

EDITORIAL

COVID-19, Inequality, and Social Stratification in Africa

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Abstract

The global health emergency reflects systemic global inequalities central to which is social stratification in Africa. While existing analyses frame Africa as needy of global ‘help’, this editorial argues that whether in terms of the economics of inequality, pandemics, or recovery, Africa can teach the rest of the world key lessons.

Keywords: Global Health Crisis, Africa, Inequality, Social Stratification.

1. Uncharted

We live in unchartered times. The world's most powerful nations have been brought to their knees. Both the learned and the lay have fallen ill and died. Neither the mighty nor the meek has been spared. Dead bodies have become a common scene in some of the world's most celebrated cities, while celebrities have been forced to keep indoors. The leisure class and the working class have similarly been quarantined. The certainty of the past has been broken. *An Age of Uncertainty*, as John Kenneth Galbraith called his book with that theme (Galbraith, 1977), is upon us.

Margaret Heffernan (2020) is right: these are unchartered times, but the foundations of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inequality and social stratification, risk becoming endemic, hidden by a thick debris of shock and panic. Both in terms of access to and control of income and wealth, global inequality has increased. The proliferation of academic books on the subject – ranging from *Capital in the 21st Century* by Thomas Piketty (2014); *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions* by Jason Hickel (2017) and *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* by Branko Milanovic (2016), to Frank Stilwell's (2019) *Political Economy of Inequality* – reflects the seriousness of this issue. The outrage of leading politicians, from Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders to Cyril Ramaphosa, about growing inequalities and the prominence the issue is given in magazines such as *The Economist* and *Time* demonstrate that the concern about inequality is no longer simply academic. The issue is not just about the so-called class divide, either. Inequality is also about race and gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the leading black feminist, has described this inequality graphically:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked – feet standing on shoulders – with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who – due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below – are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-

burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 151-152).

It is commonly asserted that neoclassical, Austrian, and new institutional economics have been particularly incapable in framing this type of inequality as a focus of research and avenue for policy alternatives. This is accurate, but the question is not who is at fault, but who can break this vault. Is the so-called alternative in the form of ‘heterodox’, ‘progressive’, ‘critical’ or ‘humanist’ scholarship sufficient? While distinct, like the orthodoxy, big data, big push, and big men have been the typical response in the cornucopia of alternatives. In short, as humanity walks an uncharted path, we have shown quintessential collective failure.

Consider big data. There has been increasing faith in prediction and precision. These have become the new economic religion (Cobb, 2019; Nelson, 2019). Universities and research bodies no longer prefer centres of complexity and uncertainty: they cherish generalities and simplistic forecasts. Like the magician, G.J. Faust, who traded his soul and long-term values for momentary and worldly pleasures, universities are now involved in musical chairs in which there is a race to obtain a chair who can say with certainty and certitude what tomorrow will bring. Books such as *An Inclusive Academy* (Stewart and Valien, 2018) and *The Good University* (Connell, 2019) make the point. Traditional investigators who cautiously study reality and reflect on it systematically are scorned. Forecasters and fortune tellers are preferred. They generate even larger data and wilder predictions. They are rewarded with even more grants. This Faustian bargain is the new normal.

From its framework, Africa is seen as needy of global ‘help’. Yet this special issue of the *African Review of Economics and Finance* (AREF) shows that, this framework is fundamentally flawed. Not only is it based on heroic assumptions and shaky modelling, it is like defibrillating a corpse; it may jump, but it does not revive (Shrader-Frechette, 2011, p. 4). Based on a new stratification economics, this issue demonstrates that whether in terms of the economics of inequality, pandemics, or recovery, Africa¹ can teach the rest of the world key lessons. The rest of this editorial fleshes out this argument in four sections.

¹ Following the idea that, in this journal, ‘Africa’ refers to both continental Africa and Africa elsewhere in the world, including African spaces created on other continents because of voluntary and forced migration due to slavery (Obeng-Odoom *et al.*, 2019), ‘Africa’ is used in its broadest sense in this editorial.

Section 2, *Black Lives Don't Matter*, highlights the neglect of Africa in the scholarship on inequality in the world. *Africa Matters* (section 3) analyses the articles in this issue, highlighting their contribution to recognising and centering inequality research on Africa. *Economic Medicine* (section 4) demonstrates how COVID-19 shows why research should take inequality and social stratification in Africa seriously. *Toward the Future* (section 5) is a methodological exegesis.

2. Previous Studies: Black Lives Don't Matter

The economists in the Anglo-Saxon world – ranging from Thomas Piketty (France), to Tony Atkinson (UK), and Joseph Stiglitz (USA) – have disregarded black lives. Although a global phenomenon, the vast amount of knowledge on inequality is centred on the Global North (Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021), an illustration of inequality which Thomas Piketty (2019, p. ix) has called 'the largely Western framework'. Quantification can be described as both a strength and a weakness. When it obfuscates by relying on single measures such as the Gini coefficient or the $r > g$ relationship, utilised by Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), quantification becomes an albatross around the neck of social reality. The world is not flat. So, the neglect of urban and regional development, that is, of space, even if time is taken seriously in the existing work on inequality, is a major limitation. With urbanisation everywhere becoming important, and the spectre of the pressing ecological crises wiping away humanity, the land question has become not less, but more important, contravening the laws of mainstream economics. Overlooking (urban) land in these circumstances is a scandal.

The Western Left Consensus has questioned this Conventional Wisdom. The range of intellectual power here is, therefore, much wider and larger, with titles such as *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) and *The Inner Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2019). Yet, there are also many continuities, for example, in terms of geographical concentration on the West. Disturbing alternatives have emerged within this consensus. Not only do they neglect Africa, Africans, and African alternatives, they undermine them. Such have been the experiences of the *Me Too Movement* inspired by the work of Tarana Burke, *Black Lives Matter*, and the range of movements in Africa called 'Africa Uprising' (Branch and Mampilly, 2015). They are dismissively called mere 'identity politics' (see, for example, Stache, 2019, pp. 144-145; Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger, 2018). Other initiatives do not question alternative social movements, but they concentrate on national-level inequalities within and, sometimes, across the rich world.

In these cases, too, Black Lives Don't Matter. Of course, much has been said about addressing this major gap (see, for example, Boushey *et al.*, 2017). According to Piketty (2017), 'it is urgent to move beyond a Western-centred approach to inequality, and to move beyond Capital in the Twenty-First Century' (p. 561) by 'a reconciliation between economics and the social sciences' (p.543). In trying to address that gap himself, Piketty (2019) has offered another tome, *Capital and Ideology* (2019). The trouble is that its focus is so wide that even Piketty fans, including *The Economist* (2020b, pp. 71-72), have suggested that it does not, and cannot, address black lives nor face the daunting challenge of Africa. Even worse, land, the most important resource in Africa – spiritually and materially, is narrowly treated as similar to any factor of production. With all his attempt to do something different, something more radical than describing inequality and, perhaps, sometimes venturing into the domain of stratification, 'Mr. Piketty', *The Economist* notes, 'believes the worth of a society is measured by its Gini coefficient alone' (*The Economist*, 2020b, p. 72). Piketty's obsession with income, blinds him to deeper questions about wealth, especially land, property, and the institutions that create and sustain property in land – an aspect of African political economy that requires ongoing analysis (Padayachee, 2015; Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021). So, black lives still don't matter. For Piketty at least, black economies have to 'catch-up' (Padayachee, 2015, p. 41) or shut up.

