A Report on "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa" by Nunn and Wantchekon (2011)

Reviewer 2

February 06, 2026

v1

isitcredible.com

Disclaimer

This report was generated by large language models, overseen by a human editor. It represents the honest opinion of The Catalogue of Errors Ltd, but its accuracy should be verified by a qualified expert. Comments can be made here. Any errors in the report will be corrected in future revisions.

I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

Overview

Citation: Nunn, N., and Wantchekon, L. (2011). The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa. *American Economic Review*, Vol. 101, No. 7, pp. 3221–3252.

URL: http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/aer.101.7.3221

Abstract Summary: The paper shows that current differences in trust levels within Africa can be traced back to the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades. Individuals whose ancestors were heavily raided during the slave trade are less trusting today, a relationship the authors argue is causal and primarily driven by the persistence of cultural norms, beliefs, and values.

Key Methodology: Quantitative analysis combining individual-level survey data (Afrobarometer) with historical ethnic-group slave export data, using *OLS*, selection on observables, and instrumental variables (historical distance from the coast).

Research Question: Can current differences in trust levels within Africa be traced back to the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, and is this relationship causal?

Summary

Is It Credible?

This article presents a seminal investigation into the historical origins of contemporary behavior, arguing that the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades generated a culture of mistrust within Africa that persists to the present day. Combining historical data on slave shipments with contemporary survey data from the Afrobarometer, Nunn and Wantchekon claim that individuals whose ancestors were heavily targeted by the slave trade exhibit significantly lower levels of trust in relatives, neighbors, and local government. Furthermore, they decompose this effect to argue that the persistence of mistrust is driven primarily by "factors that are internal to the individual, such as cultural norms, beliefs, and values," rather than solely by the deterioration of external legal and political institutions (p. 3221).

The core empirical finding—a robust negative correlation between the intensity of the slave trade in an ethnic group's past and the current trust levels of its descendants—is credible and survives an extensive battery of robustness checks. The authors demonstrate that this relationship holds across five different measures of trust and remains significant when controlling for individual characteristics, district-level factors, and colonial history. To establish causality, the analysis employs an instrumental variable strategy using an ethnic group's historical distance from the coast. While the authors argue that distance from the coast affects trust only through the mechanism of the slave trade, this exclusion restriction is a strong assumption. Coastal proximity in Africa is correlated with numerous other historical vectors, including legitimate trade, colonial penetration, and ecological differences, which could independently shape institutional and social development. The authors attempt to mitigate this by showing that coastal distance does not predict trust in Europe or Asia, but this falsification test cannot rule out Africa-

specific confounders where coastal access might proxy for other developmental trajectories distinct from slavery. Consequently, while the causal claim is plausible and rigorously defended, the reliance on coastal distance leaves room for alternative historical explanations regarding the coastal-interior gradient.

The article's second major contribution—the decomposition of the effect into internal cultural norms versus external institutional environments—is innovative but faces significant methodological limitations. By comparing individuals who live in their ancestral homelands ("non-movers") with those who have migrated ("movers"), the authors attempt to isolate the portable "internal" component of trust from the fixed "external" environment. They conclude that the internal channel is "at least twice as large as the external channel" (p. 3224). However, this identification strategy relies entirely on the sample of movers, who constitute 45 percent of the population and are systematically different from non-movers—for instance, they are more likely to live in urban areas (p. 3248). Because the decision to migrate is non-random and likely correlated with traits like risk tolerance or trust itself, the estimates derived from this sub-population may suffer from selection bias and may not be generalizable to the population at large. Additionally, while the authors frame the persistence of mistrust as a cultural phenomenon, they acknowledge but cannot empirically rule out the possibility of genetic selection, where the slave trade might have altered the population's composition by removing inherently more trusting individuals (p. 3227). Thus, while the article successfully documents a persistent legacy of the slave trade, the precise mechanism—whether purely cultural transmission, institutional decay, or other factors—remains difficult to disentangle definitively.

The Bottom Line

The analysis provides compelling evidence of a robust negative relationship between historical exposure to the slave trade and contemporary levels of trust within Africa.

The claim that this relationship is causal is supported by rigorous statistical work, though it relies on the assumption that historical distance from the coast influenced modern trust solely through the slave trade, which is open to debate. The finding that this legacy is transmitted largely through internal cultural norms is suggestive, but the reliance on a selected sample of migrants to distinguish culture from institutions means the exact magnitude of this channel remains uncertain.

