

Of Magic, Invisible Hands and ELFs

How not to study ethnicity in Africa (or anywhere
else)

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OF MAGIC, INVISIBLE HANDS AND ELF'S:

HOW NOT TO STUDY ETHNICITY IN AFRICA

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I. The Failure of African Development

For the past thirty years Africa has been the horror story of global development. Instead of the increasing growth and prosperity from the application of scientifically grounded structural adjustment programs that would free markets and trade from the predatory interference of corrupt states, country after country experienced economic decline, growing social disorder and political unrest. Compared to the apparent rapidly growing prosperity of Asia and Latin America, Africa was a continent apart, a signal and bloody failure in the march of globalization. But why?

For economists who dominated policy making in the international financial institutions and were the primary authors of the neo-liberal "Washington Consensus", the explanation could only lie in the fact that Africa was the continent of ethnic conflict to a degree unknown anywhere else in the world. Africa is poor because it is unstable and that derives from its ethnic complexity (Bates, 2000, 131)

Africa's ethno-linguistic fragmentation (ELF) trumps the magic of the market. And thus, the 'African tragedy' has become the conventional wisdom of international development institutions. It is a tragedy, however, for which economists, as Jean-Louis Arcand and his colleagues note, offer no practical solution; it is Africa's fate. (2000, 926)

During the same period, among historians, political scientists, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists and even some structurally focused economists of Africa, the understanding of ethnicity has undergone a profound change grounded in an increasingly rich body of empirical research. The initial understanding of African 'tribes', derived from colonial ideology and late 19th century evolutionary anthropology and social Darwinism, defined them as ancient, primitive and stagnant societies, governed by unchanging custom and rigid identities. This primordial explanation of African tribes saw them as fixed and unchanging and mutually hostile, sources of constant conflict and mortal threats to modernity and development. Primordialism, though, has been increasingly dismissed by growing contemporary research in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa that demonstrates that ethnicity is a modern and open-ended cultural, social and political process shaped by the relationship of African communities to the development of the state and market beginning with colonialism. (Berman, 1998, 2010; Takahashi, 2010)

The dominant contemporary approach to studying ethnicity (as opposed to 'tribes') in Africa, constructivism, is a broadly inter-disciplinary and historically

focused method of analyzing the development of ethnicity communities through the complex interaction of cultural, economic and political factors. Another approach widely used by political scientists is 'instrumentalism' which focuses on the instrumental employment of ethnic identities and interests by African political elites and educated intelligentsias to mobilize support for political and economic claims. Instrumentalism, however, fits within the wider constructivist approach since such elites are also among the most important agents shaping the socio-cultural and political boundaries, interests and mobilization of ethnic communities. In short, for the social sciences, with the striking exception of economics, the old conventional wisdom of primitive tribes has been replaced by constructivist and instrumentalist approaches that open up a much deeper understanding of the varied development of African ethnic groups in relation to the crucial economic and political transformations of the twentieth century, including the neo-liberal globalization of the past thirty years. (Berman, 1998, 2004; Takahashi, 2010, 2, 12, 29)

Economics has, however, been largely untouched by these fundamental changes in the understanding of ethnicity in Africa. Instead, economists have become what historians and sociologists of science call an "invisible college" (Crane, 1972; Cronin, 1982) of researchers who almost entirely cite only each other, as the constant references to "the literature" in the publications studied in the present paper clearly demonstrate, or what international relations scholars of the "constructivist" school (a broadly similar but parallel development to constructivism in the study of ethnicity) call an "epistemic community" (Adler and Haas, 1992) that has an important impact on the definition of reality shaping policy

in states and international institutions. Economics has thus pursued a quite separate course in the study of ethnicity in Africa; the articles cited here have few references to research in the instrumentalist mode and have none to the research of constructivism and, indeed, show little awareness of its existence. Economics we must remember is a discipline where as late as 1994 Douglas North could suggest in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that economists were operating under the erroneous idea that non-economic variables did not matter for economic development. (Okediji, 2011, 77) Within the orthodoxy of market economics, moreover, political, social or cultural factors can only interfere with or distort the perfect functioning of the market. Over the past thirty years economists have not only not entered into dialogue with other social scientists, but have increasingly dismissed their research as not 'scientific' and 'ideologically motivated' when it has been critical of the impact of neo-liberal reforms in Africa.

In the rest of this paper I will examine the dominant research by economists on ethnicity in Africa and critically unpack its theory, method and evidence. I hope to show that it has little understanding of African history or culture and its characterization of ethnicity in Africa is almost wholly lacking in empirical content. I will argue that it is itself an ideological discourse attempting to protect the central premises of neo-liberal theory and policy. Not only is not valid knowledge, but also it is deeply misleading in the realm of public policy. In the final section, I will show that it has contributed to the marginalization of Africa as a failed continent apart in the understanding of contemporary globalization and has been unable to

comprehend how the impact of neo-liberal 'reforms' and democratization has actually intensified ethnic conflicts in many African countries.

