

LDST 390: Destiny, Decisions, and Development

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Classroom: Jepson Hall 120

Tu/Th 9:00 - 10:15 AM

Office Hours: We 3:00 - 5:00 PM and by appointment

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Course Description

For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.

H. L. Mencken

Why are some countries rich while others remain poor? This course tackles one of the biggest questions in world politics and history: the origins of global inequality. Students will explore how geography, institutions, and leaders shape the destinies of nations, and why millions remain trapped in poverty despite decades of development efforts. Through structured debates and case studies drawn primarily from Africa, students will evaluate competing explanations for why some societies thrive while others struggle. We will test theoretical frameworks against real-world evidence, examining whether deep historical legacies matter more than contemporary policies, whether mineral resources are a blessing or curse, and what roles international actors play through aid and intervention. The course pays particular attention to the difficult choices leaders face in fragile states and aims to equip students with critical thinking skills for analyzing development challenges. Ultimately, students will move beyond simplistic explanations and formulate their own evidence-based perspectives on what it takes for societies to achieve sustainable development.

Course Goals

- Students will become familiar with competing theoretical explanations for why nations develop differently, including geographic, institutional, historical, and resource-based perspectives.
- Students will acquire knowledge of how scholars test development theories empirically, including the use of historical evidence, cross-national comparisons, and case study analysis.
- Students will apply theoretical frameworks to real-world cases, particularly from Africa, to assess the strengths and limitations of different explanations for poverty and prosperity.
- Students will develop critical thinking skills to evaluate trade-offs in development policy, including debates over foreign aid, humanitarian intervention, and post-conflict reconstruction.

My Teaching Philosophy

When teaching in the undergraduate classroom, I proceed with three overarching goals in mind. The first and most fundamental is to cultivate a life-long passion for learning in my students. My philosophy is that a great teacher lights a spark of curiosity that is innate to all human beings. The second objective of my approach to undergraduate teaching is to give students the tools and cognitive habits that allow them to critically evaluate arguments and consider alternative explanations to claims they encounter. Finally, I seek to equip students with an ability to articulate their own ideas in clear language, whether spoken or written. Together, these principles coalesce to prepare my students for a life of curiosity, respectful yet critical appraisal of differing views, and a measure of comfort with sharing and defending their own ideas.

Course Materials

I will make most of the course materials available to students on the course website. Students are required to use university libraries to obtain the rest. There are no required texts to purchase.

Assignments and Grading

Reading Annotations (5%)

To ensure thoughtful engagement with course materials, students must bring printed and annotated readings to every class. Annotations will be collected at the end of each class and returned the following class period. When multiple readings are assigned for a given session, only the first reading listed on the syllabus will be collected. Before class, students must annotate readings using a red pen with at least five substantive comments, questions, or observations per reading. During or after class, students may add annotations using any other color pen. Substantive annotations demonstrate critical engagement and include questions about arguments (*“How does*

this explain the Botswana exception?”), connections to other readings (“*This contradicts Herbst’s argument*”), critiques of reasoning, identification of key claims, or analysis of evidence. Single words like “Why?” or “Exactly!” and excessive highlighting without commentary do not count as substantive. Annotations will be graded pass/fail. There will be no make-ups for missed submissions, even for excused absences.

Map Quiz (5%)

Much of this course focuses on specific African countries and regions. Knowing where countries are located when they are mentioned in readings and discussions is foundational to understanding the material. Therefore, a map quiz will be administered in class on January 22. Students will be given a blank map of Africa and will be expected to write in the name of a random sample of countries. A list of the 49 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and a current map are provided at the end of this syllabus. There are a number of online African map quizzes that students can use to practice, including [this one from The Washington Post](#).

Participation (7%)

Students’ participation grade will be based on two components:

1. **Office Hours Visit (2%)** – Each student must visit the instructor’s office hours at least once during the semester. The purpose of this visit is for students to become better acquainted with their instructor and to have an opportunity to discuss course material, assignments, or any academic questions they may have. Students who complete this visit earn full credit. Those who do not will receive zero points for this component.
2. **Ongoing In-Class Participation (5%)** – Throughout the semester, I will make notes on student participation. Participation will be graded on the following scale:
 - 0 – attends class irregularly or never participates
 - 1 – contributes meaningfully only a few times a semester
 - 2 – contributes meaningfully less than every two weeks
 - 3 – contributes meaningfully at least once every two weeks
 - 4 – contributes meaningfully at least once a week
 - 5 – contributes meaningfully every class

Midterm Exam (20%)

Students will complete one midterm exam on March 5. The exam will draw from the assigned readings, lectures, and class discussions through week 7. The exam will be a mixture of multiple-choice questions (four answer options, one correct answer), short-answer questions, and a short essay. Students will have the entire class period (75 minutes) to write the exam. The exam will be closed-book.

