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Abstract

The ‘Scramble for Africa’ has historically been a concept used to describe the plunder of Africa by colonial powers, their subsequent economic capture of African resources, their political control and their racial domination of Africans. But, in recent times, many writers have pointed to Chinese ‘Scramble for Africa’. Of these depictions, *The Economist’s* has been both categorical and relentless. But is the set of relationships between China and African countries imperial? Does it amount to a Chinese ‘Scramble for Africa’? If so, what can be done; if not, why not? Neither content nor institutional analyses of 27 stories, sampled from 132 issues of *The Economist* from 2019 to 2021, show conclusive evidence that the relationship between China and Africa is imperial. Evidence of African indebtedness to China, Chinese opaque resource transactions in Africa, and the controlling effect of China’s Belt and Road Initiative typically emphasised by *The Economist* is serious. But it does not amount to economic plunder, political control, military destabilisation or racial domination. *The Economist’s* characterisation of China–Africa relations reflects wider processes of Westernisation. Its features include the use of mainstream economic analysis, (mis)representation of the Global South to maintain Western hegemony and inhibiting Southern struggle to break the Western chokehold on global development. As an elite newspaper, *The Economist’s* ‘frame analysis’ not only presents news, but also produces views that caricature Global South agendas, especially those that threaten Western liberalism and imperialism.

Keywords

Black political economy, Africa, China, *The Economist*, scramble

Africa, China’s second continent?

‘Imperialism’, wrote Walter Rodney (2011 [1972]), ‘is essentially an economic phenomenon and it does not necessarily lead to direct political control or colonisation. However, Africa was the victim of colonisation’ (p. 137). As Rodney continues, the Scramble for Africa entailed both imperialism and colonisation. ‘In the period of the notorious “Scramble for Africa”, Europeans made a grab for whatever they thought spelled profits in Africa, and they even consciously acquired many areas not for immediate exploitation but with an eye to the future’.

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The scramble itself reflected a regime of oppression. It was linked to a previous system of slave-based accumulation. Both regimes entailed structural and institutional stratification. Africa was parcelled out and fenced in. By and large, Africa became a colonial space. ‘The colonial analogy permits perception of the Black community as a “nation”, systematically deprived of an opportunity to save and invest’ (America, 1970: 46). In the words of Frantz Fanon (1961), Africa was mutilated into ‘the Wretched of the Earth’ (p. 5). White Europeans became ever more privileged. ‘This compartmentalised world’, Fanon (1961) stressed,

this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species . . . You are rich because you are white . . . It is not the factories, the estates, or the bank account which primarily characterize the ‘ruling class’. The ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere . . . (p. 5)

So, structural racism, entailing the inferiorisation of ‘Black’ and glorification of ‘White’, was central to colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism. Political control, economic plunder and racial domination were, therefore, three of the cardinal features of the ‘scramble for Africa’, but these were linked to other characteristics such as military destabilisation.

The persistent and widespread nature of such relationships was analysed by Kwame Nkrumah. In *Neocolonialism: The Last State of Imperialism*, Nkrumah (1965) argued that, while colonialism in Africa entailed direct control, military force and economic subjugation, neocolonialism is largely indirect, in terms of political, economic and social control. There *is* still military involvement in a neocolonial relationship, but it is covert, taking the form of military aid, for example (Nkrumah, 1965: ix). Nkrumah uses the metaphor of a ‘stage’, but his analysis implies that the elements of imperialism are interdependent, recurring phenomena. For instance, he sought to show the relationship between imperialism, capitalism, colonialism, neocolonialism, monopoly and monopoly-capitalism (Nkrumah, 1965: 31). In this Nkrumahist theorisation, even monopoly is not self-contained: it has other forms, ‘monopoly-capitalism’, for example. Neither is imperialism static. So Nkrumah drilled right through imperialism to study ‘imperialism finance’ (Nkrumah, 1965: 37–51). His analysis of such relationships requires emphasis:

Though the aim of the neo-colonialist is economic domination, they do not confine their operations to the economic sphere. They use the old colonialist methods . . . by undermining confidence in the national government and social system through exalting their own notions of how a state should be run, and forget that there is no monopoly of political wisdom. (Nkrumah, 1965: 35)

Recent China–Africa relations have also been framed as such. Howard French (2014), for example, regards Africa as ‘China’s Second Continent’. This view is widespread. Popularised (e.g. *The Economist*, 2019a) and utilised by academics (e.g. Carmody, 2011), it is also commonly held by Western leaders. In meetings such as those of the G7 (e.g. 2021 G7 meeting), key participants imply that China is scrambling for Africa.

That China and Africa have become locked in a serious relationship is palpable. This can be demonstrated in many ways (e.g., Pepa, 2020). The depiction in *The Economist* stands out. In its latest ‘Special Report: China in Africa’, *The Economist* calls this an ‘unequal relationship’ (*The Economist*, 2022: 3), an indication that ‘China wants to co-opt the global south’ (*The Economist*, 2022: 4) and a ‘malign’ relationship (*The Economist*, 2022: 4). Not only does *The Economist* call this relationship ‘colonial’, a ‘new scramble for Africa’ (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9, 18–20), but it also reproduces similar descriptors. For instance, in its latest ‘Special report: China in Africa’, *The Economist* quotes Hilary Clinton’s descriptor of China–Africa relations as a ‘new colonialism’ (*The Economist*, 2022: 3). *The Economist*, a liberal economics newspaper, has significant global

influence, is read by a wide range of economists, finance ministers and world leaders (Zevin, 2019). This newspaper creates a space for vigorous academic debate.