I. From the Washington Consensus to ELF

Mainstream economists' approach to understanding ethnicity in Africa derives from the contemporary version of neo-classical economics, often described by critics as "market fundamentalism", that is the intellectual basis for the Washington consensus and the neo-liberal reforms imposed on African governments since the early 1980s. The underlying assumption of these reforms is that they are based on 'scientific' economic theory and should produce the predicted results of economic growth. Indeed, development is defined solely as economic growth in the form of the measurable growth of the GDP for each country. (Easterly and Levine, 1997, pp. 1203, 1224). If, however, the structural adjustment programs fail to produce the predicted growth, this can only result from characteristics of African society and politics that interfere with the proper functioning of the market.

In the most important contribution to research on ethnicity by William Easterly and Ross Levine the direction of causality is assumed (Easterly and Levine, p. 1206). The most distinctive characteristic of African societies, their asserted extreme ethnic fragmentation, is postulated as the cause of Africa's failure to grow as expected. The underlying understanding of ethnic groups is that of the primordial model of ancient tribal communities relatively isolated by differences in language and culture with uncooperative if not hostile relations with other communities. The more groups, it is assumed, the greater the level of social disruption. Ethnic

diversity, therefore, ‘explains’ Africa’s development failure. (Easterly and Levine, p. 1205)

Easterly and Levine’s 1997 article on “Africa’s Growth Tragedy” in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* has become the conventional wisdom of economics on ethnicity in Africa (Posner, 2004, p. 849) and, according to Google Scholar, has been cited in other academic works more than 2900 times since its publication. In line with their assumptions, they correlate economic growth rates in Africa and other continents with a measure of ethno-linguistic fragmentation called ELF, purporting to show that the failure of African economies to grow is correlated with their significantly higher levels of ELF compared to other continents. It is, however, an indirect causal effect through the impact of ethnic fragmentation in promoting ‘poor’ state policies. Higher levels of ethnic diversity encourage poor policies and a virtual war of attrition on public goods. (Easterly and Levine, pp. 1204-05, 1230-31; Takahashi, pp. 3, 5) They also assert that ethnically diverse societies have weaker governments and are less likely to have democratic institutions. (Easterly and Levine, pp. 1232, 1215)

The index of ethno-linguistic fractionalization, ELF, is based on quantitative data of the number of languages in countries of the world compiled by Soviet scholars in the Miklukho-Maklai Ethnological Institute based on data from 1961 and published in 1964 in the *Atlas Narodov Mira* (Atlas of Peoples of the World) and reprinted in Taylor and Hudson’s *World Handbook and Political and Social Indicators* (1972). The Soviet study deployed a variable called ETHNIC that “measures the

probability that two randomly selected individuals in a country will belong to different ethno-linguistic groups.” Taylor and Hudson who “discounted the possibility that the country-by-country construction of the Soviet data were contaminated by ideological bias” turned this into the ELF index. (Easterly and Levine, p. 1219} The index assumes that ethnicity is homologous with a distinct identified language, representing a unique and common culture, and the greater the difference between languages the greater the cultural and linguistic distance between groups and the degree of ethnic fragmentation. Easterly and Levine note that the Soviet data shows that “fourteen out of fifteen of the most ethnically heterogeneous societies in the world are in Africa; eight countries classified as high income countries in the World Bank’s Development Report are among the most ethnically homogeneous, and no such rich countries are among the top-fifteen most ethnically diverse countries.” (Easterly and Levine, p. 1219) The direction of causality is assumed.

They go on to both derive a measure of ELF for Africa that they compare to similar measures for other continents, particularly Asia, showing that Africa is by far the most ethnically diverse continent, and then run numerous regression equations correlating the ethnic diversity of African countries with negative economic growth and with ‘poor’ growth-retarding policy choices: “Although the results do not hold for every policy indicator, the data are consistent with the view that ethnic diversity tends to slow growth by making it more difficult to agree on the provision of public goods and policies that foster economic growth. Since Africa is more ethnically

diverse than other regions, this feature of African economies helps explain their tendency to choose growth-retarding policies.” (Easterly and Levine, pp. 1231-32)

In the years since its publication, Easterly and Levine’s paper has drawn substantial and continuing interest from other economists. In many instances this further research has reinforced their conclusions that “in heterogeneous societies there is a greater likelihood for competition among interest (ethnic) groups for the provisions of public goods, leading to poor public policy decisions” and that “it is well established in economics literature that ethnic fragmentation has significant effects on long-term economic performance.” (Okediji, 2011, p. 78) Other research, has both confirmed the effect of ethnic fractionalization on economic growth in Africa in the 1990s due to ‘adverse governance’ and that ethnic diversity increases the likelihood of conflict, especially in ethnically ‘polarized societies’. (Schuler and Weisbrod, 2010, pp. 458-59)

