

Does Economics Have an “Africa Problem”? Some Data and Preliminary Thoughts

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“The ideas of economists [...], both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from an academic scribbler of a few years back.”

John Maynard Keynes¹

“In this discourse of the blind, the side with the money usually won.”

Eboe Hutchful²

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Origins

This essay, which has aspects of the personal, is my attempt at grappling in a more structured way with my growing ambivalence towards economics, in particular the kind that has come to be described as “mainstream economics”.³ I became fully aware of this ambivalence during the northern hemispheric summer of 2014 while reading and following the debates around Thomas

¹ Keynes, J.M., 1936. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. Palgrave Macmillan.

² Hutchful, E., 1995. “Adjustment in Africa and Fifty Years of the Bretton Woods Institutions: Change or Consolidation?”, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 16(3).

³ “Mainstream economics” refers to the dominant type of economics, sometimes referred to as “neoclassical economics”, that is taught in “leading” universities, especially in the United States, and whose research output dominates “leading” scholarly outlets in the discipline. When most people criticize economics and economists, they are likely criticizing mainstream economics.

Piketty's much acclaimed book on inequality, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.⁴ In South Africa, where I was doing my graduate studies at the time, physical copies of books released in North America or Western Europe tended to arrive with a delay. But through the miracle of the internet, which in turn spawned the e-book, I was able to read *Capital* and follow debates around it in "real time". At the time, most of my intellectual heroes were based at universities in the United States owing to a steady staple of the type of literature I was made to consume at the University of Cape Town.

Disagreement and debate are the mainstay of academia. But what struck me most about the online debates and disagreements around *Capital* were the extents to which my intellectual heroes were willing to go to discredit Piketty. I saw leading economists write in prominent periodicals that Professor Piketty had neglected to deal with issue X and yet X had an entire chapter dedicated to it in the book. Then came the scandal with the *Financial Times (FT)*, a leading newspaper based in the United Kingdom, where Piketty was accused of fabricating historical data⁵ in spite of the fact that his book came with 200pages worth of notes and a 100page online data appendix anticipating the accusations levelled by the *FT*. Some of the commentary even took on aspects of being personal.⁶ All this, at least to me, was unprecedented.

⁴ Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁵ "Piketty findings undercut by errors", *Financial Times*, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e1f343ca-e281-11e3-89fd-00144feabdc0>

⁶ "France's 'rock star' economist Thomas Piketty 'beat former lover'", *Daily Telegraph*, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/10807714/Frances-rock-star-economist-Thomas-Piketty-beat-former-lover.html>

In the wake of the global financial crisis and the recession that ensued, inequality re-emerged as an important topic of debate within economics inspiring several books, even within the mainstream vintage where inequality had traditionally been viewed as the inevitable outcome of a “meritocratic” process.⁷ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz published *The Race Between Education and Technology*⁸ in 2010 while Joseph Stiglitz published *The Price of Inequality*⁹ in 2013. So why was Piketty and his *Capital* singled for what was patently unfair criticism?

Was it because Piketty had challenged the adequacy of one of the linchpins of mainstream economics, namely that one’s income was determined by their incremental contribution to production?

He was by no means the first economist working within the mainstream neoclassical paradigm to challenge the “marginal theory of distribution”. Joseph Stiglitz, in the *Price of Inequality* and indeed in his academic career had pointed out, without relent, the pervasiveness of so-called “market failures” – that is, instances where the workings of perfectly competitive textbook

⁷ See Mankiw, N.G., 2013. “Defending the One Percent”. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(3): 21 - 34

⁸ Goldin, C. and Katz, L.F., 2010. *The Race between Education and Technology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁹ Stiglitz, J.E., 2013. *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. New York: WW Norton and Company

economics broke down.¹⁰ As far as I could tell, Stiglitz had not received the kind of criticism reserved for Piketty.

The only plausible explanation to my mind was that Piketty had challenged the hegemonic reign of American and, to a lesser extent, British economists on owning the conversation in economics. Piketty was, by many counts, an outsider. Except for a very brief period in the early 1990s, he had spent his entire academic career in France.¹¹ He of course published his work in leading scholarly journals in the discipline, which is to say in US-based outlets. But this work hardly had any impact beyond the narrow group of scholars who were working on inequality. To my mind, what was different about *Capital* was not so much that an economist was mounting a challenge on the hallowed tenets of neoclassical economics but that such a widely publicized challenge was coming from an “outsider”.¹²

L’affaire Piketty of the summer of 2014 led me towards my own Damascene Conversion. Prior to this, I uncritically read the economics literature paying no attention to such matters as the

¹⁰ Joseph Stiglitz was, as a matter of fact, awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in economics for his work on market failures in 2001.

¹¹ After completing his doctorate in France, he served as an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for three years. He writes in *Capital* that his reason for hurrying back to France was that he found the work of U.S. economists highly abstract with little attempt given to testing theory with data.

¹² Of course the whole “insider” “outsider” perspective is relative. To economists in Africa, Piketty is an insider, after all many of his publications have appeared in such mainstream journals as the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and *Econometrica*, among others. What is important, however, is that from the perspective of U.S. economists, Piketty was an outsider, even if slightly less so than the typical economist in Africa.

“politics of knowledge production”. I had been sold on the idea that economics was a science, perhaps on par with physics. Therefore, it did not matter that economics, particularly the kind that mattered for my part of the world, was dominated by voices at U.S. universities. Poverty and underdevelopment were poverty and underdevelopment regardless of who studied them. To my mind, the dominance by the U.S. merely reflected the fact that economists based there had better diagnoses of the ailments that afflicted us. In other words, the “market for ideas” in economics was perfectly and fairly competitive.

After the events of 2014, I began to wonder if this market was in actual fact a monopoly with significant barriers to entry erected against “outsiders”. And just as the theory of monopoly predicted “inefficiencies”, did this state of affairs, at least in part, explain the dismal nature of our knowledge on development and particularly on the failure to properly diagnose the African malaise?^{13, 14}

My thoughts on this were initially laid down in an 800word piece on the online blog *Africa Is A Country* in February of 2015.¹⁵ I showed in that piece that there was an underrepresentation of African-based scholars on the editorial boards of at least three leading scholarly outlets in

¹³ A 2005 review of the economics literature on growth and/or development found that there were at least 145 different explanatory variables of growth and/or development with 43 conceptually different theories in the literature! See Durlauf *et al.*, 2005. “Growth Econometrics” in *Handbook of Economic Growth*.