The Economist does not just report, it also creates its own economics, news and dedicated powerful subscribers. As of 2021, the newspaper had 1,122,000 subscribers and 56 million social media followers. Between 2020 and 2021, when the world economy slumped, 90,000 more people subscribed to *The Economist*, a growth of 9% (The Economist Group, 2021: 18–19). Many of *The Economist*'s readers and followers are leaders and decision-makers (Zevin, 2019). The newspaper is more influential than most academic journals. Unlike the leaders of many academic periodicals, editors of *The Economist* are personally briefed by the Head of the UK Exchequer on the state of the British economy. Also, the editors of *The Economist* receive calls from world leaders to discuss articles in the newspaper. Its editorials are sometimes signed by American presidents. Historically, editors of *The Economist* have been leading political figures. Over the 178 years when *The Economist* has been published (Zevin, 2019: 1–8), it has carved a niche for itself. In airports around the world, while other newspapers are arranged on shelves marked as 'magazines', *The Economist* sits on a special stand, marked 'Global Press'.¹

The Economist maintains sections dedicated to China and Africa. Yet, this 'Global Press' is rarely researched in Africa–China studies, rarely analysed in wider research in global political economy, and rarely discussed in media studies. This neglect seriously impairs our understanding of African, Asian and Afro-Asian relations. They are often mischaracterised in Western media houses (see, e.g., Bunce et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2015; Hawk, 1992). Their reports tend to be partial accounts of reality (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Shin and Boonjubun, 2021). Regarding political-economic analysis, many media accounts in the West are neither scholarly nor intellectual (see Lainé, 2019). *The Economist* is different. Its news is quite scholarly, reflected in its recurrent references to studies, concepts and statistics.

According to *The Economist* (2019: 18), there are some 10,000 Chinese businesses in Africa (*The Economist*, 2019: 18) and 'more than 1 m Chinese living in Africa' (*The Economist*, 2019: 19). In Beijing, a triennial Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meetings are held to celebrate and deepen this embrace. Also, from 2017 to 2018, 79 visits were made by top Chinese officials to Africa. Chinese military presence and military exports to Africa have also increased (*The Economist*, 2019: 19). Between 2008–2012 and 2013–2017, African arms import from China was some 16%, but this substantially increased to 27%. *The Economist* also points to deepening, not just widening, relations. Between 2006 and 2018, Chinese trade with Africa increased by 226% (*The Economist*, 2019: 19). On top of this, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to Africa rose from US\$16 billion in 2011 to US\$40 billion in 2016 (*The Economist*, 2019a: 18–19). The conditions for increasing and deepening these forces of China's penetration have also been created. Chinese economic zones have been set up in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Rwanda (*The Economist*, 2019a: 18–19). *The Economist* also speculates about a Chinese naval presence in Equatorial Guinea (see *The Economist*, 2021g: 46–47), but the more categorical claim is about Djibouti.

Is this set of relationships imperial? Does it amount to a Chinese 'Scramble for Africa'? If so, what can be done; if not, why not? *The Economist* claims so, but recent research (Achenbach et al., 2020: 3, 5, 8, 9) contests these characterisations. The differences in the approaches of these two polarised views are notable. Therefore, I revisit these questions, using a more comprehensive method: examining the content and context of *The Economist* itself. Its dedicated sections on 'China' and 'Middle East and Africa' are particularly appropriate data sites.

From these sources, I collected data from 2019 to 2021. The most appropriate way to organise these data is content analysis (Holsti, 1969). It enables careful reading of and engagement with meaning, a clear improvement over orthodox bibliometric counting of word use frequency without deep appreciation of content and context (Lainé, 2019). To locate newspaper contents within

context, society, economy and environment, I framed *The Economist's* account within a broader institutional milieu (Polanyi, 1957). My analysis of the 27 stories, sampled from 132 issues of *The Economist* in the period under study, shows no conclusive evidence that the relationship between Africa and China is imperial. Evidence of African indebtedness to China, Chinese opaque resource transactions in Africa, and the controlling effect of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) typically emphasised by *The Economist* is serious. But it does not amount to economic plunder, political control or racial domination.

The Economist's characterisation of China–African relations reflects wider processes of Westernisation. Its features include the use of mainstream economic analysis, (mis)representation of the Global South to maintain Western hegemony and inhibiting Southern struggle to break the Western chokehold on global development. As an elite newspaper, *The Economist's* 'frame analysis' (Goffman, 1974) presents not only news, but also produces the views that caricature Global South agendas, especially those that threaten Western liberalism and imperialism.

Placed beyond grand narratives of colonialism, indeed imperialism and euphoric claims about South–South co-operation, my argument is 'triangulationist'. It is fleshed out in the remaining four sections of the paper. *Research Approach* clarifies the study's methodological foundations. *Problems* discusses how *The Economist* regards the relationship between China and Africa as a 'scramble'. *Prognosis* focuses on *The Economist's* proposed ways of addressing the 'problems'. *Problematics*, the final section in this paper, contests *The Economist's* account as exaggerated and misleading.

Research approach

The place of the media in producing and disseminating economic analysis is vitally important. However, media analysis is yet to be widely recognised in neoclassical economics. Sociologists have long appreciated that the role of the media is not simply reporting news, but also the creation or reframing of events (Goffman, 1974; Molotch, 1970). Systematic research (see, for example, Bunce et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2015; Hawk, 1992) has also demonstrated specific mischaracterisations of Africa and Asia in Western media.

For these reasons, and because of the continuing caricature of Black people in the media, Black economists have historically paid close attention to media depictions (see, e.g., America, 1970). In institutional economics, too, content analysis, involving the representation of economics in the media, is slowly being recognised (Lainé, 2019; Oleinik, 2022). The *Journal of Economic Issues*, for example, recently published (Grisold and Theine, 2020) analysis of inequality based on media coverage of Thomas Piketty's books on inequality. The Grisold and Theine (2020) study focused on analysing articles in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Der Standard*, *Dier Presse*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *Irish Times* and *the Irish Independent*. The rest were articles in *Der Spiegel*, *Profil*, *The Sunday Times* and *the Sunday Independent*. Grisold and Theine (2020) used MAXQDA – a qualitative data analysis software – to systematise the articles.

