 (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1967); "European Activity and African Reaction in Angola," in *Aspects of Central African History*, ed. T. O. Ranger (London: Heinemann, 1968), 49-70; *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974).

writers such as Ivor Wilks<sup>4</sup> or Joseph C. Miller,<sup>5</sup> and its wide acceptance by many Africanists has long since erased its specifically radical political character.

In its original formulation, as applied by Frank, the theoretical scheme was applied to Latin America and relied heavily on the notion of the conquest of these areas by an expanding Europe to explain the nature and outcome of the dependent relationship between Europe and its American colonies. However, since there was no significant European colony in Africa outside Angola, which was tiny in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries compared to its modern size, world-systems analysis for Africa has modified the original proposition to include peaceful, largely commercial interactions.

The world-systems analysis has been applied to Africa emphasizing the relative economic strength of Europe in comparison to the relative economic weakness of Africa, and explains the pattern and effects of commerce in terms of this relative imbalance. As a result of Africa's weakness in the relationship, the continent was exploited and impoverished. Often terminology will reflect this assessment: Europe is typically described as "capitalist" or perhaps "merchant capitalist" while Africa is "pre-capitalist." Occasionally more Marxist-oriented scholars have been fond of describing the contacts as "articulation" of these two opposing modes of production.<sup>6</sup>

The general idea of a backward Africa confronting a dynamic Europe has many implications. For example, anthropological writing, especially that governed by evolutionist sentiments, may regard European states as true states, while Africa has only "chiefdoms," or more commonly, the type of state characteristic of the "lineage mode

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<sup>4</sup> Ivor Wilks, "Wangara, Akan and Portuguese in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," part 1, "The Matter of Bitu," part 2, "The Struggle for Trade," *Journal of African History* 23 (1982):333-49, 463-72; "The State of the Akan and the Akan States: A Discussion," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 23, nos. 87-88 (1982 [1983]):231-50.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph C. Miller, "Paradoxes of Impoverishment in the Atlantic Zone," in *History of Central Africa*, ed. David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1983), 1:118-59; *Way of Death: The Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1988), 3-283.

<sup>6</sup> The classic study in this genre is Pierre Philippe Rey, *Colonialisme, néo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme* (Paris: F. Maspéro, 1971).

of production."<sup>7</sup> Eric Wolf, in a world survey of European expansion and the domination of the Third World, discerns three modes of production: capitalist (characterizing a later European period), tributary (feudal Europe and Asia for the most part), and kin-ordered (which includes Africa and many of the native societies of America).<sup>8</sup> Although Wolf does not rank these modes of production, and makes general theoretical statements of a nonevolutionary type, it is clear from the analysis in his work that he regards the capitalist and European type of tributary mode of production as being more powerful and capable of exploiting kin-ordered modes of production from a distance.<sup>9</sup>

Fernand Braudel, in his massive survey of the world between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, divided humanity into three levels of development, placing expanding Europe in the highest category—"civilization"—while consigning most of Africa to the second group, which he calls "societies."<sup>10</sup> He argued that this division of the world into fortunate and unfortunate, rich and poor, and developed and underdeveloped regions, had serious consequences for the future of Europe's expansion. Braudel used it occasionally to describe how Africa could be exploited by a richer Europe, though he qualified his general theory considerably when presenting the African data.<sup>11</sup>

The general acceptance of the world-systems approach to explain Africa's role in the developing Atlantic shaped the reactions of Africanists to the festivities of the Columbus Quincentennial. Africanists mirrored the sentiments expressed strongly by Native American spokespeople: that the commemoration was nothing more than the celebration of "a murder," or, to place this dramatic language in a

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<sup>7</sup> A strongly stated theory of such interactions is developed in Christine Ward Gailey and Thomas C. Patterson, "State Formation and Uneven Development," in *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization*, ed. John Gledhill, Barbara Bender, and Mogens Trolle Larsen (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 77-90. See especially 83-86, where African examples based on the lineage mode of production are discussed.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Robert Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 77-100.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-231, where the African slave trade is discussed.

