To the frustration of many, the world’s media is engaged in the gripping reality show-cum-soap opera surrounding Oprah’s interview of the Sussexes last week. To such people, it is a waste of the world’s energy and resources to focus on private matters. Instead, they say, we should discuss important issues affecting ordinary people and the planet.

However, British royal family matters are as political as it gets. Not because it matters who gets married and how many children are born, but because the whole performance of the intrigues of the British royal family is a part of the cultural system that legitimises global capitalism. As John Davis wrote in Counterpunch last year, the royal family serves a political purpose, which is to justify “Britain and its cruel inequities”. Through the fanfare of royal rituals, tabloid frenzy and fairy tale weddings, the royal family “stifles overt class dissent, forever bubbling beneath the surface of British society.”

But it is not only in British society where this class dissent bubbles under the surface. The peoples of the global south also have a bone to pick with the British monarchy for the extractive oppression and poverty under which they still live. That would explain why the hostility of the royals and the British press towards Meghan Markle is particularly annoying to people of African descent.
More enraging are the childish tantrums of the British press. Ever since it was announced to the public that Meghan was Harry’s fiancée, the press has attacked her with racist and sexist tropes—calling her a Jezebel, a gold-digger—all the while denying that these attacks have anything to do with her skin colour. To add insult to injury, Meghan’s slanderers refuse to be reminded that the inauthenticity of which they accuse Meghan barely compares to the crimes committed by Britain, or to Prince Andrew’s close links to a convicted sex offender. The trauma could not get worse when we find even Kenyans taking the same position.

The British royal family serves as the cultural custodian of the global system of inequality and exploitation.

This amnesia and split consciousness is not an accident but part of the deliberate strategy to turn attention away from the harmful impact of the British monarchy. As Davis writes, the royal family’s display of grandeur and tradition accounts for the spectacular dissonance between the British Empire’s rhetoric and its actions. And once we accept that an insanely wealthy family is separate from the exploitation on which that wealth is built, we go down the slippery slope of excusing all manner of injustices which were necessary for the royal family to gain that wealth.

The lengths to which the defenders of the British royal family would go to attack Meghan also proves that the British monarchy’s identity is not only racial. It is also so fragile that a drop of black blood in Meghan’s children is enough to give the House of Windsor migraines. But this fragility is familiar. It has been lived in the “one drop rule” that governed slavery in the United States, where any hint of black parentage automatically meant enslavement.

It is also told in the European fairy tale of The Princess and the Pea, about a queen who confirmed that a young woman was a princess worthy of marrying her son after the young woman passed the test of delicateness. The test was to sleep on a heap of soft mattresses under which a pea had been hidden. The next morning, the young woman innocently complained of a restless night, proving that she was delicate enough to have been an aristocrat. In the same way, the British monarchy is extremely sensitive to race, because race is the foundation of the hierarchy which decides who works and is disposable, and who enjoys the fruit of that work.

This fragility entails a life of cruelty, even for members of the royal family. Every human aspect of the lives of the members of the royal family must be controlled, down to the last detail. The misery is masked by a cult of mannerisms and traditions, regularly pumped into the public discourse by the British press. But beneath the glamour, the quaint mannerisms and the stories of decadence, members of the royal family suffer cruelty and betrayal. This is the misery which Princess Diana unhappily lived and from which she tragically died. Diana’s son and his mixed-race wife Meghan are now the next in line, after Diana, to refuse this mistreatment.

However, this is the same cruelty that billions of people of colour around the world have suffered through kidnappings, dispossession, impoverishment and discrimination for at least four centuries so that the British monarchy can live in luxury.

This latest royal family drama is therefore of interest to Kenyans, because it allows us to reflect on
the absurdities that dominate our life, even decades after supposedly attaining independence. It so happens that at this very moment, Kenyans are being bulldozed into accepting, through the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a return to the aristocratic colonial system where power and wealth are distributed based on inheritance.

In addition, the government has replaced the 8.4.4. system of education with an aristocratic competency-based curriculum (CBC) education system which basically seeks to condemn the bulk of Kenyan children who attend school to a future of semi-skilled labour. This shift back to the aristocratic system is being facilitated by a new Kenyan upper middle class which is consolidating its power through the cruelty of neoliberalism and managerialism. There are parallels between what is happening with the Sussexes and what is happening in Kenya with BBI and CBC.