Content analysis is needed to nuance political-economic investigations of Asian and African experiences. 'Content analysis is not only compatible with the methodology of heterodox economics through critical realism but has a potential to contribute to its further development' (Oleinik, 2022: 260). The approach utilised in this paper is similar, but it is also quite different. Similar because, like Oleinik (2022), I analyse content. But different because, instead of focusing on the other media outlets currently researched (Grisold and Theine, 2020; Lainé, 2019; Oleinik, 2022), I single out arguably the most powerful economic periodical: *The Economist*. Although highly influential among economists (Zevin, 2019), not even the previous content analyses of the economy in the media (Grisold and Theine, 2020; Lainé, 2019; Oleinik, 2022; Shin and Boonjubun, 2021), has

considered this newspaper. Existing books on China–Africa relations do not research this newspaper either. Yet, ‘China’ and ‘Africa’ both have permanent and prominent sections in *The Economist*, which produces and reports important accounts of Africa–China relations.

The Economist has shaped the world. Through its own ideas, it has influenced discourse. By British and American economic and military power, this discourse has changed the world. *The Economist* is itself a connecting tissue of Western imperialism (Mishra, 2019; Zevin, 2019). Historically, *The Economist* has advocated the use of force to repress dissent. James Wilson, the founder and first editor of *The Economist*, once advised the British government to respond to Irish demands with ‘powerful, resolute, but just repression’ (cited in Mishra, 2019: n.p.). Where necessary, *The Economist*, would argue, ‘laissez-faire may best be furthered through the barrel of the gun’ (cited in Zevin, 2019: 51). In 1914, *The Economist* was opposed to the demands for a general right to vote. Instead, it favoured a right to vote for only the learned, not the lay. *The Economist* stands accused. It has ‘missed an opportunity to reconfigure for the postcolonial age’ (Mishra, 2019: n.p.). The newspaper remains pro-Western, especially Anglo-American. For *The Economist*, therefore, any transformative alternatives to this world order become a target of caricature and condemnation and character assassination.

The Economist has always been this way: an advocate of pro-Western liberalism. It was formed to promote global free market fundamentalism (Starr, 2004; Zevin, 2019). However, its interpretation of Western liberalism has evolved. Often driven by changes in its leadership, changes in the composition of its core readership base and changes in the wider political-economic environment inhabited and recreated by *The Economist* (Grosvenor, 2020; McArthur, 2020; Mishra, 2019; Zevin, 2019), the newspaper has claimed to be more pragmatic. Sometimes it has promoted a purist form of global capitalism, as was the case when it was founded. But, increasingly, it has reinterpreted Western liberalism to include giving a more assertive role to states for the creations of markets. The only constant in *The Economist*’s identity seems to be its unflinching support for the West, for Western liberalism. *The Economist* and its editors (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014: 5–23) point out that the liberal state has gone through three and a half revolutions, from a big, central state (first revolution in the 17th century), a smaller state (second revolution in the late 18th and 19th centuries) and a bloated state offering welfare and overregulation of capital (third, current revolution). This current phase is problematic. It is debt-ridden and struggles to stay ahead of the global competition. To maintain and extend its global dominance, the liberal state must undergo ‘the fourth revolution’, characterised by small governments. One way to produce this ideal is to embrace technology. It must be freely available to the unfettered individual, neither commanded nor controlled by central states. So, the state must be a servant, not a master.

Yet, simultaneously, *The Economist* also styles itself as an objective, neutral, even scientific, analyst of the world (Harjuniemi, 2020). The newspaper recurrently appeals to leading economists, who are quoted, cited and interviewed. It is, of course, well-known that media houses present themselves as objective, leading Neville Petersen (1993) to famously demand *News not Views*. Editors of *The Economist* (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014) accept that they have a distinctive worldview. ‘But’, as they insist, ‘that is a prejudice to be tested against the facts, not an article of blind faith’ (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014: 21). So, the rest of the paper examines the facts.

Collecting data from *The Economist* is relatively straightforward. I subscribed to *The Economist* from 2019 to 2021. Doing so gave me full access to the paper copies of *The Economist* during the period under study (2019–2021). How to analyse the stories is more challenging. One’s analysis of *The Economist*’s stories about China–Africa relations cannot be pre-determined, but it cannot be done in a vacuum either. Yet, China–Africa relations in *The Economist* cannot be analysed in a vacuum either. In *Writing Culture*, anthropologists from around the world reflect on the politics of

poetics and the poetics of politics. In highlighting the key lessons from this *methodenstreit*, James Clifford (1990) points out that ‘the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes’ (p. 2). What is required, therefore, is an empirical question to be *framed* within the ongoing historical political economy of the newspaper. This ‘frame analysis’ (Goffman, 1974) is part of, rather than apart from (cf. Bohman, 2010), institutional political economy (Obeng-Odoom, 2020, 2021a, 2022).

I frame *The Economist* as a key institution, ‘an instituted process’ that is ‘embedded’ within global political economy (Polanyi, 1957), not as simply producing a ‘discourse’, ‘text’, ‘videos’, ‘rhetoric’, ‘frame’ or ‘narratives’. These are, indeed, part of the tools used by The Economist Group, of which *The Economist* newspaper is part (see, e.g., The Economist Group, 2021; The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2022). But, as an institution, *The Economist* cannot be reduced to these tools. So, in analysing *The Economist*, I keep my focus on the bigger institution, while *systematically* examining the contents of this newspaper. Doing this content analysis (Holsti, 1969) ‘systematically’ means ‘that the inclusion and exclusion of content or categories is done according to consistently applied rules’ (Holsti, 1969: 4). One cannot understand *The Economist* simply by reading its stories. They must be seen as part of, not reducible to, *The Economist’s* attempt to understand and shape the world. In this respect, Holsti’s (1969) content analysis complements Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis because sound content analysis must be anchored to a frame. As Holsti (1969) notes, ‘content analysis must be . . . undertaken for some theoretical reason’ (p. 14).

In this approach, data collection and data analysis can be distinguished, but are inseparable. Who edits *The Economist*, who writes the articles, who collects the articles as data are part of one’s ‘frame’, not only of data collection (e.g. collecting answers to these questions from *The Economist*) but also data analysis. Analysis entails casting one’s view widely, for example, through participant observation, the production of text (typing, summarising, taking notes), interpreting text within historical context and reproducing synthesised text (Clifford, 1990). I pooled 132 issues of *The Economist*, published between 2019 and 2021 and studied them. As a participant observer, a regular reader of *The Economist*, I focused on ‘Africa–China’ relations, ‘China–Africa’ relations or some other coupling of Africa and China (e.g. Chinese investment in Africa and African students in China). I also looked for evidence of political control, evidence of activities to undermine national governments and systems, and evidence of economic plunder and racial domination (Césaire, 1972; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 2011 (1972)) specifically against Africans.