¹⁴ On the less than satisfactory state of the economics literature on Africa, see Jerven, M., 2014. *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*. London: Zed Books.

¹⁵ “Economics has an Africa problem”, *Africa Is A Country*, available at: <http://africasacountry.com/2015/02/economics-has-an-africa-problem/>

economics that had a focus on Africa or had the continent as subject matter.¹⁶ I referred to this underrepresentation as economics' "Africa problem". To my surprise, the piece received a lot of attention particularly from U.S.-based economists. Some economists expressed shock at the extent of the underrepresentation while others, especially the more prominent voices in the discipline who also had a large African research portfolio, suggested that Africans were themselves to blame for this state of affairs.¹⁷

This essay continues the conversation started by that blogpost and extends it in new directions. First, I perform a deeper audit of not only the editorial boards of leading journals that have Africa as a focus (extended to 10) but also audit patterns of authorship in these journals to figure out "who is writing about Africa?". Second, I draw some implications for economics scholarship of the results of this audit.

¹⁶ The *Journal of African Economies*, *Journal of Development Economics* and *Journal of Economic Growth*.

¹⁷ This is a brief collection some of the commentary that followed: "Africa problem in economics", by David McKenzie for the *World Bank Impact Evaluation Blog*, available at: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluations/blog-links-february-20-understandability-replication-debate-continues-thoughts-africa-problem>; "Does economics have an 'Africa problem?'", Morten Jerven for *African Arguments*, available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2015/02/13/does-economics-have-an-africa-problem-by-morten-jerven/>; "Economics has an Africa problem?", Chris Blattman, available at: <https://chrisblattman.com/2015/03/24/economics-has-an-africa-problem/>; "Economics has an Africa problem: take 3", Markus Goldstein for the *World Bank Impact Evaluation Blog*, available at: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluations/economics-has-africa-problem-take-3>.

1.2. Contribution to contemporary debates

Given economists' inability to predict the 2007/2008 global financial crisis and the ensuing, at times acrimonious, debates on the appropriate policy response which exposed how little the profession knew¹⁸, there is now a discussion on the need to reform the way the discipline is taught, especially to undergraduates, and the way research is conducted. The debate to "rethink economics" which initially started out as a fringe issue now seems to have taken center stage receiving coverage in such mainstream outlets as the *Financial Times*.¹⁹ Even the eminent mainstream growth theorist Paul Romer, who incidentally is the new chief economist of the World Bank, has recently rebuked economists for their extreme "mathiness" by which he means their all-to-often practice of letting "academic politics [or ideology] masquerade as science".²⁰ Angus Deaton, the eminent development economist and Nobel laureate, has recently written two essays essentially making the point that the "new development economics", with its reliance on "randomized controlled trials" and sophisticated statistical methods, is not delivering "deep knowledge" beyond telling us, for example, that "villagers" in northern Zambia tend to substitute mosquito nets for fishing nets if the former are handed out free-of-charge.²¹ The call is to now

¹⁸ The acrimony with which these debates were conducted is typified by the exchanges between economists Paul Krugman then at Princeton University, writing in the *New York Times*, and John Cochrane of the University of Chicago writing on his personal blog *The Grumpy Economist*.

¹⁹ "Crash and learn: should we change the way we teach economics?", *Financial Times*, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0dc9b416-8573-11e6-8897-2359a58ac7a5>

²⁰ Romer, P.M., 2015. "Mathiness in the Theory of Economic Growth", *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, 105(5): 89 – 93

²¹ Deaton, A., 2010. "Instruments, Randomization, and Learning about Development". *Journal of Economic Literature*, 48: 424 – 455 and Deaton, A. and Cartwright, N., 2016. "Understanding and Misunderstanding Randomized Controlled Trials". National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 22595

make economics more pluralistic²², that is open it to other methods of knowing beyond mathematics and statistics, and to make it more interdisciplinary.²³

Second, there is now an acknowledgement that economics has a gender problem particularly in the U.S. where recent work has shown that relative to other disciplines, female academic economists are underrepresented at the highest levels and fair worse than their male counterparts on many other outcomes.²⁴ Then there is the discussion around economics' "race problem" – a recognition that the discipline's current set of methodological tools, at least those of its mainstream vintage, are not appropriate for distilling America's structural racial iniquities.²⁵ The inappropriateness of the tools has been argued to partly stem from the underrepresentation of minorities at the highest levels of the discipline.²⁶ It comes as no surprise, some might say, that the initiative confronting economics' "race problem" is being spearheaded by African American economists.²⁷

²² For example, the Cambridge economist Ha-Joon Chang wants more aspects of "heterodox" economics to feature in undergraduate training while economic historian Morten Jerven wants more of history proper to guide development economics research on Africa.

²³ This point is made quite strongly and eloquently by Piketty in *Capital*.

²⁴ Ceci et al., 2014. "Women in Academic Science: A Changing Landscape". *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 15(3): 75 – 141

²⁵ See Parramore, L., 2016. "Here's What Economists Don't Understand About Race". *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, available at: <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/heres-what-economists-dont-understand-about-race>

²⁶ Bayer, A. and Rouse, C.E., 2016. "Diversity in the Economics Profession: A New Attack on an Old Problem". *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30(4): 221 – 242

²⁷ Some of the prominent African-American economists spearheading this are Duke University's William Darity and Darrick Hamilton of the New School for Social Research.