<sup>10</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982-1984). For the general scheme, see 1:56-91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:430-40.

more historical context, that the advanced, wealthy, and powerful Europeans initiated a centuries-long process of systematic exploitation of other less developed, poorer, and weaker societies around the Atlantic basin. This "murder" was not a surprise ambush in the night, but was simply the strong overcoming the weak, an uneven battle which the Europeans could not help but win. For Native Americans, of course, the murder did indeed involve killing—cultural, economic, and physical. For Africans, the murder was less dramatic but the analogy still holds.

Yet in many ways, the vision of Africa enmeshed in a world-system where it became increasingly a part of an exploited periphery despite the best efforts of its leaders, runs contrary to the findings of the past thirty years of Africanist historiography, which tended to stress African strength and development rather than its weakness and backwardness. Since 1960, Africanists have increasingly shown through careful historical studies that Africa was not nearly as backward as the popular imagination and so many non-Africanist historians view it. These findings significantly weaken many of the central arguments of the world-systems theory thereby decreasing the developmental distance between Africa and Europe.

The contradictions revealed in the new historiography are apparent in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Despite his commitment to explain African underdevelopment and backwardness in the modern world in terms of its historical roots in the early European contact, Rodney is still anxious to embrace the positive aspects of the new discoveries of the 1960s which emphasize a more dynamic Africa.<sup>12</sup> He takes great pains to show how advancements had been made in ancient and medieval Africa and how the inaccuracies of the older historians portrayed the continent as static, conservative, and backward.

Yet, he argues, it simply was not enough to emphasize Africa's own progress. It is true that the continent was advanced and its history before 1500 was glorious, but for all that, it was still woefully behind

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<sup>12</sup> Rodney is less pessimistic than others who also embraced the new scholarship. See Edward A. Alpers, "Rethinking African Economic History," *Kenya Historical Review* 1 (1973):163-88, written with Rodney's work at hand, or more significantly, William R. Ochieng's "Undercivilization in Black Africa," *Kenya Historical Review* 2 (1974):45-57.

Europe, which was at that time entering the early stages of capitalism and was equipped with both the ruthlessness and the technical power that the capitalist mode of production could deliver. The mass trading of slaves, the degradation of African society and systems of justice, and the development of crippling internecine wars were the inevitable result of the clash between the weak and the strong.<sup>13</sup>

Braudel also paused before the new scholarship, though from a different perspective. The discoveries of Africanist historiography weakened the general argument that the advanced exploited the backward in Africa, shifting the explanation for African behavior from Europe to Africa. This thought caused him to subtitle the chapter dealing with African integration into the Atlantic world, "Collaborator as well as Victim?"<sup>14</sup> Confronting work by Philip Curtin showing the advanced commercial acumen of Senegambian traders,<sup>15</sup> Braudel is less confident that the origins of the slave trade can be explained by the overwhelming economic power of Europe, and leans towards suggesting that some sort of emerging African capitalism is also partly to blame.

It seems likely, in fact, that Africa's role in the Atlantic was much more dynamic than the world-systems analysis suggests. This research goes a long way to demonstrate that Africa was not sufficiently backward relative to Europe in any aspect that bore on commerce and other interactions to warrant the kind of passive submission that this analysis proposes. Understanding this relies on the comprehension of how world-systems analysis evaluates African economies, and how Africanists favoring a view of a stronger African economy have come to see them.

The view of Africa as a backward and exploitable region derives from the following positions:

1. Africans did not have the advanced weapons of Europeans, especially firearms. Their productive capacities in defense-related industries, namely steel production and machine tooling, made them

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<sup>13</sup> Rodney, *How Europe*, 33-70 (African development, glories of the African past), 75-77 (European superiority), 78-82 (African shortfalls despite the glory), 95-135 (disasters as a result of the contact).

<sup>14</sup> Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 3:430 and discussion, 438-40.