My search narrowed to various sections of the newspaper. For instance, I collected data from the section of the newspaper called, *Letters*, where both learned and lay make comments about articles published in *The Economist*. It soon became clear that particular sections of the newspaper contain more relevant articles. The *Middle East and Africa* section was one of them. The *China* section was another. The *Finance and Economics*, *Briefing*, *Graphic Data*, *Cover/Leader* and *Special Reports* sections were others. The *Books and Arts* section was complementary. No work specifically on China–Africa relations has been reviewed in *The Economist* during the period under study. However, books which make explicit references to the relationship (e.g. *The Economist*, 2021c: 69–70) or imply such relations in the general theme of the growing power of China, amid authoritarianism, suppression of internal rights of minorities internally or in China’s ‘territorial states’ (*The Economist*, 2020i: 71) have been reviewed in the newspaper. Overall, I found 27 directly relevant stories. They were published in various sections of *The Economist*, as shown in Table 1.

My coding and analysis strategies varied, depending on the importance I attached to the stories, which I considered as ‘data’. My tools of analysis included boxing, underlining, circling, highlighting, diagramming and making *sorting* notes in the margins of *The Economist*. Such strategies have also been successfully utilised by other political economists doing content analysis of newspapers (see, e.g., Lainé, 2019; Oleinik, 2022: 268–270). I carefully read and classified

Table 1. China-Africa relations in *The Economist*, 2019–2021.

Section	2019	2020	2021
Middle East and Africa	0	5	0
China	2	1	2
Finance and Economics	1	2	1
Briefing	1	1	0
Graphic Data	1	0	0
Cover/Leader	1	0	0
Special Report	0	1	0
Books and Arts	1	5	2
Total	7	15	5

Source: Author's analysis of stories in *The Economist*.

the stories represented in Table 1 into intertwined recurring themes – *Problems, Prognosis and Problematics*.

Problems

Foremost among the problems identified by *The Economist* in China-Africa relations is debt (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9, 18–20; *The Economist*, 2019b: 64; *The Economist*, 2020a: 28; *The Economist*, 2020b: 65–66; *The Economist*, 2020c: 32–33; *The Economist*, 2020d: 62). Chinese lending, in general, has been described as ‘frenetic’: ‘China’s overseas . . . loans have risen from almost nothing in 2000 to more than \$700bn today’ (*The Economist*, 2019b: 64). Consider Zambia. its sovereign debt consistently rose as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), from 21% in 2010, and more than 50% in 2015 to around 120% in 2020 (*The Economist*, 2020c: 32). According to *The Economist*, China is the biggest bilateral lender to Africa, which owes 20% of all its debts to China. *The Economist* centres its analysis on the debt profile of African countries which owe 35% of all debts to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and 32% to private lenders. China is a net creditor to Congo Brazzaville, Djibouti and Zambia (*The Economist*, 2019a: 20). There are only three African countries which are largely dependent on China. However, what is troubling, *The Economist* argues, is that China utilises in the diplomacy of debt traps, a phenomenon in which China is accused of ‘using loans countries cannot pay back to extract other concessions from them’ (*The Economist*, 2019a: 20). According to *The Economist*, not only does this indebt Africans, but it also comes at onerous terms, in one case a suspected mortgaging of Port Mombasa in Nairobi (*The Economist*, 2019a: 20). Debt servicing takes money away from essential services, as in Zambia which ‘spends four times as much on external debt as on health care’ (*The Economist*, 2020c: 32). These are serious problems.

They also become complex problems. *The Economist* points out that, with US\$35 trillion in assets, the banking system in China is the largest in the world. Chinese banks offer 26% of all cross-border loans to poorer nations, a share which is lower than the 34% offered by European banks. Loans by Chinese banks are ascendant, while those by European banks are ‘retrenching’ (*The Economist*, 2020d: 62). This growing dependency of Africa on China means that, were China to pull out its loans from the continent, in some African countries, there could be ‘a local credit crunch’ (*The Economist*, 2020d: 62). Because such credit is essential to inject capital into African economies (*The Economist*, 2020d: 62), a withdrawal of Chinese finance would trigger a general problem of debt crisis in many African economies.

The sovereign debt crisis in Africa is complex, of course, and *The Economist* shows nuance in its analysis (see, e.g., *The Economist*, 2020a: 28). One important point made in the newspaper is a catch-22 problem about debt cancellation. In theory, Chinese debt forgiveness would free money for developmental projects in Africa, but taking such an offer from China or any other country could mean that African countries risk credit-rating downgrade. Even showing a risk of default is not good for credit record of African countries. In turn, African leaders do not usually seek debt relief. In any case, seeking debt forgiveness is no guarantee that it will be given. Instead, such an economic strategy could create a risk that private creditors would start to consider African countries unworthy of credit. This ‘junk rating’, usually a BB+ or worse to denote risk of default (*The Economist*, 2020b: 65), could explain African leaders’ propensity to go for China’s credit-for-resource deals, sometimes called ‘resource swaps’. ‘Whereas the norm for other official creditors is to lend at concessional terms, about 60% of Chinese loans are extended at higher interest rates and shorter maturities. They often have commodity revenues as collateral’ (*The Economist*, 2019b: 64).

The Economist’s second basis for calling Chinese relations with Africa imperialist is China’s ‘scramble for commodities’ in Africa (*The Economist*, 2021a: 59–62; see also *The Economist*, 2020e: 28–29; *The Economist*, 2020f: 27–29; *The Economist*, 2020g: 23–24; *The Economist*, 2021a: 59–62). On the flipside, *The Economist* contends that Africa is increasingly dependent on imports from China. The domination of African economies by Chinese employers constitutes another concern. Not only do Chinese employers pay low wages, but also Chinese control kills African initiative to develop export-oriented and import-substituting industrialisation (*The Economist*, 2020g: 23–24).

