



Review of Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History*

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Gerardo Serra



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Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon,
The Idea of Development in Africa: A History

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2021, 333 pages, 978-110710369-6

Gerardo Serra*

The protean notion of “development” constitutes the main framework through which the performance, structure and aspirations of the African continent are usually expressed in Western discourse. This ambitious book, authored by two distinguished historians of East Africa, presents a wide-ranging exploration of the colonial roots of development, and its postcolonial legacies. Rather than taking the form of a conceptual history, or a self-contained intellectual history, the book presents a critical genealogy of what the authors call the “development episteme” since the 19th century. The authors draw on Michel Foucault’s expansive notion of “episteme,” and on the work of Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988; 1994), who unpacked and problematised the ways in which “Africa” has been constructed and mobilised as a category of thought and discourse. Accordingly, Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon treat the “development episteme” as a “knowledge system” built on a “logic of difference and differentiation” (4) that perpetuates tropes of the “civilising mission,” and silences alternative ways of imagining Africa’s place in the world.

The book’s division in three parts mirrors the different (but overlapping and mutually reinforcing) meanings that the authors attribute to “development”: firstly, the “development episteme”; secondly, “the set of policies and practices arising from this ‘knowledge’ imposed onto African communities” and, finally, “a discourse of power that ‘experts’ have inflicted upon Africans, though Africans have also challenged, redefined, subverted or engineered development theories and practices” (15). This choice allows the authors to cover in a fluid and integrated manner issues as different as the Darwinian underpinnings of scientific racism, the regulation of labour, gender and sexuality, the re-organisation of urban spaces, health and sanitation, and the continuities between missionary discourse and practice and those of

*University of Manchester. gerardo.serra@manchester.ac.uk

contemporary NGOs. It is also laudable that the selection of case studies overcomes the division, still conventional in much Africanist historiography, between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa: Morocco, Tunisia and Libya are discussed alongside Zanzibar (the authors' main area of expertise), South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, among others.

Secondly, the case studies provide an overview of the discourses and practices of "development" in places that were colonised by different European powers. Although most of the literature analysed is in English, the book makes a commendable effort to integrate the experiences of Francophone and Lusophone African countries. Each chapter includes some self-contained "boxes" with concise case studies about specific individuals (like Mary Kingsley and Frantz Fanon), historical episodes (like the Dakar Railway Strike in 1947-48) or broader phenomena (like female genital mutilation).

Overall, this volume is a remarkable work of synthesis that summarises the insights of a wide range of research in history and anthropology on different parts of the continent. From this point of view, the "development episteme" is an effective framework to bring together the findings and implications of a plethora of concerns and methodological traditions. While engaging seriously with questions about knowledge and power, the volume is also almost completely jargon-free. All these features make *The Idea of Development in Africa* an excellent textbook, providing an effective introduction to key themes in colonial and postcolonial thought and policy, while also deserving to be widely read by historians of Africa and colonialism, and scholars in development studies.

At first sight, the volume does not contain much of direct interest to historians of economic thought. Issues that could be naturally inscribed within our field are confined to brief remarks on Walt Rostow (146-147), Kwame Nkrumah's views on neocolonialism (9 and 153-154), or economist Dambisa Moyo's recent interventions on the shortcomings of aid (283-284). On the other hand, there is much in the book of value for our scholarly community. At a time when both the evolution of development economics and the economic ideas of thinkers from the Global South are being subject to an unprecedented degree of historicization (e.g. Alacevich and Boianovsky, 2020; Bach, 2021 respectively), this volume's contribution is twofold. Firstly, it could lead historians of economic thought to embrace a more holistic view of "development, and appreciate the complexity and ambivalence of its relationship with the colonial order. This is not just a matter of periodisation, or of promoting narratives that favour continuity rather than a break around World War II. Instead, the book contains a more substantial invitation to interrogate the relationship between development economics and other forms of disciplinary knowledge (such as colonial anthropology), and to inscribe the discourses about "development" within a wider

array of policies and political practices. The volume's emphasis on scientific racism and processes of "othering" could also be read fruitfully by historians of economics interested in the relationship between eugenics and the social sciences in other geographical contexts, a theme at the centre of much recent literature (for example Fiorito and Erasmo, 2022).