Kevin Anderson (2016) has apologised for Marx's racist comments in *Marx At the Margins*. He does so by suggesting that Marx indeed changed his views as he became more experienced. Yet, Marxists continue to suggest that any questions on race amount to mere 'identity politics'. Consider how black lives are analysed in the leading Marxist journals. As far back as 1985, the political economist, Gary Dymksi (1985), edited a special issue of *The Review of Radical Political Economics* on race and class. Not only is this work poorly cited, but also the journal has not made that issue a central focus. Given its global focus, it might be argued that we cannot reasonably expect Africa and blacks to become such a central figure on its pages, especially when the journal has published many excellent studies by Africans. Yet, that geographical defence is problematic. The Marxist journal, *Review of African Political Economy*, is geographically focused on Africa but its emphasis is class, not race, nor their intersectionality (Obeng-Odoom, 2020c). Clearly, whether in the hands of American Marxists (*Review of Radical Political Economics*) or British Marxists (*Review of African Political Economy*), the question of race is of much less interest to the Western Left Consensus.

If geography is hardly a reason, is academic methodology the right reason? Perhaps, but Marxist political parties have also downplayed the racial question. Aime Césaire, Frantz Fanon's teacher, had to resign from his leadership in the Communist Party. His call for the greater recognition of African people was often brushed aside. The official view is that this lack of interest is analytical: class is so important that the overthrow of capitalism and its accompanying philosophy of neoliberalism would automatically address the inequality question (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). Yet, could it also be that the comrades are hiding behind class in order to avoid searching questions about persistent racism even among Marxists? If so, then, as Henry George famously noted, political economists 'have been like physicians employed to make a diagnosis on condition that they shall discover no unpleasant truth' (George, 1886/1991, p. 8).

Postcolonialism used to be the official antidote to these challenges. Yet, recent developments in this field have been similarly dismal. Unlike the earlier postcolonial approaches by scholars such as bell hooks, Walter Rodney, and Issa Shivji, along with the radical politics of leaders such as Thomas Sankara that are both global and local (Obeng-Odoom, 2018a, 2020b), the new decolonial turn is quite silent on these global intersectional political-economic questions of race, class, and gender. Relativist positions whose critiques are not matched by their alternatives have flourished (see, for example, Robinson, 2006), leading '[m] any indigenous intellectuals [to] actively resist participating in any discussion within the discourses of post-coloniality. This is because post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world' (Smith, 1999, p. 14).

On methods too, similar problems exist. The organisations in the UN system, for example, reduce everything about inequality to better measurement (e.g., United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019), and development indices and goals (e.g., (Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], 2020). Others (Jerven, 2015) have pointed to data problems. For a third group, it should all be about experiments, as the 2019 economics Nobel Prize holders (Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banerjee, and Michael Kremer) have argued. As I have noted elsewhere (Obeng-Odoom, 2017a), and in my book, *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b), the issue cannot be reduced to measurement, data, development goals, or experiments. These are major distractions because Africanist attempts to correct these matters – whether by establishing their own journals, providing their own systems of judging progress, or maintaining collective systems of land tenure and gifts of land – have typically been devalued and denigrated.

What I have elsewhere called ‘the intellectual marginalisation of Africa’ (Obeng-Odoom, 2019a) is justified in top-down global health policy-making and research. As Helen Lauer (2006) has famously argued, Africa, African scientists, and African systems are branded incompetent. Historical visions of backwardness, tradition, and superstition are invoked, while ideas of enlightenment located in the Global North are canvassed to maintain the status quo. With funding decisions skewed against African scientists and scientific outlets controlled in the West by powerful white men and women, such claims become self-fulfilling prophecies. The result is that Africa is written out of serious rethinking, as others arrogate unto themselves the power to think for Africa. In fact, African economists do quality, world-class research that shows that analytically, empirically, and politically, Africa matters.

3. This issue of AREF: Africa Matters

African activists and intellectuals such as Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, George Padmore, Frederick Douglas, Marcus Garvey, and Cheikh Anta Diop have contributed significantly to showing that Africa matters². So have African economists such as W. Arthur Lewis and Ibn Khaldun. *The Review of Black Political Economy* has been persistent in helping to develop alternatives, as have other journals such as the *Review of African Political Economy*, and the *African Review of Economics and Finance* (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b; Obeng-Odoom *et al.*, 2019). ‘External’ outlets, including the *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, have shown solidarity by publishing papers on ‘Global Economic Inequalities and Development’ that emphasise that Africa matters (Obeng-Odoom, 2017b). Recent books, notably *The Political Economy of Inequality* by Frank Stilwell (2019), take the struggle further, highlighting the need to recognise social strata and, hence, recommending ‘pre-distribution’; not just redistribution. Vishnu Padayachee (2015, p. 40) has called for ‘a serious re-look at old and new forms of control over currency, capital mobility and banking regulation’.

We can also consider cross-cutting themes like class, race and gender, which led Relebohile Moletsane of the University of Kwazulu-Natal to ask: ‘Can our feminist agenda transcend the discomfort, resentment and silence that surround issues regarding power relations among feminists from different racial and social class contexts? Is the unity we need and seek to fight against unequal

² Douglas F, 2020, ‘Frederick Douglass Railed Against Economic Inequality’, *Jacobin*, 2.20. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/02/frederick-douglass-railed-against-economic-inequality> (10.04.2020).

gender relations, our common enemy, possible, or even desirable, when racial inequality remains unchallenged and is allowed to fester? Isn't it time we had an honest discussion among ourselves that will resolve this issue once and for all?' (Moletsane, 2002, n.p.).

The single-issue framework, as Crenshaw (1989) calls it, is not working. Stratification economics, an approach developed by black scholars, especially William Sandy Darity of Duke University, and other social scientists of colour, for example, could be considered (see, for example, Darity, 2009; Darity *et al.*, 2015; Davis, 2019). Characterised by its focus on multiple inequalities as the point of departure for every investigation, critiques of existing approaches to studying inequalities, and a strong commitment to developing new explanations for inequality (Obeng-Odoom, 2018a), this approach is being strongly developed by writers of colour. Recent books in this tradition include *The Politics of Blackness: Racial Identity and Political Behaviour in Contemporary Brazil* (Mitchell-Walthour, 2017); *Uneven Urbanscape: Spatial Structures and Ethnoracial Inequality* (Ong and Gonzalez, 2019), and *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b).

