

Intellectual honesty is key to identifying a modernising emperor

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Writing in the Sunday Independent of July 25, Prince Mashele makes the following preposterous observations about the president of the republic: "...the problem with the emperor who leads South Africa today is that there is no evidence that he possesses the necessary analytical capacity to penetrate our overarching problem."

Mashele astonishingly argues that "beyond the realm of songs, dance and smiles, few in our society would be ready to be mobilised intellectually by our melodiously gifted Emperor."

For this reason, Mashele argues, the country has stalled and may in fact be sliding backward.

It is not easy to expose Mashele's prejudice and concomitantly avoid joining him in the intellectual gutter. For this sake of intellectual enterprise, let the reader adjudicate.

Join me in a short journey to lay bare both fundamental and elementary flaws in Mashele's thesis. On top of the snag list is his assertion that "our people are no different from the Americans or Europeans of today." But then he contradicts himself by arguing that "often, the weight of history does impose itself on generations far beyond the immediacy of an historic moment."

How can South Africans be no different to Americans and Europeans when the weights of their histories have imposed themselves into current conditions? Can a generalised comparison of contemporary South Africa and America, without necessarily considering the weight of their histories, pass the test of intellectual rigour?

Still on comparisons, the article employs caricature to contrast apples and oranges: Japan and South Africa at different historical epochs between 1868 and 2010. Oblivious to own advice that the weight of history influences current conditions, he draws inconsequential parallels between the two countries. The questions arise, what conditions existed in both countries in the epochs cited?

He conjecture to himself, "without the modernising vision of the Meiji emperor, one wonders what Japan would be like today." An intellectually honest analyst would have asked: without the chains of racial oppression and systematic underdevelopment of the majority, where would South Africa be today? Had the doors of learning and culture been open by the colonialists between 1868, 1912 and beyond, would the SA of 2010 be experiencing high-levels of poverty and unemployment?

A short history lesson for Mashele: the corresponding period of the Meiji dynasty (1868 – 1912) is a time many South Africans would prefer to forget. This is a time of

colonial wars and internal displacement that produced devastating results for the indigenous people. Boer Republics were starving-off British advance which intensified in pursuit of control of the newly discovered precious metals.

What we now call the South African War (formerly Anglo-Boer War) – in recognition of the role played by Africans and other racial groups – shaped internal conditions and resulted in public policies that systematically excluded the majority from meaningful participation in the economic and political life of the country. The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 sealed the face of Africans and gave the trusteeship of the country to minority settler group.

In fact, the conditions created in the period leading up to 1912 gave reason for the formation of the African National Congress (ANC). Whereas the Japanese sought to consolidate the legacy of the Meiji from 1912 onwards, the majority of South Africans rallied behind efforts to create a national movement, the ANC, whose project was the destruction of a racialised society in order to create conditions of equality and social justice.

A year after the death of Meiji, South Africa saw the introduction of the Land Act which sealed the fate of Africans as they had to share less than a fraction of unproductive land. Losing their land and property ensured that they became available as cheap labour in the mines and farms of colonisers. When the Meiji declared “there shall, in future, be no community with an illiterate family, or a family with an illiterate person”, racist emperors declared that there shall be no African in decent work, in productive farms and in empowering education.

So, you need not be an erudite to discern that when Japanese were exploiting the legacy of the Meiji emperor, black South Africans were dealing with dispossession, disenfranchisement, dislocation, disempowerment, discrimination and dehumanisation. Although the president is a target of his diatribe, Mashele is actually dissing all South Africans by calculatingly omitting the effects of accumulated disabilities in our developmental trajectory.

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” I am sure Mashele has encountered this Karl Marx citation yet the dearth of intellectual humility prevents him from applying it in his deleterious anti-president project.

Yet he volunteers a lesson that “... so has the impact of the Meiji Emperor been on contemporary Japan. Japan is today the second largest economy in the world.”

This is typical of an emerging crop of intellectual purists who dominate our print and electronic media. This is a group that uses the individual, in this case the president, as a proxy and pictogram of our current disabilities. They delete history in their analyses and reduce such challenges as low levels of technological innovation to contemporary public policy. Such intellectual laxity perverts ideas and one’s world

outlook. Intellectual perversion undermines the basics of the enterprise: objectivity and enlightenment.

The bourgeois world outlook, as Mao Tse Tung calls it, isolates the intellectual enterprise as an 'exclusive preserve' of a few. This intellectual dislocation, as Molefi Kete Asante calls it, prevents purists from identifying modernisation and progress even as it unfolds before them.

Very few in our society today would agree that our country is not modernising as Mashele pontificates. Just as Mao Tse Tung said of post-independence China, transformation in South Africa is "going ahead vigorously on all fronts and very successfully too, but in the present transition period of tremendous social change there are still many difficult problems. Progress and at the same time difficulties..."

A jaundiced view of current progress and government's priorities undermines the reality that ours is indeed a society marching to claim its rightful place in the community of nations. Just as the Meiji Empire could determine a future of Japan, so is the current government; doing so under conditions of liberty and the pursuit of social justice.

For ease of reference, education is the number one priority of this administration. Even the most cynical of observers of our education system have embraced most of the initiatives introduced to improve its quality. Young people have reciprocated by taking up every space possible especially in the higher education arena. Public and private investments in R&D are rising sharply.

Therefore, as we reflect on our country's developmental trajectory, let us do so guided by the principles of intellectual honesty, rigour and objectivity. These virtues breed humility. Evidence of modernisation should not be sacrificed at the altar of prejudice and individual preferences for leadership. That our president can sing has nothing to do with his commitment to fast-track transformation. Let him be judged by the outcomes of his transformation efforts; just as intellectuals are judged by their rigour and not their neo-con political leanings and private delinquencies.

Like all other leaders, the current leadership will "make their own history", but not "as they please." They will make it "under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." The reforms they are making now – with affirmation from many conscientious observers – in areas such as education, will determine the course and depth of modernisation of society. Our education reforms, like those of the Meiji, are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Their effects will transcend generations. That is what civilisations do – they outlive 'emperors'. I suppose intellectual purists do not apply such logic in pursuit of their perverted ideals.

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