At the same time, numerous other papers by economists and some rational-choice political scientists have critiqued Easterly and Levine’s data and conclusions from a number of directions. Arcand, Guillaumont and Jeanneney argue that the ELF index correlates poorly with policy variables and results are weak and debatable. The limits of Easterly and Levine’s data and poor correlations with African growth data make it difficult to assess African ‘difference’: “It is not only because the level of ethnic fragmentation in Africa is high that the growth rate of African countries is low. Rather, it is also because the marginal impact of ethnic diversity on growth is so high in Africa, for a given level of ethnic diversity, that

African growth is so low. In other words, the instability of the coefficient associated with ethnic diversity implies that difference in ethnic diversity *per se* do not constitute a satisfactory explanation for the slow rate of African economic growth. On the contrary, this instability in the coefficient leads to what Easterly and Levine should have focused on as being the central problem: why is the impact of ethnic diversity so much larger in Africa than in the rest of the world.” (2000, p. 934) And they conclude that ethnic diversity may effect economic growth, but not through public policy as the transmission mechanism. (Ibid., p. 936)

Other scholars try to develop new composite indices of ethnic diversity that are based on more complex and reliable data sources. Okediji, for example, deploys the Social Diversity Index (SDI) that is based on diverse sources for measuring ethnic fragmentation with several variables that take account of multiple, cross cutting characteristics and the lack of rigidity of ethnic boundaries, recognize the ethnic diversity of OECD countries as well, and the importance of change over time, although still limited to the static effect of ethnicity on economic growth. (2011, pp. 79-80, 81-84) The political scientist Daniel Posner, meanwhile, noted three problems with the ELF index that call into question the findings reported by Easterly and Levine and others: “First, the underlying ethnographic data from which the ELF measure is constructed are suspect. Second, summarizing the ethnic landscape of a country with a single statistic, as all ethnic fractionalization indices (including ELF) do, obscures features of ethnic diversity that may be highly relevant to the relationship between ethnicity and economic growth. Third, and most important, there is a critical mismatch in most studies between the causal

mechanism that is claimed to link ethnic diversity with slow growth and the measure of diversity that is used to test that mechanism. ... there is no single 'correct' accounting of ethnic groups in a country and thus no single 'correct' ethnic fractionalization index value. Countries possess multiple dimensions of cultural cleavage and multiple possible accountings of the salient ethnic communities."

(2004, p. 850) Instead, he proposes a new index of ethnic fractionalization based on a measure of politically relevant ethnic groups (PREG) that takes account of the variation in ethnic political mobilization in different countries, and that when replicating Easterly and Levine's regressions "the empirical finding that emerges when the new measure is used is that ethnic fractionalization is, in fact, strongly negatively related to economic growth in Africa." (ibid, p. 861)

Other research, however, challenge Easterly and Levine's findings about the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and low or declining economic growth. Cinyabuguma and Putterman, for example, focusing on variations in growth rate among only African countries, conclude that "the ethnic heterogeneity variable, identical to the main measure of that concept used in their paper, is positively and significantly related to economic growth and favorable institutions and policy outcomes, at least over the range in which most observations fall, in our Africa-only panel. ... Ethnic heterogeneity appears to be a positive determinant of lower corruption and of greater political rights and shows a significant convex relationship with political openness, with a positive relationship predominant over the range of ethnic heterogeneity levels in which three quarters of sub-Saharan African countries fall." (2010, pp. 249-50) The political scientist, Robert Bates, based on his own

fieldwork in Zambia, concludes that, contrary to the belief that ethnic heterogeneity retards development and distorts public policy, ethnic groups can promote the formation of human capital and that ethnic diversity in itself does not necessarily imply political violence. (2000, p. 131) Looking at more recent data on Africa through the 1990s, Schuler and Weisbrod conclude that “the growth hampering impact of ethnic fractionalization remains only in the 1990s and in Sub-Saharan Africa once the policy framework ... is controlled for. ... The specific Sub-Saharan effect of fractionalization, instead, shows an indirect effect via public investment on growth and not governance *per se*. (2010, p. 458) Extending their analysis to include countries that are ethnically diverse through immigration, they note that the negative impact of ethnic fractionalization on growth is mitigated in these societies. (Ibid, p. 458)

Conceptual and theoretical criticism of the Easterly and Levine approach is less common. Arcand, et al. challenge the identification of the channels, such as public policy or governance, through which ethnic fragmentation supposedly affects growth, and argue that the degree of ethnic polarization and conflict, which varies from one country to another, is more relevant than simply measures of fragmentation. Others, perhaps more aware of research on ethnicity in other disciplines, note the fluidity and multiplicity of dimensions of ethnic identity and the difficulty of constructing a single measure of ethnic fragmentation. (Okediji, 2011, pp. 79-80; Posner, 2004) Unfortunately, all of the critiques of Easterly and Levine from within the invisible college of economists stay within the positivist neo-classical paradigm of theory, method and evidence. In the next section I will try to

show that this research paradigm suffers from such debilitating failures of theory, method and evidence that it is questionable whether the 'literature' on ethnic fragmentation and development in Africa, despite its scientific pretensions, constitutes valid knowledge of any kind.