This special issue of AREF extends this bulwark against the marginalisation of African and Africanist scholarship. The volume contains thirteen papers. Some of these emerged from the 2018 AREF Conference on 'Growth and Inequality in Africa' and the 2019 AREF Conference on 'The Political Economy of Africa's Development'. Others were independent submissions. Regardless of their origin, all these papers have been rigorously reviewed, both internally and externally. Of these papers, seven are regular articles. The rest are substantive essays.

The lead article is my up-close interview with Professor Daniel W. Bromley, a fearless critic of orthodoxy, whose research has, for more than half a century, called into question the boldest of claims about African economies. Professor Bromley's outstanding scholarship, engaged practice, and inspiring pedagogies make him the ideal first candidate for our much-awaited section on biographical interviews (Obeng-Odoom *et al.*, 2019). Centred particularly on Professor Bromley's contribution to unequal foundations of economic systems; economic development; and natural resources, the article throws light on the origin, nature, and implications of the scholarship and public engagement of a radical Africanist economist. The essay covers questions about the power of original institutional economics not only as a critique of development and underdevelopment, but also as a way of providing alternative analysis of Africa and another compass for non-Western political-economic policy in Africa and the world.

Building on these foundations, Augustin Kwasi Fosu, Africa's leading institutional economist and former president of the National Economic Association (founded as the Caucus of Black Economists) works with Dede Woade Gafa to examine the trends in growth, poverty, and inequality in Africa. A valuable insight into the nature of inequality in Africa, we learn that addressing inequality is not simply an ethical question. Rather, doing so is pragmatic because persistent inequality undermines both growth and poverty reduction. What is important here, analytically, is that, as we become more and more interested in investigating inequality, we need not overlook its connections to other social problems with which inequality is associated. A separatist analysis of inequality is neither wise nor sound.

To pursue this holistic analysis, the microeconomics of inequality must first be problematised and reconstructed. Typically based on the homogenous household, this microeconomics of per capita analysis has formed the basis of comparing and ranking countries with large household sizes. Such comparisons, which often depict bigger households as more unequal, implicitly signal that individualism is, perhaps, a better value than African collective systems of living. Yet, drawing on evidence from South Africa, analysed using Engel's equivalence scales, Dorrit Posel, Daniela Casale, and Erofilo Grapsa show that there are economies of scale when black Africans live in common. For a race that has been historically marginalised and discriminated against, and continues to suffer the triple penalty of poverty, unemployment, and lack of recognition at work and in society, living together *intergenerationally* is sustainable, economically, socially, and environmentally.

When this commonwealth is considered, Posel and her collaborators show that inequality in South Africa is six percentage points less than traditional estimates suggest. Clearly, the racial composition of households, household size, and other demographic features of households (such as age and gender) substantially shape the estimate of aggregate inequality, but it is not linear. The social relations within such households require careful study. These findings do not dispute the growing long-term intra and, especially, inter group inequalities that characterise the South African society. They nuance them, pointing to the possibility that greater communitarianism *together with* state support could provide one way of fighting the pandemic of inequality.

Not all inequalities, however, are within the control of the nation-state in Africa. Some require re-examining rules of global governance. The control of local African currencies by agents of neocolonialism and imperialism is a

clear example. Guinea-Bissau, the focus of the next article by Mouhamadou Fallilou Ndiaye, is among the world's most impoverished. Yet, much like others countries under the neocolonial influence of France whose currency is pegged to the CFA-euro complex controlled by France, it transfers rents to France, one of the wealthiest countries in the world. If J.M. Keynes (1919/2019) connected the dots from such seigniorage advantages and indebtedness, to poverty, Mouhamadou Fallilou Ndiaye shows how the *seigneurialism* of imperial France is complicit not only in impoverishing Guinea-Bissau, but also in maintaining its underdevelopment and institutionalising global inequalities and stratification through currency rent extraction. Ndiaye's synthetic control methods convincingly show that, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that money brings freedom, for Guinea-Bissau at least, joining the French currency imperium has been a Trojan horse. Guinea-Bissau's per capita GDP, fisheries capture, and rice yields have all plummeted. While the majority of people in Guinea-Bissau have been adversely affected, many French people have been able to maintain affluent and wasteful lifestyles supported by the sacrifices of the poor in Guinea-Bissau.

With the nature, drivers, and impediments to change clearly illuminated by these three articles, it can be argued that inequalities in Africa are non-random. Rather, they arise from social stratification; not from state failure, moral hazard, corruption, attitudinal problems of Africans, or such like. So, the entire project of social transformation in Africa needs to be rethought. That is evidently the focus of Chibuzo Nwoke in opening the section on contesting potential solutions. Trade, aid, and foreign assistance are the targets of Nwoke's critique. Much has been written about their design problems and how they could be revamped. Free trade, for example, could become fair trade. Yet, for Nwoke, the problem is not at all that problem diagnosis and proposed resolution have failed Africans. Rather, they have weakened African economies and reduced them to dependent economies, societies, and polities. Whether these processes and policies, often driven by global development agencies such as the World Bank, were deliberately rolled out to put Africa in the margins and the rest in the main space is moot. What is important for Nwoke is that the time has come to develop Afro-centric policies that make Africa self-sufficient, self-sustaining, and self-flourishing.

Again, this work brings us to emphasising a key principle: the need for holistic and dialectical analysis. This lesson, however, is neglected in the growing literature on financial inclusion. Velenkosini Matsebula and Derek Wu

demonstrate this point empirically in the succeeding article. Using evidence from South Africa, they demonstrate a surprising paradox. On the one hand, South Africa is the hub of the most advanced forms of financial products in Africa. On the other hand, the distribution of these products is uneven. High class, urban-based white South Africans are more likely to be able to assess these products and to use them in advancing their status and position. Although explicitly aimed at including Africans in the 'South African dream' by increasing their access to money, Matsebula and Wu show that the realities are much more complex. Banks which are supposed bridge have rather built the inequality divide through concrete discriminatory practices. Here is banking on an iron wedge between classes and races. For products whose access and control inherently marginalise blacks, this financial institutional racism is particularly concerning because financial exclusion worsens both inequality and poverty. Financial support is clearly needed. Whether it is to come from the state, community, or from creating more appropriate private financing mechanisms requires additional analysis, which takes into account the dignity of any social policy.

A national employment programme is needed, which is characterised by decent work. This case for directly supporting labour through empowering employment is, however, easier said than done. Where even the International Labour Organisation has wavered, Odile Mackett, succeeds in showing how it could be done empirically. 'The purpose of this study', she writes in the next article, 'is to construct a decent work index, using an iteration of the South African Labour Force Survey'. Not only is this timely to 'identify measures which currently exist in secondary data', it is also welcome 'in identifying shortcomings in relation to the use of the Labour Force Survey to measure decent work'.