<sup>15</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*, 2 vols. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

incapable of imitating European weaponry both in firearms and in hand weapons such as swords. This backwardness gave Europeans control over advanced weapons which allowed them to force African participation in the slave trade through control over military victory.<sup>16</sup>

2. African imports from Europe in the early periods included large numbers of manufactured items, such as cloth, metal goods, and "toys" (mechanical items, knickknacks, beads, etc.), which were important almost everywhere. Moreover, African exports were typically raw or semi-manufactured goods: ivory, copper, gold, pepper, and particularly, slaves. This pattern of trade suggests a weakness in African production of manufactured items, and in turn implies that Africa had become dependent on external trade to satisfy several needs for clothing and tools (placing the toys on the side at present).<sup>17</sup> Thus, borrowing from modern African patterns of trade and production, scholars have assumed that even in the pre-industrial period Africa was dependent upon external sources for basic commodities, giving the European producers of these commodities structural power in trade.

3. Africa was "pre-capitalist," or dominated by the "lineage mode of production," or even the "slave mode of production." Underlying such terminological differentiation is often a deeper belief that the technological and economic backwardness mentioned above was a direct result of less advanced social structures, or conversely, the failure to develop technology led to a failure to transform social structures. The implication of this is that Africans were unable to compete in trade because they failed to develop a capitalist (or merchant capitalist) commercial outlook, but rather focused on such things as creation of use value, reinforcing of social structures, or acquisition of status.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although superficially Africans and Europeans traded and "spoke the language of commerce," they were not in fact doing the same thing.

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<sup>16</sup> Rodney, *How Europe*, 77-80; Miller, *Way of Death*, 84-90; Ralph Austen and Daniel Headrick, "The Role of Technology in the African Past," *African Studies Review* 26 (1983):163-83.

<sup>17</sup> Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 152-53, 171-99; Miller, *Way of Death*, 78-86; Austen and Headrick, "Role of Technology," 176-77; and Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (London: Heinemann, 1987), 47-48, 99-102.

<sup>18</sup> Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 195-99. Miller, *Way of Death*, 42-70, also coins a term to differentiate Africa from Europe: "ethno-political economy."

One irony of all three of these approaches is that they represent a return to older themes in African history by scholars who for the most part have been participants in the post-1960 development of African historiography. The colonialist historiography of the early and mid-twentieth century had stressed the backwardness of African technology and social structure to justify colonial conquest as a means to bring Africa out of a stagnant past. Colonial labor policies, economic policies, and political processes were defended because the apologists saw them as educational to people who otherwise could not make the transition to modern life. Of course, much of the development of modern African historiography was a direct reaction to such ideas, and scholars, fired by nationalist sentiments, sought to refute the ideas of the colonialists directly by new historical investigation.

Obviously, the emphasis or reemphasis on African backwardness has not been the product of any colonialist sentiments on the part of the world-systems scholars. Most have spotless credentials on that score, and, in fact, like Rodney, are regarded as radicals. Rather, the arguments have often been advanced to explain how Africans could have participated in the slave trade, even though this trade is typically seen as leading to long-term underdevelopment.<sup>19</sup> Not wishing to charge Africans with complicity in the trade, they have sought to use the imbalances in economy and technology as explanatory mechanisms. Indeed, Braudel's doubts about the backwardness of African commerce, induced by reading Curtin's study of Senegambian trade, led him to raise the complicity issue directly, though only in the form of a possibility.

However, contemporary scholars need not worry about the political interpretations of this or that position on either African development in general or the nature of Afro-European commerce. Colonialist historiography, which was largely motivated by political

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<sup>19</sup> There are dissenters from this view, one of the most notable being J. D. Fage, author of "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History," *Journal of African History* 10 (1969):393-404. It is reprinted in *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies*, ed. J. E. Inikori (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1982), along with Rodney's celebrated earlier piece, "African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave Trade," (originally published in *Journal of African History* 8 (1966):431-43). Inikori's introduction and editorial apparatus make it clear that this is regarded as a conservative position.



concerns and was more or less explicitly propagandistic, is safely behind us. What is of concern is the degree of truth in the African backwardness model, its implications for the world-systems approach to African history, and the interpretation of African participation in the Atlantic economy during the Columbian era.

On the basis of existing historical research the backwardness model is not applicable. Africa was not a backward continent in 1500 as compared to Europe. While it may be true that European strategies of production, eventual technological development, and social structure predisposed it to make the transition of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, these features of European society had not reached a decisive level in the period under consideration. To be more exact, the nature of the African military and technological, economic, and political systems between 1450 and 1800 did not render them weaker or dependent on Europe when the two regions entered intense commercial relations. Recent research and interpretation support this view more than that of world-systems analysis.