Debates (20%)

Students will be divided into four debate teams. Each team will participate in three debates throughout the semester. Debate resolutions include:

- Geography matters more than institutions for explaining contemporary differences in development.
- African borders inherited from colonialism should be redrawn.
- Mineral resources are a curse for developing countries.
- The United States should have intervened militarily to stop the Rwandan genocide (1994).
- Foreign aid is a net benefit for developing countries in Africa.
- Germany should pay reparations for the Namibian genocide (1904-1908).

Students will not know which side of the debate they will argue until the day of class. They must prepare arguments for both positions. All team members will receive the same grade for each debate. While two teams debate, the non-debating teams will evaluate both debating teams using a rubric. Each debate will be graded as follows: the instructor's evaluation counts for 50% and the average of all non-debating students' evaluations counts for 50%. Extra points will be awarded to the team that changes more minds, determined by polling all non-debating students before and after each debate. Students' overall debate grade will be the average of their team's three debate scores. Students who miss a debate without a university-excused absence will receive a zero for that debate. Students with excused absences will complete an alternative assignment.

Final Exam (20%)

Students will complete one final exam on April 23. The exam will draw from the assigned readings, lectures, and class discussions from weeks 10-14. The exam will be a mixture of multiple-choice questions (four answer options, one correct answer), short-answer questions, and a short essay. Students will have 75 minutes to write the exam. The exam will be closed-book.

Final Project: Country Podcast (23%)

Working in their debate teams, students will produce a podcast (minimum 60 minutes) focusing on at least one African country of their choice. The podcast should discuss how one or several theories covered in the course help us understand the country's political economy. Students should demonstrate depth of country knowledge and apply course concepts accurately and thoughtfully. Creativity is encouraged, and students may use a variety of sounds and voices, provided that the final product respects copyright laws. The Weinstein Learning Center on campus has an audio/video editing space available and students are encouraged to use its resources (wlc.richmond.edu). A detailed grading rubric will be circulated later in the semester. The final project is due May 1.

Extra Credit

Students may earn extra credit by living on \$5.50 or less for 24 hours and writing a reflection about the experience. Shelter and medical necessities are excluded from the calculation, but students should think carefully about the cost of everything they eat, drink, and use. Students may eat in the dining hall if they wish, but must stay within budget and document that whatever they consumed there did not exceed the limit. Students must submit all receipts and show their calculations demonstrating they stayed within the \$5.50 limit. The reflection (minimum one page) should discuss the challenges faced, connections to course concepts about poverty and development, and what the experience revealed about living under severe resource constraints. The reflection will be graded on a scale of 1 to 5 points, which students may add to one of the following graded assignments: map quiz, debates, midterm exam, final exam, or final project. Reflections must be submitted by the last day of class along with a clear indication of which assignment the credit should be applied to.

Letter grades for student performance will be assigned based on the following percentages:

Grade	Range	Grade	Range	Grade	Range
A	94-100	B-	81-83	D+	68-70
A-	91-93	C+	78-80	D	64-67
B+	88-90	C	74-77	D-	61-63
B	84-87	C-	71-73	F	0-60

Important Dates

1. **Map Quiz:** January 22
2. **Midterm Exam:** March 5
3. **Final Exam:** April 23
4. **Country Podcast due date:** May 1

Course Policies

Attendance Policy

Attendance is both expected and absolutely crucial for student success in this course. Many of the assignments (particularly the midterm and final exams) will be partially based on lectures and in-class discussions and students will miss important information if they choose not to attend regularly. It will be hard for students who do not come to class to pass the course. Students can expect me to be prepared and organized, and to deliver lectures and answer

questions. In turn, I expect students to have read *all* of the assigned readings and to come with questions and requests for clarification.

During Class

Because a number of recent studies (e.g., [this one](#)) suggest that the use of laptops in classrooms is negatively correlated with student learning, students may not use computers while in class (except in cases of documented disability). Phones are prohibited unless explicitly permitted for class activities. Tablets are allowed only if used exclusively for note-taking. Eating and drinking are allowed in class but students are asked to ensure that it does not interfere with their learning or the class in general. Students should try not to eat their lunch in class as classes are typically active and require full attention.

Re-grading

I will do my best to grade all assignments fairly, accurately, and quickly. That said, mistakes can occur. If students have a concern about their grade, they can write a description of the mistake as they see it and send it to me within one week of receiving their grade. Please note that the entire exam or paper will be re-graded, and it is thus possible that students' final grade will go up or down.