The last set of conversations that my essay speaks to is the movement regaining traction across much of the Global South on the need to “decolonize” university curricula and research. For example, students engaged in the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa have made “decolonization” an inseparable part of their call for free higher education in that country. Whereas most of the action and debate is taking place within the humanities and some social sciences, economics and the physical sciences have not been spared from scrutiny.²⁸

My overriding objective with this essay is to hopefully start a conversation within economics similar to the one that has been taking place in “African Studies” following the events of the 1969 African Studies Association meetings in Montreal, Canada. At that meeting, the black attendees boycotted the proceedings in protest over the underrepresentation of black academics in the highest echelons of the discipline as well as protesting the Eurocentric outlook of much of the scholarship. Following on from that meeting, there have been active attempts to redress the deficits identified by the black academic caucus even though the pace appears glacial to some observers, particularly in the black/African academic community.²⁹ Curiously, this conversation

²⁸ See Bassier, I., 2016. “UCT’s economics curriculum is in crisis”. *GroundUp*, available at: <http://www.groundup.org.za/article/ucts-economics-curriculum-crisis/>; Chelwa, G., 2016. “Decolonizing the teaching of economics”. *Africa Is A Country*, available at: <http://africasacountry.com/2016/04/decolonizing-the-teaching-of-economics/>; Prescod-Weinstein, C., 2015. “Decolonising Science reading List”. *Medium*, available at: <https://medium.com/@chanda/decolonising-science-reading-list-339fb773d51f#.xwu5x5kpz>

²⁹ See Owomoyela, O., 1994. “With Friends Like These...A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodology”. *African Studies Review*, 37(3): 77 – 101; Mkandawire, T., 1997. “The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence”. *African Studies Review*, 40(2): 15

has never taken place in economics especially given the disproportionate impact of Northern economics research on policymaking in Africa.³⁰

2. DATA AND METHOD

In this section of the essay, I discuss in some detail the method used to collect the data on which the audit is performed.

2.1. The Journals

As discussed in the introduction, the audit is performed on 10 “leading” scholarly journals in economics that either explicitly focus on Africa and/or whose subject matter is of relevance to the continent. “Relevance” is determined by whether the journal has a focus on development-related topics including a focus on poverty, land, agriculture, economic history and general economic policy, among others. The determination of whether a journal is a “leading” journal depends on its ranking according to a simple impact factor calculation for all the years that the journal has been in existence. These are compiled and calculated by the IDEAS/RePEc bibliographic database which, as of October 2016, ranked a total of 1,691 journals in economics. The simple impact factor is calculated as the “ratio of the number of citations by the number of

– 36; Mama, A., 2007. “Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom”. *African Studies Review*, 50(1): 1 – 26; Pailey, R.N., 2016. “Where is the ‘African’ in African Studies”. *African Arguments*, available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2016/06/07/where-is-the-african-in-african-studies/>

³⁰ Mkandawire, T., 2014. “The spread of economic doctrines and policymaking in postcolonial Africa”. *African Studies Review*, 57(1): 171 – 198

items in the series³¹ with a higher impact factor signaling influence among academics and possibly on the formulation of economic policy.³²

This criterion results in the 10 journals listed in Table 1 below ranked according to their simple impact factors as per the IDEAS/RePEc database.

Table 1: The 10 Journals To be Audited

Rank on IDEAS/RePEc out of 1,691 Journals	Name of Journal	Simple Impact Factor
22	World Bank Economic Review	25
27	American Economic Journal: Applied Economics	22
36	Journal of Development Economics	19
44	World Bank Research Observer	17
106	Land Economics	8
133	Agriculture Economics	7
135	World Development	7
138	Economic Development and Cultural Change	7
145	Journal of African Economies	6
Unranked	African Economic History	N/A

Source: IDEAS/RePEc Database

Admittedly, the journals in Table 1 are arrived at in a rough-and-ready fashion. Ideally, one would want to compile this list in a more systematic manner by, for example, only considering the top 10 economics journals on the IDEAS/RePEc database. Such a procedure would not, however,

³¹ See more here: <https://ideas.repec.org/top/top.journals.simple.html>

³² Notwithstanding the standard criticisms levelled at impact factors as a measure of influence. See “Hate journal impact factors? New study gives you one more reason”. *Science Magazine*, available at:

<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/07/hate-journal-impact-factors-new-study-gives-you-one-more-reason>

guarantee that the journals so compiled would have sufficient Africa coverage or would contain topics of relevance to the continent. Therefore, the list in Table 1 is compiled in an eclectic manner at times going for “big name” journals like the *Journal of Development Economics* or going for a leading journal in a particular subfield like *Agriculture Economics*³³ or going for a journal with an explicit focus on Africa like the *Journal of African Economies*. In any case, all the journals in Table 1 with the exception of *African Economic History* are ranked in the top 10 percentile of all economics journals on the IDEAS/RePEc database. These journals, therefore, are part of the elite set in the discipline whose content not only influences future research but also influences economic policy. Any student of economics, particularly the student of development economics, with an interest in understanding the challenges of Africa will at the very least consult most of the titles in Table 1.

African Economic History (AEH) is not ranked because IDEAS/RePEc requires that a journal have a sizable number of articles for an impact factor to be computed. Since its inception in 2004, the journal had only published 76 articles by 2015. I nonetheless opt to audit it as opposed to, for example, the *Journal of Economic History* which is ranked on IDEAS/RePEc because of *AEH*'s explicit focus on the continent.

A question that might arise is why focus on only 10 journals? The answer is simply one of convenience given the tedious and manual nature through which the audit is performed (see 2.2.

³³ Here *Agriculture Economics* is the leading journal in the field of agriculture economics because it has the highest rank of any journal in this subfield on the IDEAS/RePEc database.

below). In any case, the number of individual journal articles that eventually get audited, at 5,356 articles, is large enough to almost guarantee the reproducibility of the results obtained where the number of titles to be extended beyond the 10 considered here.³⁴

2.2. The audit

The main focus of this essay is to conduct an audit of patterns of authorship of the titles in Table 1 to figure out “who is writing about Africa in economics”. The audit proceeds as follows. First, I need to determine whether an individual journal article or paper is written on Africa, where Africa refers to the 54 countries that make-up the entire continent.³⁵ In order to do this, I follow the rule that an article is classified as written on Africa if:

(1) It has the word “Africa” in its title and/or at least one African country is mentioned in its title; and/or

(2) The word “Africa” appears in the journal article’s abstract and/or at least one African country is mentioned in the abstract; and/or

(3) The word “Africa” and/or at least one African country is listed in the journal’s “keywords” section.³⁶

³⁴ In “econospeak”, the audit is a “large n” study.

³⁵ I abstract from the common practice of splitting up the continent into North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

³⁶ Not all journals have a “keywords” section. But when they do, it tends to appear right below the abstract.

Once an article is classified as written on Africa, the next step is to assign a geographical location for the author(s) based on their self-declared institutional affiliation at the time of the article's publication. Authors are classified as "African-based" if their institution is in Africa. Those whose institution is not on the continent are classified as "Not African-based" with further classifications for "North American-based", "European-based" or "other".³⁷ In the event that an author has more than one affiliation including one in Africa and another one in, for example, Europe, then the author is classified as "African-based" irrespective of whether the African institution is listed first or last by the author. By this standard, a visiting professor from the U.S on sabbatical at the University of Zambia (UNZA) would be counted as "African-based" for as long as UNZA was listed as one of the author's institutions of affiliation. If an author has more than one affiliation in, for example, North America and Europe, then the first listed affiliation is taken as the author's home affiliation.