Kenya: the white man’s country

The curse of Kenya is not only to have been colonised, but to have been colonised by British colonists who were elites in their own country. Queen Elizabeth II ascended to the throne while on a visit to Kenya. Even within the tiny European community in Kenya, the class differences were stark. When Kenya became a colony in 1920, writes Bruce Berman, the colonial government was markedly aristocratic, because the British government recruited the bulk of its colonial administrators from the upper levels of British society, and especially from Oxbridge and public schools. Before then, colonial administrators had been largely drawn from members of the British lower and middle classes who had either been staff of the Imperial British East Africa Company, or had served in the Boer War in South Africa.

This class difference also applied to land allocation. The only British settlers allowed to settle in Nanyuki and the surrounding areas came from aristocratic backgrounds. Lower class British nationals and Boers could not own land there, and the few who lived there did so as squatters. The area is still largely inhabited by these elites, and to this day, a British Army Training Unit is stationed in Nanyuki to protect this class. Most of the conservation industry—whose access to land is embedded in colonial tropes about saving Kenyan wildlife from Africans—is located around that area. The icon of that industry is the Craig family, founder of the Lewa Conservancy. Their daughter Jessica Craig is Prince William’s ex-girlfriend.

The class bias of the colonial elites against lower class British settlers is evident in the British government’s opinion of the latter as “unnecessarily arrogant, high-handed and brutal in dealings with Africans”, and in one colonial governor’s reference to them as “cowpunchers”. The lower class British settlers often complained of discrimination by the colonial government, for example in the employment of British-born Europeans as opposed to Kenyan-born ones. The tussle for power within the European community produced the absurd situation where each side claimed that they were the real defenders of African interests and African culture.

The curse of Kenya is not only to have been colonised, but to have been colonised by British colonists who were elites in their own country.

This colonial legacy has meant that the Kenyan elite are not simply colonised; they are decidedly aristocratic in their thinking. Even as they pay lip service to African culture, they voice racist attitudes towards fellow Kenyans. Meanwhile, English afternoon teas are returning to Kenyan hotels, and African Kenyans even attended teas hosted as watch parties during the Sussexes’ royal wedding.

And Kenyan institutions remain viscerally cruel to ordinary Kenyan citizens. For instance, the
recruitment of the Kenyan police still includes the demeaning slave-auction habits of inspecting the teeth of recruits, which produces that unsurprising result that poor young Kenyan men literally suffer the same murder at the hands of the Kenya police as blacks do in the United States. Similarly, it is not uncommon for government policies to be announced to the public with demeaning lectures and threats. In the months following the COVID-19 pandemic, the bulk of the coronavirus casualties among the Kenyan poor were those who had been killed by the police in the enforcement of the lockdown.

Kenyan public life is extremely cruel. It is a daily dose of violence that combines physical force with death by a thousand small cuts. Daily interactions cannot proceed without Kenyans first asking insidious questions about one’s name or where one grew up in order to determine where the other is positioned on the class hierarchy. Social and gender roles have become such hot potatoes that mention of gender descends into bile, insults and fights. It is so bad that when a woman was hacked to death in public in Eldore, there was no public mourning or introspection about the loss of our soul and the loss of somebody’s life. What followed, instead, was a debate about the oppression of men and the devaluation of women’s lives.

Most of Kenya’s schools are still modeled on elite British schools such as Eton and Winchester, even though most schools can hardly afford to provide the bare minimum to ensure decent living standards for students. The discontent of teens living in poor conditions leads to frequent—and often deadly—student riots. And even though adolescents die from injuries inflicted by bullying or fires, the government and the parents remain committed to protecting the elite system, probably due to pressure from the alumni of those schools, many of whom now dominate the corridors of state power.

The icing on the mud cake is that we have now installed a new school system whose philosophy is spectacularly similar in orientation to what the British wanted for Africans in the 1920s. The Kenyan government has openly articulated its desire for an education system in which 60 per cent of children are condemned to a future of low paying, semi-skilled labour, and this has been met with celebratory compliance from the Kenyan middle class.

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In legal circles, the British horsehair wig returned to the Kenyan justice system in 2016, after having been temporarily retired by the first chief justice under Kenya’s 2010 people-centred constitution. As the second chief justice was sworn in wearing the full British regalia, the president of the Law Society celebrated in a tweet: “The honour of robes and wigs for learned friends is back”. In response to enquiring members of the public, he said that they had no social standing to “determine the regalia for advocates and judges” because law “is not menial work”.

