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# From ‘commodity currencies’ to Covid loans: Africa and global inequality, past and present

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Abstract
This article focuses on the question of Africa and global inequalities, bridging research in the past with the experience of the present. It argues that frameworks of indebtedness and growing inequalities have characterised the African continent’s relationship with globalisation at times of structural socioeconomic crisis. This was true in the early modern period, and can also be seen to characterise the macroeconomic framework of the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding the pandemic response through a structural and *longue durée* economic perspective opens up new avenues of interpretation and shows the importance of perspectives from the humanities and social sciences in shaping pandemic responses. Comparative historical approaches, socioeconomic continuities, and the critique of power provided by non-STEM subjects are shown to be vital in shaping a more holistic understanding of the pandemic time, and of how to respond to future pandemics.

Keywords
Africa, inequality, Covid-19, humanities, social sciences, pandemic response.

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As with many things in our time, the lecture on which this article is based was delayed. It was initially scheduled for the previous academic year, but the ongoing social restrictions related to the response to the Covid pandemic made that impractical. One of the consequences of that delay is that this is a very different essay to that which I might have offered to this journal a year or 18 months ago. It also helps to frame a question which some readers may have been asking already: namely, what is a historian of precolonial West Africa doing writing and researching on the theme of Global Public Health in the 21st century?

The short answer is that I am now a historian of Covid, as well as of precolonial West Africa. Having published a book,[1] three articles for *African Arguments*,[2] and a number of jointly authored essays for *UnHerd*,[3] the question of the relationship between the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the theme of global inequality is one which has been preoccupying my research already for some time.

But there is a much longer answer – and one that will occupy the rest of this article. My hope is that readers may agree that there are clear continuities between research on precolonial African economic history on the one hand, and research on the Covid crisis on the other. Fundamentally, by considering the current socioeconomic crisis as part of a structural conjuncture of power – rather than through the somewhat narrower lens of the virus itself – we can reflect not only on our present predicament, but also on the continuities in terms of power and economics that underpin the evolution of human societies over the past centuries. We may also see the nature of the impacts of the pandemic through a new lens, and begin to reflect on questions such as debt repayments – and the question of the debt of Low Income Countries in particular – in a different light.

To begin the process of this reflection, we can turn to the precolonial West African past, and the question which preoccupied my research for the 13 years or so between around 2006 and 2019, the year in which I published the book *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*.[4] This was a book which dealt with many aspects of the West African past, but one of the core elements was what we might call 'the old politics of global inequality'. In that book, I attempted to build on Walter Rodney's thesis from his landmark work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*,[5] as Ana Lucía Araujo notes in a new essay to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Rodney's landmark book.[6] In that work, Rodney sought to analyse the continuities linking economic extractivism in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the colonial era and the immediate post- (or neo-)colonial context. Rodney analysed the structural framework which extracted surpluses from the African continent at the expense of the African poor; and argued that the frameworks of these systems eventually collapsed through their internal contradictions in the era of formal European imperialism on the African continent.

Rodney's thesis was part of the dependency school of economics which sought to interpret the concentration of wealth in the West and the economic underdevelopment of other continents through a relational lens. It grew out of and alongside the work of economists such as Samir Amin and André Gunder Frank, as well as from an existing tradition of Caribbean critique of the history

[1] Green (2021a).
[2] Cardoso & Green (2020); Green (2021b; 2021c).
[3] Fazi & Green (2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c).
[4] Green (2019).
[5] Rodney (1972).
[6] Araujo (2022).

of capitalism in the mould of Eric Williams.[7] Amin’s landmark work *L’Afrique de l’Ouest Bloquée* (‘Neo-Colonialism in West Africa’ in its English translation) had been published the year before Rodney’s book,[8] while Frank’s work on economic dependency in Latin America appeared somewhat later.[9] The dependency school took a transformative position: instead of seeing Western wealth as the product of some sort of innate genius or native wit, this was seen as predicated upon the impoverishment of other world regions. So-called ‘core’ economies extracted surplus from those which became in this process peripheral.

It’s important to note, too, that Rodney’s book was published at a time of great interest in the economic history of precolonial Africa and its relationship with the world economy. The following year (1973), A.G. Hopkins published his book *An Economic History of West Africa*, which took a market-based approach to the region’s economic history – and was also intended as a strong critique of modernisation theory then in vogue among development economists.[10] Over time, Hopkins’ approach and that of other ‘formalists’ tended to predominate in the Western academy – and yet by the time of the 1980s, and the rise of structural adjustment policies on the African continent, the question of the precolonial economic past almost disappeared from academic research agendas as the modern took centre stage.