One question that might arise is why is the classification based on geographical location and not descent if the object of the audit is to get at the heart of the "African voices" debate? In other words, why not focus on whether an author is an "African" scholar (i.e. currently lives on the continent or is from the continent) as opposed to using geography? The latter case might lead to the wrongful attribution of an "African voice" to the visiting American professor at UNZA. Or perhaps discounting the "voice" of an African presently employed at an American or European university. Whereas the concern is valid, resolving it would require much more detailed

³⁷ The North America classification covers both the United States of America and Canada. The classification "other" refers to all institutions not based in either Africa, North America or Europe.

information than is readily available. For example, downloading and sifting through individual authors' curriculum vitae (CVs). CVs are often not available online for many authors and even when they are, some authors opt to not indicate their nationalities. In any case, the "large" number of individual journal articles considered here and discussed in Section 3 below imply that these cases of what econometricians call "measurement error" are likely to be small and hopefully even out in the aggregate.³⁸

The counting is done as follows: All journal articles that have at least one African-based scholar are given equal weights of 1 regardless of whether the article is single authored, lead-authored or merely co-authored by the African-based scholar. This is different from the approach used recently by Briggs and Weathers who, in their paper auditing the politics scholarship on Africa, give greater weight to sole-authored articles by African-based scholars.³⁹ Lastly, if the authors of an article are all based in Africa, then that article is treated as if it were sole authored by an African-based author.

The audit is also extended to the editorial boards of the journals in Table 1 using the geographical location criterion detailed above.

³⁸ In a recent exercise but looking at politics scholarship on Africa, Briggs and Weathers use a similar method to classify authorship based on similar practicalities. See Briggs, R.C. and Weathers, S., 2016. "Gender and Location in African Politics Scholarship: The Other White Man's Burden". *African Affairs*.

³⁹ For example, if a journal article has 3 authors and only one of them is African-based, then the article gets a weighting of 1/3. See *ibid*.

3. RESULTS

This section of the essay presents the results of the audit. In 3.1. I report the results on patterns of authorship and in 3.2 I report the results of the audit of editorial boards.

3.1. Patterns of authorship

In Table 2, I list the total number of journal articles published from 2005 to 2015 and report these by journal.⁴⁰ I also report the number of journal articles on Africa and the “Africa share”, that is the percentage of the total written on Africa.

Table 2: Number of journals, number of journals on Africa and Africa Shares, 2005 to 2015

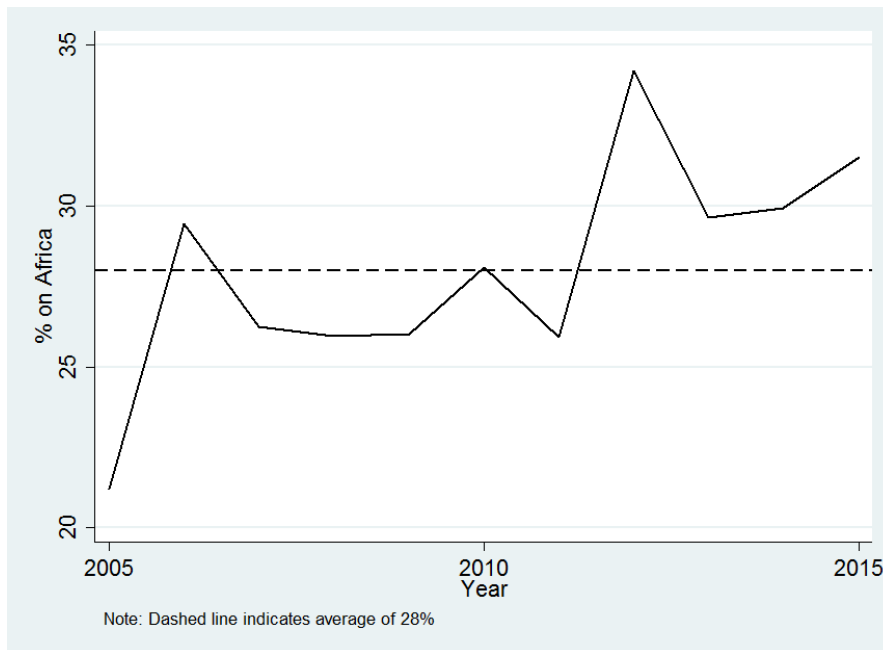
Name of Journal	Articles from 2005 to 2015	Articles on Africa	% of total on Africa
Journal of African Economies	364	364	100%
African Economic History	66	66	100%
Economic Development and Cultural Change	291	92	32%
World Development	1794	539	30%
Agriculture Economics	784	205	26%
World Bank Economic Review	247	41	17%
Journal of Development Economics	995	144	14%
World Bank Research Observer	116	13	11%
American Economic Journal: Applied Econ.	263	28	11%
Land Economics	436	26	6%
TOTAL/AVERAGE	5356	1518	28%

⁴⁰ I exclude errata given the likelihood of double-counting. Book reviews are also excluded.

The total number of journal articles published from 2005 to 2015 in the 10 journals in Table 2 was 5,356 and the total number on Africa was 1,518 accounting for 28% of the total. The two Africa-specific journals, *Journal of African Economies (JAE)* and *African Economic History (AEH)*, naturally had the biggest Africa share over this period. Outside of these two, the biggest Africa share at 32% was from *Economic Development and Cultural Change* with the lowest share due to *Land Economics* at 6%. *World Development* had the highest absolute number of articles on Africa at 539 followed by *JAE* with 364. All in all, the information in Table 2 shows that Africa, at one-third of the coverage, is an important topic of inquiry for these journals.

To get a sense of the dynamics behind the information in Table 2, I present Figure 1 that shows the evolution in the Africa share over the period 2005 to 2015.

Figure 1: Evolution of Africa Share, 2005 to 2015



From Figure 1 we see that the Africa share started off in 2005 at 21% and then stayed around the average of 28% from 2006 to 2010. Thereafter, it has been increasing hovering above the average for most of the 2010 to 2015 period.

