

Bronwen Everill. *Africonomics: A History of Western Ignorance*. William Collins Books, 2024. 978-0008581152

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No one reading *Africonomics: A History of Western Ignorance* will come away uncertain about its argument. Ranging across centuries, Bronwen Everill confronts the intellectual habits that have shaped how Africa has been imagined, managed, and misunderstood. This is a history of misrecognition, charting the ways in which European and American thinkers, traders, and policymakers imposed economic assumptions that obscured the realities of African agency. The result is not only a challenge to orthodox development thinking, but a sweeping indictment of the epistemologies that continue to govern North-South engagement.

At its core, *Africonomics* makes a simple but unsettling claim: Western ignorance is not an episodic failure, but a structural and enduring feature of how Africa has been imagined, intervened upon, and misapprehended. Everill excavates this continuity across more than two centuries of economic thought and social action, arguing that the paternalism of 19th-century abolitionists and the metrics of 21st-century technocrats are linked less by their differences than by their shared disregard for African epistemologies. This is not an easy thesis to sustain over time and across geographies, yet Everill does so with scholarly discipline and rhetorical flair.

The book opens with a deft treatment of abolitionist misunderstandings of wealth in African societies. Far from reducing Africans to the caricature of subsistence traders beguiled by trifles, Everill emphasises the relational nature of wealth in many precolonial settings. Their treatment of “wealth in people” is not novel in itself, but Everill uses a comparative framing, particularly with Victorian Britain, which gives the argument fresh resonance. In both societies, social ties, patronage, and dependency networks served as vital instruments for status and accumulation. That many abolitionists failed to appreciate this parallel is indicative not only of their cultural blinkers but of the broader failure of liberal humanitarianism to reckon with its own ideological premises.

In the chapters that follow, the tone sharpens. Ignorance becomes more than a benign absence of knowledge; it becomes an alibi for domination. European assessments of

African labour, especially the trope of idleness, are shown to have had devastating material consequences. The idea that Africans were incapable of organised agricultural production justified intrusive labour regimes and informed a series of miscalculations. This phenomenon was most notable in Nigeria, where Lord Lugard's efforts to subsume the Sokoto Caliphate into a broader imperial economy rested on little understanding of its internal structure. The result was not modernisation but disruption, affecting labour markets, land tenure systems, and political legitimacy.

Everill's treatment of monetary history is one of the book's most compelling sections. In the hands of the author, the cowrie shell ceases to be an ethnographic curiosity and becomes a deeply functional medium of exchange, embedded in ritual, militarism, and credit. European critiques of African trade systems, particularly the notion that Africans foolishly exchanged slaves for baubles, are reinterpreted not as errors of calculation but as errors of comprehension. This chapter, in particular, exemplifies Everill's strength. Namely, the ability to move between microhistorical anecdote and macrohistorical argument, without losing sight of either.

Yet if the historical chapters offer confident and well-evidenced reinterpretations, the book's treatment of the post-independence period raises more complex issues. Everill is on firm ground when critiquing the technocratic optimism of recent decades, ranging from microfinance and mobile money to the more fashionable strains of Effective Altruism. Everill's argument that these initiatives reproduce the same dynamic of external imposition under a new moral grammar is persuasive. But at times, the analogy between past and present appears to be overdone. Chapter 7's comparison of the rise of microfinance and cryptocurrency in Africa with the MMM Ponzi scheme of the 1990s is a case in point. According to Everill, their similarities lie in the extent to which they "all appeal to the idea that through pure hustle and hard work, through mobilizing social networks and by having access to start-up capital – especially start-up capital that comes from those who trust your business sense – people will be able to propel themselves into a higher standard of living." While the crypto-craze and microfinance initiatives undeniably stem from economic precarity, the former is also embedded in global discourses of monetary sovereignty and decentralised finance that are not wholly reducible to desperation or illusion. In flattening the motivations of African cryptocurrency users to a single explanatory register, Everill risks undermining the pluralism she otherwise defends.

Similarly, Chapter 8 verges on conflating the critique of ignorance with a more general condemnation of what may be referred to as 'economic imperialism'. While rhetorically potent, it lacks the historical specificity that characterises the rest of the book. The insinuation that the economisation of social life is a uniquely African burden, or one disproportionately inflicted by Western economists, overlooks both global trends and endogenous African actors who have actively engaged with economic rationalities in strategic and selective ways.

Still, these are quibbles set against a work of real intellectual ambition. *Africonomics* is not a comprehensive history of African economies. It is, rather, a genealogical interrogation of how Africa has been misunderstood from the outside. In doing so,

the book sheds light not only on Western misapprehensions but on the institutional machinery that has allowed such misapprehensions to flourish, including development banks, foreign ministries, NGOs, and universities.

What makes this book valuable is not simply its indictment of past failures, but its invitation to reimagine how knowledge itself is produced and circulated. In an era of renewed geopolitical competition on the African continent, where China, the United States, and Gulf states now jostle for influence, Everill's call for epistemic humility is both timely and essential. Whether this book will fundamentally alter development practice is unclear. But it will, one hopes, compel historians and policymakers alike to confront a basic truth that Africa has been over-interpreted, under-consulted, and seldom taken on its own terms.