Potential Issues

Plausibility of the instrumental variable's exclusion restriction: The article's central causal claim relies on an instrumental variable (IV) strategy where the historical distance of an ethnic group from the coast instruments for its exposure to the slave trade. The validity of this approach requires that distance from the coast affects current trust levels *only* through its effect on the slave trade. This "exclusion restriction" is a strong assumption, as coastal proximity is correlated with numerous other historical and geographical factors that could independently shape trust norms, such as differences in climate, ecology, pre-colonial trade, and the nature of European contact for non-slave-related activities. The authors acknowledge this is a potential issue, stating that "distance from the coast may be correlated with other forms of European contact, like colonial rule," as well as reliance on fishing and access to Saharan trade networks (p. 3239). They attempt to address this by including an extensive set of controls for these factors in their IV regressions (pp. 3240–3241, Tables 5 and 6). However, whether these controls are sufficient to account for all relevant differences between coastal and interior regions remains a central and debatable challenge to the identification strategy. The instrument may still be capturing a broader, unobserved "coastal vs. interior" development pattern of which the slave trade was only one component.

Logical limitations of the instrumental variable falsification tests: To support the validity of their instrument, the authors conduct falsification tests showing that the relationship between coastal distance and trust does not exist in samples from Asia and Europe (pp. 3242–3243). They argue that if the effect of distance operates only through the slave trade, no such relationship should exist where there was no slave trade (p. 3242). While this test provides some reassurance, its logical power is limited. The primary threat to the instrument's validity is not that coastal distance is a universal determinant of trust, but that within the specific historical and geographi-

cal context of Africa, it is correlated with omitted variables that also affect trust, such as the particular nature of colonial investment or state formation. The histories of Europe and Asia are sufficiently different from Africa's that finding no effect there does not logically rule out the existence of Africa-specific confounders. The test demonstrates that the relationship is not a global geographic constant, but it cannot prove that the relationship observed within Africa is driven solely by the slave trade.

Selection bias in the causal channel decomposition: The article's second major contribution attempts to separate the effect of the slave trade into "internal" cultural norms and "external" institutional factors. This analysis relies on identifying the effects from "movers"—individuals who no longer live in their ancestral homelands. The authors are transparent about the significant limitation this imposes, stating that "the estimates are an average effect among the movers only, and they may not apply to the population more generally" (p. 3248). This is a critical issue because the decision to migrate is not random and is likely correlated with the outcome variable, trust. Indeed, the article's appendix suggests that movers have systematically higher levels of inter-group trust (p. 50, Table 21). Because this entire analysis is conducted on a self-selected, non-representative subset of the population (45 percent of the sample, p. 3248), the resulting estimates for the internal and external channels are likely affected by selection bias and their generalizability to the broader population is uncertain.

Failure to distinguish between cultural transmission and genetic selection: The article interprets its findings as evidence for the persistence of culturally transmitted norms of mistrust. However, it explicitly acknowledges but does not empirically rule out a different mechanism: genetic selection. The authors note that it is "theoretically possible that the persistent change in cultural norms arises because a greater number of inherently more trusting individuals were captured and shipped from the continent" (p. 3227). They state that their "analysis is not able to distinguish between these finer transmission mechanisms" (p. 3227). This is a significant limi-

tation, as genetic selection is a first-order alternative explanation, not a "finer" detail. If the slave trade selected for heritable traits related to mistrust, the observed correlation would be due to a change in the population's underlying composition, not the intergenerational transmission of learned behaviors. By defaulting to a cultural explanation in the conclusion (p. 3250), the article's interpretation is stronger than its empirical design can support.

Potential for measurement error in the core independent variable: The analysis is based on a variable measuring the number of slaves exported from each ethnic group, which is constructed from historical samples of slaves whose ethnicity was recorded. For the transatlantic trade, this sample consists of 80,656 individuals (p. 3229). The article does not provide an analysis of whether this small sample is representative of the whole. The historical process of recording a slave's ethnicity was likely not random and could be correlated with factors such as proximity to major ports or the practices of specific traders. If the probability of an enslaved person's ethnicity being recorded is correlated with factors that also affect long-term trust, the key independent variable could suffer from systematic measurement error, a possibility that is not explored in the article.

Ambiguity in the causal mechanism of victimhood versus perpetration: The article's slave exports variable measures the total number of people taken from a given ethnic group, treating this as a measure of victimization. However, the historical process was complex, with some groups acting as active perpetrators or intermediaries in the trade. The instrumental variable, distance from the coast, is correlated with both increased exposure to being captured and a greater opportunity to participate in raiding. The article's core mechanism—that insecurity caused individuals to turn on each other (p. 3221)—is consistent with this ambiguity. However, by using a single aggregate measure, the analysis cannot distinguish between the long-term effects of being raided by outsiders versus the effects of participating in raiding, potentially conflating different historical experiences that may have generated mistrust

through different pathways.

