# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE POLITICS OF LIFE

Edited by Inocent Moyo and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni

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This book explores the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic is poised to be a permanent fixture in the modern world which in contemporary times will be thought of in terms of before and after the pandemic. It looks at how the pandemic has brought to the fore the question of the appropriate ethics, politics, and spirituality and highlights the present condition of humanity and the need to rethink alternative planetary futures. It argues that the pandemic has existential and epistemic implications for human life on planet Earth, and a post–COVID-19 future requires a fundamental transformation of the present economic, political, and social conditions.

Drawing on empirical case studies on the COVID-19 pandemic from Africa and beyond, contributions in this book challenge the reader to rethink alternative planetary futures. It will be a useful resource for students, scholars, and researchers of African studies, citizenship studies, global development, global politics, human geography, migration studies, development studies, international studies, international relations, and political science.

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# 1

# THE PLANETARY IMPACT OF COVID-19

*Inocent Moyo and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni*

## Introduction

It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic is poised to be a permanent temporality in the modern world which in contemporary times will be thought of in terms of "before COVID-19" and "after COVID-19". While the "after COVID-19" is still speculation, the "before COVID-19" as a timescale is upon the modern world. This will be one of its most important abstract planetary impacts. But it has other existential and epistemic implications for human life on planet Earth as well as economic and other impacts (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Human health is a key existential issue. Pandemics threaten human life itself. The emergence of coronavirus and the outbreak of COVID-19 put human life on Earth at risk across the planet. The initial responses by the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, of trying to "ethnicize" the coronavirus as a "Chinese virus" (see e.g. Reja, 2021; Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020) did not help as the whole world was fast caught up by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ironically, across the world a pandemic provoked national and then transnational responses. Both developed and developing countries in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic invoked travel bans. The distinctive example is how in the period from November to December 2021, many Western European and North American countries introduced travel bans against South Africa and other southern African nation-states in response to the new COVID-19 variant, omicron. What motivated the travel bans is that in line with the World Health Organization (WHO) protocols, South Africa reported the new COVID-19 variant. The media in developed countries went into a frenzy, and this culminated in the new variant being referred to as the South African one, leading to travel bans. What is disturbing is that this new variant had been discovered in some European countries such as the Netherlands, who

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never reported it and were never vilified, but it was huge news when South Africa made the report and thus attracted the said travel bans. It was such responses that led to the emergence of notions of COVID-colonialism capturing the attitude towards and treatment of developing countries in the response towards the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g. Marwala, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

## The planetary impacts of COVID-19

On a broader scale, the coronavirus pandemic hit the world at a time when it was trying to recover from the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, which affected Europe and North America hard. While the world was grappling with COVID-19, Russia invaded Ukraine. Taken together, these developments have negative impacts mainly on economies of both the developed Global North and the developing Global South. This is the case because of the increased interdependencies of the economies of the world facilitated by globalisation. That considered, the outbreak of coronavirus and the way it caught the world unprepared indicated that modern science has not yet triumphed over viruses. The planetary impact of COVID-19 is multiple. In the epistemic domain, our modern knowledge systems were challenged as they were pressured to come up with a scientific solution. New vocabularies such as social distancing and national lockdowns emerged. National lockdowns and reborderisation within a context of the modern world that was characterised by globalisation and increased planetary human entanglements introduced new nationalisms and new forms of securitisation.

Differently stated, the advent of the coronavirus diseases, which started in China in 2019 but quickly spread to many countries in the world, leading to lockdowns and the closing down of borders to tame the virus, has complicated and at the same time amplified the securitisation of borders, migration, and the linkage of rights and citizenship to the geographical territory. But as the coronavirus which neither knows and/or respects borders, or the colour of skin, and the socio-economic class of people, hit the modern world hard, this speaks to the very core of the existence of humanity. Beyond this, the question of the closing down of borders on account of COVID-19 may linger or reinforce narrow nationalism in the post–COVID-19 period, and this has implications on the politics of life – issues that animate this book.

As a result of COVID-19, the state returned as an active actor and protector of human life and accentuated its interventionist tendencies. In many countries, the security sectors (army and police) were deployed to enforce national lockdowns (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The human rights violations and costs of these interventions are yet to be fully known. The ironic part is that the national lockdowns were implemented to deal with a coronavirus that had no respect for borders. The concept of the "new normal" emerged as the modern world grappled with how to do things differently in a context of a COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions of learning and education had to shift swiftly to online/e-learning forms of delivery. The aviation sector was hugely impacted as travel bans ensued. The mask became preferred

planetary protective wear while the scientists were busy trying to find vaccines to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenge facing the medical scientists regarding finding a vaccine can be likened to engineers being asked to fix an airplane while it is airborne. When the vaccines began to emerge, a lot of scepticism engulfed the human population around matters of their safety and efficacy more than in any era in human history. The enforcement of the uptake of vaccines remains a challenge as some members of society remain reluctant to be vaccinated.