*A Fistful of Shells* sought to re-engage with these questions, and to build on Rodney’s thesis with new archival research on the one hand, and the new critical perspectives which intersectional theories of the past decades have brought to the question of agency and subalternity on the other. By looking at early globalisation on the African continent through the lens of currency exchanges, what I tried to do in that book was to analyse the core of that process of economic underdevelopment through the lens of the global accumulation of capital. I also sought to balance this approach with the rise of what may be termed the ‘Agency School’ of African and African Diaspora history, which has emphasised the agency of African actors in the construction of history – but has at times done so through reproduction of the neoliberal paradigm of ‘agency’.[11]

This was a book which dealt, then, with what we may call ‘the old politics of global inequality’. The intellectual continuity between that work and my current research on the Covid crisis emerges through this theme of global inequality. My argument in this article is that it is possible to trace structural continuities between our present context of indebtedness and extractivism in the Covid era, and the contexts of precolonial Africa’s economic relations with the Atlantic world. By making those connections, we can understand both contexts better.

Some may be surprised at this. What can the lens of the economic historian, and the contexts of precolonial Africa, bring to a framework in which the pandemic response has been driven through the hard sciences – or at least a specific constituency among them? When the majority of the reading public is, I would suggest, addicted to data and scientific debate as never before, what can the perspective of someone who is outside that world really offer?

Often in academic life, it is precisely analyses from outside a specific disciplinary norm that can be revealing. Certainly, the policy response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has been driven almost exclusively through the lens of data-driven medicine and public health. The role of the social sciences – in which I would include economics, and economic history – has been stark

[7] Drayton (2022).
[8] Amin (1971).
[9] Frank (1978).
[10] Hopkins (1973); see also Hopkins (2019).
[11] Green (2019: xxx-xxxi); see also Bennett (2018).

through its absence from the decision-making table, as discussed widely in *The Covid Consensus*.[12] But what happens if we recognise the ways in which medicine and public health are deeply imbricated in the accumulation of capital in the 21st century, as indeed they were during the era of the development of modern medical science in the period of formal European colonialism in Africa – and therefore in associated patterns of inequality?[13] What happens if we analyse what has happened in the last two years through the lens of inequality – continuing to the present the type of analysis which was conducted in *A Fistful of Shells*?

The argument advanced in this article is that, if we do that, the implications are stark – and very revealing. The phenomena of credit, inflation, and economic marginality in a context of technological flux were all deeply related to the transformations of West African socioeconomic contexts from the 15th to the 18th centuries. And they are also fundamental to the contexts of the oceans of Covid debt that have been created in the past two years, and the increasing inflationary pressures which have since followed and been further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. It's the argument of this article that this is not some accident; thinking about the continuities allows us to reflect more deeply on the structural configuration of 21st-century capital and the Covid policy response of the past two years.

There are far more things to be said about the precolonial era of West Africa than I can articulate in this essay. My focus here will be on the economic aspects – and specifically on what historians have generally known as 'commodity currencies'.

What is meant by 'commodity currencies'? Historians generally use this term to refer to the goods which were traded as currency in the era of Atlantic trade, but which had multiple uses beyond those of strict monetary value. This includes textiles – widely used as currencies in parts of Atlantic West Africa – iron and copper bars, salt, and rum. Cowries – described by Jan Hogendorn and Paul Lovejoy as 'the shell money of the slave trade'[14] – were also widely traded. In any case the term 'commodity currency' is used to denote a currency that has utilitarian as well as monetary uses.

Nevertheless, this framework has been updated by economic historians in the past 15 years. In the first place many of these 'commodities' were actually widely used as currencies in other parts of the world: copper was used for coin in Portugal and Peru in the 17th century,[15] while cowries were used as currency in Yunnan, China. There was nothing specifically 'African' about this framework, therefore, and the African use of these monies was connected to world economic frameworks. Moreover, Akinobu Kuroda has done much work on the West African economic context, and argues that plural currency areas have in fact been the norm in global economic frameworks – where different currencies may coexist depending on usage and seasonality.[16] It has also been shown that many of the goods imported by European traders in the Atlantic exchange were pre-existing forms of currency in West Africa – in the case of copper and cowries especially.[17] In many cases, what occurred in fact was an expansion of an existing monetary base, which often had inflationary consequences.