Decent work indicators are multi-pronged and contingent on the type and rank at work. For instance, 'the higher up the occupational ladder the occupation is, the lower they score in terms of certain indicators, such as decent working time, and balancing work, family, and personal life'. These two reasons, combine to show that even more care is needed in studying African economies which are predominantly informal. Simple wage-based conceptualisation of decent work, which is insensitive to class, race, and gender, therefore, will not do. We come back to our key lesson: Africa demonstrates the need to go beyond 'single-issue' frameworks and to expand the analysis of social problems today from inequality to social stratification.

So reframed, moving toward the future requires vigorous debates on alternative analyses, theorising, and new directions for policy. That is what the last part of this special issue does. Compelling and inspiring though they are, the two keynote papers (Fosu and Gafa; and Nwoke, both in this volume), require critical reviews. So, after they had been externally reviewed and accepted, I asked two leading scholars to write their commentaries on these papers. After subjecting the review essays to rigorous review and processes of revisions, I accepted them as valuable contributions. Consider John Mbaku's article. While the reduction in inequality is important to win the fight against widespread poverty, Mbaku contends that the case for fighting inequality can be more politically powerful if foregrounded on African liberation. Mbaku is not against case-by-case analysis. He is for it. Pointing to the African Union's new Agenda for Africa's emancipation as one point of departure, and consistent with his own contribution to African political economy, Mbaku is less enthusiastic about cross-country quantitative analysis that neglects the political economy of specific African countries. For him, general analyses can be generalising. They tend to hide context.

Important as macroeconomics is, it must be linked to the micro and meso levels of analysis, along with investigating wider economic systems to understand the wealth generation process, and the obstacles to poverty and inequality reduction in Africa. He recognises that Fosu has been a leading exponent of carefully analysed policies for alternative transformation, so he wonders why Fosu's keynote address, revised and co-authored with Dede Woade Gafa, offers a limited range of policy choices, why Fosu has not, for example, reached out to other analytical schools and insights, and why he has not followed through his own advice for pursuing multi-scalar analyses.

It follows, and Mbaku makes the point explicitly, that his critical reflections on Fosu and Gafa's work is not particularly about any limitations in Fosu's excellent scholarship: Fosu made those observations himself as early as 2018. Rather, Mbaku seeks to point out that in political-economic analysis of Africa, there can be a disconnect between lofty aspirations and actually-existing scholarship. Mbaku seeks to close that gap by opening discussion about it. Such holistic future research, he suggests, can bring significant oomph to African political economy. These suggestions are well-received by Fosu and Gafa. In their reply, they offer additional thoughts on how such alternatives could be pursued.

In these respects, Nwoke's work offers one such alternative. If Fosu and Gafa develop institutional economic analysis, Nwoke's work is a synthesis of

postcolonial economics, Marxist political economy, and dependency theory. But even that broad approach also invites inevitable questions: would this endogenous change address just basic needs or inequality? What about internal and external group-based inequalities? In what ways could Africa be autonomous and still be a global citizen, working in solidarity with others to defend and develop an ecologically sustainable alternative? Reginald Cline-Cole applauds Nwoke's diagnostic thesis, he nods at most of Nwoke's alternatives, but Cline-Cole develops a synthesis of his own, which questions Nwoke's proposed steps for reaching the Promised Land. For Cline-Cole, many of these steps are welcome, but they need to be rigorously debated, fleshed out, and polished in order to refine and strengthen them. In one area, at least, Cline-Cole breaks away quite radically from Nwoke. While in his keynote address in South Africa, Nwoke did express strong support for ecological and environmental analyses, proposals, and politics, Cline-Cole shows that these are not systematically considered nor developed in his important contribution.

There is only so much that journal articles can do. They are limited by space. Books provide more room for problematisation and prognostication. Yet, the global knowledge divide invisibilises inequality book Africa or books on inequality with implications for African economies. Seeking to correct this imbalance is part of the core mission of this journal. So, Vishnu Padayachee, Abdallah Zouache, and Edward Webster carefully assess of such three major books. All of them seek to develop distinctive approaches to inequality research. Respectively, these books are Frank Stilwell's *The Political Economy of Inequality* (2019), Franklin Obeng-Odoom's *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa*, and *Shadow of Liberation: Contestation and Compromise in the Economic and Social Policy of the African National Congress, 1943-1996* (2019) by Vishnu Padayachee and Robert Van Niekerk. Writing from their own intellectual paradigms, respectively Keynesianism (Padayachee), original institutionalism (Zouache), and historical political economy (Webster), all the reviewers accept that the books have put a compelling case against the Conventional Wisdom, as well as the Western Left Consensus. In all three cases, the reviewers point to the need for additional analyses of inequalities, but they contend that the case for a radical third position, developed and defended by the three key books, is compelling. So are the various approaches on offer.

As long-term inequalities in Africa have a social gradient, are widespread, and are non-random, they not only damage growth and poverty reduction, as this issue of AREF shows. Neither do they simply arise from 'African culture' nor the 'culture of poverty', 'backward tribal', or ethnic, attitudes. They are

mass inequalities with widespread and wide-ranging effects. For inequalities patterned after social stratification, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2019, p. 2) have shown that they generate worse health outcomes:

...lower life expectancy and higher rates of infant mortality, mental illness, illicit drug use and obesity. Greater inequality also damages social relationships: more unequal societies experience more violence (as measured by homicide rates) and higher rates of imprisonment; people trust each other less and community life is weaker. Inequality also damages children's life chances; more unequal societies have lower levels of child well-being and educational attainment, more teenage births and less social mobility.

These problems worsen as income – indeed wealth – inequalities surge and become more widespread and more complex, as *The Spirit Level* by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) show. As life becomes more socially stratified, inequality gets deeper into our heads and spirits, individually, as Wilkinson and Pickett (2019, p. 7) put it. In seeking to explain these cascading ramifications through the prism of ‘psychological effects’ in *The Inner Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2019), the sequel to their more descriptive work, we learn something interesting, but not profound enough. The drivers of *cumulative* inequalities are not only psychological, but also institutional and systemic (Stilwell, 2019). Over time, growing inequalities and social stratification get hardened in the global DNA (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). In turn, systemic inequalities come to define Africa's position on the global social gradient. Africans and Africa become even more inferiorised, individually and institutionally, as African systems are devalued, demeaned, and downplayed. Shoving this reality aside and viewing Africa in ‘cultural’ terms or as ‘Africa rising’ – the usual trope for Africa (Obeng-Odoom, 2015a, 2020b) – is politically convenient, but analytically suspect. Institutional changes are important, but they can worsen the problem (Padayachee and Niekerk, 2019). In the current political-economic times, the global response to COVID-19, what *The Economist* (2020d, p. 22) has called ‘economic medicine’ for COVID-19, neglects these lessons.

