

## Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom

*Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom* is an entertaining and engaging guide to global economic history told for the first time from an African perspective. In thirty-five short chapters Johan Fourie tells the story of 100,000 years of human history spanning humankind's migration out of Africa to the Covid-19 pandemic. His unique account reveals just how much we can learn by asking unexpected questions such as 'How could a movie embarrass Stalin?', 'Why do the Japanese play rugby?' and 'What do an Indonesian volcano, Frankenstein and Shaka Zulu have in common?'. The book sheds new light on urgent debates about the roots and reasons for prosperity, the march of opportunity versus the crushing boot of exploitation, and why it is the builders of society – rather than the burglars – who ultimately win out.

Johan Fourie is Professor of Economics at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, where he coordinates the Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past (LEAP). He is a National Research Foundation-rated scholar, co-founder of the African Economic History Network and former editor of *Economic History of Developing Regions*.

# **Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom**

## Lessons from 100,000 Years of Human History

**Johan Fourie**  
*Stellenbosch University*



Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-22846-6 – Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom  
Johan Fourie  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009228466](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009228466)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009228503

© 2021 Johan Fourie (Originally published by Tafelberg, an imprint of NB Publishers, Cape Town, South Africa in 2021)

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2022

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-009-22846-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-22848-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

**To my teachers**

## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>A Note on Sources and Terminology</i>	xvi
How Do We Thrive? An Introduction	i
1 Who Are the Architects of Wakanda? African Economic Historians and the Stories We Tell	6
2 What Happened at Blombos in 70,000 BCE? The Out-of-Africa Hypothesis and the Peopling of the World	12
3 Why Are the Danes So Individualistic? The Neolithic Revolution and the Rise of Civilisations	17
4 Why Does isiXhosa Have Clicks? The Bantu Migration	23
5 How Did Joseph and His Eleven Brothers Solve the Three Economic Problems? Custom and Command in the Ancient World	29
6 What Do Charlemagne and King Zwelithini Have in Common? Feudalism	34
7 Why Do Indians Have Dowry and Africans Lobola? Pre-Colonial African Economic Systems	38

## viii / Contents

8	Who Was the Richest Man Ever to Live? The Spread of Islam in Africa and the Crusades	43
9	How Did 168 Spanish Conquistadores Capture an Empire? Europeans in the New World	48
10	Why Was a Giraffe the Perfect Gift for the Chinese Emperor? The Indian Ocean Trade and European Imperialism	53
11	Who Visited Gorée Island on 27 June 2013? The Atlantic Slave Trade and Africa's Long-Run Development	58
12	What Is an Incunabulum? Book Printing and the Reformation	65
13	Who Was Autshumao's Niece? The Arrival of Europeans in South Africa and the Demise of the Khoesan	71
14	What Did Thomson, Watson & Co. Purchase? The Emancipation of the Enslaved	78
15	What Do an Indonesian Volcano, Frankenstein and Shaka Zulu Have in Common? The Mfecane and the Great Trek	83
16	Why Was the Spinning Jenny Not Invented in India? Science, Technology and the Industrial Revolution	88
17	Why Did Railways Hurt Basotho Farmers? South Africa's Mineral Revolution	95
18	What Did Sol Plaatje Find on His Journey through South Africa? Property Rights and Labour Coercion	102
19	Why Can You Have Any Car as Long as It Is Black? The Rise of American Industry	109

## ix / Contents

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 20 | What Does a Butterfly Collector Do in the Congo? The Berlin Conference and the Colonisation of Africa            | 114 |
| 21 | Who Wrote the Best Closing Line of Modern Literature? The Great Depression and the New Deal                      | 121 |
| 22 | How Could a Movie Embarrass Stalin? Russia and the Turn to Communism   | 127 |
| 23 | Who Is the Perfect Soldier? The Causes and Consequences of the Second World War                                  | 134 |
| 24 | What Was the Great Leap Forward? Mao Zedong, Famine and the Cultural Revolution                                  | 141 |
| 25 | Why Should We Cry for Argentina? A Country Reverses  | 147 |
| 26 | Who Was the Last King of Scotland? African Independence Struggles  | 153 |
| 27 | How Did Einstein Help Create Eskom? South Africa Industrialises  | 161 |
| 28 | Why Would You Want to Eat Sushi in the Transkei? The Economics of Apartheid                                      | 167 |
| 29 | Why Do the Japanese Play Rugby? The Rise of the East Asian Economies   | 174 |
| 30 | What Do Lego and the Greatest Invention of the Twentieth Century Have in Common? The Second Era of Globalisation | 181 |
| 31 | What Is Funny about Moore's Law? ICT and the Fourth Industrial Revolution  | 188 |