[12] Green (2021a, esp. 14-17); see also Sutoris *et al.* (2022).
[13] See Green (forthcoming).
[14] Hogendorn & Johnson (1986).
[15] Green (2019: 225-6).
[16] Kuroda (2008).
[17] Green (2016).

In this, of course, Atlantic Africa was not alone. Economic historians have long noted how the huge increase in silver circulating in Europe following the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century had inflationary consequences in many parts of the continent.[18] While some have challenged this view of causality as ignoring European demographic growth and increased demand, the role of increasing currency availability in what historians know as the 'price revolution' is still generally accepted as a significant factor. Much of this silver was destined to be re-exported to China, and the economic historians Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez have shown how this accompanied a depreciation of the value of silver during the Ming dynasty in China.[19] In sum, the pattern of increased currency supplies and inflation was a common one across the world in the 16th century.[20]

So the past two decades of research have done much to show just how integrated precolonial Western African economies were with world economic processes. These movements of history have therefore sought to include Africa within a dynamic from which academic research has too often excluded it, dating from the era of the 1960s and the Trevor-Roper school of history. The importance of this integration of West Africa within a broader picture of the world economy is crucial, for it also helps to bolster the relational approach to global economic questions which, as noted above, was developed in the 1970s by the dependency school: *A Fistful of Shells* argued that the patterns which emerged in this period disadvantaged the African continent in the accumulation of capital, setting in train the pattern of a more globalised inequality – and what Walter Rodney called economic underdevelopment – which subsequent processes have added to.

But how did this framework take shape? In sum, while the currencies which Western Africa had previously used, and imported, lost comparative global value – in the case of cowries and copper, for instance – the value which accrued through productive labour in the New World of enslaved Africans, and from the export of gold (which led to the creation of the Gold Standard in 1821), increased. Over time, therefore a shift in capital accumulation took place. The consequence was that by the start of the 19th century, during the industrial revolution, economies of scale meant that there were scant returns from manufacturing investment in Africa, accelerating the process of comparative inequality.[21]

The events of the last two years have provided a useful perspective on these ideas. One fundamental question is that of credit. It was in fact normal in the Atlantic era for currencies to be imported from elsewhere (one can for instance think of the importance of the silver mines of Spanish America to European currency stocks). The reliance of African states such as Kongo, Dahomey and the Aro of Biafra on external forms of currency was therefore not unusual. What was unusual, perhaps, was the relationship which this had to questions of credit – and the role of Atlantic traders as creditors, supplying these varied currencies to African traders and rulers.

This dependence on external credit has in many ways been a core characteristic of African economic systems since this time – something that can be seen very clearly in the current era of Covid loans. This is why I wrote an essay with Carlos Cardoso (former research director of CODESRIA and now based in Bissau) during the first months of the pandemic, arguing that this

[18] Hamilton (1934).
[19] Flynn & Giraldez (1996).
[20] Green (2016).
[21] Green (2019: 471).

crisis required a reconsideration of how African countries secured economic credit going into the future, and the creation of much more consolidated creditor institutions based on the continent.[22]

Nevertheless, two years into the Covid crisis, we can see that this kind of solution is very far from being on the table. The latest data on the debt crisis is alarming, and has grave implications for future public health on the continent. Yet, as we see, the relationship of external credit and economic underdevelopment is a very old one indeed, and in its own way is nothing new. That's why what we have really seen during the Covid pandemic is a radical continuity of existing policies.

Let us turn therefore to a consideration of the landscape of inequality in the Covid era: what I called in my 2021 book on the topic, 'the new politics of global inequality'. We can see straightaway a situation that takes to new levels a longstanding structural economic framework. We can consider this continuity in two ways: either as an inevitable outcome of the emergence of a new respiratory virus, where the response is driven by scientific priorities; or as the intensification of existing frameworks of political and economic power, reproducing interconnections of credit, debt, and impoverishment which are by now structurally baked into any policy 'innovation'. Most analysts to date have generally opted for the former approach, but in this article I am going to explore the latter.

