



We Need a New Humanity

By Wandia Njoya



In the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the government announced, with great fanfare, that Kenyatta University students had invented a ventilator that could help with patient treatment. The Trade and Industrialisation Cabinet Secretary, Betty Maina, and Health Cabinet Secretary, Mutahi Kagwe, visited the students and lauded the local innovation in response to the pandemic.

A year later, the media announced that the ventilators were not yet ready for use because the machines had not gone through the necessary approvals. The CSs, whose job is to facilitate innovations such as these, had little to say. Betty Maina pleaded that she was “also concerned that the process had taken us that long”, as if she did not have the authority as the Cabinet Secretary to find out where the bureaucracy had stalled. And as if to console Kenyans, she cited Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and masks as some of the locally manufactured items being used by medical workers.

The theatre was annoying, yet so familiar. For every innovation made by Kenyans, one obstacle constantly stands in the way: government bureaucracy. The popular explanation is that government officials are so corrupt that they will block local innovation unless it allows the officials to siphon money through avenues such as bribes and tenders. Another common narrative is that the government is shooting itself in the foot in its efforts to industrialise Kenya.

I want to suggest here that these responses miss the root of the problem. The fate of the ventilators

is just a snippet of what has been happening in Africa for the last four centuries. The truth is simply this: global capitalism has always intended that Africa never industrialises. For the last four centuries, Europe has put in place infrastructure to ensure that industrialisation never happens. Furthermore, I want to suggest that industrialisation is NOT progress, and therefore, we should not aspire to it in the first place.

As Walter Rodney told us in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Europe began this underdevelopment of Africa through the transatlantic slave trade, which extracted the skills and energy of Africans to build the Americas and Europe. During colonial rule a few centuries later, European governments collected and exported diverse forms of African knowledge, artefacts, archives and biodiversity, thus suppressing the growth of African technologies and knowledges in areas like smelting, dye making, fabric weaving, architecture and medicine. Intellectual innovations, such as in theology, were shut down by criminalising people like Elijah Masinde and Simon Kibangu or declaring them mentally insane. In Kenya, independent schools started by Africans were shut down. In Cameroon, colonial authorities suppressed African orthographies, such as the one commissioned by King Ibrahim Njoya of the Bamum.

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The message was simple: innovation was never to come out of Africa. As the colonialists paid lip service to development and civilisation, their actions demonstrated a determination to keep Africa confined to being a source of raw materials. The African minds and hands which could have been engaged in industrialisation were sent to endure brutality in the mines of southern Africa and the plantations of the Congo, and the few Africans who went to school were subjected to a mind-numbing education that turned them into bureaucrats to facilitate the extraction of African resources. The contradiction was maintained by a racist ideology which depicted Africa's stagnation as a problem with Africans themselves, and which preached that ideas and creativity were not profitable or relevant to African life.

This suffocating system was unsustainable, because maintaining violence ate into the profits which the European bourgeoisie extracted from the colonies. The brutality of the colonies was also becoming politically problematic in the metropole, where the European public was now receiving news of what their governments were up to in the colonies.

But more importantly, as Frantz Fanon explains in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Europe was now saturated with manufactured goods and the European bourgeoisie, true to its voracious character, was desperately seeking new markets. European bureaucrats of the state therefore reluctantly relinquished control of the colonial governments. And conveniently for them, colonial schools had raised a small enough African bourgeoisie who could defend the continued extraction by European capital but also open up Africa as a market for European goods.

So, as the white faces disappeared from the colonial institutions, imperialism left behind two pillars for ensuring that Africa never industrialised.

One was the economic weapons of sanctions and debt traps. As Fanon reminds us, the beginning of decolonisation signaled to Europeans in Africa to withdraw the capital which they had built on the backs of Africans. The retreating Europeans also destroyed the facilities they had constructed, and after that, they used economic coercion to ensure that Africa remained stuck where the colonialists had left her.

The second weapon against Africa's industrialisation was the African bourgeoisie itself. Due to the education system they had gone through, accompanied by the political compromises which reduced freedom to simply Africans replacing Europeans while the colonial state remained intact, the African professionals and politicians were incapable of creativity, production or work. Fanon argues that this reality, compounded by the economic stagnation imposed by the West, made the African bourgeoisie accept the role of being "the conveyor belt of capitalism", mired in mimicking the "negative and decadent aspects" of the Western bourgeoisie.

The decadence of the bourgeoisie includes a notoriously voracious greed which consumes everything in its wake, especially that which has not fully developed or matured. The bourgeoisie capitalises on ideas for their public relations value and prevents the maturing of those ideas, or treats the raw innovation of Africa's youth as materials for extraction by foreign venture capitalists. These days, this suppression of African innovation goes under the banner of approvals, licenses, or as "quality" and "standards" norms drafted elsewhere.