Perhaps the most blatant evidence of British upper-class sensibilities in Kenyan institutions and public life is in tourism. The Kenya government still uses 19th century colonial tropes to advertise the country as a tourist destination, including offensive phrases such as “ancient tribes” to refer to the Maa peoples, and celebrating colonial settlers such as Karen Blixen. “Safari” now means tourism for rich whites seeking to fulfil fantasies of shooting wildlife in an African continent with no Africans, or with only Africans whose attire suggests separation from modernity. During her visit to Kenya in 2018, Melania Trump was taken on the stereotypical safari adorned in a pith helmet, itself “a symbol of how race and colonialism ghosts shape the African landscape when it comes to safari, poaching and trophy hunting.”
These dynamics are replicated politically through proposed constitutional reforms that are designed to secure the entitlement of the Kenyan elite. The reforms are being bulldozed by the current president, a blue-eyed boy born to a wealthy landowner who was Kenya’s first president. The president has also filled the top posts in his administration with families whose patriarchs, like his own, enjoyed privileges under colonial rule.

Global problem

Kenya is simply one of many countries and territories worldwide where Britain has exported its form of social organisation. Centuries ago in the US, the framers of the constitution publicly expounded on the values of liberty while also voicing aspirations for English aristocratic manners, values, consumerism and style, all of which were funded by the labour of enslaved Africans.

In China, the British aristocratic model in education has become so successful that British elite schools have found a market there.

The British royal family therefore serves as the cultural custodian of the global system of inequality and exploitation. As David Graeber observed, Britain has attained this status because it is the country whose ruling class has seemed to best stave off what almost every other power in the world lives in fear of: the democratic will of the people. From the days when Edmund Burke developed a political rationality to ensure that the French Revolution did not cross the English Channel, Britain’s monarchy has maintained a rigid class system side by side with a semblance of democracy.

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Most monarchies in continental Europe—distant relatives of the House of Windsor—have not been as successful in maintaining the British formula. They have conceded much more to popular government and socially driven policies than Britain has. Their royal weddings do not mesmerize the world, although Sweden does try to catch the world’s attention once a year using the Nobel Prize (see my article The Nobel Prizes, Racism, and the Economy of Prestige). As aging monarchs in continental Europe abdicate rather than die on their thrones, the British nonagenarian monarch remains firmly seated on hers.

Graeber also identified British class privilege as responsible for the growth of the world’s rentier class, and of the City of London’s status as the world’s financial capital. London is the city where people make profits from rent (real estate or patents), speculation, or stashing the wealth in tax havens, safe from the vagaries of democracy. In other parts of the world, Graeber argued, magnates live under the spectre of social challenge to their wealth, but in London, “you can get Mary Poppins, you can get the nannies, the maids, the butlers . . . they really know how to do that. They do it with a smile.” Similarly, Peter Jukes, commenting on the British media, observed that, “For all our rebelliousness, we are quite an obeisant and sycophantic society. We are a monarchy, after all.”

Meghan’s pushback against the monarchy therefore appears to be a pushback against an unjust system that exploits the world’s black and brown peoples. But regardless of the catharsis we derive from seeing equally powerful centres of power square it off, it is important to remember that the Sussexes are not challenging the monarchy from the outside. Rather, they are reforming it from their base in America.
The Oprah Effect

The Sussexes’ interview with Oprah had more significance than just media ratings. As Ash Sarkar brilliantly put it in her interview with Novara Media, the message which Meghan and Harry sent with this interview is that they had crossed from one aristocracy into another. But this intra-aristocratic spat is not a split, as the hysterical British press, parasitic reporters of the royals, would have us believe. Rather, the tension across the pond is a sibling rivalry between the British monarchy and the American billionaire aristocracy.

Even before the marriage, the British royals and the American billionaire and cultural elites have enjoyed mutual relations. British royalty still featured in the pages of American entertainment news, attended Hollywood gala events, and as Prince Andrew did, kept company with the wealthy US underworld. American billionaires such as Bill Gates have been knighted at Buckingham Palace. Even the flamboyance, especially the ball gowns designed by haute couture designers, is an American adaptation of European court fashion.

However, as Sarkar noted, there are differences between the American and British aristocracies. Entry into the American aristocracy is still largely decided by industry as opposed to the UK where it is decided by birth. The American aristocracy is therefore more multi-racial than the British one. And while the British aristocracy maintains a stiff upper lip, the American one engages in fun with Ellen or goes to Oprah for confession.