When considering the inevitability of the policy response, and the impacts which this has had in West Africa in terms of incomes and inequalities, there is fortunately much useful data to consider. In the first place, there is the question of employment. A good example here is Nigeria, where the Nigerian Statistics Agency estimated in September 2021 a 20 per cent loss in formal employment.[23] This was in fact a positive outcome, when compared to initial projections: at the end of March 2020, at the outset of the pandemic, the UNDP estimated that half of all formal jobs in Africa could be lost as a result of the pandemic mitigation measures that were put in place.[24] Nevertheless, 20 per cent is an enormous impact on employment, and the ongoing impacts were brought home in harrowing form in a short film by Tobi Akinde of the French Research Institute in Africa at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, broadcast in December 2021, where the first interviewee described how there were no jobs in Nigeria today.[25]

To the question of formal employment, there is of course the informal market. In 2018, the International Labour Organization estimated that 85 per cent of all work in the African continent was conducted in the informal sector.[26] According to a November report from ReliefWeb, most have not recovered the ability to work, their earnings still far below 2019 levels, and one in three threatened by food insecurity. Four in every ten (40 per cent) domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers were still earning less than 75 per cent of their pre-Covid earnings in mid-2021.[27]

In this situation of economic collapse, naturally the debt crisis is growing, and here the relationship with international credit – which is by now familiar to us in the framework of this article – has been central. Debt suspension initiatives sought to postpone about $20 billion owed by 73 countries to bilateral lenders between May and December 2020; and yet, afraid of downgrades

[22] Cardoso & Green (2020).
[23] *Reuters* (2021).
[24] *New Zimbabwe* (2020).
[25] Akinde (2021).
[26] International Labour Organization (2018).
[27] *ReliefWeb* (2021).

in their credit-ratings and higher borrowing costs, many Low Income Countries were reluctant to adopt the Covid loans offered by multilateral lending institutions.[28] In the end, just 42 countries received relief totalling $12.7 billion.[29]

With collapsing earnings from formal and informal employment, and ballooning debts through the international credit system, the consequences have been stark. A report in February 2022 noted that not only had GDP fallen by as much as 7.8 per cent in some cases, but that remittances from abroad had fallen by 25 per cent.[30] In a context where remittances from rich countries accounted for over half of private capital flows to Africa prior to the pandemic,[31] this has had a devastating effect on the daily economy, with over 40 million additional people in extreme poverty across the African continent.[32]

We can take a couple of examples from West Africa. In late January 2022 the Ghanaian economist Godfred Alufar Bokpin suggested that Ghana’s economy was on the brink of collapse;[33] investment has collapsed as the debt-to-GDP ratio has grown, triggered by the response to the pandemic.[34] In Nigeria, meanwhile, the panorama is of dwindling earnings, growing debts and unaffordable debt servicing agreements;[35] these have all led to a huge spike in the cost of basic foods, following a tripling of the country’s debt since President Buhari took office in 2015.[36] It is moreover to be noted that this severe situation all predated the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and analysts are agreed that this has had a further sharp impact in terms of rising fuel and food prices.[37]

Where African nations have adopted the bail-outs offered by international creditors, the panorama is little better. An Oxfam report from 2021 found that 85 per cent of the 107 Covid loans negotiated by the IMF to alleviate the immediate debt crisis provoked in poor countries by the response to SARS-CoV-2 are attached to future programmes of austerity to pay for them.[38] That is, future erosions of healthcare, social programmes and education in poor countries are a guaranteed outcome. Meanwhile, a December 2021 article in the *Financial Times* by Ayoade Alakija (co-Chair of the Africa Vaccine Delivery Programme) spoke of two decades of progress in eradicating inequality being lost[39] – but this figure on Covid loans makes it clear that this is just the beginning of a process of the impacts of all of this on socioeconomic lives and livelihoods on the African continent.

There has been one exception to this, and in this the impacts of the pandemic in Africa have been notably similar to those elsewhere in the world. The continent’s billionaires have done excellently. A January 2022 report from Nigeria found that Africa’s 18 billionaires had seen their wealth increase by 15 per cent in 2021 alone.[40] This put them on a par with US billionaires,

[28] Sandefur (2021).
[29] Green (2022).
[30] *ReliefWeb* (2022).
[31] UNCTAD (2018).
[32] *ReliefWeb* (2022).
[33] *Pulse Ghana* (2022).
[34] *Bloomberg UK* (2022).
[35] *Guardian Nigeria* (2022).
[36] *Vanguard* (2022).
[37] *Economist* (2022).
[38] Oxfam (2021).
[39] Alakija (2021).
[40] *Premium Times* (2022).