4. Wrong Economic Medicine

This medicine contains three pills: red, blue, and white. The red pill is monetary policy. The blue pill is fiscal policy and the white pill is health policy. They are all in a red, blue, and white global capsule and are to be taken together, at once. On the monetary side, many central banks have reduced base rates, triggering consequential reductions in interest rates. Fiscal policy has been more wide-ranging, taking the form of pumping more money into the health

system to spruce it up, injecting more cash into the economy to bail it out, and offering welfare packages to business owners in the guise of incentivising them to remain in production. Also, many governments around the world are offering to fully or partially pay the salaries and sick leaves of workers. Others have provided free utilities, free food, and free services for a few months, while a few governments have suspended taxes on businesses. So, these policies target public services, businesses, and households. At the global level, the white pill has been administered, taking the form of fiats for lockdowns, social distancing, and a new conclave of public health measures such as hand washing and sanitising, wearing masks, and avoiding large gatherings. This white pill also includes limited suspension or postponement of debt-repayment programmes by international development agencies and major economic groupings.

This economic medicine is aimed to return the world to business-as-usual. Supply should be kept going and, if so, demand management is needed too. Insulating the global economy from a possible recession is an evident ambition. Thus, the primary concern of most economists has been about restoring growth, how to deal with post virus debt-to-GDP problems, and questions of unemployment. Poverty reduction is intermittently mentioned, but only as an afterthought aimed at ‘helping’ the deserving poor. These pills are targeted at the novel coronavirus, but they are not novel themselves: most of them are well-known as members of the economist’s standard catechism for fighting recessions. When in trouble, appeal to superficial canonical national Keynesianism or, at the global scale, implement a stimulus plan to ensure that demand and supply are shored up to return to business-as-usual.

When implemented long enough, or more widely, through cash re-routed from the investment in arms, not only recovery, but also a more peaceful world, is anticipated (Peters, 2020). The imposition of widespread state controls on the labour market may appear ‘different’ to some economists, including the eminent macroeconomist Sir Charles Bean³. However, as the aim of such measures is to return markets to normalcy, none of this economic medicine is really new. Rather, it is a repackaged story of reinsuring more fossil-driven growth, confusing stratification for random inequality, and peripheralising Africa. If anything, as I have discussed elsewhere (Obeng-Odoom, 2019b), this economic medicine can only lead to what Keynes himself called a ‘Carthaginian peace’ because of its unequal ramifications on different countries and regions.

³ Bean C, 2020, ‘The economics of coronavirus’, *LSE Business Review*, March 30, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/03/30/the-economics-of-coronavirus/> (accessed on 17.04.2020).

This economic medicine is also wrong because it is out of kilter with reality. At work, both unequal labour/capital relations and labour aristocracy are likely to play out differently and further worsen the inequalities and social stratification in Africa. Top management and the biggest executives can cope much better than low-waged workers who are struggling to stockpile. Such workers do not have the luxury of working from home, so they have to risk exposure or risk losing their jobs, an inevitable Faustian bargain. The majority of these workers, constituting 85 per cent of the working force in Africa, are informal (*The Economist*, 2020a, pp. 33-36)⁴; their work is not digitised and not offered digitally. They work with their brawn; not just their brain.

At home, school, and across these spaces, similar comments apply. The wealthy and powerful classes who live in affluent neighbourhoods with the best and most reliable provision of municipal services are also the most likely to be able to cope with staying at home. The majority poor are crowded and cramped together in narrow enclaves, which they call 'home'. With unreliable services, dwindling food supplies, and debt piling from rent – exacted by landlords, this economic medicine is not only limiting, but also worrying. African schools, a major conveyer belt for transmitting intergenerational inequality, have also been affected. So, we can expect children from wealthier families with greater access and control of electronic gadgets to be much more prepared for any online or digitised tuition and additional private tutorials. Children from poorer homes are in a more difficult position. Even if they benefit from state-subsidised education, their unequal access to and control of reliable digital resources, along with unavailable much-needed study rooms in homes that are crowded limit them and, hence, worsen existing education inequalities. Across these spaces, the transportation system provides an additional mechanism for stirring and mixing inequalities from many fronts. Mass privatised transport has usually been unsafe (Obeng-Odoom, 2013a, 2016). Now it has also become insecure. The rich can continue to travel in their private individual private vehicles with continuing social costs borne disproportionately by the poor.

These inequalities do not merely reflect group-based stratification within nations. They also accentuate inequalities across countries in Africa, inequalities between Africa and the rest of the world, and inter-urban inequalities. The economic structure of many cities in Africa is similar, but within nation-states, the distribution of informality is uneven. So is the relationship between

⁴ On the reliability of statistics about informal economies in Africa, see *Reconstructing Urban Economics* (Obeng-Odoom, 2016, pp. 107-133).

the power houses called ‘capital cities’ and secondary cities. Oil cities whose economies are dependent on how well the global oil industry does are likely to be disproportionately hit, as the global oil industry takes a tumble, but other cities will be hit as well, as they too depend on oil cities (Obeng-Odoom, 2014, 2015b, 2020b, 2020c). Similar inequalities and social stratification can be expected between oil nations and non-oil producers. These inequality and social stratification-producing mechanisms are not simply going to create vicious cycles. Instead they are likely to create what, in analysing systemic inequalities faced by African Americans in the US, Gunnar Myrdal (1944) called ‘circular and cumulative change’. He later applied this idea to underdeveloped regions generally (Myrdal, 1957), but the power of the concept remained for Africans. Briefly, existing social stratification becomes cumulatively worse.

In a pandemic, as in a recession, these forces of circular and cumulative causation amplify. True, the current pandemic and the resulting cleaner environment arising from the slowdown of economic activities may create some optimism for a fundamentally different post-crisis world marked by the increase in solidarity and mutual respect – as the crises reveal the limits of extreme individualism (Settelle *et al.*, 2020). Yet, with both the effects and proposed solutions to the crises patterned after, and reinforcing, global inequalities and global social stratification, the post crises period is unlikely to be any different. It can be expected to be worse. With systemic and institutional discrimination against Africans in the diaspora (Sautman, 1994; Huang, 2019) worsening (Sui, 2020), Africa is becoming even more infantilised. The system of transferring wealth from Africa to elsewhere is intact, and the structural process of stratification within and beyond Africa is still in place. Indeed, judging from previous boom-bust cycles, the current temporary emissions reductions can easily backfire, generating a new type of Jevons Paradox (Jevons, 1866). As economies are pressured to recoup what has been lost now, to grow even faster, and to defibrillate struggling industries, including oil TNCs, for example, by waiving modest environmental standards for them. Some of these, as Alice Hill (2020) has shown, marked the period after the 2008 crisis: while emissions dropped during the crisis, they increased more than 300 per cent after recovery. The case for optimism needs to be tampered.