## Vaccine nationalism and the Global South

The politics of distribution of vaccines was very uneven in terms of access, reflecting the uneven global power structures and systems. This has revealed once more the problems of a hierarchised and asymmetrically structured modern world order mediated by geographies of opulence, on the one hand, and geographies of poverty, on the other hand. This is a modern world that was bequeathed on us by the coloniser's model of the world (Blaut, 1993). The decolonisation struggles have not yet successfully de-structured this modern world, a poised gift of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. The key consequence has been what is known as "vaccine nationalism", which refers to the practice in which nation-states, especially in developed countries of North America and Western Europe, quickly developed vaccines and began to administer them to their own populations, and this has left countries, especially those in the Global South, without access to these vaccines (see e.g. Lock, 2021).

For the Global South, waiting for the vaccine has been like waiting for the rains. The other gory aspect were the predictions by such figures as Melinda Gates that Africa would be the hardest hit by COVID-19 and that bodies of dead Africans would be found on the streets. This has not happened. These attitudes, and indeed expectations, of many dead Africans because of the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the long-standing racial and colonial-generated attitudes informing Western political actors towards developing countries. This deserves commentary.

The very fact that Global South countries generally looked to the Global North for vaccines speaks volumes about uneven power dynamics as well as the uneven intellectual division of labour. In this scenario vaccines are developed in the Global North and tested in the Global South. It was within this context that there were efforts and calls by some sections of the European scientific community to test the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines on African people. A classic case is that of two French doctors who suggested that the effectiveness of the COVID-19 needed to be tested on Black African patients (see e.g. Rosman, 2020). Although the doctors later apologised, their commentary cannot be dismissed as a simple case of oversight or a mistake but are emblematic of a deep-seated racism and paternalistic attitude towards developing countries and particularly Black Africans. In any case, history teaches us that such a dehumanisation of Black Africans is not new. Examples include, among others, the slave trade, the testing of a meningitis drug on Black African children in

the Nigerian state of Kano in 1996 by Pfizer, and the sterilisation of Herero women in Namibia by German doctors around 1900 (Noko, 2020).

It is also within this systemic and structural condition that one must understand and make sense of how the developed countries' support for developing countries to combat the spread of the virus bordered on what can be described as harmful, as illustrated by examples of some developed countries literally hoarding vaccines. Cases in point are developed countries that bought more vaccines than were needed by their populations (New York Times, 2020). For example, Canada bought and hoarded vaccines that were enough to vaccinate its entire population five times, and this happened as most developing countries did not have sufficient access to these vaccines (OXFAM, 2020). It has been argued that this reluctance by Western and North American countries to assist developing countries in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic created a gap for China and Russia to expand their partnerships with developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It should be remembered that in August 2020, Russia announced the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V. China also developed and manufactured its own COVID-19 vaccines, which are Sinovac and Sinopharm. The China-Russia collaboration led to these vaccines being generously distributed to developing countries (Westcott, 2021).

But how COVID-19 hit Europe and North America harder than Africa has the potential to wake them up from the arrogance of being a zone of human security compared to other parts of the world. At another level, one wishes that those who survived COVID-19 across the world would develop a survivor consciousness capable of invoking a new economy of care rather than profit in which human health is made a priority. COVID-19 also indicated beyond a doubt how connected human lives are within the context of globalisation to the extent that a pandemic which begin in China must worry the rest of the world rather than being dismissed as a Chinese virus. It is these issues and many more that make *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Politics of Life* a timely book. While the book does not exhaust all the issues and impacts of COVID-19, the contributions raise some of the most interesting aspects drawing from detailed African empirical case studies and beyond.

## Structure of the book

This introduction is followed by Chapter 2, which argues that the coronavirus pandemic appears to have caused a fundamental shift in the ways in which the state performs its role in providing public goods to citizens. The neoliberal turn in the global political economy has reduced the function of the state to a minimum level of supporting corporations and maintaining law and order. Although the COVID-19 pandemic spurred different responses from states, they all acted in ways that call for a fundamental question on renegotiating the purpose of the state. The state exists as a social contract to provide public goods for the citizens, for whom it holds the commonwealth in trust. Based on this, the chapter asserts that the failure of the neoliberal state to ensure equal access to basic social goods such as education, health,

and insurance to all and sundry led to disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on the population in various countries.

Chapter 3 highlights the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns have led to trauma, death, and destruction accompanied by endemic poverty, racism, structural inequality, aggression, and authoritarianism. The chapter illuminates that in the case of India, the COVID-19 pandemic led and continues to lead to trauma at two levels. This is because it causes illness and disease, and second it has consolidated authoritarianism, racism, and poverty. The chapter asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the question of appropriate ethics, politics, and spirituality and in this way brings into conversation the present condition of humanity and the need to rethink alternative planetary futures and not just post–COVID-19 futures. That is, post–COVID-19 futures require a fundamental transformation of the present economic, political, and social conditions; otherwise, there are no post–COVID-19 futures if the present conditions remain the same.