III. Failures of Theory and Evidence: Context and Reality

The food writer Michael Pollan makes a critical distinction between food and nutrients. Nutrients, he notes, are chemical compounds found in great diversity in the food we eat; a leaf of the herb thyme contains more than two hundred such compounds. Nutrition science extracts and isolates these elements and studies their positive and negative effects on human health. However, we eat food, not nutrients, and food, whether plant or animal, is a complex environment combining numerous nutrients that are produced and consumed in diverse social and natural contexts that shape the actual effect of nutrients on us. (2008, pp. 64-7) The effect can thus vary widely in different contexts, and research that is based on the experimental laboratory isolation of individual nutrients can produce ambiguous and even contradictory results. Similarly, the same variety of grape, grown in different *terroir* whether ten miles apart in a valley in Burgundy or across the world in California or Australia, with variations of soil, rainfall and sunlight, will produce strikingly different wines. The underlying and crucial point is that in the real world, natural and social, causality is complex and that the same factors interacting in different contexts can and do produce contingent and variable outcomes. All cases are thus both the same and different, and contemporary research on African ethnicity

focuses on the explanation of complexity and contingency producing open-ended results both for individuals and institutions.

Contemporary mainstream economics, however, operates on a very different theoretical and methodological paradigm that might be described as scientific positivism. This conceives of economics as a science akin to classical physics, based on sophisticated mathematical models of the 'free' market (i.e., unregulated factor markets) under highly restrictive ideal conditions that express fundamental 'laws' of economic behavior. There is actually very little empirical evidence offered in support of these models, especially historical evidence dealing with the development of factor markets in the early 19th century during the beginnings of industrial capitalism. Indeed, economists often show an aversion to examining such evidence. The form of their models is actually normative, the way markets 'should' operate, and it is tested against reality only to identify conditions that prevent markets from operating as they should. In face of this approach, it is not surprising that there has been an enormous revival of interest in other social sciences studying contemporary globalization and development in the 1944 study by Karl Polanyi of the destructive social impact of the development of labor markets in early industrial Britain. Polanyi, significantly, went on to become a major figure in the development of economic anthropology and a distinguished Africanist.

The positivist model of 'science' is the basis of economists' study of ethnicity. The research is based, however, on a number of striking false assumptions in the theoretical model and fundamental problems in the 'data' used to test it. The

problem to be explained is why Africa has failed to achieve the projections of growth contained in neo-liberal structural adjustment and reform programs. Since the programs were based on theories assumed to be scientifically correct, Africa's failure can only be explained by distinctive factors of African societies that set it apart from other regions. Ethnic diversity and conflict is obviously a distinctive characteristic of Africa the impact on economic 'development' can be tested scientifically. In a stylized replication of 'experimental' method in natural science, a quantitative measure of ethnic diversity is calculated for each country and correlated directly with other measures of economic performance or, indirectly, with the presence or absence of 'good' or 'bad' government policies that affect economic performance. Such variables, extracted from a complex reality, are believed to 'test' the relationship between them. Despite all of the strictures of statistical texts that correlations cannot be assumed to equal causality and that correlations may be spurious, hiding the influence of other more influential variables, the direction of causality is assumed.

So, the theoretical model is deterministic, even if expressed in a probability coefficient, and the variables isolated and extracted from a complex reality hardly correspond to the conditions of a laboratory experiment. The problem of stating variables as numbers and using quantitative data to count ethnic groups and invent indices is even more problematic. The approach reflects clearly the number fetish of the culture of the dominant institutions of Western capitalist states in which decision making largely rests on the analysis of vast amounts of social and economic statistics and quantitative data that are regarded as more valid and reliable than

often derided 'qualitative' evidence. Counting, however, is a cultural and political act in itself and such numbers must be interrogated with regard to how, amongst all the possible things that can be enumerated, the units to be counted are identified, classified and aggregated, and if indices of their characteristics are being constructed, what are the units of measurement employed. Social data are, in particular, neither natural nor neutrally objective. (Irvine, et al, 1979) So, if we examine ELF we find that the hypothesis is that the number of ethnic groups in a country alone is a source of economic instability and failure; groups are counted, nothing more. The ELF index is based on the assumption that ethnic groups speaking different languages are isolated from each other and the more there are, the greater the degree of social fragmentation. This assumption is also clearly based on the primordial assumption that all African ethnic groups are ancient, stable and self-contained groups, each one speaking its own language. In light of contemporary research, however, both assumptions are false. First, pre-colonial groups may have spoken diverse languages, but multi-linguality was the common condition and the groups were far from isolated, but were linked by relations that were mostly far from hostile and marked by trade, intermarriage, migration, and cultural exchange, including language. (Berman 1998; Takahashi, 2010) Second, more than one ethnic community may in more modern times speak the same language, and these are formalized versions drawn from numerous dialects and rendered literate starting with the work of missionaries in the 19th century. African languages are modern creations, not ancient survivals and as dynamic as other living languages.