Consider the white pill, which is more directly focused on health policy. It can be sub-divided into two broad categories: the Conventional Wisdom (in the Galbraithian sense) and the Western Left Consensus, to use a contrasting taxonomy I developed in *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty* (Obeng-Odoom, 2021). The conventional wisdom focuses on the health system. From

this perspective, some attention has been given to inequality. Its manifestation in a crisis is that Africa is definitely ‘The Next Calamity’, as *The Economist* (2020a, pp. 33-36) put it. According to this analysis, the crisis will devastate Africa because its health systems are far weaker:

That is a worry across Africa, where outbreaks could rapidly overwhelm health systems. Sub-Saharan Africa has about one doctor for every 5, 000 people, compared with one per 300 in Europe. Data are patchy, but the average American hospital may have more intensive-care beds than most African countries. Kenya has 130; Uganda 55; Malawi about 25. In Zimbabwe there are probably even fewer in the public system, and doctors and nurses are on strike. Ventilators are scarce: Mali and Mozambique may have one per 1m people (*The Economist*, 2020a, pp. 33-36).

If Africa has been recording far fewer cases now, the Conventional Wisdom goes, it is mainly because African countries have not tested enough people. Or, because of natural processes: the population is young, the weather is hot, and Africans are used to living with malaria. From this view, Africans are less well-prepared for the virus, either they are imitating the West or anything else they do, including praying, is nonsense. The verdict from this line of diagnosis, and prognosis, is definitely negative: Africa will be wiped out. To avert the worst, the West, must ‘help’ Africa. ‘If the rich world declines to help more, China will probably dominate the response’ (*The Economist*, 2020a, p. 35). Until then, COVID-19, as Belinda Gates put it in a CNN interview, ‘you are going to see dead bodies out on the street’⁵.

To date, however, the statistics about infections and deaths in Africa has confounded the Conventional Wisdom. Of the total global reported cases of 1,211,961 people and 67,666 related deaths as of 3 pm Eastern African Time (EAT), 7 April 2020, Africa’s share has been less than 1 per cent, making Africa one of the safest continents in the world (see Table 1). These numbers are ever changing, riddled with false positives, and based on highly debatable estimates and estimating techniques (Guihua *et al.*, 2020)⁶, so they are only indicative.

⁵ CNN, 2020, ‘Melinda Gates: COVID-19 will be horrible in the developing world Melinda Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, speaks to CNN’s Poppy Harlow about the coronavirus pandemic and the “crisis” facing countries in Africa’, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/business/2020/04/10/melinda-gates-coronavirus.cnn-business/video/playlists/business-coronavirus/> (accessed on 15.04. 2020).

⁶ See various debates on The Corbett Report here: <https://www.corbettreport.com/coronastats/> (accessed on 22.04.2020). Criteria for counting COVID-19 death keep changing, while examinations of the death certificates of those who might have died from the disease suggest that ‘presumed’ deaths tend to be counted with certainty as actual COVID-19 deaths. Indeed, people who were infected with COVID-19 and died even without proof that they died of COVID-19 are deemed COVID-19 deaths. Statistics about earlier pandemics, including HIV, suffered similar problems (for a fuller discussion, see Lauer, 2006).

Based on Table 1, it appears that the hottest places in Africa (e.g., North Africa) are also the most widely affected; while the poorest (e.g., Central Africa) are also the least hit. These patterns confound the Conventional Wisdom.

Is there a chance that African indigenous medicines and medicine makers, ranging from herbalists and traditionalists, traditional priests, and chiefs to elders might offer much deeper support in terms of offering local herbs and foods that might contribute to some form of protection? African pathologists have long argued that to be the case (for a discussion, see Lauer, 2006). To address diseases effectively, ‘in biodiverse climates, the first line of investigation is into plant materials indigenous to the very region where the pathogenic varieties are

TABLE 1: CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASES IN AFRICA, 31 MARCH - 7 APRIL 2020, 1PM EAT

Region	No. of Cases	No. of Deaths	No. Recovered
Central Africa	950	33	34
East Africa	861	18	37
North Africa	4,485	362	437
Southern Africa	1,798	17	59
West Africa	1,992	57	348
Total	10,086	487	915

Source: African Union and Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, pp. 2-4

proliferating’ (cited in Lauer, 2006, p. 116). This insight is particularly profound because the latest science about COVID-19 (Forster *et al.*, 2020) shows that it mutates depending on the region in which it is located. Recognising the power of the local environment, China has strongly relied on Chinese traditional medicine in treating more than 85 per cent of COVID-19 cases (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Traditional medicine is sound. So, in Africa about 60 per cent of the population largely rely on it; not the health system which, when used, is secondary (Lauer, 2006; James *et al.*, 2018). If so, simply because Africans are poorer and their Westernised health systems are weaker, should not destine them for disproportionate mass deaths.

The Conventional Wisdom is clearly problematic. Or, is its 'prediction' an expression of a ‘wish’ for philanthropists to remain relevant in Africa? Perhaps. Aminata Sow Fall contemplates such possibility in her classic novel *The Beggars Strike* (1986). According to that novel, the giving of donation is more in the interest of the giver who, in turn, is in need for the conditions of the donation to persist. In the case of the Gates, Jacob Levich (2015) has shown

that they stand to benefit materially from their promotion of vaccines and health system re-engineering in ways that amplify their disproportionate wealth and institutionalises a 'global health imperialism'.

The Western Left Consensus is far more sophisticated, and far more genuine. Inequality here is expressed in more profound ways. Typically, there is a focus on cities and regions in Africa where, without water, adequate housing, and regular water supply – the reality of most residents of informal settlements that characterise urban and regional development in Africa (Obeng-Odoom, 2011a, 2012, 2013a, 2015b; Alagidede and Alagidede, 2016a, 2016b; Ojong, 2011, 2020) – the conditions for the escalation of the pandemic seem ripe. The emphasis here is on labour, class, and capital, along with colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism. Here is a crisis not so much of the Anthropocene, but of the capitalocene and its grotesque growthism (Moore, 2018). Africa, like elsewhere, must degrow and desist from digging minerals under its feet. There is a chance to reboot. Helping Africa is one step to that ideal.

These two sides of the white pill appear strikingly different, but they have important similarities too. Both construct Africa as a 'risk society', to use Ulrich Beck's terminology, which we discuss elsewhere (Obeng-Odoom and Marke, 2018). Both place significant faith in health systems, big data, predictions and certainty. Both are mostly focused on capital and its relationship with labour, a relation in which the Conventional Wisdom holds is win-win, while the Western Left Consensus contends is exploitative and, hence, 'but for' capital, or capitalism, all would have been fine: inequality would vanish, the environmental crises would fix itself, and the social crisis of disease could not even have happened. If the Conventional Wisdom posits that there is no alternative to capitalism, the Western Consensus claims that there is no alternative to socialism and its related systems of communism and social democracy. Both call for development assistance for Africa. Both frame COVID-19 as a population problem, pointing to how 'overcrowding' is definitive proof of contagion.