That is the fate to which the poor young Kenyans at Kenyatta University were subjected. And they are not alone. A more horrifying illustration of the Kenyan bourgeoisie's hatred for innovation comes from a story I heard a few years ago at one of the few locally owned innovation hubs. According to this account, one of the members of the hub produced a prototype. Shortly afterwards, he received two hostile guests. One was the Kenya Revenue Authority demanding taxes, and the other was his area MP threatening him with death should he develop and publicise the prototype.

Another example comes from the education sector with which I am most familiar. Teaching staff are subjected to stifling control and surveillance by the central government in the name of "international" benchmarking and competitive graduates. In pre-tertiary education, teachers are blocked from adopting innovative pedagogy or curriculum through drastic system replacements and the constant surveillance of examinations and performance management.

These tools have now multiplied with the Competency Based Curriculum, where children will be subjected to increased nationwide assessments, and where the curriculum includes even instructions on daily learning activities. In tertiary education, institutions are subjected to inspections, examination procedures are policed from Gigiri, and curriculum requires government approval for as little as introducing new units. This system of control is based on Euro-American models but is camouflaged under the banner of "quality assurance", which is a term adopted from industrial manufacturing.

Evidently, Western capital is assured of support from the African bourgeoisie in suppressing innovation on the continent. To hide this truth, the Kenyan elite calm our nerves with performances like that of Betty Maina and Mutahi Kagwe at Kenyatta University, singing about industrialisation from the hymnals provided by the UN, the World Bank and their bevy of consultants who make money lying to Africa that it can industrialise. This reality is propped up by a racist narrative which implies that Africa must always follow in the path of the West because we don't know better.

And yet, the trajectory of Europe and America shows that the gospel of industrialisation being preached to poor countries is not followed in Euro-America itself. The West, especially the United States, has de-industrialised to undermine its own citizens who had successfully fought for better working conditions through their unions. From the time of Reagan, followed by agreements such as NAFTA, American industries broke up their factories and scattered the pieces among various poor countries, to as to avoid the labour and environmental regulations of the US and to take advantage of poor countries where such regulations were weak. Today, major American brands do not own factories. Rather, they rent their brand names and logos to factories in poorer countries, an absurdity which has been explained in detail by Naomi Klein in her work *No Logo*.

The capitalist priests of industrialisation have themselves never intrinsically cared for manufacturing. Their main goal is, and has always been, cheap profits at the people's expense, whether the people are cultivating on plantations, running factory machines or being exploited in the colonies. As Eric Williams famously told us in *Capitalism and Slavery*, plantation slavery in the New World did not end due to the moralism of abolition and the weapons of the American Civil War; rather, the Euro-American capital had no use for slave labour after it had developed machinery that produced goods faster than slavery.

The exploitation of human beings did not end with the abolition of slavery; it simply migrated to the cities. Factories lined the pockets of the American and British wealthy through terrible working conditions, the poverty of depression and the humiliation of living in quasi-prisons called workhouses. Moreover, the African labour that produced the raw materials was no longer in the Americas but now in the motherland itself, thanks to colonisation.

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By the same token, the rebellions of the plantations transferred to the factories. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the early twentieth centuries were characterised by some of the bravest and costliest fights for unionisation and labour rights in the US and the UK. While we are told about the industrialists to whose philanthropic foundations we must write for grants for research and cultural work, we are not told about the Haymarket Strike, or the rise of Jim Crow laws, race riots and lynchings to prevent the solidarity of workers across race, and to constantly subvert black American economic prosperity.

But just like a spoiled brat, Anglo-American capital soon became disinterested in industrialisation. With the neoliberal turn, Reagan and Thatcher famously crushed the unions with a brutality that is barely discussed publically. In the decades that followed, Euro-American capitalists threw their white working classes under the bus, excited them with false narratives blaming their misfortunes on immigrants, and increased the amount of bureaucracy and military surveillance, thus creating the rabid armies that would sweep Trump and Boris Johnson into power.

In Kenya, public sermons on the need to industrialise are notoriously silent on this parallel history of industrialisation. The Kenyan youth naively celebrate prospects of industrialisation as possibility for employment, having not been exposed to the reality of backbreaking work and precarious employment (popularly known as *kibarua* - contract labour).

Africa must grapple with the human cost of industrialisation over the centuries. We must not be seduced into avoiding the question of whether industrialisation is really the path to progress, even though China is willing to help Africa industrialise rather than behave like Euro-America which constantly places booby traps in the path of African innovation and industrialisation.

With industrialisation preached as religion, questioning it is literal blasphemy. But a number of reasons lead me to commit this blasphemy.

As a middle class, urban Kenyan, I am often amazed when I am in the kitchen and I see how much packaging I throw away. Everything from spices to salt is packaged in some paper or plastic container. We drink tea with milk from cows we do not see, brewed with tea leaves which we do not grow.