The data used by Easterly and Levine and other economists to count ethnic groups are extremely problematic. The Russian compilation of world languages used by them in the ELF index was certainly shaped by the assumptions of Soviet nationality theory that closely attached a language to each national group in the USSR, while the data on Africa, since Soviet scholars were largely unable to do any first hand research in Africa until the end of the Soviet era, was based on colonial reporting and classification and academic research on African languages and ethnography from the 1920s to the 1950s. Thus the analyses of ethnic fragmentation are based on data that is at least 50-70 years old, and can be used to explain events in the 1980s and 1990s only if we assume, erroneously as I have argued, that the ethnic groups of Africa are static and unchanging. Since ethnic groups are only counted, the indices contain no information about their internal cultural, social, economic or political characteristics, even their names are unrecorded; they become opaque marbles in a jar. This leads to some strange inconsistencies in Easterly and Levine's analysis. Thus, the table of most ethnically fractionalized countries in the world lists Tanzania at the top with an index of 93, while the index of least ethnically fractionalized includes Burundi, with an index of 4. (1997, p. 1220) Tanzania, however, is a country with some of the lowest levels of ethnic conflict, while Burundi had major Hutu-Tutsi violence in 1988, and in its ethnically related cousin, Rwanda, the genocide of Tutsi occurred in 1994, three years before the publication of Easterly and Levine's article. They appear to be unaware, however, of the striking differences in the levels of ethnic conflict in different countries and how this might challenge the ELF index.

If we attempt to incorporate evidence on the internal characteristics and external politics of real African ethnic groups, then the problems of constructing measures of ethnic diversity become much more difficult (Posner, 2004, pp. 851-54). Just the question of the actual number of ethnic groups becomes increasingly difficult to answer. In fact, in most African countries there is no universally accepted number of the ethnic groups they contain. In Kenya, the argument is whether there are 40 or 42 or perhaps more, and in recent historical times there has been the documented creation of new major groups and of 'super ethnicities' aligning previously separate groups to gain greater political clout. (Berman, 1998; Lynch, 2006; Takahashi, 2010) The ethnic federalism of Ethiopia, meanwhile, recognizes forty ethnic groups, although analysts estimate there are as many as 80. (Turton, 2006) The fact that the number of groups is widely contested in so many countries attests to the ongoing politics of social construction. ELF, however, comprehends none of this. In addition, there is no real evidence that the number of ethnic groups in itself is positively related to conflict and economic instability; fewer and larger groups may create more unstable and conflict-ridden distributional inequalities and struggles for control of the state, as in Kenya, where the five largest groups comprise more than 60% of the population, with the largest alone being more than 20% of the total.

Then there are the problems of the concept of development limited solely to the rate of economic growth in each country. This data is largely derived from World Bank sources compiled for all countries in Africa. Such data is highly suspect not only due to the serious technical and political problems of their collection that

renders their accuracy suspect to begin with, but also from the equation of 'development' with the growth of GDP to the exclusion of any other measures. Within the UN agencies, Amartya Sen and Mabub al Haq developed the Human Development Index for the UNDP to counter the limits of the growth fixation of the IFI's with a broader concern with indices of literacy, life expectancy and infant mortality. (Cleveland, 2007) The methodology of World Bank data has been repeatedly challenged, especially those relating to growth and global poverty. Georges Monbiot notes that "the World Bank's methodology is so flawed that its calculations cannot possibly be correct. Not only does it appear to wildly underestimate the level of global poverty, but the downward trend it purports to show appears to be an artefact of the way in which it has been compiled. The World Bank's figures, against which the success or failure of the entire global economy is measured, are useless." (2003)

So, if such questionable data is correlated with ELF or other indices of ethnic diversity in Africa, what do the resulting correlations mean? Not much, I believe. Moreover, what if, as Easterly and Levine do, we use a continent-wide aggregated measure of ELF that lumps all countries together, correlate it with dubious growth figures for Africa as a whole and compare it with similar measures of ethnic fragmentation and growth for other continents (although, significantly, not including North or South America)? We move further away from any direct link with African reality and with results that are the product of the statistical methodology employed not of the empirical content of the 'data'. Even worse, the construction of indices of governance or 'democracy' through the arbitrary assignment of numbers

of no recognized unit of measurement for such things as “political openness” produces quite phony ‘scientific’ precision in the analysis and the intellectual authority it claims.