These similarities are disturbing. Scientifically, it seems that 95 per cent of people who are in close contact with infected people do not contract COVID-19 (Shen *et al.*, 2020). The issue is not so much about 'overcrowding', which has historically been the basis to brand 'African cities' as 'abnormal'. Subsequently this name-calling inspired the implementation of discredited programmes to 'decongest' cities and remove urban biased public subsidies (Obeng-Odoom, 2010, 2011d, 2013a). Constructing Africa as a 'risk society' creates other problems.

Reposing significant faith in the human capital approach to analysis is one of them. Downgrading African systems as inferior is another. Begging for external help, a third. All these overlook long-term structures of dependency (Lauer, 2006; Obeng-Odoom and Marke, 2018; Obeng-Odoom, 2020b, 2020c). In these imaginations, Africa is only important because, without addressing the African risk, the world is not safe. The rich world would re-contract COVID-19 or mutations of it from Africa, if they do not ‘help’ Africa. As it was in the days of colonialism and apartheid when Africans were seen as disease carriers posing a risk to the rest of the world, so it is now: without a big push in needy and diseased Africa, the world is in big trouble of catching COVID-19 from Africa. Yet, the health system has historically been the focus of significant marginalisation, paving the way for a conclave of health non-governmental organisations whose cornucopia of visions have, overall, undermined their initiative, undermined one another, and undermined the public health system (Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Adu-Gyamfi *et al.*, 2019). Richard Titmuss’s (1970/1997) study of the health system in South Africa during apartheid shows how the imported Western health system was seen as the emblem of discrimination. Komla Tsey’s (1986, 2013) study of the health system in Ghana arrives at similar conclusions. Post-apartheid, postcolonial neoliberal health systems in Africa have become even more discriminatory.

Historic marginalisation has been worsened by structural adjustment programmes. In prioritising austerity over stimulus programmes to address recessions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank programmes of adjustment and so-called ‘stabilisation’ exported the widely discredited American health system approach to Africa. Healthcare became a commodity. Only the high and middle classes in society who, in essence, took the place of those who benefitted from apartheid and colonialism could afford it (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). Even if some states tried to invest in universal healthcare provision, they faced debt so huge and its servicing enforced with such military precision that African states diverted funds that could go into the provision of essential services into debt servicing (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). In Angola, for example, the former lost to the latter by a ratio of 1:6 in 2016 (*The Economist*, 2020e, pp. 26-27). The resulting health system was not just weak, it was also a two-tier health structure that caters more for the wealthy and powerful. While these elites, constituting some 40 per cent of the population, rely on the health system to live (Lauer, 2006; James *et al.*, 2018), the rest go to the health system to die (Lauer, 2006) or, in essence, avoid the health system entirely.

Such is also evidently the case among most Africans elsewhere in the world. African Americans or ‘the truly disadvantaged’ underclass of American society faced systemic healthcare discrimination (Wilson, 2012). Currently, ‘[t]he US is the epicentre of the pandemic with 592,743 cases and 25,239 deaths. Government data suggests that 33% of those in the US hospitalised for coronavirus are black – even though African Americans only make up 13% of the US population. In Chicago, nearly 70% of those who died from coronavirus were African American – while only 23% of the population was black’ (BBC, 2020, n.p.). These disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on African Americans reflect the long-term concentration of poverty within African American communities (Wilson, 2009). More than 20 per cent of African Americans live in abject poverty compared to 10 per cent of white people. The median black household wealth has remained 90 per cent less than that for a white household. The situation has remained unchanged for the last 50 years during which, at least in one county in South Dakota, the life expectancy for black people is much lower than for Africans in Sudan (*The Economist*, 2020c, pp. 3-12).

These disparities are long-standing. African Americans are, in general, more likely to die in childbirth than white Americans. That is the result of a number of factors: African Americans receive less care, poorer care, and worse attention than others⁷. There are, of course, questions of access, which, to be sure, do not just arise from inadequacy of health systems. There are also questions of control and hierarchy patterned after local and transnational matters of race, class, gender. African healers and healing systems are seen as backward and the Western health systems extolled as an undifferentiated Eldorado. Where African health practices and institutions have been included, they have only become carriers of the ideology of the health system. That was evidently the case of the Ebola Virus Disease during which black anthropologists were co-opted to do the bidding of the slave-colonial model (Obeng-Odoom and Marke, 2018). This window-dressing of a highly problematic system is intended to hide more than reveal.

Health conditions in Africa are much less about the health system and more about the activities of transnational corporations. Consider the stimulating research about the key drivers of the health status of Nigerians from 1980 to 2014 published in this journal (Akintunde *et al.*, 2019). Using cointegration and VECM methodology, the study shows that ‘only emission from carbon

⁷ BBC, 2019, ‘Black women are five times more likely to die in pregnancy, birth or postpartum than white women. Why?’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0006sg5> (accessed on 9. 04. 2020). Rabin R.C., 2019, ‘Huge Racial Disparities Found in Deaths Linked to Pregnancy’, *New York Times*, May 7.

dioxide, the gross fixed capital formation and unemployment offer significant explanations to life expectancy' (Akintunde *et al.*, 2019, p. 381). Fossil TNCs in Nigeria drive these emissions not only through extractivism, but also through the sale of highly sulphurous petroleum products to aid automobility (Obeng-Odoom, 2018b). This process generates significant rents for transnational corporations. The emphasis on weak health systems hides all these, including the importance of wider social context of health such as decent work, public housing, and common land for good health together with the many complex drivers of subjective well-being (Botha and Snowball, 2015), wider questions of building immunity, supporting nature, seeking sovereignty and African emancipation. The only justification for such blatant neglect cannot entirely be about addressing a global emergency; it could also be located in ensuring the continuation of a long history of making transnational pharmaceutical companies profit from global health crisis, as the systematic and sustained work of Helen Lauer has shown (see, for example, Lauer, 2006). Seeking aid only soothes the process and hides its logics from site.

If the economic medicine is likely to cause more ill health, research and policy priorities are even worse. They should not at all be about development aid, charity, pity, remittances, or development loans. Even if these bring temporary reliefs, they also accentuate inequality and stratification. Neither should it be about emphasising 'financial inclusion' because, as Velenkosini Matsebula and Derek Wu (this issue of AREF) show, the banking system itself is structurally discriminatory. Rather, it is reparations due to Africans that must be demanded. If there are crowded conditions in the slums in Lagos, as has been shown in this journal (Lawanson and Oduye, 2014) and updated by Taibat Lawanson more recently in *The Conversation*⁸, the logical conclusion is not to ask for 'help'. Rather, it is to demand justice from colonial and colonising creation of slums in Africa, for creating and maintaining discriminating systems, and divided cities across Africa (Njoh, 2012; Obeng-Odoom, 2011b, 2015b, 2016) and among Africans in the diaspora (Darity *et al.*, 2015; Darity and Mullen, 2020).