If anything, it appears that Meghan’s expectation upon joining the royal family was that the cultural weight she brought from Hollywood—with stars such as Oprah, Gayle King and Serena Williams on the Sussexes’ wedding guest list—was going to be the substitute for not being white and British. And that probably explains Oprah’s dramatic reaction in the interview when Meghan talked of queries about the skin colour her unborn child. After all, for people like them, skin colour remains the only obstacle between them and complete assimilation into racialised capitalism, as opposed to most people of colour who have to face, in addition, barriers such as poverty, limited education and police violence. For Oprah, a horrifying experience of racism was being snubbed at a Swiss luxury goods shop, where an attendant declined to show her a bag costing $38,000 because the attendant thought that a black woman could not afford it.

One would even say that at the core of Meghan’s treatment is the possibility that the Windsors sense that what is at stake is not simply a visibly black child; it is also a collapse of the feudal logic of the aristocracy. The battle of the Sussexes is, in fact, a battle for supremacy between the feudal and the commercial logics of Anglo-American capitalist aristocracy. From the 19th century, the British monarchy has avoided being submerged by the rise of the industrial-commercial aristocracy by maintaining its hold on the symbolic power of awards, costumes and rituals at old institutions such as prestigious universities. However, this symbolic power has also remained essentially white.

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But there is a practical convenience in the identity of European aristocracy being white. By remaining white, the aristocracy could stave off revolution from its white working classes by convincing them that the latter were superior to exploited blacks and therefore need not seek solidarity with them. The US may have blacks like Oprah and the Obamas ascend to the aristocracy, but it compensates for this leeway with more violence, such as the incarceration of predominantly black people, and more vicious union-busting to prevent working class solidarity across race. As the
fate of the political campaigns by Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn attests, both countries remain united in crushing any political mobilisation by the working classes.

For the British royal family, therefore, the skin colour of Meghan’s children has political implications. Allowing black blood into the British aristocracy potentially breaks the racial pact of white supremacy which sustained slavery and empire, thereby releasing the white working class to find multi-racial class solidarity as the aristocrats have found with the marriage of the Sussexes.

**Marriage across the pond**

On the other hand, one could also read the Sussexes’ interview as the consolidation of the two aristocracies. Anglo-American capitalism is badly in need of cultural legitimacy. The wealth of the world’s top handful of people still remains immorally equivalent to the bottom half of the world’s population, and this cruel system is crushing the ability of the planet to host human beings. For Americans who proclaim the principle of pulling oneself by the bootstraps, defending this inequality is getting increasingly awkward. American capitalism needs a cultural justification that goes beyond the humour of Ellen and the cuddling from Oprah, into love and family life.

That would explain two series being aired on Netflix: *The Crown* which glosses over the atrocities of the British Empire, and *Bridgerton*, the brainchild of yet another black queen of television drama, Shonda Rhimes. As argued in the *Oprah* magazine (no surprise), Bridgerton multi-racialises European aristocratic culture, with the promise that a multi-racial aristocracy is no different from a multi-racial professional office. That argument is essentially asking black people to substitute their memory and current lived experience for the audacity of hope to one day live like the Oprahs and the Obamas of the world.

A multi-racial global aristocracy is no substitute for the reality of global inequality that remains thoroughly racialised. Moreover, racial inequalities do not disappear under neoliberalism, despite having a generous sprinkling of people of colour at the top.

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Marketisation and bureaucratisation, the American route into the aristocracy, are very deceptive. While the American version does allow more people of colour to rise to the top through achievements in politics, education and culture, it simultaneously reduces the racial diversity at the entrance. One cannot rise up the ranks without getting their foot in the door first, and what neoliberalism does is to block the doors of the temple of social mobility by privatising all social services, forcing people into low pay, gig jobs, and the burden of debt. For every Oprah, Beyoncé, Obama and Serena, there are millions of black people whose similar work ethic and equal excellence are crushed by difficult living conditions and limited opportunities.

In other words, while we must call out the racist treatment of the Sussexes, we must also add that their plight is an intra-aristocratic, and fundamentally Anglo-American sibling rivalry. With more blacks like Meghan, their refuge Tyler Perry, and their confessional priest Oprah, all now connected to Buckingham Palace from the “promised land” of a black former US president and a current black and female vice-president, it is tempting to believe that defending Meghan against racism is also asserting the dignity of the majority of the people of colour.

The reality is almost anything but. We still live under a cruel economic system that squeezes more out of us and makes us more miserable, while the rich accumulate more wealth, and the planet
continues to send distress signals. The tragedy across the world, including Kenya, is that the neoliberal ideology has created a new middle class that is committed to enforcing a system of cruelty from behind the scenes, away from the gossip, glamour and glare of aristocratic life, while displaying their sorrows and angst on public media. The good news is that all these shifts are a sign of the continued decline of the Anglo-American empire.

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