Make-Up Exams and Late Assignments

The exams must be taken when scheduled except for the following reasons:

- documented attendance at a university-sanctioned event
- death in the family
- observation of a religious holiday
- illness or injury

If an exam is missed due to an *excused* absence, a make-up exam will be scheduled in consultation with me. It is the student's responsibility to initiate this process and to provide the necessary documentation. Exams missed due to an *unexcused* absence will receive a grade of 0 and cannot be made up. Unexcused late assignments will be penalized by a full letter grade for each 24-hour period by which the assignment is late.

Emails

The classroom is the best place to raise questions that are relevant to every student in the class. Office hours should be dedicated to discussing deeper questions related to class material as well as assignments. While I welcome communication via email, students should be sure to exhaust all other sources (especially the syllabus) that might help answer their questions and consider direct emails as a last resort. Students should include the title of the class in the subject line when writing an email.

Academic Integrity

The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.” Integrity is expected of every student in all academic work. Plagiarism, which means intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one’s own, is a serious and egregious violation and the perpetrator will be subject to any one or a combination of the following sections: report to the Honor Council, loss of credit for the work involved; reduction in grade; or a failing grade in the course. Visit studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/pdfs/statutes.pdf for more information.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The use of AI is not prohibited in this class. However, students should understand what they stand to lose by relying on it. This course is designed to teach students how to grasp complex arguments and articulate ideas persuasively. These are skills that excessive reliance on AI will ineluctably hinder. My experience is that students who use AI to avoid engaging deeply with course materials will find themselves unprepared for debates and exams. At the end of the day, I am offering students an opportunity to develop crucial intellectual capacities. Whether they take advantage of this opportunity or undermine their own education is their choice.

Religious Observance

Students should notify me within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance. Visit registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/religious-observances.html for more information.

Disability Accommodations

Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should let me know as soon as possible so that we may discuss arrangements for assignments and participation. Visit disability.richmond.edu for more information.

Additional Academic Support

Boatwright Library Research Librarians

Research librarians help students with all steps of their research, from identifying or narrowing a topic, to locating, accessing, evaluating, and citing information resources. Librarians support students in their classes across the curriculum and provide individual appointments, class library instruction, tutorials, and research guides. Students can contact an individual librarian (library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) or ask a librarian for help via email (library@richmond.edu), text (804-277-9ASK), or chat (library.richmond.edu/chat.html). Visit library.richmond.edu/help/ask for more information.

Career Services

Career Services can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR. Visit careerservices.richmond.edu for more information.

Counseling and Psychological Services

Students may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce a student's ability to participate in daily activities. Counseling and Psychological Services assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include brief consultations, short-term counseling and psychotherapy, skills-building classes, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services. Visit caps.richmond.edu for more information.

Weinstein Learning Center

The Weinstein Learning Center is the go-to destination for academic support at the University of Richmond. Services include academic coaching, content tutoring, English language and intercultural learning, quantitative and programming resources, speech preparation and coaching, technology studio support, and writing assistance. Peer consultants and professional staff are available for appointments and drop-in sessions to help students develop essential academic skills. Visit wlc.richmond.edu for more information and to view service schedules and appointment times.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (January 13 & 15): Introduction

TUESDAY: Introduction to the Course and Syllabus

- familiarize yourself with the syllabus

THURSDAY: The Big Question

- Diamond, Jared. 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. **Prologue**.
- Martin, Courtney. 2016. “**The Reductive Seduction of Other People’s Problems.**” *BRIGHT Magazine*, January 11.

Week 2 (January 20 & January 22): Geography

TUESDAY: Geographic Determinism

- Diamond, Jared. 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. **Chapter 4**.
- Sachs, Jeffrey and Pia Malaney. 2002. “The Economic and Social Burden of Malaria.” *Nature*, 415(6872): 680-685.

THURSDAY: Building States in Africa

- Herbst, Jeffrey. 2014. *States and Power in Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. **Chapter 1**.
- Congo: Jungle Fever (documentary, available on [YouTube](#)).

Week 3 (January 27 & 29): Institutions

TUESDAY: Extractive vs. Inclusive Institutions

- Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. **Chapter 3**.

THURSDAY: Geography or Institutions? (Debate 🗨️ vs. 🍌)

- Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. **Chapter 2**.

Week 4 (February 3 & 5): Legacies of Early Statehood

TUESDAY: Salutory Legacies of Early Statehood

- Gennaioli, Nicola and Ilija Rainer. 2007. "The Modern Impact of Precolonial Centralization in Africa." *Journal of Economic Growth*, 12(3): 185-234.

THURSDAY: Deleterious Legacies of Early Statehood

- Chlouba, Vladimir, Daniel S. Smith, and Seamus Wagner. 2022. "Early Statehood and Support for Autocratic Rule in Africa." *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(4): 688-724.