From oil to gold and diamond, cobalt and copper, China is characterised as the new mineral lord, indeed landlord, because China is also the new owner of much African land. Africa ultimately loses market share in this process (*The Economist*, 2020e: 28–29). According to *The Economist* (2020f: 29), this trend is likely to intensify when commodity prices fall, leading to more ‘oil for infrastructure’ deals. As concerning for *The Economist* is the opaque character of such transactions. Neither African people nor Western interests know the terms of trade in China’s ‘new scramble for Africa’. This opaqueness, *The Economist* argues, falls to the sole benefit of China.

China’s ‘scramble for commodities’ (*The Economist*, 2021a: 59–62) is heavy at the production level, but it also extends to processing and distribution. For example, in terms of ‘value, as much as 90% of cobalt mined in Congo comes from industrial firms such as Glencore, and Anglo-Swiss trader, and China Molybdenum, a Chinese state enterprise, which use modern methods to drill and refine the ore’. Artisanal miners also sell their cobalt to Chinese middlemen who first transport them to South Africa or Tanzania and then to China. As noted by *The Economist*, ‘China processes 72% of the world’s cobalt and 61% of its lithium’ (*The Economist*, 2021a: 60).

The third axis of the ‘new scramble for Africa’, according to *The Economist* (see, e.g., *The Economist*, 2019a: 19; *The Economist*, 2019c: 85; *The Economist*, 2019d: 49; *The Economist*, 2019e: 49–50; Ziegler, 2020), is the disproportionate benefits China extracts from Africa. Consider the BRI. It is an extensive physical and digital China-led infrastructural project; estimated at some US\$400 billion, spent in Africa and elsewhere in the world. BRI is much grander – in funding at least – than the American Marshall Plan of US\$130 billion in today’s terms (Ziegler, 2020: 4). *The Economist* points out that the extensiveness of the road and infrastructural projects, the location of the project and the promotion of the BRI – including in movies supported by the Chinese State – are intended to mark, but not necessarily expand, China’s influence. ‘The location of the 22 maritime-road projects that we have identified as under way show how it is most likely to aid China’ (*The Economist*, 2019c: 85). These projects ‘will be more useful for protecting existing trade routes than expanding Chinese influence’ (*The Economist*, 2019c: 85). The existence of raw materials

needed by China does not predetermine the location of BRI projects, neither can we predict the location of BRI projects based on where Chinese trade routes are fastest or busiest or trade is growing the fastest. ‘Given two otherwise average countries’, *The Economist* (2019c: 85) notes, ‘one with high trade-protection benefit (like Libya) is 2.7 times likelier to host a BRI port than another with an average benefit (like Liberia)’.

The BRI is mostly aimed at offering protection to already secured interests. Of course, such protection also gives China local influence and symbolic power, but it is the protective power of BRI projects that, according to *The Economist*, makes them unique (*The Economist*, 2019c: 85). Evidently, that is why China’s only military base outside of China is at Djibouti’s Bab al-Mandab Strait to protect a waterway whose closure can do major commercial damage to China (*The Economist*, 2019c: 85). With so many other superpowers building military bases in Djibouti, ranging from America and France, to Japan, Djibouti offers more than a simple commercial base for China whose more than 1 m people also need some protection (*The Economist*, 2019a: 19). Silk roads are linked to China’s “‘Silk Road scholarship” schemes’. They are typically offered to students from BRI countries (*The Economist*, 2019e: 49–50). China’s scholarship scheme enables the dissemination of Chinese education and values, a system which *The Economist* claims falls to China’s benefit. ‘China is using it to buy influence’ (*The Economist*, 2019e: 49). ‘China is using higher education for political ends’ (*The Economist*, 2019e: 49–50).

This *Common Destiny*, to use the name of what *The Economist* (2019d: 49) considers to be ‘the world’s first film featuring China’s Belt and Road Initiative’, cements China’s presence in Africa. It seems only a third of online China-based commentators on BRI are upbeat about it, with the others concerned that China might be giving away too much to Africa. In Sierra Leone, for example, where port infrastructure is badly needed, notes *The Economist* (2021e),

China has agreed to give it \$55m to help build the port. But when details lead out . . . they were not well received. Many Sierra Leoneans fret that the project may threaten the surrounding rainforest and the country’s fledgling tourism industry. Some fear the development will include a fishmeal plant, which could make the environmental impact all the worse. (p. 39)

However, these are not the key concerns of the Chinese authorities. According to *The Economist* (2021e: 39), ‘China is buying fleets and building ports to help satisfy its own demand for fish’. Of all the boats in the fleet of Sierra Leone’s modern fishing industry, Chinese vessels account for 75% (*The Economist*, 2021e: 39). If the newspaper gives room for some African agency, it is simply to point out that Sierra Leone recently upended a Chinese plan to build a US\$318 million airport in the country (*The Economist*, 2021e: 39). The newspaper refers to the evidence in China which suggests that, if BRI is explained a bit more carefully, more than 90% of Chinese people are likely to be supportive of BRI (*The Economist*, 2019d: 49). So, the BRI is, in principle, a platform for a common destiny. However, as argued in reports (e.g. Ziegler, 2020) commissioned by, and published in, *The Economist*, ‘things look increasingly zero-sum’ (Ziegler, 2020: 9) in favour of China whose internal economic growth is linked to the BRI (Ziegler, 2020: 4). On the pages of *The Economist*, these three problems – debt traps, resource grabs and self-interest – are presented as intertwined (see, e.g., *The Economist*, 2019a: 9, 18–20; Ziegler, 2020).