where a report at the end of October from *Forbes* showed that they were US$2 trillion richer than they had been at the start of the pandemic.[41] In Latin America, meanwhile, billionaires increased their wealth by 52 per cent during the pandemic,[42] while in Mexico multimillionaires saw their wealth increase by 31.4 per cent in 2021 alone.[43]

In the case of the African continent, I hope that the earlier part of this article has placed this massive increase in poverty and inequality – both within the continent, and between the continent and other parts of the world – in a useful context. That context is one of credit and debt, and the significance of this framework at a time of structural sociopolitical crisis. This is a reasonable description of the early modern era of Atlantic trade – and it certainly describes the situation during the era of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In sum, where economies are globally interconnected, and since the 1500s, periods of economic and social crisis have often seen the emergence of policies which increase the debt burden on African nations and lead to greater relations of economic and political dependence. The aftermath of the Age of Revolutions in the Western hemisphere, for instance, saw the massive depreciation of the cowrie currency in West Africa and presaged the rise of formal colonialism.[44] During this period of crisis, what we are seeing is another framework of increased indebtedness and impoverishment. Much current analysis would describe this as an 'inevitable outcome' of the pandemic; but we can instead choose to see it as the inevitable outcome of five centuries of political and economic globalisation.

Are there any ways of imagining a different kind of economic and political relationship to the one that has been outlined so far? In our article on this topic, Carlos Cardoso and I developed two core ideas. The first was that it was imperative for African institutions to develop continental credit frameworks through existing multilateral institutions such as Ecobank and the African Union. This could be kickstarted through a campaign to encourage members of the diaspora to bank with institutions on the continent, which in time would make the continent less dependent on international credit. Our second suggestion was that the debts to global credit institutions from Africa should not just be postponed, but cancelled.

Since we published that article in August 2020, the case in support of this latter idea has grown much stronger. This will be the focus of the final part of this present article.

In terms of poverty and inequality, it's clear that what has been witnessed in the past two years is one of the largest and quickest transfers of wealth in history from the poor to the rich – an enormous increase in inequality. As the liberal Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote in *Scientific American*, 'the pandemic's most significant outcome will be a worsening of inequality, both within the U.S. and between developed and developing countries. Global trillionaire wealth grew by US$4.4 trillion between 2020 and 2021, and at the same time more than 100 million people fell below the poverty line'.[45]

Many journalists and media outlets aver that this increase in inequality has been caused by the pandemic. Yet it is my contention in this article that this has been caused not by SARS-CoV-2, but

[41] *Independent* (2021).
[42] *Forbes Colombia* (2022).
[43] *Yahoo!* (2022).
[44] Lovejoy (1974).
[45] Stiglitz (2022).

by the response to that new respiratory virus. As the historian Adam Tooze argued in *Shutdown*, there is nothing new about a pandemic of such a virus – what is new and unprecedented is rather the response to that virus.[46] Since what is also unprecedented is the increase in inequality, it follows that this latter has been caused by the other unprecedented factor – the response – since such increases in inequality have not been associated with other pandemics.

Nevertheless, if this virus were a terrible threat to African nations, every bit as much as to Western nations, one could well argue that this was simply a painful process that had to be gone through. However, the evidence of the last two years shows that this is not the case.

By the date at which this article went to press (18 July 2022), Africa had recorded 256,424 deaths in total.[47] Of these, 171,500 had occurred in just four countries, generally wealthier countries with older populations (South Africa, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco). Just 85,000 deaths had been recorded in the rest of the continent, or roughly 42,000 per year. And this should not be entirely surprising when the UN recorded the median age on the continent in 2019 to be 19.8,[48] and when it has become clear that this is a virus which overwhelmingly affects people much older than that. Indeed, some health professionals noted this potential outcome back in March 2020 when the pandemic began,[49] but they were ignored, and lockdown measures were recommended / imposed by the WHO across the continent.[50]

Of course, these figures are widely said to be an underestimate, and yet perhaps not by so much as to be truly significant. In July 2020, Stanford University Professor of Medicine John Ioannides estimated that African case numbers represented 30-80 per cent of the true figure, and that this proportion was increasing with time.[51] Meanwhile, the WHO declared in October 2021 that only 1 in 7 Covid cases on the African continent were recorded (*c.* 15%).[52] Given that Covid cases alone are less likely to be recorded than Covid deaths (since they may result only in mild symptoms), these estimates of cases and fatalities are quite comparable. They would indicate that the Covid fatality rate in Africa is perhaps two or three times that recorded, in countries where diagnostics and medical facilities have not allowed for accurate recordings (i.e. outside the four countries with higher death rates noted above).