Secondly, the book explicitly calls for putting African voices and experiences at the centre, and by extension for a broadening and revision of what constitutes the "canon" in the historiography of political and economic thought. Although this reader would have enjoyed a more extensive and systematic treatment of African authors and intellectual traditions, there are several insightful contributions in this sense. The first chapter, for example, building on classic studies such as Peel (1978) on the Yoruba notion of *ọlaju* (literally "enlightenment"), mentions how several African languages express the concept of "development." Seen through this lens, African concepts of "development" inhabit a wide and porous semantic sphere: the Swahili word *maendeleo*, for example, can refer to movement in space or movement in time, and thus "can indicate anything from an individual travelling to a foreign land to a community planning for its future" (6). The Shona (spoken primarily in Zimbabwe) word *budiriro* denotes "physical and material progress," but also expresses a critique of greed and lack of redistribution, thus containing "both the idea of striving for material gain and the warning about the negative consequences that this might bring" (5). In light of the book's argument and approach, these examples could have been fruitfully complemented by instances of the untranslatability of the development concept into African languages (such as in the Mooré language spoken in Burkina Faso), or pointing at its foreign and colonial nature: for example, the Eton language from central Cameroon would translate "development" as "the white man's dream" (Aime, 2016, 39).

Far from being indicative of an immutable "traditional" and communitarian worldview, semantic and linguistic change in how African societies define and contest "development" remains a privileged entry point to ask broader questions on the evolution of alternative forms of belonging and political imagination (see for example Hunter, 2014 and Lal, 2012 on colonial and postcolonial Tanzania respectively). It is important to interrogate how and why African visions of "development" sometimes sit uncomfortably with Western normative notions of what is desirable (as indicated in the case of human rights belonging to individuals rather than communities, 174-175). Although African concepts of "progress" predate the colonial encounter (276-278), several African intellectuals have articulated powerful critiques of the "development episteme". These are discussed in the penultimate chapter, one of the most refreshing of the book. Besides exposing the Eurocentric roots of "development" as a discursive and heuristic framework, the book

could have analysed more explicitly how the work of some African intellectuals (and others that could have been included, such as Felwine Sarr's 2016 *Afrotopia*) express a plea for new social imaginaries that, centred in African epistemologies, can also challenge the boundaries separating the "economic", the "political" and the "social". A more extensive exploration of African conceptualisations of the relationship between human and non-human agents could have perhaps enriched the discussion of "development" and the environment, which is primarily conducted with reference to the impact of specific initiatives on African lives and resources (like the infamous Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, 148-149), or instances of resistance to state-led modernisation programmes (such as Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement in Kenya, 179-181). But, overall, *The Idea of Development in Africa* remains impressive in its capacity to cover so much ground, and to do so in an effective manner.

Within the discussion of Afro-futurism as a form of resistance against teleological narratives ending up with Africa's "failure to develop", the inclusion of the movie *Black Panther* (286-287) can also be read, between the lines, as a reminder that intellectual history can be written with sources other than texts. This is an insight that has already led to some interesting work in other areas of intellectual and conceptual history (for example Rajamani, 2012), but that remains under-appreciated in our field (unless the movie in question is, in itself, about economics—as in a recent account of Michael Polanyi's "Keynesian" animated movie, Bíró, 2020).

In conclusion, the book constitutes a welcome contribution that would reward historians of economic thought and the social sciences, both for what it says explicitly about the place of "development" in colonial and postcolonial thought and policy, and for its indirect invitations to broaden and diversify our choice of authors, sources and methods.

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