On our shelves are books and papers we have accumulated over the years. Many are government

documents, receipts and certificates that are supposed to prove that we have done what we have done. Many of these documents and reports would be better off in a library where they can be catalogued and we can consult if we need to.

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Our phones are built to deteriorate quite fast, and the new models do not significantly improve our lives. They simply give us more cameras, games and apps to play with.

With all this “progress”, we are bombarded with more information as we become less knowledgeable. We are becoming physically less healthy because of relying on food that is not locally produced. We are now sitting in traffic longer while our government borrows loans to build roads in the air, instead of building infrastructure to make cycling and walking easier, or building tramways for travel over longer distances.

More annoying is the fact that many times products are marketed to us as essential, only for them to gather dust after a short period of use.

All this packaging, junk and isolation is produced by industrialisation.

The foundation of industrialisation, therefore, is not technology, as we’re taught to believe. It is alienation. Alienation from ourselves, from each other, from our environment and from reality. Industrialisation requires amnesia and detachment from the being human, to the extent that we accept the lie that to be dehumanised and to ruin the planet is “progress”.

So what is the alternative to industrialisation?

We need a society that ends alienation, alienation from what we consume, who produces it, and from each other. We should be able to buy food from farmers we know. We should be able to go to a producers’ market or a farm on a regular basis to buy food in season, and grow a few regulars at home. We should shop with containers which will be refilled every time we go to the market, rather than always throw away yet more unnecessary packaging.

We should have libraries so that we don’t have to keep buying more and more books. We should have spaces for concerts, festivals and regular occasions to meet and know each other. As a teacher who loves sewing and knitting, I should be able to earn a living while splitting my time between having conversations with young people in my house and making clothes to sell. My creativity and knowledge should not be policed by people in the lush suburbs of Gigiri who do not care who I am and whom I teach.

And without industrialisation, there would be no need for surveillance to control our bodies and minds, which means no meaningless bureaucratic jobs, less paper waste on bureaucratic documents, less corruption, and less misery of sitting at a desk from eight to five. We would not need to make children spend the whole day in school because parents would be free to pick them up.

A de-industrialised world would give us less illnesses, would make us pollute the planet less, and would give us time to be with ourselves, our families and our communities. It would make us more creative and hopefully, happier. We would experience travel not as the harassment we now know, but as a series of adventures like the ones reflected in our folk tales, of meeting new people and either settling as new communities or returning home.

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By contrast, all that industrialisation does is to voraciously consume the planet and our humanity in useless and brutal pursuits. Industrialisation packs people in cages called plantations, factories, mines, offices, schools and prisons. Initially, the zombie owners of the cages harvested whatever the caged human beings produced. Now they have added a new layer to their greed: they collect rents on money, patents, buildings and risk. This system is justified culturally by a media that celebrates the owners of the cages and disparages the caged. To maintain this madness, the US and the UK dedicate their resources to manufacturing weapons and occupying human talent with surveillance. The US notoriously holds a quarter of the world's prison population behind bars for profit and the post-Brexit UK is now beefing up its nuclear arsenal.

Unfortunately, this madness is being mimicked by African leaders with no sense of irony. Ghana, a major site of export of kidnapped Africans during the Middle Passage, is considering a repeat performance of the evils of the prison industrial complex. Kenya's president has just commissioned a weapons factory to profit from African wars, even as the aforementioned ventilators are yet to receive approval and as the lack of ICU beds and oxygen cylinders is killing Kenyans.

And this is not an invitation for escape to rural life. Rural life may give us a reprieve from the toxicity of urban life, but it remains embedded in the colonial logic of extraction and exploitation. In any case, the vulture capitalists are coming for rural areas too, under banners such as conservation, protecting wildlife from Africans and seed and food colonisation.

Euro-America is miserable. To echo Fanon, it has never stopped talking of humanity, while it increases and securitises its industrialisation of humanity. Africans should not thoughtlessly follow the path of industrialisation when industrialisation is not working in the West and has always dehumanised Africans. The West has constantly sabotaged industrialisation in Africa anyway. As Fanon, and later Thomas Sankara said, we must invent a new future. Fanon's final words in his last book (with my modifications) are very much worth repeating:

We now know the price of suffering humanity has paid for every one of Europe's spiritual victories. Come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else. We can do anything provided that we do not ape Europe, provided that we are not obsessed with catching up with Europe. Europe has gained such a mad and reckless momentum that it has lost control and reason and is heading at dizzying speed towards the brink from which we would be advised to remove ourselves as quickly as possible.

Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us tense our muscles and brains in a new direction. Let us endeavour to invent humanity in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving. What matters now is not a question of profitability, not a question of productivity, not a question of production rates. No, it is not a question of back to nature. It is the very basic question of not dragging humanity in directions which humiliate humanity. If we want to respond to the expectations of our peoples, we must look elsewhere besides Europe. We must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new humanity.

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