But let us be more conservative, and say that the true figure is four times that recorded – or roughly 340,000 deaths over two years for the continent (excepting the four countries noted), or *c.* 170,000 per year; in a continent where 9 million people die annually, this mortality increase of around 2 per cent is not huge. Moreover, it should be noted that these are conservative estimates, assuming a fourfold increase on recorded Covid mortality. Some distinguished African scholars feel that the Covid mortality estimates are over- rather than under-estimates. This was the view of Dr Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, the Ghanaian Historian of Medicine and Head of the Department of History and Political Science at KNUST, in an interview which he gave in October 2021.[53]

A good case study for this would be Nigeria. By 19 April 2022, Nigeria had recorded 3,143 Covid-19 deaths, or around 1,600 per year. Let us be ultra-cautious, and assume that the true figure

[46] Tooze (2021).
[47] https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/
[48] Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2019).
[49] *Science* (2020).
[50] Green (2021a: 138).
[51] Ioannidis (2021).
[52] WHO Africa (2021).
[53] Green & Adu-Gyamfi (2021).

is seven times this, and around 10,000 per annum. As a country where 1.8 million people die annually, this represents a mortality increase of 0.6 per cent. In a context where an additional 40 million people in Africa entered extreme poverty in 2021 according to *ReliefWeb*, and where the WHO says that malnutrition is responsible for the deaths worldwide of 45 per cent of children under 5,[54] the rationale of mandating these policies across the whole world – as the WHO did in February and March 2020 – must be called into question.

Moreover, lockdowns had in fact already been trialled in Africa in the context of infectious diseases. This was during the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic which struck Guinea-Conakry, Liberia and Sierra Leone. What is striking is that esteemed practitioners of global health such as Doctors-without-Borders (Médecins-sans-frontières: hereafter MSF) warned against this policy at the time as breaking trust and unenforceable in countries with such a large informal economy.[55] Riots followed in Liberia,[56] and as the anthropologist Paul Richards showed, the control of the Ebola epidemic had nothing to do with lockdowns and came from sustained dialogue with communities and policies developed in partnership with them.[57] This is why experienced practitioners of global public health, such as the former Deputy-Director of MSF in Spain Llanos Ortíz Montero, who was involved in MSF's Ebola response in Freetown, were shocked as to the WHO's recommendations for universal lockdowns in this pandemic.[58]

In sum, rich countries have pressured Low Income Countries on the continent to destroy their livelihoods and income streams, hugely increasing the debt burden as we have seen in this article, to combat a disease that is mainly a problem for wealthier people with longer life expectancies in rich countries. This is a 21st-century iteration of medical colonialism, as I noted in a recent article in *African Arguments*.[59] Meanwhile, the focus of the global pharmaceutical industry on Covid tests and Covid vaccines has meant a shortage of other vaccines and indeed of the rapid malaria tests – as test manufacturers switch to Covid tests.[60] African medical priorities are subordinated to those of the rich world, and African economies and infrastructures have been set back 20 years, with future impacts from Covid indebtedness to come – following a one-sized-fits-all response for a disease which, in fact, does not impact the continent nearly as much as the rest of the world.

Given that this has caused an enormous spike of indebtedness, for the sake of fighting a disease which a number of commentators have said is far less serious than existing endemic diseases,[61] the question of whether African countries should be forced to foot the bill for this indebtedness is very much a live one.

From an academic perspective, one of the striking elements of the last two years has been the almost complete exclusion of the disciplines of the Social Sciences and the Humanities from the debate on policy responses to the Coronavirus pandemic. I say striking, rather than surprising, since this response is clearly of a piece with the generalised policy direction of government in

[54] Green (2021a: 135).
[55] *BBC* (2014).
[56] Tooze (2021: 52).
[57] Richards (2016).
[58] Green (2021d).
[59] Green (2021c).
[60] Green & Ortíz Montero (2021).
[61] See for instance the interview with Elsa Rodrigues, an Angolan social scientist (Green & Rodrigues 2022).

recent decades – prioritising STEM subjects and defunding or under-funding the social sciences and the humanities.