Finally, there is the periodicity of the data employed and the attempt to explain change over time. The data for ELF is, as noted earlier, at least 50 years old and provides a snapshot of ethnic fragmentation in Africa circa 1960 that is supposed to explain change from 1960 up to the 1990s. There are serious problems here. First, taking conditions at one moment in time and drawing a direct causal arrow to conditions at another moment in time, is a crude imitation of historical analysis based on a simplistic deterministic model and, in the case of ELF, the erroneous assumption that ethnic diversity in Africa does not change over time. History, unfortunately, is all the messier and more confused events and circumstances that fill the time between the two moments and are rarely amenable to neat quantitative reduction. (Leys, 1995) Second, the period chosen combines two quite distinct periods in African development and manages to conceal a major change in the global and local circumstances of the relationship between ethnic diversity and economic growth. Thus, as Cinyabuguma and Putterman note, “Data from the World Bank and other sources indicate that most sub-Saharan African economies attained positive growth in the 1960s and 1970s and reached their peak per capital GDP in the latter decade. Forty-one percent of the countries in our sample had per capita income in 1995 that was less than its 1960s level, 35% a 1995 income below their 1970 level, 56% a 1995 income below their 1980 level and 62% an income below their 1990 level. Only 6% of sub-Saharan Africa’s population live

in nations with higher per capita income in 1995 than they had ever achieved.” (2010, pp. 223, n6) Apparently, ELF was positively correlated with growth in the 1960s and 70s, but negatively correlated with it since the 1980s. What was the major difference between the two eras?: the forced abandonment of the broadly Keynesian state-managed programs of development that focused on economic diversification and investment in public services to overcome ‘poverty, ignorance and disease’ in favor of structural adjustment programs of neo-liberal ‘free market’ reforms. Could this suggest that neo-liberal reforms were the most important independent variable in Africa’s economic and social deterioration since 1980?

Research by economists on ethnicity in Africa is strikingly empty of real empirical content. Given their propensity to only cite each other from the ‘literature’ of their invisible college, it is hard not to conclude that they actually know little about ethnicity in Africa and the conclusions they draw from their very questionable ‘data’ are, as will be discussed below, potentially both misleading and destructive. What is clearly missing is any real knowledge of context – African history, culture and politics, primarily – and its relationship to the complex causality of ethnicity as a socio-political phenomenon in Africa. And there are numbers that are of acute importance here, but that can only be effectively critically analysed in the broader context of African history that economists’ models have no room for. Of particular importance for the social construction of African ethnicity are the censuses begun in the colonial period.

Modern European states developed on the basis of cadastral surveys and population censuses that provided a knowledge base facilitating bureaucratic control of the population and national territory. Transported to the colonies, censuses categorized and counted the population and located them territorially and culturally. (Kertzer and Arel, 2002; Berman, forthcoming) While modern scientific censuses were not conducted in Africa until after 1945, colonial states all emphasized a focus on clarity and eliminating ambiguity in naming and locating the 'ancient tribes' they believed they had found. Such knowledge was understood as the essential basis of administrative control and provided local communities, previously more mobile and open, both a name and fixed territory. The celebrated chapter "Census, Map and Museum" by Ben Anderson in the second edition of *Imagined Communities* (1991) outlined the role of the colonial state in knowledge creation and the development of ethnic identities. Census numbers and categories were and are highly politicized, however, and were contested and changed from census to census (Uvin, 2002). Takahashi notes, for example, that in Kenya post-independence censuses were marked by changes in ethnic classification and enumerations that indicated both shifting ethnic identities and the emergence of 'super ethnicities' with multi-layered identities. (Takahashi, 2010, pp. 25-29)

In addition to colonial states, missionaries compiled grammars and dictionaries to preach the gospel in indigenous languages, thereby turning them into literate cultures, and by a growing number of anthropologists who conducted ethnographic research in many communities and provided rich resources for the imagining of ethnicity. The actual cultural and political work of constructing

modern ethnic communities was, however, carried out by Africans themselves, particularly growing literate elites who benefitted from privileged access to the resources of modernity available through the colonial state and market. The diverse forms of European knowledge were appropriated, incorporated and adapted -- maps and censuses, dictionaries and grammars, official inquiries and ethnographies, into active oral and written internal discourses about the cultural character of the community, its social boundaries and relations with other communities and the colonial state. (Lynch, 2011) Knowledge was deployed as an instrument of political mobilization and representation.