This account of China–Africa relations is reinforced by the reviews of books on China in the newspaper. One of such books was, in fact, considered to be ‘the best book’ of the year 2020 (*The Economist*, 2020k: 75). In the period under study, *The Economist* reviewed books (two books²) about the Chinese state’s brutalities against Tibet, Hong Kong (*The Economist*, 2020h: 66–67) and the Uyghurs (*The Economist*, 2021f: 83–84, two books³). Books (two books⁴) on Chinese spies and espionage were also reviewed (*The Economist*, 2019f: 75–76), with some of the reviews

suggesting that the BRIs in Africa are part of a large scheme that feeds into Chinese interest. One review (*The Economist*, 2020i: 71) of a book on China⁵ and the second world war criticises China's narrative of its experiences with the war because it aims to make China look less imperialistic and more as a major contributor to a new world of peace. Another review of two books⁶ (*The Economist*, 2020j: 66–67) seeks to contest the rise of China as a superpower. This review examines how China struggles to work within the rules, while America attempts to contain the rise of China. Such reviews reflect an inbuilt assumption that China is a new imperium, itself the focus of another book review⁷ entitled, 'China's Grand Strategy: Seeking World Domination' (*The Economist*, 2021d: 62–63). So, for example, one review⁸ of China's role in 'selling the world' (*The Economist*, 2021c: 69–70), 'supplying vast quantities of raw materials from Africa and elsewhere' (*The Economist*, 2021c: 69) corroborates *The Economist's* depiction of China as a new, but uninvited, coloniser. Because this new 'Scramble for Africa' is portrayed as more devastating for Africa, *The Economist* has also been proposing solutions to these problems.

Prognosis

At the heart of this pastiche of solutions is promoting the West as a superior alternative to China. Instigating African scepticism of China's activities is another. A third is seeking to break China's 'monopoly'. Consider the Western alternative, *The Economist* (2019: 20) reminds its readers of Western greatness or the need for greater Western foresight: 'In September [2019] the EU announced it would give €40bn in grants from 2021 to 2027, building on Germany's "Marshall Plan for Africa" launched in 2017'. Another example: 'In October last year [2018] America doubled the lending capacity of its Overseas Private Investment Corporation to \$60bn; it is also now allowed, for the first time in 50 years, to invest in equity as well as debt' (*The Economist*, 2019: 20). These echo initiatives such as Build Back Better World (B3W), the EU's Global Gateway infrastructure-for-Africa plan and the EU post-Cotonou Agreement promoted more recently by *The Economist* (see, for example, *The Economist*, 2022: 12) and The Economist Group (see, e.g., EIU, 2022: 3–4) more broadly.

To counter Africa's over indebtedness to China, *The Economist* recommends collective bargaining. It is also promoted to weaken China's apparent dictatorship in designing its terms of engagement with Africa. A free-trade area is also recommended. So, *The Economist* has praised the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement. The key point is that greater bargaining power for Africa is preferable (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9, 20). This 'free to choose' strategy is promoted as the elixir to address the problem of opaque contracting with China.

Therefore, closely tied to this proposed solution is the direct demand for transparency. 'First, voters and activists can insist on transparency' (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9). This demand is primarily, if not entirely, directed at national leaders. The request for investigating corruption is also recurrently made. As China is presented as supporting 'autocrats' like Denis Sasou Nguesso, president of the Republic of Congo (*The Economist*, 2019a: 20), African embrace of Western democracy would give them a breakthrough. Clearly, working even more closely with the West, the perceived paragons of transparency and democracy, is *The Economist's* third proposal (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9, 20). Breaking Chinese monopoly is a third proposed strategy. It ensures agglomeration economies such that '[i]f China builds a bridge in Ghana, an American car can drive over it' (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9). In general, Africa should be more sceptical about China, specifically on its advice that democracy is 'Western'. Instead, *The Economist* implies, Africa should embrace more democracy. 'Democracy and transparency are the antidotes to corruption' (*The Economist*, 2019a: 20). 'As politics grows more competitive, voters' clout will grow. And

they will be able to insist on a form of globalisation that works for Africans and foreigners alike' (*The Economist*, 2019a: 9). Promoting liberal democracy as a panacea, for *The Economist*, is significantly more than voting, transparency and democracy as we know it.

The Economist's version of democracy must entail classical liberalism. *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State* (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014) makes the point. Written by two of *The Economist's* editors, the link between the book and *The Economist* is direct, indeed categorical. In addition to the input made by many of the writers for *The Economist* in terms of suggestions about what should be included, 'bits of published articles' from *The Economist* are reproduced in the book (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014: 271). The authors state the point even more forcefully. 'We come from a newspaper rooted in classical liberalism, which generally places a high premium on the freedom of the individual . . . In general we favour a smaller state' (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014: 21). This state must be efficient, cut cost, means-test welfare and guarantee private property.

These analyses by *The Economist* need to be taken seriously. Not only does *The Economist* have a wide circulation, but also it has substantial influence on its readers, many of whom are powerful decision-makers (Zevin, 2019). Also, the views presented and published by *The Economist* are also held by many academics and many media practitioners (for a detailed review of the African–Chinese relations literature, see Achenbach et al., 2020; Monson, 2020; Nguemjio, 2020; Park et al., 2016). Therefore, where claims are unfounded, it is essential to provide critique.

Problematics

The *Letters* section of the newspaper provides a forum to critique the articles published by *The Economist*. Chinese authorities often challenge what they deem mischaracterisations by *The Economist* (see, e.g., a lengthy letter by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in London, Rong, 2020). However, the representation of a 'scramble for Africa' has not been contested in the paper in the period under review. Indeed, although a few academic writings (e.g. Achenbach et al., 2020; Bello, 2008; Chen and Duggan, 2016; Sheridan, 2016) seek to address misrepresentations generally, no academic articles have specifically addressed the mischaracterisations by *The Economist*. Such a critique must recognise that, unlike many accounts on the relationship between Africa and China, *The Economist* has produced helpful data for social science research.