Clearly, funding medical and scientific research is of great importance. And yet, in beginning to pull the threads of this discussion together, I would argue that we can also see that the exclusion of perspectives from the humanities and social sciences in the pandemic policy response has been a grave error.

In the first place, critical perspectives from non-STEM disciplines are very useful in the question of data. The past two years have proceeded on the assumption that data always must hold primacy over critique. And this is, I would argue, one of the core assumptions that has driven the response to the pandemic – and cleared the field of relevant perspectives from the humanities and social sciences. And yet this is to fetishise data in a way which presumes an objectivity which is far from the reality. There has in fact been much argument – as most readers will know – about the definition and interpretation of Covid data: the redefinition of a ‘case’ away from its pre-SARS-CoV-2 definition of requiring symptomatic expression; the definition of a ‘Covid fatality’ as being within 90 (or 28) days of a positive test result, and the question of comorbidities.

Historians and social scientists know very well that data is not objective, and that core assumptions are built in to the way in which data is presented and analysed – as indeed the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has shown. Bringing together the perspectives discussed in this article, we could suggest that those core assumptions and policy directions have included the continuity of longstanding global relations of inequality linking the Global North and the Global South.

In fact, I would argue that to really compute what an appropriate response to pandemics should be, we need to move away from a fetishisation of data which merely reflects our addiction to computing technology. We need to incorporate perspectives from Psychology, Sociology, Economics, and Medical Anthropology, as well as History. In many ways, this is the type of critique that a range of scholars from the humanities and social sciences are now seeking to develop, and which has also emerged in the frameworks which have been under discussion in this article.

Beyond the question of critique, what can History as a discipline bring to the phenomenon that has convulsed global societies over the past two years – the reality of a pandemic on the one hand, and the associated socioeconomic catastrophe which has been produced by the response to this one on the other?

It’s my contention that it can bring a lot, and in this final part of the article I shall give some examples that illuminate this – and to my mind demonstrate two things: (1) that, in the case of future pandemics, the analyses and critiques of social scientists and scholars from the humanities are vital in framing policy responses; and (2) that they must be vital now in the post-pandemic phase.

One example of the utility of the discipline of History – or what that utility could have been – comes with the question of comparative history. Comparing this pandemic to others is quite easy to do in terms of severity, and this can and should help to guide what an appropriate response might be. The comparison that has usually been made is with the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-19. According to the US Center for Disease Control, Spanish Flu killed at least 50 million people during the two years of its novel endemicity in 1918-1919.[62] The vast majority of these fatalities were among younger people. At this time, the world population was around 1.8 billion,[63] less than

[62] CDC (2019a).
[63] *Our World in Data* (2019).

one-quarter of what it is today, so this is roughly 200 million fatalities in 2020-2021 terms. This clearly cannot be compared to the 6.25 million largely older people who have been recorded as having died in two years from SARS-CoV-2 to date;[64] even if there may be undercounting, and the true figure may be more than this, it is clearly not comparable to the mortality of Spanish Flu.

What other comparisons might we make? One might be the 1957 Asian Flu so-called, which according to the CDC killed between 1.1 million people over the space of two years, at a time when the world population was 40 per cent of what is it now – that is 2.5 million fatalities in today's terms.[65] This would be a fatality rate which is roughly 40 per cent that of the present estimate for Covid-19; as this was a pandemic which affected the young more than the old, the number of life years lost was greater, although clearly in terms of overall mortality this was still much less than in the case of Covid-19.

Comparative histories can of course be risky, and indeed dangerous, if we end up comparing apples and pears. Certainly, the relative mortality figures of Covid-19 and Spanish Flu would suggest that apples and pears are being compared here. Some may say the same about the 1957 pandemic, and certainly more research is required. It's a shame that more of this was not either funded or forthcoming over the past two years, as this could have helped to assess what was the most appropriate policy response.

Another example of the utility of History as a discipline is the question of histories of policy. One thing that historians are usually adept at doing is to look at official documents, and then to look at actual events and policies in action – and to propose hypotheses when the two do not cohere. That is one of the contributions of the work I have done in this area to date: to look at official policies, to assess the nature of the response, and then to present hypotheses to explain the gulf between them. My contention here is that there is an urgent need for much more work to be done by historians in this area.