Chapter 4 takes the debate forward and shows that the implementation of the COVID-19 lockdowns, and particularly the closure of borders, demonstrated a narrow nationalism which assaults the values of globalisation and human entanglement in the 21st century. The chapter questions why in this age of multi-lateralism, nation-states in Africa in general and southern Africa specifically responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in narrow and inward-looking approaches such as closing down of borders and segregating against those considered outsiders in total disrespect to the interconnectedness of the world. It is this interconnectedness and entanglement of people, especially in an African context, which should provide a foundation for implementing solutions to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. While on the subject of entanglement, Chapter 5 analyses the geopolitical effect of public health measures like the movement restrictions on cross-border flows and regional security in West Africa. The chapter highlights that the implementation of COVID-19 lockdowns had repercussions on other forms of security such as economic, state, and human security in West Africa. These intersections suggest a complex entanglement of the biopolitics and geopolitics of health and security imperatives in West Africa.

In the implementation of strategies or solutions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the difficult task of balancing the protection of human rights, on the one hand, and implementation and policing of the COVID-19 rules and regulations, on the other. This is the context within which Chapter 6 suggests that in the case of South Africa, it was difficult to attain the balance between the responsibility to protect (R2P) the lives and rights of all citizens and the protection of human rights and dignity that are enshrined in South Africa's constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). For instance, the South African government deployed the Disaster Management Act, 2002 [Act No. 57 of 2002] (Republic of South Africa, 2002) to contain the spread of COVID-19. It was in the process of doing so that there were human rights violations in the name of preventing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The full-scale impact of this is yet to be documented, but as suggested in

Chapter 6, this demonstrates some of the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as the protection of human and other rights of people continues to be elusive.

Another effect of COVID-19 is data colonialism. Chapter 7 argues that COVID-19 has led to increased use of and dependence on virtual platforms/spaces and this has consolidated data colonialism. This is because the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of the virtual space for labour activities has led to the extraction of information from people, and this information is owned and controlled by private data organisations and corporations in developed countries such as those in Western Europe. These companies have links with colonial superpowers who have been engaged in the data collection process. In this regard, the companies with rights over human data have control over the people from whom data has been extracted. More importantly, the use of the virtual space led to a certain degree of exclusion of those who do not have access to these platforms and, of course, the evolving labour market. On this basis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its demands on how people should function have led to the reproduction of social and economic inequalities, which, through the logic of decoloniality, must be resisted particularly in Africa and South Africa specifically.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also aggravated the health condition of some vulnerable segments of the labour markets. In this regard, Chapter 8 suggests that in the case of South Africa the conditions of mineworkers have worsened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because many mineworkers who are Black have chronic health conditions like silicosis which compromises their immune system such that they are more prone to COVID-19. What is even more problematic is that the working conditions in underground mining tunnels provide conditions for the easy spread of the COVID-19 virus. This is compounded by that the views of Black mineworkers are not considered by the mine owners, whose target is profit even at the expense of the health and lives of black workers. To this extent, the Black mineworkers have come off worst from the COVID-19 pandemic and are treated as the dispensable other. This is the basis for the call for the decolonisation of the political economy so that the Black mineworker is not sacrificed for the maintenance of coloniality and wealth in contemporary South Africa.

In addition to the decolonisation of the political economy is also the need to fight COVID colonialism in which African countries are treated in a paternalistic way by developed countries and also used as guinea pigs for the trial of COVID-19 vaccines. It is in this context that Chapter 9 examines how and to what extent the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) diaspora in Europe and North America engaged in health transnationalism to influence the health behaviour of people and public health governance in their country of origin. The Congolese diaspora utilised social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and talk shows to disseminate information and experiences about their use of indigenous methods to successfully treat COVID-19. The Congolese diaspora has also campaigned against vaccination trials, which has, in turn, contributed to public resistance to COVID-19 vaccine trials and the uptake of indigenous solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided both a site of resistance against European

paternalism and an opportunity for African/indigenous solutions to the pandemics to grow in importance.

Beyond the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic has also created an opportunity for religious and other divisions to mushroom within nation-states. This is the context within which Chapter 10 brings into conversation the issue of Islamophobia in India. An example of this is that Hindus in India used the occasion of a religious gathering of Muslims at Nizamuddin Markaz in New Delhi on 13 March 2020 to propagate Islamophobic sentiments by claiming that the event was a COVID-19 spreading initiative and for which reason Muslims needed to be driven out of India so that the country could become a Hindu *rashtra*, or Hindu-dominated nation. The chapter argues that these divisive tendencies in India, in which the COVID-19 pandemic has provided room to flourish, must be resisted. This could be attained by promoting non-Islamophobic, de-hierarchical, and socio-culturally inclusive practices such as non-synchronous synchronicities and para-modernity to create a diverse and inclusive society and nation-state of India.

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