Yet, while growing public debt problem in Africa is, indeed, a concern, the reasons are less to do with what *The Economist* says they are (for a critical commentary, see also Brautigam, 2020). In Africa – and the Black world generally, systemic research (for more discussion of the literature, see Ndikumana and Boyce, 2011; Obeng-Odoom, 2020: 161–170; Pigeaud and Sylla, 2021) shows the debt problem has been tied to currency imperialism. Although this 'seigniorage' is presented in the literature as quite benign currency advantages accruing to national governments (Reich, 2017), these advantages are unearned rents accruing to the West whose currencies are imposed as the universal 'store of value and medium of exchange'. Such extractions or tributes have been exacted by countries like France, which demanded of their ex-colonies certain payments of tribute and rents that have compounded the indebtedness of African countries. Then, there is the problem of 'odious debt', Western-generated debt given implicitly or explicitly to be used for investments and the advancement of the West by certain African leaders for their own gain, while ordinary Africans and African states are asked to pay back.

The Economist suggests that the debt is, in fact, utilised in Africa, by listing a litany of problems with public spending. In the case of Zambia, the newspaper points to everything from waste, through corruption, to misplaced priorities:

Much of the money has been wasted. A dual carriageway north from Lusaka estimated to have cost \$1.2bn stops on the outskirts of the capital. Other roads have been commissioned at inflated prices (roughly twice the African average per kilometre), suggesting ample opportunities for the well-connected to take a cut. (*The Economist*, 2020c: 32)

The Economist refers to ‘fishy tenders’. That is, evidence of US\$520 million worth of money laundered or suspicious transactions in 2018. This problem is not new, but it has worsened. In 2017, fraudulent tenders amounted to US\$382 million (*The Economist*, 2020c: 32). So, between 2017 and 2018, the problem nearly doubled.

But none of these problems is ‘Chinese’ in any sense of the expression. Rather, there appears to be a deeper ideological opposition to public spending or, even, the public printing of more money by the Central Bank. Indeed, in the litany of problems placed at the doorsteps of the Zambian state, *The Economist* includes how a central bank governor who refused to simply print more money was sacked and replaced with one who would more easily do so (*The Economist*, 2020c: 32). In ‘Free Money’, *The Economist* (2020h: 7, 13–16) clearly reveals its aversion to the creation of money for public spending. A reassertion of a monetarist view of money, *The Economist* warns about how increasing the role of the central bank in day-to-day banking through new technological finance such as ‘Govcoins’ could give the state too much power (*The Economist*, 2021b: 11). This neo-classical analysis, reflecting the monetarist theory of money, however, has directly been questioned (for a detailed analysis, see Heinwood, 2019). So, again, the attempt to suggest that the issue of generating and (mis)using public funds is ‘Chinese’ is itself questionable. Also questionable is the debt-to-GDP concerns raised by *The Economist*. Empirically, ‘nations with debt-to-GDP ratios in excess of 90 percent experience lower GDP’ are not necessarily doomed to failure (Powell, 2021: 352. See also Herndon et al., 2014).

The depiction of African–Chinese relations is also quite skewed. Despite the zero-sum game in which *The Economist* places Afro-Chinese relations, there is substantial evidence of historical and contemporary co-operation (see, for example, Lee, 2014; Monson, 2020; Obeng-Odoom, 2021b; Park, 2019). Indeed, there is increasingly substantial African agency proxied, in this case, by growing African presence and investment in China (see, e.g., Amoah et al., 2020; Bodomo, 2012; Bodomo and Ma, 2010; Lee, 2014; Mathews et al., 2017), a growing influence of Africans on Chinese cityscape, and an emerging realisation that urban and regional development in China and Chinese national policy need to take Africans in China into account. This evidence of growing savings and investment by Africans in China and Chinese in Africa (see, e.g., Crescenzi and Limodio, 2021) question ‘the colonial analogy’ which, by definition, must mean the denial of opportunity to save and invest (America, 1970: 46). Afro cities in China do not have it easy. Many residents experience racism and continuing surveillance. However, these Africans also redefine the spaces they inhabit and their social relations with Chinese residents. Africans demonstrate substantial agency in (re)shaping Chinese–African relations, whether at among ordinary people, at the level of the state (see, e.g., Alden and Large, 2018; Mohan and Lampert, 2013), or both.

Again, the claim that China is imperial in Africa is exaggerated in another sense. As noted by the systematic analysis by Walden Bello (2008),

exploitative relations between China and other developing countries have not congealed structurally. Economic trends where China emerges as a net beneficiary do not add up to imperialism. Moreover, there is absent that element of force and coercion that accompanied the imposition of European and American economic power on weaker societies. (p. 10)

Bello’s analysis is persuasive. Clearly, China does not use the brutal force utilised by Western powers. Even the build-up of military base in Africa – only one of such, by *The Economist*’s own

account – signals that such a tactic is, for the period under study at least, exaggerated. Indeed, there is no evidence that China actively tries to seek regime change, a key criterion in Nkrumah's (1965) analysis of imperialism. On the contrary, China maintains an official policy of non-interference in African political arrangements. The evidence of a net benefit to China is, in fact, not the only way to look at the relations between China and Africa. Opportunity cost is another frame. Had Africans not worked with the Chinese, they could have been coerced to work with the Western historical monopolists and oligopolists.

Third, the panacea status given to transparency, accountability and democracy, indeed liberalism, is questionable. This view is also quite commonly promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, Oxfam, several think tanks in Africa and elsewhere, the United Nations (UN) and academics. Yet, detailed empirical studies (Obeng-Odoom, 2013, 2020, 2021a, 2022) of this particular form of governance show that governance – specifically Western liberalism – creates even more problematic outcomes, including increasing inequalities, social stratification and ecological crises in Africa. In addition, *The Economist's* analysis does not say much about the problematic relations between Western resource transnational corporations (TNCs), historically dominant in Africa, particularly resource communities. The power of Western TNCs, and the lack of congruence between good governance and resource-based transformation, even when such relations are deemed transparent, raises significant questions about whether Western liberalism is a silver bullet.

Even worse, this representation hides the more fundamental drivers of the problems in Africa. Research (Obeng-Odoom, 2020, 2021a) has shown that the private appropriation of socially created rent in Africa has been a far greater problem. But it receives far less attention. *The Economist* is sanctimonious about democracy today, but it has not always been so. *The Economist* has shown a willingness to condone colonialism and imperialism whenever it suits the West (Zevin, 2019). Thus, in spite of the image of a neutral and objective analyst, *The Economist* is clearly partisan, supporting Western approaches to development, not Asian, African nor Afro-Asia alternatives. The newspaper does not only seek to interpret news, but it also actively tries to create news and reshape the world in its own image, in the image of a Western liberalism, of landowners, dominant and hegemonic groups.