World-systems theory, with its emphasis on the disparity of development between Africa and Europe, rests on two mutually reinforcing and incorrect suppositions. On the one hand, it presents Europe as more developed and modern in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it actually was, and on the other hand, it presents Africa as less developed than was the case. The undeniable difference in the development of the two areas today lends seductive credence to the idea that such disparities have always existed. To put it another way, the analysis of relative development relies on an anachronism.

Another problem lies with the choice of criteria for development. In general, world-systems analysis assumed a uniform pattern of development, usually modeled on the pattern of western Europe. Non-western societies are judged largely on how closely they conform to this assumed pattern, and the greater the divergence, the less developed the non-western country is viewed to be.

Finally, much of the analysis misinterprets process as results. The analysis of military systems should be tested by the results of battles, not by assessments of weapons. The measure of the relative efficiency of productive processes should be the quantity and quality of the product, not the organization of production or availability of machines. Comparisons of social structure ought to be judged by the

capacity to solve social and economic problems, not by the formal processes involved.

To deal with military imbalances Africanists have only recently begun systematic research on the art of war in Africa during the Columbian era. The results of this early research show that African military systems were complex and changing.<sup>20</sup> Even more significant, however, was their capacity when confronting Europeans. The effective resistance of African societies is especially well demonstrated in the case of the Luso-Spanish invasion of Angola after 1575, the one instance where a European power sought to invade and conquer an African state. The kingdom of Ndongo ultimately contained Portuguese advances in Angola between 1579 and 1590, although the Portuguese employed many more soldiers in the effort than it took to conquer either Mexico or Peru. This containment was not simply the result of climatic barriers, but was the direct result of the decisive defeat of the Portuguese army in several battles, culminating in the battle of the Lukala in 1590.<sup>21</sup> When Portuguese expansion in Angola resumed in the early seventeenth century, it did so largely through alliance with Africans, especially the Imbangala, and even then the colony did not extend much more than one hundred kilometers inland, and did not succeed in conquering the whole of the kingdom of Ndongo, its principal opponent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Two studies exemplify this: Ray Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics on the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 130-68; and John Thornton, "The Art of War in Angola, 1575-1680," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (1988):360-78.

<sup>21</sup> The basic primary sources are the reports of Jesuit missionaries who accompanied Paulo Dias de Novais in founding the colony. The reports are largely reproduced in António Brásio, ed., *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, 1st series, 15 vols. (Lisbon: Agencia geral do ultramar, Divisão de publicações, 1952-1988), vols. 3 and 4. An excellent summary is found in the report of Francisco Rodrigues, "História da residencia dos padres da Companhia de Jesus em Angola, e cousas tocantes ao reino, e conquista" (1 May 1594) in *ibid.*, 4:546-81. On the battle of the Lukala, see *ibid.*, 4:571-77 (summary of all defeats up to 1594) and Domingos de Abreu de Brito, "Svmmario e descripção do Reino de Angola," fols. 33-35v (extract in *ibid.*, 4:533-36).

<sup>22</sup> For early phases up to 1630, see Beatrix Heintze, "Das Ende des Unabhängigen Staates Ndongo (Angola): Neue Chronologie und Reinterpretation (1617-1630)," *Paideuma* 27 (1981):197-273. For later periods, see David Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) or the basic primary source,

More significant was the relatively small impact of firearms, the most important elements of European weaponry. Such technology clearly gave the Portuguese little advantage, and was soon found in African armies in any case. Muskets played a limited part in the warfare in Angola,<sup>23</sup> and were similarly restricted on the Gold Coast, where Ray Kea's study has analyzed their role in battles.<sup>24</sup> It was only at a fairly late stage, after about 1680, that firearms became important in wars in Africa, but even there the record is uneven, some states rearming quickly, others retaining the older weaponry.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there is the broader issue of military technology in general. Most world-systems analysis assumes gunpowder weapons to be vital because they were items of advanced technology for their day. While one must recognize that the potential for gunpowder weapons to become dominant existed even in early versions of the musket, one must also accept that the matchlock of the sixteenth century and even the flintlock of the eighteenth century were a far cry from the effectiveness of a modern rifle. If the final verdict on weapons and military systems was delivered on the battlefield, then results clearly reduce the force of the world-systems argument.