Figure 2 presents what can be thought of as the main result of this essay. The figure shows that, on average, only 25% of journal articles on Africa had at-least one African-based scholar over the period 2005 to 2015. Conversely, on average, 75% of journal articles on Africa did not have a single scholar based on the continent over the period 2005 to 2015.

Figure 2: Representation of African-based scholars, 2005 to 2015

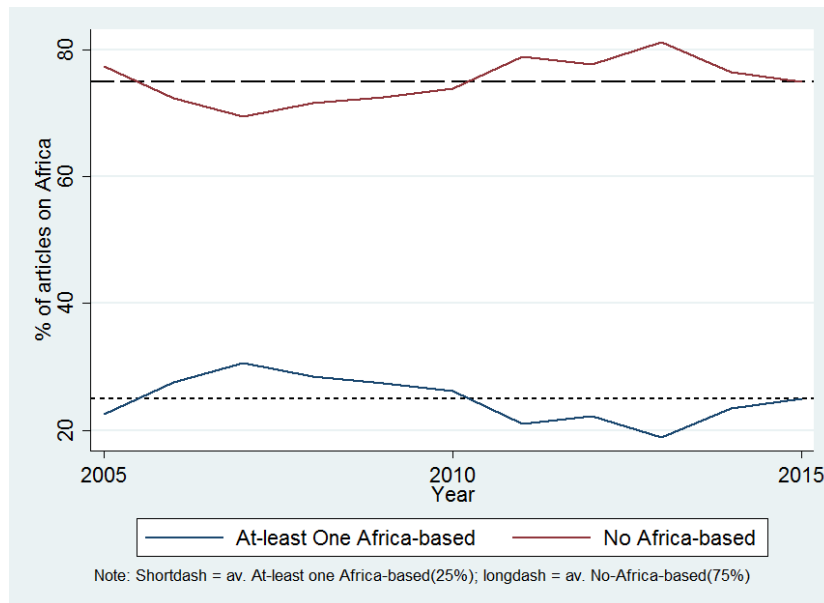


Table 3 presents the same information as in Figure 2 but by journal and averaged over the period 2005 to 2015. The table also presents information on the Africa share taken from Table 2. *Agriculture Economics* at 41% had the highest percentage of papers on Africa having at least one African-based author. The *World Bank Research Observer (WBRO)* had the lowest percentage of representation at 0%. In other words, none of the journal articles that appeared on Africa in *WBRO* from 2005 to 2015 had an African-based author. Later in the essay, I discuss in some detail the implications of this finding especially given *WBRO*'s crucial role of providing non-technical summaries of "research being undertaken within the [World] Bank and outside the Bank in the areas of economics relevant for development policy".⁴¹ Given its relatively high impact factor

⁴¹ See: <http://wbro.oxfordjournals.org/>

(see Table 1), *WBRO* sets the terms about what “we” know or do not know about a particular problem in economic development.

Table 3: Africa shares and representation shares, 2005 to 2015

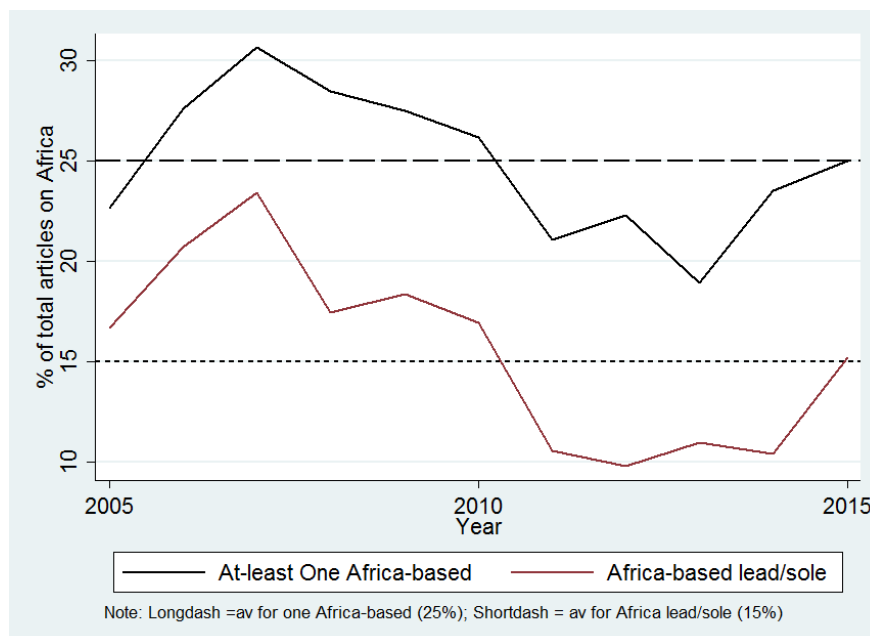
Name of Journal	% of total articles on Africa	% with At least One African-based Author
Agriculture Economics	26%	41%
Journal of African Economies	100%	28%
Land Economics	6%	28%
World Development	30%	24%
African Economic History	100%	19%
Economic Development & Cultural Change	32%	16%
Journal of Development Economics	14%	14%
World Bank Economic Review	17%	11%
American Economic Journal: Applied Econ.	11%	10%
World Bank Research Observer	11%	0%

The shares of African-based scholars in the Africa-specific journals *AEH* and *JAE* were respectively 19% and 28%. These shares are worth keeping in mind when thinking about whether Africa-focused journals are the best ways of tackling the problem of underrepresentation.

Recall that Figure 2 reports the percentage of articles on Africa that have at-least one African-based author irrespective of whether they are a sole, lead or just an ordinary co-author on the paper. It is useful to know the percentage of papers on Africa where African-based authors are lead or sole authors if only because these two categories are measures of influence or significant

input on the research itself.⁴² In Figure 3, I report the combined percentage of single authored and lead-authored papers by African-based authors. I also report from Figure 2, the percentage of papers with at-least one African-based author regardless of whether the author is sole, lead or a mere co-author.