The second set of quantitative evidence that is critically important for understanding the construction and internal and external politics of African ethnic communities are those that measure the growing inequality of the distribution of values within and between ethnic groups from the colonial period. Such evidence is rarely referred to or understood within the efforts to construct indices of ethnic fragmentation, which treat ethnic groups as undifferentiated wholes fighting for control of public goods. In reality, increasing vertical social differentiation and inequality within ethnic communities opened growing conflicts over reciprocal obligations and responsibilities between wealthy elites and their poor kin and dependents. These conflicts of hegemony and legitimacy framed in ethnic terms were termed by John Lonsdale and me “moral ethnicity” and dealt in particular with questions of ‘authenticity’, the real or true expressions of group culture and, closely related, who was or was not a real member of the community. (Lonsdale, 1993; Berman 1998) Given the historical reality of cultural hybridity and variation and the

movement of people between communities all over Africa, there has always been a lot to argue about.

Externally, conflicts of authenticity focused on the claims of elites to represent and speak for a community in relation to both the state and other ethnic groups that Lonsdale and I have called “political tribalism”. Here we find the second crucial set of quantitative evidence in the structural political economy of Frances Stewart and her colleagues (2008) that analyses the horizontal inequalities *between* ethnic groups based on differential access to the resources of the state and market competition for which have increased dramatically in Africa, especially during the past thirty years.

Four further characteristics of the highly politicized and elite driven process of ethnic construction should be noted. First, underlying the internal politics of moral ethnicity and external politics of political tribalism are strong material interests regarding access to the fundamental resources of livelihood and family, both the traditional ones of marriage, land, and livestock and, increasingly, the social and economic resources of modernity available through the state and market. Second, the focus of conflicts of moral ethnicity on the authority and responsibility of elites reinforces traditional forms of “Big Man-Small Boy” patron-client relations, especially with regard to access to the resources of the state. This, and the competition with other ethnic communities for those resources, is the actual source of the corruption and ‘bad policies’ that many economists blame for Africa’s economic failure. Third, the key subjective dimension of ethnicity is not a rigid

identity of primordial groups but a matter of recognized membership and belonging to a group that confers access to the key material resources of life. Since most contemporary African ethnic communities are far larger than any pre-colonial group, even if known by the same name, and embrace a variety of sub-groups of culturally and socially hybrid origin, contests of authenticity and belonging can take on a particularly sharp edge. Fourth, horizontal inequalities and control over state resources are the most important source of the conflicts of political tribalism rather than the 'ancient tribal hatreds' so glibly and inaccurately identified by colonial authorities in the past and assumed in the models of economists today.

From the pattern of citation and reference in their work, economists appear to be mostly unaware of the growing body of research on the historical and contemporary development of ethnicity in Africa within the context of local and global political and economic factors. It is ignored, I suspect, for two reasons. First, this work is largely (although not entirely, as I have noted above) based on qualitative evidence (rather than 'data') of human thought and action in different places and times that tends to be dismissed as 'unscientific'. Second, because it focuses on the negative impact of globalization and structural adjustment programs on African societies and ethnic politics, it is seen as critical of neo-liberal and policies and dismissed, as noted earlier, as 'ideologically motivated'. Because of the dominant position of economics in the global politics of knowledge, this is a source of serious problems for Africa as well as Africanists.

IV. The Politics of Knowledge and the Isolation of Africa

During the decades from 1920 to 1950, generally noted as the era of 'high colonialism', several young members of the developing African intelligentsia studied anthropology in Western universities. A number of them – Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kofi Busia – would go on to become major political figures of the independence generation of African leaders. They did so not only because it was the only subject at Western universities at the time in which they could study their own societies, but also because it appeared to offer an instrument for pursuing their political goals. They sought, in particular, to find a mode of discourse about their societies that carried intellectual authority with Europeans and could counter the shared racist stereotypes of African primitiveness and savagery that dominated the epistemic community of metropolitan officials, academics, missionaries, businessmen and journalists and defined the intellectual context of colonial policy. Jomo Kenyatta, for example, studied anthropology and wrote the classic ethnography of the Kikuyu, *Facing Mount Kenya*, in order to find a way to establish his intellectual authority and win British acceptance of his representation of Kikuyu interests and grievances. (Berman and Lonsdale, 1998, 2007) While skeptical white imperialists were rarely persuaded, the anthropology of the African intelligentsia historically links two dimensions of social constructivism: the writings they produced often became key texts in the construction of their own ethnic communities even if they failed to influence the epistemic community of national and international policy-makers.