As for technological and productive backwardness, Africans are seen as militarily dependent because they did not manufacture guns, although there is substantial evidence to show that they repaired them effectively and often reworked and customized the fairly crude weapons

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António de Oliveira Cadornega, *História geral das guerras angolanas*, ed. José Matias Delgado and Manuel Alves da Cunha, 3 vols. (Lisbon: Divisão de publicações e bibliotecas. Agência geral das colónias, 1940-1942; reprinted, Lisbon: Agência do ultramar, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Thornton, "Art of War," 371-77.

<sup>24</sup> Kea, *Settlements*, 150-68. For a broader survey, see Kea, "Firearms and Warfare on the Gold and Slave Coasts from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 12 (1971):185-213.

<sup>25</sup> On the situation in Angola, with all its ambiguities, see Miller, *Way of Death*, 86-89. At one point, a "trained marksman" might "intimidate hundreds of subjects and dependants;" yet in all, weapons were so ineffective that "the physical ability of the guns to mete out death and destruction was seldom greater than the magical powers they gave their owners," and armies were mostly still spearmen and archers. The writer's own research suggests that gunpowder weapons were frequently used in parts of the zone, and rarely in others in the eighteenth century—the dynamics of this being far from finally determined.

they received as imports.<sup>26</sup> By the same standard, the development of African manufacturing ought to be judged by the quantity and quality of output, not by the use of technology. While it would be absurd to deny that machine production today is far superior in both categories to hand production, one must be wary of applying the same standards to the pre-industrial period. The early textile machinery or iron working equipment may have augured well for the future of Europe, but it may not have given European producers much of an edge on those producing with less machinery in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. This early technology was crude, broke down often, and did not always produce a superior product.

Indeed, in the sixteenth century Europeans were actually using less machinery in many branches of production, such as textiles, than they had in earlier centuries. The cheapness and quality of handmade products, manufactured in the home through the "putting out system," was gradually replacing the machine-made items of the Italian and Low Countries urban centers in all European markets.<sup>27</sup> On a larger scale, Indian cotton, made with very simple machines (certainly less sophisticated than the European technology) was conquering world markets, and not until the nineteenth century would the more advanced machines of the Industrial Revolution finally end this situation.<sup>28</sup>

In this context, the absence of mechanization in Africa seems less of a disadvantage. In any case, whatever the process of production, Africans clearly manufactured a large quantity of goods of all levels of quality. In textiles, the usual acid test of manufacturing capacity, Africans produced in volume. The fact that statistical measurement eludes us does not reduce such production. One of the few statistical sources available, the Luanda customs records for imports of Kongo cloth in the first decade of the seventeenth century, gives an astounding glimpse of the production of one textile producing region, eastern Kongo. This area managed to export as many as 100,000 meters of

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<sup>26</sup> Kea, "Firearms and Warfare," 185-213.

<sup>27</sup> Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 3:593-95.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:506-9.

cloth to Luanda per year, putting it on a par with some of the great European and Indian textile manufacturing centers.<sup>29</sup>

Contemporary accounts and surviving samples do not suggest that Kongo textiles were of poor quality,<sup>30</sup> and neither were those from other parts of Africa. The slave coast region, drawing on the Yoruba and Aja production, managed to export cotton cloths to Barbados and Brazil as well as meeting their own needs, and indeed, were still exporting *panos da costa* (cotton shawls) to Brazil in the late nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Africans certainly imported textiles from Europe and Asia, as proved by thousands of ships' manifests, and the quantities of imports were considerable. But this does not mean in any way that the motivation for these imports was simply their inability to produce clothing as cheaply or as well as Europeans.