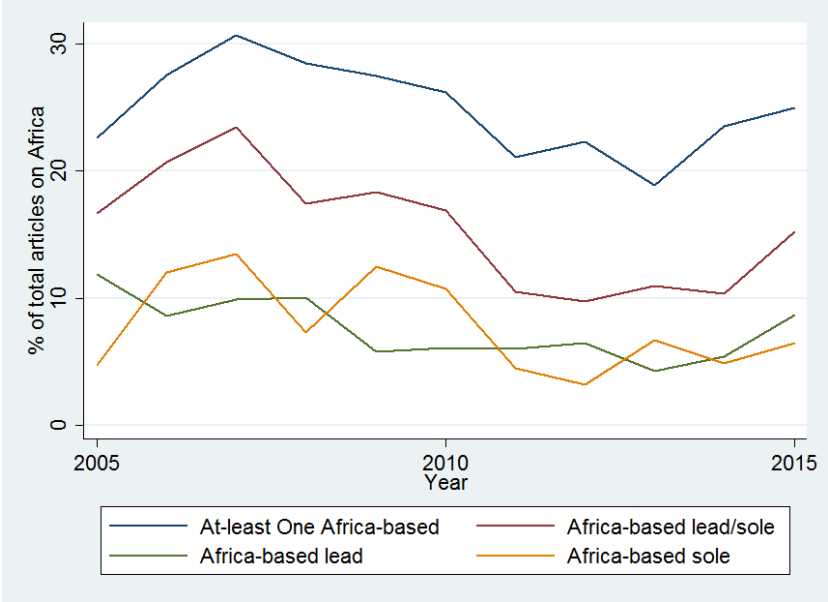
Figure 3: Looking closely at Lead/Sole Authorship, 2005 to 2015



⁴² Although, it appears that economics is unique in this respect. Author names on multi-authored papers in economics tend to be arranged alphabetically in contrast to other disciplines where ordering is presumably based on contribution. One study put the estimate for the prevalence of alphabetic ordering in five leading economics journals (none of which are considered in this essay) at 85%. See Engers, M., *et al.*, 1999. "First-Author Conditions". *Journal of Political Economy*, 107(4): 859 – 883

In Figure 3 we see that the more “stringent” criterion of only considering sole and lead authored papers gives a smaller level of representation: On average, only 15% of journal articles on Africa are sole-authored or lead-authored by academics based on the continent. In other words, only examining the information in Figure 2 might lead to an overestimate of the degree representation. Figure 4 reports separately the percentage of articles that are sole authored and lead authored by African-based scholars. I also retain the aggregate measures from Figure 3 for purposes of comparison.

Figure 4: Breaking down lead and sole authorship

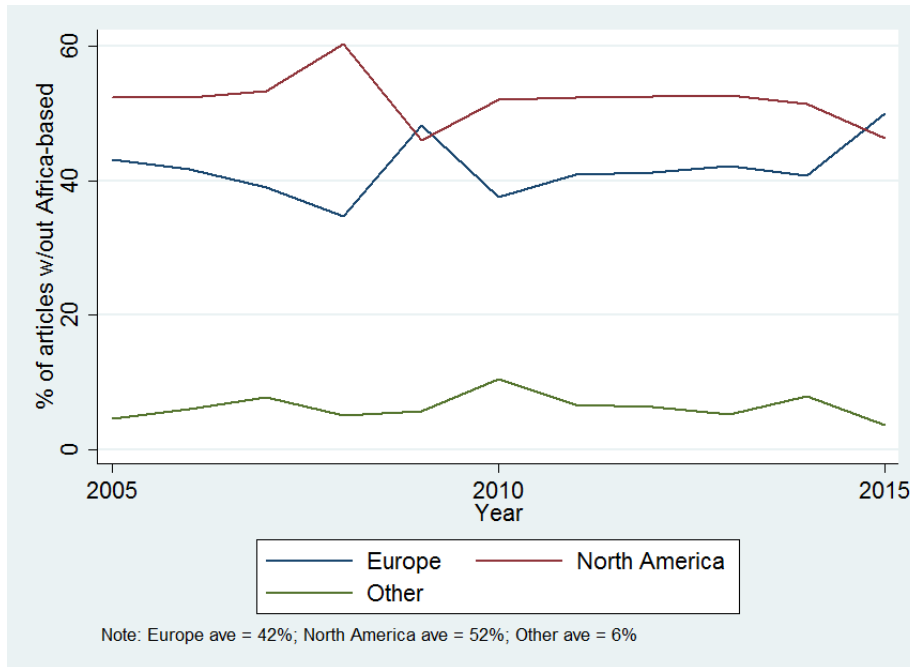


In Figure 4 we see that sole authored and lead authored papers by African-based scholars were published at about the same rate over this period. The average share of sole authored and lead authored papers as a percentage of the total was about 8% in both cases. Although the share for sole authored papers is likely biased upwards given the way I define sole-authorship in this essay (see Section 2). What the information in Figure 4 shows, however, is that it was much more difficult to publish singly or as a lead author on an African country in the journals in Table 1 if you were based on the continent.

Recall from Figure 2 that, on average, 75% of journal articles on Africa did not have a single African-based author over the period 2005 to 2015. We then might want to know how these “spoils of exclusion” are shared between North America, Europe and other parts of the world. This information is contained in Figure 5.⁴³

⁴³ Recall that for papers without a single African-based author, I assign the geographical location of the lead author (see footnote 42 for caveats around the interpretation of author positionality in economics).

Figure 5: Spoils of Exclusion, 2005 to 2015



From the figure we observe that the “spoils” are mostly shared between North American institutions (mostly in the US) and European institutions (mostly in the United Kingdom, Germany and Scandinavia). On average, half of the papers on Africa without a single African-based author were written by North American authors while the average for Europe was slightly less than half. The contribution of the category “Other” was relatively small at 6%.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ This is mostly Australia, Japan and one or two countries in Asia and Latin America.