Epistemic communities, as Adler and Haas analyse them, are groups of 'experts', sometimes 35 or less in number, who influence the creation of meaning and choice in national and international institutions. They do so through the innovation and diffusion of ideas and authoritative 'knowledge' that shapes the understanding of reality and of policy issues for policy makers and defines what becomes the orthodoxies and accepted common sense of institutions. They note that "Consensus over these theories is also necessary in any social context because all knowledge is subject to bias and regardless of its content, the difference between theories and facts is one of intersubjective confidence rather than of objective veridicality." (1992, p. 386) This is a good description of the "Washington Consensus" and the neo-liberal theories on which it is based that have over the past thirty years achieved an effective hegemony over the understanding of globalization and development in policy making institutions at the national and international levels. And economists can be readily identified in Gramscian terms as the organic intellectuals of global ruling elites. Indeed, they often cross over from the academic community to direct policy-making roles. At the time of the publication of his article with Levine, Easterly was a senior economist at the World Bank.

The reality defined by neo-liberalism is defined by the scientific correctness of the economic theories on which it is based, as strong a claim to intellectual authority as one can make in the modern world, and forms the basis for economists' understanding of ethnicity in Africa. As was noted earlier, where reality fails to meet the confident predictions of economic models, then it is the reality that is wrong. The typical mode of explaining the failure of neo-liberal reforms to

produce the predicted growth is that ‘they did it wrong’, ‘they’ always being governments charged with the proper implementation of reforms (responsibility is never linked to businesses since their behavior is assumed to be determined by the automatic workings of the market). If, however, any failure of predictions based on neo-liberal theory comes from improper implementation, then the theory is in itself untestable and fails to meet the Popperian criterion of falsifiability. What remains is “intersubjective confidence” or faith in its essential truth, more religion than science. Critics of neo-liberalism often refer to it as ‘market fundamentalism’ or ‘market fetishism’; the political philosopher John Gray goes further. Neo-liberalism is, he asserts, a secular cult steeped in the Christian millennial tradition and meets all of the criteria for such cults defined by the sociologist Norman Cohn, except belief in a deity, whose place is taken by the market. (Gray, 2008; Cohn, 1970)

How, then does this affect economists’ understanding of ethnicity in Africa and its policy consequences? Over the past thirty years the negative socio-impact on African societies of neo-liberal reforms and globalization has been widely and intimately documented, not only by social scientists whose work can be dismissed as ideologically motivated, but also from ‘disinterested’ sources like the UNDP and the UN Habitat Program on global urbanization. The UN Human Development Index (HDI) prepared for each country has documented the increases in infant mortality, decline in life expectancy and literacy rates attendant upon countries being structurally adjusted. The Habitat program has documented the patterns of rural decline and the metasticizing slums of run away urbanization and blamed the decline squarely on the decline of the state under the impact of structural

adjustment programs. (2003; Davis, 2006) While economic growth has sporadically emerged in adjusted African economies, distributional equalities, both vertical and horizontal have grown ever wider, producing what James Ferguson has described as the widest inequalities ever recorded in human societies (Ferguson, 2006, p.48) and widening the basis for social conflict, civil disorder and crime in most African countries. And these conditions, as well as the programs to foster 'democratization' in Africa that are supposed to produce legitimate regimes that can more effectively implement neo-liberal policies, have both been linked to increasing ethnic conflicts in countries like Kenya, the Ivory Coast and South Africa. (Berman, 2010)

Economists, as we have seen, reject any such negative impact of neo-liberal reforms on social conditions and ethnic politics; the arrow of causality flies only in one direction from Africa's unique ethnic fragmentation and 'bad' government policies to the failure of scientifically determined policies to produce growth. It is a rather obvious blame the victim explanation that protects the core theoretical paradigm from any possible failure. The failure is of African societies, that is the 'African tragedy' and so long as its ethnic fragmentation endures, there is no solution offered, it is Africa's fate. The pernicious consequence of such an explanation is that it constructs Africa as a continent apart from the rest of the world, the place where globalization fails. Africa is marginalized both intellectually and politically. The continent is left out of discussions of globalization and development and comparative analyses of other regions, not only in economics, but also in the other social sciences. In the more sophisticated language of modern

social science Africa, as James Ferguson notes, is rendered once again, as in the nineteenth century, a place of darkness and shadows. (2006, pp. 14-15)

The politics of knowledge and the construction of epistemic communities is, however, an ongoing historical process in which we all participate. In the continuing global economic crisis that has challenged, if not shattered, the most sacred of the theoretical assumptions of neo-liberalism, there are growing efforts to find a new paradigm for a more empirically grounded economics that can interact more effectively with other disciplines; one that comprehends the complex causality of the real world, the contingency of historical outcomes, and can understand the Africa's internal diversity from country to country, ethnic community to ethnic community. Such would involve abandoning the simplistic positivist methodology of deterministic causality and correlations of 'variables' isolated from reality, as well the spurious efforts to capture intricate socio-political processes and relationships in quantitative indices of quite meaningless numbers, and the use of bogus quantitative 'data' to 'prove' empty hypotheses; the numbers do lie. Scholars of Africa, both African and foreign have an obligation to contribute to the rebuilding of an epistemic community that constructs a reality in which Africa is no longer relegated to the dark underworld of global development.

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