Discussion and conclusion

Of what political-economic problem is this study a case? Three answers are evident. First is how mainstream economic analysis is utilised to (mis)understand the Global South. Second is why Western media houses (mis)represent Africa, Asia and Afro-Asia relations. Third is while South–South co-operation is often asserted in global political economy, there is also a battle to counter the struggle to break the Western chokehold on global development and, in turn, defend the status quo: monopolistic and oligopolistic capitalism supervised and propagated by Western imperialism. As an elite newspaper – albeit widely read beyond the circles of power – *The Economist* produces images and information which it sells to power groups. They seek to maintain their power and defend a distinctive form of laissez-faire capitalism.

While the deepening of China's relationship with Africa is also characterised by contradictions, the growing reference to the relationship as a 'New Scramble for Africa' necessitates reengaging the concept. The 'Scramble for Africa' was characterised by many structural changes, central to which were political control and economic plunder. Yet, a third feature complemented the other characteristics of the scramble for Africa: a systematic process of re-ordering racial hierarchies in which 'Black' and 'African' were inferior and 'White' was superior in ways that justified both political control and economic plunder.

This paper has examined how China–Africa relations have been covered in *The Economist* (*Africa, China's Second Continent?*), analysed how *The Economist* regards the relationship as problematic (*Problem*) and examined *The Economist's* proposed ways of addressing the problems (*Prognosis*). On all these, the account of *The Economist* is clearly contestable (*Problematics*). Newspapers or documentary sources may not capture the entire political-economic environment within which news is produced. Thus, when Keynes sought to rely only on documentary analysis, Veblen's (1920) criticism was that the wider political-economic context of such an analysis needed to be taken seriously. Accordingly, in analysing the data in *The Economist*, I have combined content (Holsti, 1969) and context/institutional (Polanyi, 1957) analyses. Therefore, I have considered the stories in *The Economist* as a case of how the Global South is framed (Goffman, 1974) in mainstream economic analysis, mainstream Western media and mainstream global development policy.

Within this political-economic context, China's relationship with Africa can neither be called 'imperial' nor 'colonial', much less be discussed within the framework of a 'Scramble for Africa'. Not only is there not the absence of (military) force and political control, including attempts to undermine national governments, but also the structural, state-sanctioned racism that accompanied the Scramble for Africa does not feature in Chinese engagement with Africa. There are many individual cases of racism against Africans, and African racism against Chinese, but this is neither state-sanctioned nor are these large-scale attempts – borne out of years of slavery, colonialism and imperialism – to inferiorise Africans. Again, there are many instances of unequal and uneven relationships, but they do not amount to colonial-level unequal relations and social stratification.

These results differ from others in the literature (e.g. Carmody, 2011; French, 2014). My account certainly diverges from those of *The Economist*, both those analysed (2019–2021) and more recent ones (e.g. *The Economist*, 2022: 3–12). However, my findings are consistent with studies such as Samir Amin's work on 'India, a great power' (see Amin, 2005). My findings also affirm Walden Bello's broad results on China (see Bello, 2008), developed in another context (see Obeng-Odoom, 2022: 157–176). My methodology and methods extend the field. It is often stuck in 'stylised facts' and 'conventional wisdom', to borrow, respectively, from Nicholas Kaldor and John Kenneth Galbraith (for discussion, see Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Powell, 2021). It seems *a priori* mainstream economics is complemented by *a priori* news in *The Economist*. But a complex world requires evolutionary political economy, an imperative to change the frame based on empirical analysis. Erving Goffman (1974) once pointed out that,

a properly dressed woman who closely examines the frame of a mirror on sale at an auction house and then stands back to check on the trueness of the mirror's reflection can well be seen by others present as someone who hasn't really been seen. But if she uses the mirror to adjust her hat, *then* others present can become aware that only a certain sort of looking had all along been what was expected and that the object on the wall was not so much a mirror as a mirror-for-sale. (p. 4, italics in original)

The frame is important. So is its projection, but its social context must always be part of political-economic analysis. Framing the 'scramble for Africa', 'neocolonialism' or 'imperialism' by Western journalists, Western academics and Western media without social context is problematic. Doing so consciously and consistently reveals the projection of particular frames and interests. According to Aimé Césaire (1972), the Western world was also so transformed by colonialism which made it difficult for Western analysts to fully appreciate the complexity of persistent colonial, neocolonial and imperial relations between Africa and the West.

Kwame Nkrumah's (1965) references to *The Economist* in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last State of Imperialism* were brief, but prescient. According to Nkrumah, *The Economist's* analyses tend to

show that, for the Global South, colonialism was in its own interest. *The Economist* then argues that in spite of independence, the coloniser still dominates the economy of the formerly colonised. This, for *The Economist*, suggests that the national systems in Africa are not fit for purpose. Consequently, Africa must remain in the orbit of the West (see Nkrumah, 1965: 34, 35, 53, 190). From this ‘frame analysis’, this specific ‘organisation of experience’ (Goffman, 1974), *The Economist* seeks to affirm or entrench current Western imperialism. China–Africa relations, however, seek to challenge this imperialism.

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Notes

1. D & R Bookstore, Istanbul Airport, for example, makes this distinction.
2. *Eat the Buddha: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town* by Barbara Demick and *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* by Benno Weiner.
3. *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony* by Darren Byler and *Eurasian Crossroads: a History of Xinjiang* by James Millward.
4. *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer* by Peter Mattis and Matthew Brazil and *Chinese Spies: From Chairman Mao to Xi Jinping* by Roger Faligot.
5. *China's Good War* by Rana Mitter.
6. *Superpower Showdown* by Bob Davis and Linling Wei and *Trade Wars are Class Wars* by Matthew Klein and Michael Pettis.
7. *The Long Game* by Rush Doshi.
8. *The World for Sale* by Javier Blas and Jack Farchy.

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