3.2. Editorial Boards

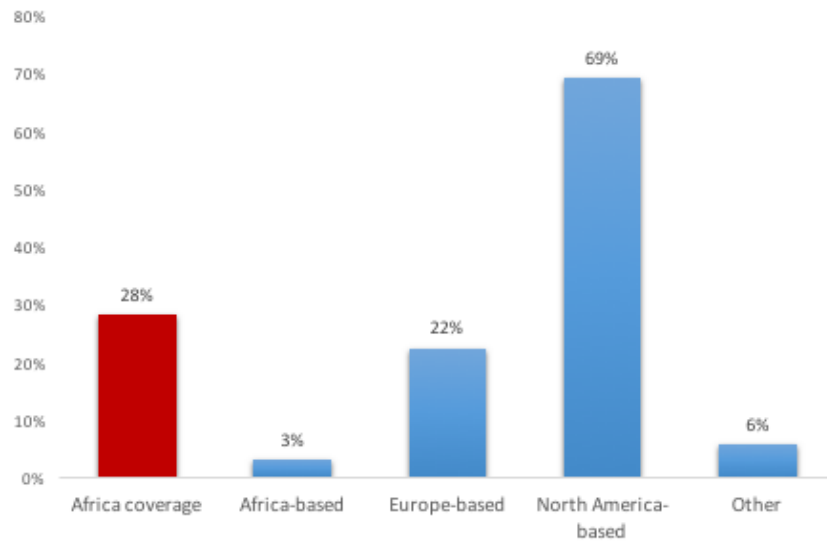
Perhaps one way of making sense of the results in Section 3.1 is to look at the geographical make-up of the editorial boards of the journals studied in this essay given the evidence that editors do influence who and what gets published in economics.⁴⁵ This subsection presents information on the geographical location of the editorial boards of the journals in Table 1 as reported between May and October of 2016. Unfortunately, I cannot report the dynamic aspects of board membership simply because journals do not publicly report information on past editorial boards.

Figure 6 reports the results of classifying journal editors according to geographical location – the 10 journals in Table 1 had a total editorial board membership of 269. The figure also reports, from Table 2, the percentage of papers written on Africa presented as the bar in red (the first bar). A rough criterion of “fairness” would be one where the editorial membership closely reflected the geographical coverage of the journals. However, in Figure 6 we see that whereas about one-third of the papers were on Africa, only 3% of the editorial board was based on the continent.⁴⁶ The lion’s share of editorial board membership belongs to North American-based scholars at 69%.

⁴⁵ See: Laband, D.N. and Piette, M.J., 1994. “Favoritism versus search for good papers: empirical evidence regarding the behavior of journal editors”. *Journal of Political Economy*, 102(1): 194 – 203; Hodgson, G.M. and Rothman, H., 1999. “The Editors and Authors of Economics Journals: A Case of Institutional Oligopoly”. *The Economic Journal*, 109 (453): 165 – 186; Innes, R., 2008. “Editorial Favoritism”. Unpublished Working Paper. Available at: <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo10444942.html>

⁴⁶ One critique of this comparison is that I am comparing a dynamic average with a static one. That is, I am comparing an average taken over 10 years with one from a single year. But even if we limited the dynamic average to papers

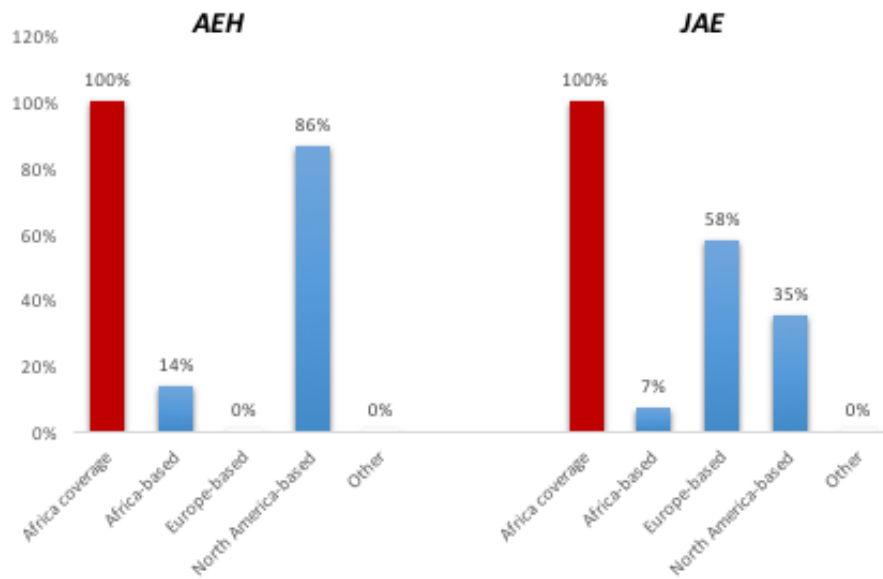
Figure 6: Editorial board membership, 2015



In Figure 7, I cast the spotlight on the editorial membership of the two Africa-focused journals *African Economic History (AEH)* and *Journal of African Economies (JAE)*. We see from the Figure that both *AEH* and *JAE* fall short of my “fairness” criterion. They both dedicate 100% of their coverage to the continent and yet the editorial boards of *AEH* and *JAE* have respectively 14% and 7% of their editors based on the continent. This puts in perspective the argument that introducing more Africa-focused journals is the antidote to the crisis of underrepresentation.

published in 2015 or in the two or three years leading up to 2015, the conclusion would still remain. If anything, things would worsen by this rough criterion of “fairness”.

Figure 7: Editorial board membership of *AEH* and *JAE*, 2015



Another interesting talking point from Figure 7 is the apparent relationship between a journal's geographical home and the geographical make-up of its editorial board. *AEH* which is based in North America (at the University of Wisconsin) has 86% of its editorial board based in North America. None of its editorial board is based in Europe. *JAE*, which is based at Oxford University, has more than half of its editorial board based in Europe, far exceeding the average for Europe reported in Figure 6.

4. IMPLICATIONS

In his 2015 book surveying the last 3 decades of the economics scholarship on Africa, the economic historian Morten Jerven argues that “economists continue to get Africa wrong”⁴⁷ with the result that “[economic] growth in Africa has been misunderstood, and as a result the discipline of economics is currently unable to give useful policy advice, let alone simply explain what is happening right now.”⁴⁸ My contention in this essay is that one cannot fully appreciate the critiques of the likes of Jerven without some reference to the data presented in the previous section of this essay. To be sure, African scholars like the distinguished Malawian economist Thandika Mkandawire have often spoken about the underrepresentation of “African voices” and how this impacts scholarship.⁴⁹ These statements have, however, often been anecdotal and made in reference to the general state of social science research about the continent. What this essay does is obtain a precise triangulation of the absence of “African voices” with specific focus on economics.

Before concluding the essay, I would like to highlight four direct implications for economics research and economic policy that have been discerned from my work perusing the more than 1,500 individual journal articles on Africa that I had to consult in collecting the evidence for Section 3.

