

Nathan Nunn: Economics from a Historical Perspective

Speaker:

Dr. Nathan Nunn, Professor of Economics at Harvard University

Reporter:

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Nathan Nunn, Professor of Economics at Harvard University, has dedicated the past 15 years of his life collecting statistical data to support his theory that current economic inequality has its roots in the past. At the 2015 World Knowledge Forum, Professor Nunn delivered his findings in his lecture, “Economics from a Historical Perspective.” He wrapped up his introduction by stating, “Hopefully I’ll convince you by the end that we can look at our past to understand current global inequality.”

Professor Nunn started 1,500 years ago with Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas. Here he made the argument that what he calls the “three corner slave trade” between Western Europe, Africa, and the Americas is where some roots of economic inequality can be found. “Those countries that had the most slaves taken are also the poorest today,” Dr. Nunn said, showing a statistical distribution of slaves taken from Africa to their current economic status.

But slave labor also had an adverse effect on areas that engaged in slave labor. “Those countries that specialized in slave labor are underdeveloped today,” Dr. Nunn stated, pointing to those areas in the Americas that heavily used African slave labor. He showed how slave labor has had an adverse economic effect on almost all nations involved and that this leads to political inequality.

Development economists believe that rugged terrain can be a source of economic disparity for certain African nations. But Dr. Nunn argued the opposite. “Rugged areas allowed people from certain societies to escape from the slave trade,” he said, as people could run up into rocky areas that were hard for slave traders to reach. And today, these more rugged areas are in many cases actually richer than some more agriculturally fortunate areas that were enslaved.

Dr. Nunn also sought to draw a line between agricultural practices in the past and women’s participation in the present labor force. He compared those areas that used large, heavy plows and those that used lighter hoes. “Those traditionally engaged in plow agriculture are those where women don’t usually work,” Dr. Nunn stated, explaining that because the plow was so heavy, only men could use it. He then showed a correlation between those nations that used hoes and those that generally have more women in the labor force today. Because hoes were lighter, women could carry a child on their back while using it.

“How do we take this information and apply it to policy moving forward?” Dr. Nunn asked. He gave a brief answer, believing the lessons learned from mining the historical economic data could be applied to how foreign aid is given out. But Dr. Nunn was mostly unconcerned about the applications of this data, saying, “I’ll leave that for another day.”