It is not pity or plea that we need, but recognition, respect, and justice. African traditional health institutions and processes demand recognition and respect; so, do African scientists. Africans around the world require justice for historical creation and continuing maintenance of a compartmentalised world (Fanon,

⁸ Lawanson T, 2020, 'Lagos' size and slums will make stopping the spread of COVID-19 a tough task', *The Conversation*, April 1, <https://theconversation.com/lagos-size-and-slums-will-make-stopping-the-spread-of-covid-19-a-tough-task-134723> (accessed 10.04. 2020).

1961), which has systematically downgraded, marginalised, and undermined Africa. Justice must entail internal and international reparations. Internal reparations should be paid by landlords who have, for years extracted rents that are disproportionately higher than how much they have invested in their rental premises (Owusu-Ansah *et al.*, 2018). International reparations should be paid by former colonisers and slavers both to Africans in Africa (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b), to African Americans (Darity and Mullen, 2020), and to other Africans who were indentured or enslaved elsewhere in the world (Beckles, 2013). For countries that have historically not been part of the plunder of Africa, there might be a place for ‘radical philanthropy’ (Herro and Obeng-Odoom, 2019), but only as part of wider radical transformation.

5. Toward the Future: Lessons from Africa

Underpinning the global health emergency and reflecting it is a much bigger pandemic: global inequalities and global social stratification. This special issue of AREF shows that what Africa faces today, indeed what characterises contemporary political economy, is not just a problem of growth nor mere random inequality. Rather, it is a long-term drama of stratification. So, the economic medicine for COVID-19 based on restoring growth and ameliorating random inequality is not only ineffective; it makes a bad situation worse.

To address this historic global fallacy, African economists have developed a fundamentally different approach to both the Conventional Wisdom and the Western Left Consensus: stratification economics (Darity *et al.*, 2015). I have detailed the essential features of this field in *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). The centrality of William Sandy Darity Jr., a leading African economist, to developing this must be acknowledged. Based on Abdallah Zouache's detailed assessment in this issue of AREF, it seems this field provides what he calls an ‘African renaissance’ that can teach the world about the economics of inequality, the economics of pandemics, and the economics of recovery. The growing global interest in the nature of this approach (e.g. the work by Mélanie Lindbjerg Guichon, working as part of the Global Inequality: An Intellectual History project, and the Global Research Programme on Inequality, led by Bjørn Enge Bertelsen) affirms the argument by its pioneers that stratification economics is ‘a tour de force’ in understanding inequalities (Darity *et al.*, 2015).

Reflecting Thomas Sankara’s well-known admonition ‘to turn our backs on the old formulas’, including the desire for certainty; embrace uncertainty

and nurture ‘the courage to invent the future’, analytically, there are several implications that arise from adopting this new political-economic approach. One is that it will not simply be about analysing how crises bear disproportionately on diverse social classes or even how existing analyses and proposals fail to address global inequalities and social stratification. As I argue in *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b, pp. 282 - 293), it must also entail investigating how the Conventional Wisdom and the Western Left Consensus worsen the situation in Africa, how they impede structural transformation, and how they distract attention from systemic problems.

Instead of single-axis frameworks of the Conventional Wisdom, or the Western Left Consensus’ ‘bourgeois-emancipatory approach which inhere the majority of intersectional approaches’ (Stache, 2019, p. 144), which simply aggregate class struggles with ‘new social movements’ as equally important, the emergent stratification economics can provide new directions. This economics draws on the work of, among others, the black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and her theory of intersectionality more generally (Carbado *et al.*, 2013). The next issue of AREF, a special issue on ‘the creative economy in Africa and the diaspora’ by Mick Brookes, Philani Moyo, Chris Tapscott, and Amy Shelver, is a step in that direction. The forthcoming call for papers to be published in a special issue on COVID-19 in Africa and within African economies elsewhere in the world is another. A third should be about sustainability and inequalities in Africa and the Global South more generally. In all these, and other future cases about African economics, three key points need emphasising.

First, analyses of inequality centred on ‘but for’ gender, race, or class are flawed. In the best of scenarios they can only give space to those whose heads brush against the ceiling; many more women – particularly black women – are on the floor in the basement. Such analyses cannot be empowering. It follows that the metaphor of a glass ceiling is a rather weak analytical frame because for most of the marginalised populations of Africa, they do not have their heads brushing against the glass ceiling: they are in the basement and the ‘but for’ the glass ceiling argument means little or nothing to them.

Second, research on inequality that sees only gender, class, or race loses sight of the intersectional picture about total liberation. If mainstream anti-discrimination analyses which ‘premise intersectional relief on a showing that Black women are specifically recognised as a class are analogous to a doctor’s decision at the scene of an accident to treat an accident victim only if the injury is recognised by medical insurance’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149), then feminist

analyses premised only on sex, gender, or sex and gender are like ‘calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries is identified’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). These approaches to gender and race are fraught because, as Crenshaw shows, ‘[d]iscrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in any intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Third, global analysis of inequality should be strongly centred on the experiences of Africans, especially black women. While this may seem narrow, we know that black people are in the ‘basement’, they are, in the words of Frantz Fanon (1961), ‘the wretched of the earth’. So, as Crenshaw (1989, p. 160) has put it, ‘only when and where [they] enter that the entire humanity enters’.

Stratification economics makes this analysis possible. Embracing holistic methodologies and dialectical analyses based on uncertainty, this approach provides pathways out of the neoclassical, new institutional, and Austrian economics dead ends. A new ecological political economy, it places emphasis on the centrality of land to our existence in a structurally uneven world and would show that continuously depending on oil and other natural resources is not sustainable. Continuous fossil-led growthism that disregards long-term ramifications for nature, society, and economy is not sustainable either, even if it is justified in employment and poverty reduction terms. African economists can more fully embrace methodologies that recognise the ecological limits to growth, more carefully integrate a consideration of inter and intra-group global stratification in all their economic analyses, and more comprehensively show the methodological power of including Africa in political economic analysis. The articles in this issue of AREF flesh out this approach in different ways.

Their insights have lessons for the rest of the world. Although the uptake of such lessons is likely to be inhibited by ignorance, ideologies, interests, and institutional inertia, the usual suspects in inhibiting any radical change, each of them can be overcome respectively by education and activism, by exposure, and by slowly reworking the grammar and rules of development (Stilwell, 2019). There are three scenarios for the future. In scenario one, a ‘do nothing’ possibility, inequality soars through the roofs. In scenario two, inequality is tamed, but equality never develops and, hence, in time, society becomes closer and closer to scenario one of doing nothing and, accordingly, unleashes similar hazards of inequality on the world. Scenario three, preferred by Stilwell (2019), is characterised by a more and more equal world. These scenarios mirror the

three positions developed in this editorial: The Conventional Wisdom, the Western Left Consensus, and the Radical Position – centred on stratification economics, Africa’s gift to the world.

Biographical notes

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