Modern research has also produced dramatic evidence with regard to African metallurgy. In general, world-systems scholars argue that African technology for making iron and steel was inefficient, lacking a number of important technical features of medieval and early modern steel production.<sup>32</sup> Often, the final product of European technology is exaggerated by an assumed industrial manufacture,<sup>33</sup> as in Rodney's argument that European iron bars, being "mass produced"

<sup>29</sup> The basic data is in Alvitre de Pero Sardinha (ca. 1611), cited in Brásio, *Monumenta* 6:52-56. For a fuller comparison of African and non-African outputs, see John K. Thornton, "Pre-Colonial African Industry and the Atlantic Trade, 1500-1800," *African Economic History* 19 (1990):1-19. For critique and response, see the debate between Thornton and Ralph Austen, Patrick Manning, J. S. Hugendorn, H. A. Gemery, and Ann McDougall, *ibid.*, 21-54.

<sup>30</sup> For a good summary, see Ezio Bassani, "Un Cappuccino nell'Africa nera del seicento. I disegni dei *Manoscritti Araldi* del Padre Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo," *Quaderni Poro* 4 (1987):41-64, and Beatrix Heintze, "Zur Materiellen Kultur der Ambundu nach den Quellen des 16. und 17. Jahrhundert," *Paideuma* 35 (1989):119-27 (correcting Bassani on the issue of capacities in dyeing).

<sup>31</sup> On exports to Barbados, see John Phillips, "A Journal of the Voyage in the Hannibal of London, Ann. 1693-1694," in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. Awnsham and John Churchill, 5 vols. (London: J. Walthoe, 1732), 5:236; for the nineteenth-century exports, see Manuela Corneiro da Cunha, *Negros estrangeiros, os escravos libertos e sua volta à Africa* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985), 108-32.

<sup>32</sup> Austen and Headrick, "Role of Technology," 167-68, for an assessment of technological shortcomings of African production by comparison with European methods.

<sup>33</sup> A more pessimistic assessment of the scale and technology of European steel production is in Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 1:373-74.

must have been symmetrical, as opposed to the individually forged bars of the African smith.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, it is not technology that counts as much as the product that finally emerges from the process.

Ever since Peter Schmidt argued, on the basis of archaeological research in Tanzania in 1975, that Africans produced a high quality, medium carbon "direct steel" by a unique method (only used in Europe after 1828), the entire question of European export of steel to Africa has been reopened.<sup>35</sup> It is likely that Africans could make better quality steel than they imported,<sup>36</sup> and whatever the causes of African decisions to import iron goods, it cannot simply be put down to the inefficiency or low quality of African steel production. This point is reinforced by recent archaeological research by Philip de Barros on the output of Bassar (modern Togo). By measuring the amount of slag in different time periods, de Barros was able to show that iron production in this center rose throughout the slave trade period, ultimately reaching its highest levels in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in both the issue of textile production and steel manufacture, scholars must abandon the idea that African participation in external trade was driven by a need for the cheaper and superior

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<sup>34</sup> Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 194.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Schmidt and Terry S. Childs, "Innovation and Industry during the Early Iron Age in East Africa: The KM2 and KM3 Sites of Northwestern Tanzania," *African Archaeological Review* 3 (1985):53-94. On the implications of these and other findings concerning the advanced nature of pre-colonial steel production, see Candice Goucher, "Iron is Iron 'til it Rusts: Trade and Ecology in the Decline of West African Iron Smelting," *Journal of African History* 22 (1981):179-89. For a recent challenge to some of these claims, see Duncan E. Miller and Nikolaas van der Merwe, "Early Metal Working in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Recent Research," *Journal of African History* 35 (1994):1-36.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Austen does not accept this conclusion and argues in essence that both Schmidt and Goucher are wrong. (In "Role of Technology," 167-68, 179 n. 9. Austen acknowledges but rejects Goucher's objections and in *African Economic History*, 13-14, 25 n. 15, he follows the same approach.) Austen argues that African smelters produced a better bloom, but that the final product, after working, was a lower quality steel than in Europe. However, the arguments of the archaeologists are not only based on bloom or theory, but also on finished products. See Thornton, "Pre-Colonial African Industry," 8-9 and "The Historian and the Pre-Colonial African Economy: John Thornton Responds," *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Philip de Barros, "Bassar: A Quantified, Chronologically Controlled, Regional Approach to a Traditional Iron Production Centre in West Africa," *Africa* (London) 56 (1986):148-73.

products of Europe. By the same token, they must also reject the notion that differences in productive techniques necessarily forced Africans into an exploitative relationship with Europe which ultimately drained Africa of its manpower and capacities.

