

Covid-19: In Memory of the “Black Death”

“The Black Death” erupted in Europe and Asia at a time (in the mid-1300s) when science and technology were nascent phenomena with only a slippery grip on the day-to-day human, animal, plant and water life. Humanity was suddenly flung into the experience of death that disrespected territorial boundaries and scorned at the artificial hierarchy of human beings based on skin colour or the shape of one’s cranium. Ignorance and helplessness in the face of the rapidly expanding and increasing number of deaths described this virtually ubiquitous loss of human life simply as “the Black Death”. Thus, in addition to being associated with evil, blackness now meant ignorance and helplessness.

Wherever human beings may be, ignorance and helplessness are present, only different in kind and intensity. Yet, the new meaning of blackness suppressed and discarded the original meaning of blackness as the signifier of ubiquitous and pluriversal ignorance and helplessness. To emphasise this, blackness was pushed to the background, and darkness became its substitute. We see this in Hegel’s philosophy of history and, Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

This new meaning was reaffirmed in “the politics of truth” during the HIV pandemic. It seems to be repeated with subtle emphasis pertaining to the germination and final rupture of Covid-19. “Darkness” is meaningful only if light is its inherent other face and not its contradiction. Darkness is not the ontological contradiction of light.

A moral pandemic, called “the universal declaration of human rights,” erupted after the Second World War. This was after the genocide of the Hereros in 1904 by the German Von Trotha and his ready-to-kill team. Perhaps the genocide was a simple pesticide, since it happened decades before the formal recognition of the International Convention against Genocide. “Human rights” was a loud-spoken spectator as the ethnic genocide unfolded in Rwanda. Only Julius Nyerere defied the Organisation of African Unity and the hallowed inviolability of the borders of sovereign African states, and sent Tanzanian troops to bring an end to the genocide. With sorrowful relief the international community, especially the West, apologised for its non-intervention in the face of such “a gross violation of human rights.”

Is Covid-19 destined to the same fate?



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Ebola was regarded as a regional epidemic resulting in massive loss of human lives. The reaction of the international community was calm, cautious and slow in coming. Ebola's colour-blind sting pierced sharply through a white skin and it was met by whiteness with instant protective action against its deadly sting. What could possibly have been the thinking behind all this? Perhaps, nature has her own way of depopulating Africa, like the trans-Atlantic slave trade did.

Africa, being the mother of "darkness," and therefore not acknowledged as a legitimate "subject of history," nonetheless now holds the "civilised" *other* at ransom in "the politics of truth" about the Covid-19 pandemic in this highly advanced age of science and technology. The voice of Africa ought to be heard in this "politics of truth."

The articles included in this "Special Issue" seek to articulate from different philosophical perspectives the voice of Africa in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We see an exploration by Attoe and Chimakonam of how the Covid-19 pandemic gives us a new prism to understand meaning in life. Pittaway discusses the ethical precedent set by South Africa's leadership during lockdown. Allsobrook contends that the pandemic has exposed deep divisions between citizens and the state, and proposes appropriate normative guidelines to reunite our state with its people. Ramose and Sethunsa take us on a journey of the pandemic and our fear of the unknown; how Covid-19 has shaken our psychological well-being, the economy, politics and our morality. Lamola focuses on "the Covid-19 moment" that exposes the alliance of a postmodernist Western philosophy, technoscience, commercial interests, and politics; and normatively alerts us of the ramifications of this leap towards the posthuman.

Phronimon invites our readers to join this exploration of the Covid-19 pandemic, through the voice of Africa.

Continuous publication, more articles to follow.

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