Week 5 (February 10 & 12): Colonial Legacies

TUESDAY: Artificial States

- Herbst, Jeffrey. 2014. *States and Power in Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. **Chapter 5.**

THURSDAY: Should Colonial Borders Be Revisited? (Debate 🍏 vs. 🍌)

- Herbst, Jeffrey. 2014. *States and Power in Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. **Chapter 9.**

Week 6 (February 17 & 19): The Political Economy of Mineral Resources

TUESDAY: The Resource Curse

- Ross, Michael L. 2012. *The Oil Curse*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. **Chapter 1.**

THURSDAY: A Curse or a Blessing? (Debate 🍌 vs. 🍏)

- Dunning, Thad. 2008. *Crude Democracy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. **Chapter 1.**

Week 7 (February 24 & 26): Ethnic Politics

TUESDAY: Origins of Ethnic Identities

- Bates, Robert. 1983. "Modernization, Ethnic Competition and the Rationality of Politics," in Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Olorunsola, eds., *State versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. **Chapter 9.**

THURSDAY: Implications of Ethnic Differences

- Posner, Daniel N. 2004. "The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi." *American Political Science Review*, 98(4): 529-545.

Week 8 (March 3 & 5): Midterm Review and Exam

TUESDAY: Midterm Exam Review

We will review concepts introduced in the first half of the course and thus facilitate preparation for the midterm exam. Students should come with questions and requests for clarification.

THURSDAY: Midterm Exam

Week 9 (March 10 & 12): Spring Break

Week 10 (March 17 & 19): The Origins of Civil Wars

TUESDAY: Greed vs. Grievance

- Collier, Paul. 2007. *The Bottom Billion*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press. **Chapter 2**.

THURSDAY: The First Liberian Civil War (Case Study)

- Berkeley, Bill. 2001. *The Graves Are Not Yet Full*. New York, NY: Basic Books. **Chapter 1**.

Week 11 (March 24 & 26): Violence and Foreign Intervention

TUESDAY: The Rwandan Genocide

- Kapuscinski, Ryszard. 2001. *The Shadow of the Sun*. London, U.K.: Penguin. **Chapter 16**.
- Hotel Rwanda (movie, available on [YouTube](#)).

THURSDAY: Intervening to Stop the Rwandan Genocide (Debate 🍌 vs. 🍷)

- Kuperman, Alan J. 2000. "Rwanda in Retrospect." *Foreign Affairs*, 79(1): 94-118.

Week 12 (March 31 & April 2): Economic Marginalization

TUESDAY: Trade and Capital Flows

- Collier, Paul. 2007. *The Bottom Billion*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press. **Chapter 6**.

THURSDAY: World Bank Virtual Visit

- Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2002. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. **Chapter 2**.

Week 13 (April 7 & 9): Foreign Aid

TUESDAY: Rethinking Foreign Aid

- Moyo, Dambisa. 2009. *Dead Aid*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. **Chapter 4**.

THURSDAY: Does Foreign Aid Help or Hurt? (Debate 🗳️ vs. 🍷)

- Sachs, Jeffrey D. 2005. "The Development Challenge." *Foreign Affairs*, 84(2): 78-90.

Week 14 (April 14 & 16): Correcting Historical Wrongs

TUESDAY: The Namibian Genocide

- Wallace, Marion. 2013. *A History of Namibia*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. **Chapter 6**.
- "Namibia: Genocide and the Second Reich." **BBC documentary**.

THURSDAY: Reparations for Colonial Violence (Debate 🍷 vs. 🍷)

- Evans, Joe. "**Why Namibian chiefs have rejected Germany's €1bn 'apology' for colonial genocide.**" *The Week*, June 4, 2021.

Week 15 (April 21 & 23): Final Review and Exam

TUESDAY: Final Exam Review

We will review concepts introduced in the second half of the course and thus facilitate preparation for the final exam. Students should come with questions and requests for clarification.

THURSDAY: Final Exam

Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa

- Angola
- Benin
- Botswana
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Cape Verde*
- Central African Republic
- Chad
- Comoros*
- Congo (Republic of)
- Congo (Democratic Republic of)
- Djibouti
- Equatorial Guinea
- Eritrea
- Ethiopia
- Gabon
- Gambia
- Ghana
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire)
- Kenya
- Lesotho
- Liberia
- Madagascar*
- Malawi
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Mauritius*
- Mozambique
- Namibia
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Rwanda
- São Tomé & Príncipe*
- Senegal
- Seychelles*
- Sierra Leone
- Somalia
- South Africa
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Swaziland
- Tanzania
- Togo
- Uganda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

*Island countries.

AFRICA



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