Potential for regional spillover effects: The study's main specification models the impact of the slave trade as being confined within an individual's own ethnic group. This approach may overlook the significant negative spillovers that the slave trade likely had on a regional basis. The "environment of ubiquitous insecurity" (p. 3221) generated by slave raiding would have affected entire regions, not just the specific ethnic groups from which slaves were taken. An ethnic group with few recorded slave exports could still have been profoundly affected if its neighbors were being violently raided, forcing it to adopt mistrustful norms for survival. The authors do attempt to address this in one analysis by controlling for the slave trade intensity of other ethnic groups in the same location (p. 3246, Table 9), and find their main result holds. However, the primary specification does not account for this regional dimension, which may lead to an incomplete picture of the slave trade's total impact.

Measurement error in district-level control variables: The main regression models include controls for district-level ethnic fractionalization and the share of the respondent's own ethnicity in the district. These variables are constructed using the Afrobarometer survey sample itself, where the average respondent's district is represented by only 48 other individuals in the survey (p. 3231, footnote 12). Calculating a district's ethnic composition from such a small sample is likely to introduce significant measurement error. This errors-in-variables problem in the control variables could potentially bias the estimated coefficient on the main variable of interest, slave exports.

Sample reduction in inter-ethnic trustworthiness analysis: In one of the tests to distinguish between causal channels, the authors control for the slave trade's effect on the trustworthiness of other ethnic groups living in the same town (p. 3246, Table 9). This methodological step requires finding other survey respondents from different ethnic groups in the same town. The baseline sample for this specific analysis is already reduced to 12,827 due to other controls, but adding the inter-ethnic trust

variable causes a further drop to 9,673—a reduction of roughly 25 percent (p. 3246). The authors acknowledge this sample reduction and attempt to mitigate it by expanding the geographic area of analysis in subsequent columns. Nonetheless, such a large reduction raises concerns about selection bias, as the remaining sample of individuals living in ethnically mixed towns may be systematically different from those in more homogenous areas, a possibility that is not fully explored.

Presentation and transparency issues: Several minor issues related to presentation and transparency appear in the article. First, a key quantitative claim—that controlling for the quality of the local council reduces the slave trade coefficient by "just under 50 percent"—is based on a comparison with a baseline coefficient of -0.141 from a regression on a restricted sample that is not reported in any table (p. 3246). Second, the article's summary of its selection-on-observables test results inaccurately states that the calculated ratios "range from 3.0 to 11.5" (p. 3238), when the corresponding table shows several values below 3.0, with the actual minimum being 2.57 (p. 3238, Table 4). Third, the complex process of matching historical ethnic identities to modern self-reported identities is described with limited detail, making it difficult to assess a source of potential measurement error (p. 3229). Finally, the main decomposition analysis in Table 10 shows a sample size reduction of about 5 percent from the comparable baseline sample in Table 3 (p. 3237), which is explained only via a footnote in an earlier section (p. 3236, footnote 19). While these are minor points, they reduce the transparency and replicability of the analysis.

Future Research

Disaggregating victimization and perpetration: Future work could refine the measurement of slave trade exposure to distinguish between ethnic groups that were primarily victims of raiding and those that acted as perpetrators or intermediaries. The current aggregate measure of "slave exports" conflates these distinct historical experiences. By separating these groups, researchers could test whether the mechanisms generating mistrust differ between the descendants of those who were raided (fear and victimization) and the descendants of raiders (predatory norms or guilt), providing a more nuanced understanding of how historical trauma translates into modern behavior.

Testing cultural transmission in neutral environments: To better isolate the internal cultural channel from local institutional effects, future research could examine the trust levels of the African diaspora or second-generation migrants living in institutional environments outside of Africa, such as Europe or North America. If the descendants of ethnic groups heavily affected by the slave trade exhibit lower trust even when living in identical institutional settings abroad, this would provide stronger evidence for the persistence of portable cultural norms or intergenerational transmission, free from the potential confounding effects of African domestic institutions or the selection bias inherent in studying internal rural-to-urban migrants.

Investigation of regional spillovers: Future studies could model the spatial dependence of the slave trade's impact to account for regional spillovers. The current analysis focuses on the impact within an ethnic group, but the "environment of ubiquitous insecurity" described by the authors likely affected entire regions, regardless of the specific number of slaves taken from a single group. Investigating how an ethnic group's trust levels were influenced by the raiding intensity experienced by its neighbors could reveal whether the legacy of mistrust is a function of direct victimization or a broader regional adaptation to historical insecurity.

isitcredible.com