## x / Contents

32	What Bubbles in Iceland? The Global Financial Crisis of 2008	195
33	What Did <i>The Economist</i> Get Spectacularly Wrong? Africa after 2000	201
34	Will Madiba's Long Walk to Freedom Ever End? The First Twenty-Five Years of Democracy and the Future of South Africa	209
35	What Should No Scholar Ever Do? Predicting the Future	217
	Epilogue: How Do You Win a World Cup?	226
	<i>Notes</i>	229
	<i>Bibliography</i>	253
	<i>Index</i>	267



## Figures

- 1.1 Share of the world population living in absolute poverty, 1820–2015 *page* [11]
- 2.1 Observed genetic diversity and population density, 1500 CE [14]
- 3.1 How individualised norms spread through migration [21]
- 4.1 Map of migration of Bantu speakers in Africa [25]
- 7.1 Africa’s five ecological zones [39]
- 8.1 Timeline of Jerusalem’s history, showing the start and end of the Crusades [46]
- 11.1 The top ten slave routes, with number of known voyages, 1650s–1860s [61]
- 12.1 Growth in the production of printed books per half-century (in thousands of books), 1454–1800 [68]
- 13.1 GDP per capita (in 1990 dollars) for Yangzi, European frontier and Cape Colony, 1400–1860 [75]
- 16.1 GDP per capita in England, 1270–2016 [90]
- 17.1 The ratio of debt to GDP in the Cape Colony, 1860–1910 [100]
- 18.1 Height of black South African men (older than eighteen), dated to their year of birth, 1900–1990 [108]
- 22.1 GDP per capita in the United States and the USSR, 1885–1995 [132]
- 22.2 Average life expectancy in former Soviet-dominated communist countries, 1960–2019 [133]

xii / List of Figures

- 24.1 Changes in the number of draught animals and cowhides in China, 1952–1957 [144]
- 25.1 Correlations between GDP in 1900 and 2000 for various countries [149]
- 26.1 Welfare ratios calculated for various cities across the world, 1880–1960 [157]
- 29.1 Correlations between schooling and economic growth, 1960–2000 [179]
- 30.1 The value of global exports, 1800–2014 [185]
- 31.1 Moore’s law: the number of integrated circuit chips, 1971–2018 [189]
- 33.1 Share of deaths from HIV/Aids across the globe, 2000 [202]
- 33.2 Share of countries with any ‘bad policy’, 1961–2015 [205]
- 34.1 Share of population living in extreme poverty by region, 1980–2015 [215]

## Acknowledgements

*Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom* was first published in South Africa in April 2021. It was a team effort. While I was writing the book during the first few months of lockdown in 2020 it was Helanya, my wife and best friend, who shared in the delights and despairs that came with colonising the living-room table in a tiny apartment. My undergraduate students, who were the first (and most critical) readers of the initial draft chapters, were only too happy to comment and to offer critiques, as did several of my graduate students and postdoctoral fellows subsequently. I dedicated the South African issue to them; they were superheroes during a time of immense upheaval.

My South African editors, Gill Moodie and Russell Martin, turned the text into an easy and fun read, not the easiest of tasks for a topic as serious as global economic history. They did such a good job that *Our Long Walk* attracted the attention of Cambridge University Press.

Michael Watson of Cambridge University Press was instrumental in making this edition happen. I've known Michael for many years. He has always encouraged me to write – even inviting me to breakfast in New York in January 2020, just before the world went into lockdown. I promised him then to write a book. Never could I have imagined that I would keep my promise – but write an entirely different book! There are few editors who care so much about their subject area as Michael. It is a privilege to work with him.

That trip to New York was partly sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which supports my team and the work we do through the Biography of an Uncharted People project ([uncharted-people.org](http://uncharted-people.org)). My own research, reported in Chapters 13 and 14, has benefited from the generosity of the Swedish Riksbankens

xiv / Acknowledgements

Jubileumsfond and the Cape of Good Hope Panel project (capepanel.org). Principal investigator Erik Green of Lund University is a great collaborator and an even better friend. There are many who support the work we do at the Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past (LEAP), the research unit I coordinate at Stellenbosch University (leap Stellenbosch.org.za). Supporting economic history research is not an obvious choice on a continent with many other pressing issues. Although it is unfair to highlight only one individual, the invaluable, no-strings-attached financial support of Keith Meintjes, a retired engineer from Michigan, has provided my students with the resources they need during times of crisis or allowed us to digitise and transcribe material that would not have been otherwise possible. Thank you, Keith.