Regarding social structures, there is little doubt that Africa possessed a different social structure from Europe, but it is less certain as to what these differences meant for the nature of African trade across the Atlantic. African political economy was characterized, among other things, by an absence of private land ownership, by a political structure whose ideological justification relied heavily on the idiom of kinship (hence the general use of such terms as "lineage mode of production"), and by a well-developed institution of slavery.<sup>38</sup> These can be contrasted with European ideas about the value of landed property and individual freedom.

It may well be that some features of European social structure predisposed them to the industrial transformation. But one need only read Carlo Cipolla's classic study of the economy of pre-industrial Europe to see that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe faced most of the problems that today burden underdeveloped countries, and that if modern analysts were to assess those economies, they might conclude that they were completely stagnant.<sup>39</sup> But, as previously emphasized concerning technology, for the analysis of Afro-European relations, one need only be concerned with the performance of merchants at the time.

It may therefore be appropriate to consider Africa and Europe as having two different types of political economies, and scholars with an interest in typology would surely assign them to different categories. However, typologies, especially of the type of which some Marxist anthropologists are fond, may confuse more fundamental issues in the selection of terminology. This is particularly true when the typologies are arranged in evolutionary sequences, so that societies of one type are seen as more evolved or developed than those of another type, rather than simply being variants of a common theme. Thus, speaking of

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<sup>38</sup> For a fuller treatment and documentation of these features, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 72-97.

<sup>39</sup> Carlo Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700* (New York: Norton, 1975).

Africa as pre-capitalist while Europe is capitalist (or as "emerging capitalism" or "merchant capitalism") certainly implies that the African system is somehow backward and deficient on an evolutionary scale.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, one certainly implies that Africans might not be able to hold their own in trade when one writes of African economics as characterized by an ethos of hospitality with an emphasis on "gainless barter" rather than profit,<sup>41</sup> or states that it was driven by a concern to use value or social reinforcement rather than to accumulate wealth.<sup>42</sup> Not all scholars agree with this assessment, however. Many researchers have maintained that the African commercial economy was driven by motives of profit that resembled those of Europe. Such an approach, known as the "formalist" method, was employed to good effect. This is detailed by A. G. Hopkins in a general history of West Africa, and particularly by Philip Curtin in his study of Senegambia.<sup>43</sup>

Both of these studies reveal more or less the same results. Whatever the overall political economy of the states where these merchants flourished (and the details of evolutionary schemes of political development need not concern us here), their behavior when negotiating with Europeans was not of a type that led to their inevitable exploitation. Indeed, studies of the skill of African merchant groups show them to have been among the most developed in African history, and the general consensus of virtually all of these studies is that such groups were indistinguishable in their economic behavior from similar groups elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Curtin commenced his recent world

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<sup>40</sup> Rodney's approach in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 3-28, 36-48. This is much more strongly worded in a fairly old-fashioned ("Stalinist") schema of succession of modes of production than most world-systems theorists would accept, though in general the same thoughts underlie a good deal of anthropology, e.g., Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.

<sup>41</sup> Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 194-99.

<sup>42</sup> Miller, *Way of Death*, 42-53.

<sup>43</sup> A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1973); Curtin, *Economic Change*.

<sup>44</sup> The analysis of merchants has been de-emphasized since the mid-1970s, but in many respects, Richard Gray and David Birmingham, eds., *Pre-Colonial African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) and Claude Meillassoux, ed., *Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute, 1971) are both classic collections and thorough statements of research.



survey of merchant "diasporas" with a fully developed section on African trade.<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, the question of Africa's role in the world economy, and in the Atlantic economy in particular, is in need of serious revision. The older idea of Africa as a passive victim of more powerful and dynamic European merchants, born out of colonialist stereotypes and ignorance, needs to be replaced with a version that better represents the discoveries of modern Africanist historiography. Such a new history is likely to see Africa as a much more important actor in the international scene, and should make the historical study of Africa more important for the study of the American background in general. Nevertheless, such studies tend to be confined to the cultural background of African slaves, rather than to the economic history of the Atlantic world.

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<sup>45</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-59.