Book Review

Benyera, Everisto (2021)
The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Recolonisation of Africa: The Coloniality of Data
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Once in a while, a book is published which can be described as having its finger on the pulse of the ordinary citizens of the world. Here is a book which introduces the notion of the Coloniality of Data and proceeds to undertake a critical analysis of how “data is now the new gold and oil” which can be mined, processed and utilised to make “data-informed policies and decisions”. These decisions are in favour of those who mine, process and own the data, Benyera argues. The capitalisation, politicisation and, not surprisingly, the abuse of data was argued as the new frontier for what he argued constitutes the recolonisation of Africa. Big Data is demystified as not constituting an innocent resource but as the latest instrument in the never-ending armoury of coloniality. The most important contribution of the book was the introduction of the Coloniality of Data as a form of epistemic crime and injustice as it perpetuates asymmetrical power relations with those who enacted colonialism continuing to benefit from its infrastructure. This way, Benyera draws a direct causal link between Euro-North American political modernity, colonialism, and the Coloniality of Data. This is an innovative way of drawing insights into new academic terrains such as how the massive amounts of data being generated is being related to those who produce, but not won the data.

This book questions what seems to be the unquestionable trajectory of life during the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its trumpeting as the panacea to African problems. In his latest book, Everisto Benyera takes time to build, layer-by-layer, the dangers inherent in the 4IR for the Global South in general and Africa in particular. Unfortunately, this also constitutes one of the weakest aspects of the book. Generalising about a phenomenon as wide, deep, and as nuanced as the 4IR to a geography as wide, deep, and as complicated as the Global South is bound to produce a narrative that tends to gravitate towards over-generalisation. To address the problems of tending to overgeneralise, Benyera laced his book with a lot of details on the concept that he developed known as the Coloniality of Data. It is debatable whether to attribute the concept and the notion of the Coloniality of Data to Benyera. However, what is undoubted is that he made a significant contribution in bringing this
concept to a wider readership and also presenting it as one unified analytical concept applicable and efficacious in unpacking the challenges faced by the Global South. Of course, the Coloniality of Data, as a concept, is not yet at the levels of the other three established decolonial analytical frameworks: coloniality of power, knowledge and being. Instead of lambasting Benyera for contributing to the development of this notion and then deploying it to analyse how Africa is prone to (re)colonisation in the 4IR, it is an ethical scholarly endeavour for others to take the proverbial button instead and developed the notion of the Coloniality of Data from where Benyera left.

Benyera exposes a new form of empire which in his view is emerging. This is a non-territorial technology empire that is powering the Fourth Industrial Revolution and mining, harvesting, stealing data from unconsenting, unsuspecting people who are dispossessed of the products of their modes of everyday online activities. Data is mined from social media platforms which Benyera correctly characterised not as social media companies but as digital and online mass surveillance and data farms.

The book cautions against the blind celebration of the Fourth Industrial Revolution across the main sectors and geographies of the Global South. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is presented as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, just like the past three industrial revolutions for which Africa has very little if anything to celebrate, he asserted.

The key contribution of the book is the application of Handt and Negri’s notion of the Empire as the thief of peoples’ individual sovereignties. The emerging technological empire is presented in the book as a new system which is this dispossessing people of their sovereignty as they kick the Terms and Conditions in order to be accepted onto the online digital platforms and the resultant digital geographies.

It must be noted that the cautioning of those that tick the Ts and Cs without reading them is almost void as there is no way in which consumers can change the Ts and Cs of social media platforms.