Just as humans thrive through collaboration, I have benefited from a strong network of supportive scholars. In November and December 2019 I was fortunate to visit the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago and the Paris School of Economics on short research sabbaticals. Despite bitterly cold weather in Chicago and protests in Paris, I met several scholars who would later contribute their time and energy to improving the manuscript: a big thank-you to James Robinson and Pierre-Cyrille Hautcoeur for the invitations. Emmanuel Akyeampong (Harvard), Belinda Archibong (Barnard), Gareth Austin (Cambridge), Jörg Baten (Tübingen), James Fenske (Warwick), Price Fishback (Arizona), Ewout Frankema (Wageningen), Leigh Gardner (LSE), Vincent Geloso (George Mason), Leander Heldring (Northwestern), Alfonso Herranz (Barcelona), Tony Hopkins (Cambridge), Kris Inwood (Guelph), Peter Lindert (UC Davis), Martine Mariotti (ANU), Anne McCants (MIT), Alois Mlambo (Pretoria), Nicoli Nattrass (Cape Town), Johannes Norling (Mount Holyoke), Nonso Obikili (UN), Sheilagh Ogilvie (Oxford), Karin Pallaver (Bologna), Elias Papaioannou (LBS), Mohamed Saleh (Toulouse), Marlous van Waijenburg (HBS), Jan Luiten van Zanden (Utrecht), Marianne Wanamaker (Tennessee) and Leonard Wantchekon (Princeton and ASE) read and improved parts of the manuscript, gave encouragement when needed, pointed me in the right direction, or invited me to give a talk or seminar. A presentation to the expert team of African economic historians at Wageningen University in the Netherlands – and the detailed feedback of Felix Meier zu Selhausen – saved me from

xv / Acknowledgements

several blunders. My two colleagues, co-authors and friends, Willem Boshoff and Dieter von Fintel, have helped to shape the text, often inadvertently, through our many conversations and collaborations.

The purpose of *Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom* is to tell the story of why humans have prospered. I do so from an African perspective. I rely almost entirely on the fascinating research of my colleagues in the field of economics and economic history. But disseminating research also requires other skills: Mike Cruywagen of Nudge Studio has done a great job of building a website – [ourlongwalk.org](http://ourlongwalk.org) – where additional resources are available. Philip du Plessis of Blindspot Films created the attractive and informative explainer videos. As I write in Chapter 33, Africa's economic prospects hinge on service exports. I highly recommend these two South African companies!

The lessons we learn from economic history are relevant and important to us all – especially at a time of rapid change. ‘Those who cannot remember the past’, the philosopher George Santayana famously said, ‘are condemned to repeat it.’ But this sounds all too pessimistic. Yes, there have been (and are!) many egregious abuses of power and privilege throughout human history – things that we have done wrong and that we should have avoided. But there is also much in our history that is worth celebrating – and repeating. No one can deny that today humans are more numerous and more affluent than ever before. Economic history is a profoundly optimistic story. Our long walk to economic freedom has not been easy, but it is undeniably taking us forward.

I've been fortunate to learn from some of the brightest minds in the field of economic history. I dedicate this book to those who act as guides on my own long walk. I would like *Our Long Walk* to contribute to a conversation, one that is frequently revised as new evidence emerges. In the words of the Coldplay song, I want to be a comma, not a fullstop. We are all students, all the time. May this book introduce a new generation of (African) scholars to these ideas, and may they be inspired to continue the search for understanding the roots of prosperity, in order to build a better world.

## A Note on Sources and Terminology

This is a book for non-specialists. I've tried to steer clear of endless footnotes. The articles that I refer to in the text are cited in the endnotes, but I do not identify every single source I've consulted.

I am an empirical social scientist. Throughout the book I rely heavily on open-access GDP and other development statistics. For the sake of consistency I rely on the 2021 version of the Maddison Project (GDP per capita at constant 2011 US dollar) and World Bank's World Development Indicators (GDP per capita at 2010 US dollar) wherever possible. Both maintain online repositories that are freely accessible. Because of different ways that the World Bank and Maddison Project calculate GDP per capita estimates, countries are comparable within these datasets but not across them. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to Max Roser of ourworldindata.org. His data, figures and maps are freely downloadable and provide a wonderful public resource for the social science community. For anyone still in doubt about the astounding progress humankind has made over the last two hundred years, just spend a few minutes on this site. For figures published in copyrighted journal articles, I have downloaded the replication data from the authors and redrawn the graphs in R. I was ably assisted by former student and data science whizz Jonathan Jayes. Find him at [interludeone.com](http://interludeone.com).

As is still the case in South Africa, I use lower case when referring to race and upper case when referring to ethnicities or nationalities. South Africa still classifies its population into four race groups, for example: black, coloured, white and Indian/Asian. To identify as 'coloured' in South Africa does not have the same derogatory connotations as it may have in the United States and elsewhere.

xvii / A Note on Sources and Terminology

Although this book is aimed at an audience outside the classroom, I will continue to use it in my undergraduate, graduate and MBA courses. It would be great if others were to do the same. Visit [ourlongwalk.org](http://ourlongwalk.org) for freely downloadable teaching material such as lecture slides, explainer videos, test banks and translations.