How Europe Underdeveloped Africa

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It has been shown that, using comparative standards, Africa today is underdeveloped in relation to Western Europe and a few other parts of the world; and that the present position has been arrived at, not by the separate evolution of Africa on the one hand and Europe on the other, but through exploitation. As is well known, Africa has had prolonged and extensive contact with Europe, and one has to bear in mind that contact between different societies changes their respective rates of development. To set the record straight, four operations are required:

1. Reconstruction of the nature of development in Africa before the coming of Europeans.
2. Reconstruction of the nature of development which took place in Europe before expansion abroad.
3. Analysis of Africa’s contribution to Europe’s present “developed” state.
4. Analysis of Europe’s contribution to Africa’s present “under-developed” state.

The second task has already been extensively carried out in European literature, and only passing references need be made; but the others are all deserving of further attention.

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How Europe Became the Dominant Section of a World-Wide Trade System

... Western Europe and Africa had a relationship which insured the transfer of wealth from Africa to Europe. The transfer was possible only after trade became truly international; and that takes one back to the late fifteenth century when Africa and Europe were drawn into common relations for the first time—together with Asia and the Americas. The developed and underdeveloped parts of the present capitalist section of the world have been in continuous contact for four and a half centuries. The contention here is that over that period Africa helped to develop Western Europe in the same proportion as Western Europe helped to underdevelop Africa.

The first significant thing about the internationalization of trade in the sixteenth century was that Europeans took the initiative and went to other parts of the world. No Chinese boats reached Europe, and if any African canoes reached the Americas (as is sometimes maintained) they did not establish two-way links. What was called international trade was nothing
but the extension overseas of European interests. The strategy behind international trade and the production that supported it was firmly in European hands, and specifically in the hands of the sea-going nations from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. They owned and directed the great majority of the world’s sea-going vessels, and they controlled the financing of the trade between four continents. Africans had little clue as to the tri-continental links between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Europe had a monopoly of knowledge about the international exchange system seen as a whole, for Western Europe was the only sector capable of viewing the system as a whole.

Europeans used the superiority of their ships and cannon to gain control of all the world’s waterways, starting with the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic coast of North Africa. From 1415, when the Portuguese captured Ceuta, near Gibraltar, they maintained the offensive against the Maghreb. Within the next sixty years, they seized ports such as Azila, El-Ksar-es-Seghir, and Tangier, and fortified them. By the second half of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese controlled the Atlantic coast of Morocco and used its economic and strategic advantages to prepare for further navigations which eventually carried their ships round the Cape of Good Hope in 1495. After reaching the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese sought with some success to replace Arabs as the merchants who tied East Africa to India and the rest of Asia. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese carried most of the East African ivory which was marketed in India; while Indian cloth and beads were sold in East and West Africa by the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French. The same applied to cowry shells from the East Indies. Therefore, by control of the seas, Europe took the first steps towards transforming the several parts of Africa and Asia into economic satellites.

When the Portuguese and the Spanish were still in command of a major sector of world trade in the first half of the seventeenth century, they engaged in buying cotton cloth in India to exchange for slaves in Africa to mine gold in Central and South America. Part of the gold in the Americas would then be used to purchase spices and silks from the Far East. The concept of metropole and dependency automatically came into existence when parts of Africa were caught up in the web of international commerce. On the one hand, there were the European countries who decided on the role to be played by the African economy; and on the other hand, Africa formed an extension to the European capitalist market. As far as foreign trade was concerned, Africa was dependent on what Europeans were prepared to buy and sell.

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From the beginning, Europe assumed the power to make decisions within the international trading system. An excellent illustration of that is the fact that the so-called international law which governed the conduct of nations on the high seas was nothing else but European law. Africans did not participate in its making, and in many instances, African people were simply the victims, for the law recognized them only as transportable merchandise. If the African slave was thrown overboard at sea, the only legal problem that arose was whether or not the slave ship could claim compensation from the insurers! Above all, European decision-making power was exercised in selecting what Africa should export—in accordance with European needs.

The ships of the Portuguese gave the search for gold the highest priority, partly on the basis of well-known information that West African gold reached Europe across the Sahara and partly on the basis of guesswork. The Portuguese were successful in obtaining gold in parts of West Africa and in eastern Central Africa; and it was the Gold Coast which attracted the greatest attention from Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The number of forts built there was proof to that effect, and the nations involved included the Scandinavians and the Prussians (Germans) apart from other colonial stalwarts like the British, Dutch, and Portuguese.

Europeans were anxious to acquire gold in Africa because there was a pressing need for gold coin within the growing capitalist money economy. Since gold was limited to very small areas of Africa, as far as Europeans were then aware, the principal export was human beings. Only in a very few places at given times was the export of another commodity of equal or greater importance. For instance, in the Senegal there was gum, in Sierra Leone camwood, and in Mozambique ivory. However, even after taking those things into account, one can say that Europe allocated to Africa the role of supplier of
human captives to be used as slaves in various parts of the world.

When Europeans reached the Americas, they recognized its enormous potential in gold and silver and tropical produce. But that potential could not be made a reality without adequate labor supplies. The indigenous Indian population could not withstand new European diseases such as smallpox, nor could they bear the organized toil of slave plantations and slave mines, having barely emerged from the hunting stage. That is why in islands like Cuba and Hispaniola, the local Indian population was virtually wiped out by the white invaders. At the same time, Europe itself had a very small population and could not afford to release the labor required to tap the wealth of the Americas. Therefore, they turned to the nearest continent, Africa, which incidentally had a population accustomed to settled agriculture and disciplined labor in many spheres. Those were the objective conditions lying behind the start of the European slave trade, and those are the reasons why the capitalist class in Europe used their control of international trade to insure that Africa specialized in exporting captives.

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The fact that Europe was the first part of the world to move from feudalism towards capitalism gave Europeans a headstart over humanity elsewhere in the scientific understanding of the universe, the making of tools, and the efficient organization of labor. European technical superiority did not apply to all aspects of production, but the advantage which they possessed in a few key areas proved decisive. For example, African canoes on the river Nile and the Senegal coast were of a high standard, but the relevant sphere of operations was the ocean, where European ships could take command. West Africans had developed metal casting to a fine artistic perfection in many parts of Nigeria, but when it came to the meeting with Europe, beautiful bronzes were far less relevant than the crudest cannon. African wooden utensils were sometimes works of great beauty, but Europe produced pots and pans that had many practical advantages. Literacy, organizational experience, and the capacity to produce on an ever-expanding scale also counted in the European favor.

European manufactures in the early years of trade with Africa were often of poor quality, but they were of new varieties and were found attractive. Estaban Montejo, an African who ran away from a Cuban slave plantation in the nineteenth century, recalled that his people were enticed into slavery by the color red. He said:

It was the scarlet which did for the Africans; both the kings and the rest surrendered without a struggle. When the kings saw that the whites were taking out these scarlet handkerchiefs as if they were waving, they told the blacks, “Go on then, go and get a scarlet handkerchief” and the blacks were so excited by the scarlet they ran down to the ships like sheep and there they were captured.

That version by one of the victims of slavery is very poetic. What it means is that some African rulers found European goods sufficiently desirable to hand over captives which they had taken in warfare. Soon, war began to be fought between one community and another for the sole purpose of getting prisoners for sale to Europeans, and even inside a given community a ruler might be tempted to exploit his own subjects and capture them for sale. A chain reaction was started by European demand for slaves (and only slaves) and by their offer of consumer goods—this process being connected with divisions within African society.