

Comparative advantage is an economic term which is used to determine which commodity or commodities a country, region or individual farm should specialise in. The concept includes the impact of conditions which affect both supply and demand and is based on the premise that the efficient allocation of resources is determined where the prices are the same throughout the largest possible market area, the differences reflecting only transport costs. Thus the price to both the producers and consumers will be higher in deficit areas than the price for producers and consumers in surplus areas but the price ratios between commodities will be the same. According to the theory of comparative advantage it will pay to specialise in and exchange that commodity in which there is the least relative disadvantage up to the point where price differentials reflect only transport costs. The theory proves that it will pay both the well and poorly endowed area to specialise and exchange, even where the one has an absolute advantage in all commodities, provided that there is a difference in the relative prices.

Although it is not of major significance to this text, the omission is a serious one and the publishers should be requested to send out a correction to pages 36, 37 and 42. The book is nonetheless a very useful text and the author is to be congratulated for his original approach and simple explanations. I would still recommend it as a most useful text for agricultural economists, anthropologists, geographers, rural planners, crop and animal scientists working with small farmers, and all those associated with development generally, including environmentalists and extension agents.

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Review of the African Poor: a History, by John Illife, African Studies Series 58, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987 (387pp, price not stated).

This is a very sophisticated, and maybe even compelling, apologia for market forces (alias capitalism) applied to very inappropriate contexts, from Christian Ethiopia to 'the transformation of poverty in Southern Africa'. From the monasteries of Ethiopia in the thirteenth century to resettlement sites in colonial South Africa, the author has marshalled an impressive array of so-called empirical data from a diverse range of primary and secondary sources.

The methodological section, ie Chapter 1, which grapples with some of the nettles besetting 'comparative history', does not manage to convince the reader that social science categories that have been applied to the history of the poor in Europe in the middle ages can be mechanically transferred to the African continent in the 20th century. At another level the book is an attempt to offer a sentimental but historicised justification of 'aid' and other Band-Aid solutions to the pressing problems of poverty.

There is also a remarkable failure to blend social and economic historiography into the very graphic descriptions of poor Africans cited in the book — from "palsied, leprous and scrofulous" beggars in Ethiopia in 1520 to recollections by a widow in the Ciskei bantustan, that her husband had been "a good, brave man . . . he never gave in . . . (But) Here in Elukhanyweni he just gave in and stayed in bed the whole time and then he died. . . . I can understand why my husband died. He died of shame and sorrow".

A prominent thesis that runs throughout the book is that the growth of the 'town'

or city has somehow alleviated poverty. There is no attempt to examine the patterns of economic organisation introduced by European colonialism, and the levels of economic performance in the traditional societies of Africa, Christian or otherwise, before they were enmeshed in the international economy created by, first, merchant and later industrial capitalism, and now, the invisible hands of finance capital.

The strenuous efforts in this book to distinguish between 'structural' and 'conjunctural' poverty amount to empty scholastic phrasemongering. This is directed at mystifying the real, as opposed to the relative, basic causes for mass poverty in colonial and post-colonial Africa. 'Structural poverty' is supposed to be the long term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances, and conjunctural poverty is supposed to be temporary poverty which ordinarily self-sufficient people may be thrown into by crisis.

Though the author has no knowledge of Ethiopian languages, the chapter on Christian Ethiopia informs "the broad character of the poor and their means of survival over some 700 years as a basis for comparison and change in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole". That Ethiopia is unique in never having been colonised is conveniently brushed aside. The impact of market forces on family cohesion and segmentation is not considered. The following ethnic bound explanation for mass poverty and insecurity, which is supposed to apply *mutatis mutandis* for the 19th century and 20th century, is only one example of the faulty analytical reasoning in the book (p15):

"Insecurity helps to explain why the very poor were numerous in Ethiopia, but it does not explain why they were more visible than in other African societies which also suffered insecurity. For this there were perhaps two reasons. One lay in the family structure of the dominant Amhara people. They were a bilateral people who reckoned descent and inheritance from both father and mother. Instead of being bound into a corporate descent group, each individual therefore had a range of social identities and rights from which he could choose the most advantageous. Bilateral societies are characteristically individualistic and mobile, both socially and geographically."

We are at loss to see how the bilateral family could have led to insecurity.

The author could have done a better job had he not restricted himself to 'official documents' and secondary academic ephemera on poverty, and integrated some literary sources for the experience of poverty. As the book stands it lacks an overall synthesis of the problem. A good starting point might have been the consideration of the antonym of poverty — development. That would have provided a better basis for a comparative perspective between Europe and Africa. Raymond Williams (1975:340-341) has noted, concerning the entire concept of 'aid', which is supposed to lead to development that

"it is ideologically overlaid by the abstract idea of 'development': a poor country is 'on its way' to being a rich one, just as in industrial Britain, in the nineteenth century, a poor man could be seen as someone who given the right ideas and effort was 'on his way' to being a rich man, but was for the time being at a lower stage of this development".

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References

Williams R 1975 The Country and the City, Paladin, London.

National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa, John Markakis, African Studies Series 55, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987 (314pp, price not stated). This may become the standard work on the Horn of Africa. It demonstrates painstaking scholarship and mature thought. John Markakis surveys the nations and classes of Ethiopia, the Sudan, Somalia and surrounding areas. He shows how colonialism radically tipped the rural-urban balance in favour of the towns. Imperial rule gave way to nationalist control of the state; radical soldiers took over from the nationalists; the soldiers turned to socialism; rural and other dissident nationalists rebelled unsuccessfully. War and famine were the result of national and class struggle in unforgiving terrain.

Chapter one surveys the material base and the institutions humans built upon it. The natural endowment was parsimonious. "Conflict was the inevitable concomitant of scarcity and mobility, with land and water as its primary objects" (p24). Chapter two treats the brief but shattering colonial period. Agriculture was transformed, and the towns became supreme over the countryside. Pastoralism was economically, socially and politically marginalised. Subsistence cultivation was irreversibly debased. Nevertheless, there was some indigenous rural support for the resulting post-colonial state.

Chapter three argues that anticolonial nationalism was not a mass crusade. It mobilised the group's spawned by the new economy and state. Colonial denial of access to the state was the mainspring of nationalism. The victorious nationalists therefore preserved the colonial economic and state structures once they had achieved access. Chapter four treats in fine detail the attacks on the state in post-colonial times. Uneven development exacerbated material and social disparities. Disadvantaged groups fought for access; the nationalist rulers fell back on the armies; eventually the military took control.

The fifth chapter is the longest, and chronicles 'the Eritrean revolution'. Temporal considerations lay beneath religious mobilisation. Some muslims, lacking access under the *ancien regime*, opposed Ethiopian rule of Eritrea. Other Muslim notables hoped to regain lost fortunes, and supported Ethiopian rule. Initial Christian support in Eritrea for Ethiopian rule dwindled when federation gave way to a provincial system with control held in Addis Ababa. Christian support for Eritrean nationalism grew; but that nationalism was riven by fractional splits. Each fraction wanted preferential access to the nascent Eritrean state. Some fractions sought Arab support; others did not. Eritrean identity became primarily a site of struggle between fractions.

By contrast, as chapter six explains, dissidence in the southern Sudan seemed less nationalist. The goal seemed merely regional recognition. Nevertheless, Markakis argues, the dissidents wanted control of the state in the southern Sudan, and were thus the same as any other nationalist movement in the Horn. Again, the dissident movement was highly fractionalised.

Somalia at independence lacked three regions which it coveted: the Ogaden, the northern Kenyan frontier, and Djibouti. Uprisings in these regions sought Somali