

# Inventing Africa: From narratives of achievement to E.U. development discourse

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## Occidental constructions: state of the art

Social scientific discourses that connect global inequalities of income, education, life expectancy and democratic rights to cultural values and attitudes of civilizations and ethnic groups have been commonplace in development studies as well as in civilizational analysis until very recently. The latter literature, in particular, has famously pitted Puritan thrift and hard work, viewed as largely European values, against an allegedly African “distaste for work” and “suppression of individual initiative” or against a perceived Islamic fatalism and suppression of enterprise. One prominent example at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were the articles collected in Samuel Huntington’s co-edited volume *Culture Matters*, which claimed that “England especially offered a lesson in self-development” (Harrison and Huntington 2000, 8). They therefore rejected colonialism, dependency and racism as valid explanations for the economic situation and living conditions in most non-Western countries except the East Asian NICs.

Such discourses have for a long time been questioned by dependency theorists and are increasingly countered by postcolonial and critical race studies today. Walter Rodney’s early answer to the claim of England’s self-development was to point to the entanglements between development and underdevelopment paths between Europe and Africa by asking “What would have been Britain’s level of development had millions of them been put to work as slaves outside of their homeland over a period of four centuries?” Had that been the case, its nearest neighbours would have been removed from the ambit of fruitful trade with Britain. After all, trade between the British Isles and places like the Baltic and the Mediterranean is unanimously considered by scholars to have been the earliest stimulus to the English economy in the late feudal and early capitalist period, even before the era of overseas expansion (Rodney 1973, 98). Such thought experiments are useful for re-inscribing the momentous transformation that was the European trade in enslaved people into the history of *both* African and European economies and societal patterns for several centuries. As a consequence, the long-standing Western imaginary that posits Europe and Africa at opposite ends on a scale of achievement, development and civilization can be traced back to an Occidental construction of Western uniqueness premised on

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the invention of otherness at least since the European colonial expansion in the sixteenth century and the beginning of the European trade in enslaved Africans in the Americas. The discursive construction of a singular notion of Europe in turn depends upon the silencing of the historical role of its member states and their predecessors in creating the main structures of global political and economic inequality. As Böröcz and Sarkar point out, the member states of the European Union before its “Eastern enlargement” in 2004 were “the same states that had exercised imperial rule over nearly half of the inhabitable surface of the globe outside Europe” (Böröcz and Sarkar 2005, 162) and whose colonial possessions covered almost half of the inhabited surface of the non-European world. Not only were the overseas empires of today’s EU states such as Britain, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, Spain and Portugal many times larger than the current size of their territories, but the political impetus behind the emergence of the European Union has been closely linked to the loss of colonial empires after World War II.

### After decolonization

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century political and economic discourse after the administrative decolonization of many parts of Africa and Asia illustrated this Occidental construction particularly well. The development of the African continent played a crucial part in upholding and reconfiguring Europe’s role in a postwar context. As Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson have recently revealed, the emergence of the European Economic Community as the EU’s predecessor went hand in hand with an intellectual, political and institutional discourse that presupposed the transformation of the strictly national colonial projects into a joint European colonization of Africa under the telling name of “Eurafrica” (Hansen and Jonsson 2011). Upon its founding in 1957, the European Economic Community included not just Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany, but also their colonial possessions, officially referred to as “overseas countries and territories,” the same label used today for the remaining colonial possessions: “they included, most importantly, Belgian Congo and French West and Equatorial Africa, whereas Algeria, which in this time was an integral part of metropolitan France, was formally integrated into the EEC yet excluded from certain provisions of the Treaty” (Hansen and Jonsson 2014, 7). Justified as a way of improving the social and economic development of the colonies and allowing Europe to posit its presence and interests in Africa as a new relationship of “interdependence,” the project in fact made clear the dependence of Europe on African resources for European economic development. As stated in the 1950 Schuman declaration: “With increased resources Europe will be able to pursue the achievement of one of its essential tasks, namely, the development of the African continent” (as cited in Hansen and Jonsson 2014, 123).

## Outlook

The full version of this paper traces the continuities of achievement and development discourses to an Occidentalist construction of Western uniqueness premised on the invention of otherness since the European colonial expansion, and zooms in on a particular moment of this construction, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century political and economic discourse after decolonization. It aims to show how the emergence of the European Economic Community as the EU's predecessor went hand in hand with an intellectual, political and institutional discourse that presupposed the transformation of the strictly national colonial projects into a joint European colonization of Africa, and, thus, how inventing Africa in a Western European lens shaped notions of achievement and development imbued with colonial racist tropes.

## References

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