⁴⁷ Jerven, M. 2015. *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*, p2

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p8 – 9

⁴⁹ See Mkandawire, T., 1997. “Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence”, *African Studies Review*, 40(2): 15 – 36

4.1. Faux Consensus

Good economic policy should be predicated on consensus. Much of Africa’s policymaking has, however, been based on the “consensus of the few”. The now widely acknowledged mistakes of the Structural Adjustment years⁵⁰ were the result of a type of consensus-driven policymaking that was preserved for the revolving door between International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Northern universities. One of the linchpins of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) in Africa was the need to scale back the state. This feature of SAPs drew its inspiration from scholarly work by “[academics] based in North American universities and [was] immediately embraced by the World Bank as it developed its political-economic analysis of African policymaking”.⁵¹ As the writing on SAPs by Mkandawire and Soludo shows, such pitfalls might have been avoided had the circle of consensus been extended to include voices on the continent.⁵²

The *modus operandi* of the “consensus of the few”, however, seems to be carrying on unabated. A recent special edition of the journal *World Development* on the rather important topic of industrialization and structural transformation in Africa did not have a single contributor from the continent.⁵³ And as reported in Section 3, all the papers on Africa in the *World Bank Research*

⁵⁰ See Ostry, J.D., et al. 2016. “Neoliberalism: Oversold?”. *Finance and Development*, 53(2).

⁵¹ Mkandawire, T. and Soludo C.C., 1999. *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*. Trenton: African World Press, p.24

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ McMillan, M.S. and Heady, D. (Eds.), 2014. “Economic Transformation in Africa”, *World Development*, 63: 1 –

Observer, a journal whose primary purpose is to synthesize research findings for the purposes of policy, did not have a single African-based author.

4.2. Hegemonic Theories

The point of departure for scholarly enquiry into “policy failure” in Africa are the dominant frameworks of ‘neopatrimonialism’ and the ‘public choice school’ that “point toward some form of malevolent state simply acting on behalf of, or at the behest of, ruling interests”.⁵⁴ The public choice approach to policy failure has inspired many minds working on Africa since Robert Bates published his *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*.⁵⁵ For its part, neopatrimonialism is considered indispensable for making sense of policymaking during the SAP years. The go-to book for many economists and political scientists on SAPs is Nicolas van de Walle’s *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*.⁵⁶ Van de Walle, working firmly within the neopatrimonial framework, reaches the rather incredible conclusion that SAPs were never really implemented in Africa because doing so would have jeopardized the interests of the ruling elites. In spite of the voluminous literature that has detailed the implementation of SAPs across the continent⁵⁷, van

⁵⁴ Mkandawire, T., 2015. “Neopatrimonialism and The Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections”. *World Politics*, 67(3), p567

⁵⁵ Bates, R.H., 1981. *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies*. Berkeley: University of California Press

⁵⁶ Van de Walle, 2001. *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979 – 1999*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁵⁷ See, for example, Mkandawire, T and Soludo, C.C., 1999. *Our Continent, Our Future* and Mkandawire, T. and Soludo, C.C. (Eds), 2003. *African Voices on Structural Adjustment: A Companion To Our Continent, Our Future*. Trenton: African World Press

de Walle's book is highly favourably cited and is required reading in leading economics and politics courses in the North.⁵⁸

4.3. The Confluence of Research on Some Questions

One striking feature about the economics scholarship on Africa is the preponderance of research on HIV/AIDS, conflict and corruption. There is obviously a "demand" for this type of research given that the continent has historically carried a fair burden of these unfortunate ills. However, given trade-offs inherent in the research process, having lots of research on conflict or corruption implies that we are not learning about other, perhaps equally important, matters. For example, one of the most socially and economically disruptive episodes in recent African history has been the era of SAPs. Sadly, we know little, at least as economists, about the medium to long-term impacts of SAP policies on various social and economic outcomes. Further, important research questions are often conceptualized in ways that do not facilitate deep learning. For example, the economic historian Morten Jerven has pointed out that the standard research question in growth economics on Africa has been "why did Africa not grow?" as opposed to "why has Africa grown at certain times and then slowed down at other times?".⁵⁹ The policy implications of the second question are profound.

⁵⁸ The book features prominently on Chris Blattman's "Political Economy of Development Course" at Columbia University. Blattman considers the book to be "one of [his] favorite books on African Political Economy". See: <http://chrisblattman.com/2007/12/09/dear-donors-please-stop-helping-us/>

⁵⁹ Jerven, M., 2015. *Africa: Why Do Economists Get It Wrong?*

4.4. The Limits of “Data”

In *Poor Numbers* Morten Jerven marshals the evidence to show that African statistical data is plagued by “systematic variation in errors and biases” and warns that “the most basic metric of development, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), should not be treated as an objective number but rather as a number that is a product of a process in which a range of arbitrary and controversial assumptions are made”.⁶⁰ This is worth bearing in mind particularly given the results of Section 3 that exemplify what Jerven elsewhere describes as the ever “increasing distance between the observed and the observer” in economics research on Africa where “analysts increasingly [make] use of downloadable datasets to test econometric models”⁶¹. A phenomenon Branko Milanovic describes as “Wikipedia with [statistical analysis]”.⁶²

⁶⁰ Jerven, M., 2013. *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled By African Development Statistics And What To Do About It*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

⁶¹ Jerven, M., 2015. *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*, p120

⁶² Milanovic, B. 2014. “My take on the Acemoglu-Robinson critique of Piketty”. Available at: <http://glineg.blogspot.com/2014/08/my-take-on-acemoglu-robinson-critique.html>

5. CONCLUSION

This essay has provided some of the first ever comprehensive estimates of what I have described elsewhere as economics' "Africa problem". About 75% of the papers published on Africa in leading economics journals did not have a single African-based author over the period 2005 to 2015. This measure of underrepresentation worsens when I exclude those papers where African-based scholars were mere co-authors. Overtly missing from this essay is a deep discussion of the likely causes of the results discussed in Section 3. Such a discussion would however require the gathering of much more information than that presented here. If anything, the hope is that, in a small way, this essay sparks a long overdue conversation about the politics and implications of the patterns of knowledge production in economics on Africa. Once confronted with the results in Section 3, it is difficult to think about anything else – to paraphrase Robert Lucas' famous quote on economic development.⁶³

⁶³ Lucas, R.E., 1988. "On The Mechanics of Economic Development". *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 22: p5