One of the core elements of this is to address the WHO and its policies. We have already seen how the implementation of brief lockdowns in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2014 had been attempted, and deemed a failure. Further research was then commissioned by the WHO into appropriate mandatory Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions in the case of a pandemic. Elsewhere, I have analysed the December 2019 WHO document on Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions in Pandemics, which is an interesting document.[66] The report, prepared by the Hong Kong University School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in collaboration with the WHO, does not use the word 'lockdown' once in addressing the question of appropriate responses to pandemics. That is, the state-of-art policy in Global Health just 3 months prior to the declaration of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic did not recommend lockdowns, or even address them at all. The report also stated that policies which became routine practices during the last two years should not be applied under any circumstances: border closures, quarantine of asymptomatic individuals, and the use of contact tracing.[67]

More work on these questions of policy, and their historical roots, is urgently required. An up-to-speed real-time analysis during the first phase of the pandemic might certainly have helped in developing a fuller understanding of scientific consensus and response to previous and past pandemics, in comparison.

[64] https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ (data accessed 19 April 2022).
[65] CDC (2019b).
[66] WHO (2019).
[67] WHO (2019: 3).

The question of political policies brings us to the third area that I wish to highlight here, one which is certainly one of the most fundamental elements of History as a discipline. As a critique of power, History both provides analysis and interpretation of the ways in which power operates in human society – and also can provide a variety of cases to show the potential diversity of social arrangements which can be produced by power, and which can also be used in some cases and to some extent to mitigate its abuse.

This is one of the reasons why this article is disciplinarily historical – since I have sought in it to analyse the question of policy, disease and impacts not through the lens of medicine but through the lens of power. As a critique of power, the analysis of the policy response to the pandemic appears quite different to how it appears when seen through the lens of medicine and medical power.

Returning to the question of Africa and global inequality, as we have seen in this article, the policies we have witnessed in the past two years are unprecedented in type and not in structure. They follow a longstanding pattern linking external credit, currency depreciation, and economic underdevelopment in Africa at times of global socioeconomic crisis. Many of the details of the impacts of the past two years are now in, and they make grim reading when the balance of the pandemic is considered: there can be no doubt that the harms in poor countries far exceed any benefits, as indeed academic research concluded from the brief Ebola lockdowns of 2014-15. As an anonymous Indian critic wrote in the *New Left Review* in the March/April 2020 edition:

> The lockdown has transferred the burden of the coronavirus pandemic almost entirely onto the shoulders of the poor and marginalised. It is clear from the videoclips on social media of ordinary people expressing their anger and helplessness that most see the lockdown as a calamity far greater than COVID-19 itself … Put brutally, workers may starve to save the primarily middle-class elderly from dying. And for anyone who doubts that the possibility of starvation is real, it’s worth noting that the Chief Minister of Kerala, widely praised for his response to the pandemic, felt the need to explicitly reassure people that he would not allow anyone in the state to starve to death as a consequence of the lockdown.[68]

This is why, in my book *The Covid Consensus*, I describe the policy framework of the pandemic response as a ‘radical continuity of existing trends’. There was already rampant inequality in global economies, and that has radically increased. Computing was already at the forefront of work and social interactions, and that has radically increased. And as argued here, for many centuries, policies leading to increased indebtedness and dependence of poor countries on rich ones are nothing new.

In conclusion, it seems therefore that we need many more works that seek to analyse the events of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic not primarily through the lens of medicine and science but rather through the historian’s lens of a critique of power. The answer offered here to the question, what is at the root of the unprecedented times we are living through, is quite different to that of many. In the first place, they are unprecedented in type and not structure – and in fact represent a radical continuity of existing trends.

In *The Covid Consensus*, I argue that the way in which the unprecedented response to a novel respiratory virus enabled the rapid acceleration of existing directions of power in human societies suggests that the response to this virus was conditioned not by the threat it posed to human health, but rather by these existing trends of power in human societies. In this article, we have seen how that framework is also conditioned by centuries of global interactions linking the African continent

[68] Musahar (2020).

with the rest of the world – interactions which have tended to exacerbate inequalities in times of socioeconomic crisis.

But I hope that I have also shown in this article how perspectives from the humanities and social sciences can offer perspectives that can shift this balance, or rather imbalance. As we have seen, a close look at the evidence can lead to important policy implications which relate to perspectives from non-STEM subjects: it can make a strong case for the abolition of indebtedness from African countries, but in order to make this case really powerful it is also necessary to bring in the long-term perspectives on the relations of Africa to global inequality, such as I have tried to offer here.

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