One issue that is bound to generate a lot of debate in the book is the concept of the recolonisation of Africa. These debates will occur at various levels, the main one being that Africa was decolonised, hence recolonisation is highly improbable. The logic is that what can only happen to Africa is what has been termed coloniality and not recolonisation. Yet at another level there is the debate that Africa was never fully decolonised hence it cannot be recolonised since it is already colonised. While these are legitimate arguments, the bottom line is that they need not divert us from the key argument which was made by every store which is that we should not just accept the 4IR because the past three industrial revolutions spelt disaster for the Global South. The same steam engines which revolutionised agriculture in the Global North are the same steam engines that propelled ships to come and partake in the slave trade. The past industrial revolution, for Benyera, deposited all their toxins in the Global South and they include the slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, and now coloniality. What is not clear though is whether what he terms the recolonisation of Africa is the same as coloniality. Conceptual clarity is lacking in this regard.

The book is written in eight chapters and the style of writing is very easy to follow cross with a lot of interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and at times what can be termed un-disciplinarity. Benyera gravitates smoothly between disciplines from geography to music
to find out to Physics to Chemistry and back to International Law and International Relations. This way he managed to tackle a very complex and otherwise very contested terrain of mapping the future of Africa in the 4IR. The take-home from the book was his argument that colonialism was not the occupation of just the land but rather it was also the occupation of the Minds the establishment of networks and the displacement of epistemologies and their subsequent replacement with Western-centric epistemologies which were then naturalised and are now and showing as the norm.

In Everisto Benyera, we see a rising prolific writer whose arguments, while tending to be general, are convincing if one takes the time to invest in understanding his logic. He thinks and writes from what Walter Mignolo termed the border, hence the notion of border thinking or border gnosis: “dwell and thinking in the borders are gnoseological and aesthetic twofold reconstitutions”. In the book, Benyera does not think for Africa, but thinks from and with Africa. Such voices of the Global South deserve an audience.

The book is organised into eight chapters which are contained in 195 pages. The first chapter is the introduction to both the book and the notion of decoloniality. It affirms the applicability of decoloniality which Benyera frames as the continued asymmetrical power relations between the former colonisers and their former colonies. Benyera also introduces what he terms the Coloniality of Data in this chapter. For him, it denotes how those with the colonial infrastructure continue to extract data from their former colonies in the same way in which they extracted human resources in the form of slaves and also raw materials during colonialism. The notion of Data for Development (D4D) is dismissed as a myth that is meant to empower non-governmental organisations and similar entities so that they can assist in the mining and pilfering of data from unsuspecting poor people of the Global South. In a way, the chapter affirms the resilience of colonialism and how it muted each time that it faced a new challenge. Chapter 2 is very much historical. It explores how Africa suffered at the hands of the Global North during the first, second and third industrial revolutions. For Benyera, the 4IR must not be celebrated if Africa is to learn from the lessons of the past three industrial revolutions. Chapter 3 contextualises the global colonial project and how Africa suffered from plunder, enslavement, pilferage and most importantly epistemicides. It is in this chapter that Benyera develops the Coloniality of Data as a decolonial analytical concept. He also explored the work of hunters, explorers, miners, and missionaries in foregrounding Euro-North American political modernity. Benyera argues that it is Euro-North American modernity that made Africa susceptible to all the evils that it continues to suffer from culminating in the current phase of the Coloniality of Data which is fuelled by the Internet of Things and Big Data among others. Chapter 4 is the theory development part of the book and focuses on the actualities of Coloniality of Data which were given as networks of coloniality and coloniality of networks, data mining, and data harvesting and their processing giving rise to datafication which is the process of turning data into capital. It is in Chapter 4 that Benyera hit the proverbial nail on the head by proffering how data is the new oil and gold and how, like oil and gold before it, data will be ruthlessly mined, processed, sold and politicised. It is also here that he links how the Coloniality of Data will eventually lead to the loss of sovereignty in Africa. Chapter 5 contains the “how” part of the book, which is how data is mined, harvested and datafied, and most importantly
who is doing all these, for what reason and at what expense accrues to who? The coloniality of networks and the networks of coloniality are given as the instruments used by an emerging technological oligarchy that is operating and managing the emerging online empires. The empire is no longer political, Benyera argues but is now a cyber empire that is farming the cyber geography. Chapter 6 unpacks how Africa was destroyed from various fronts and left standing on shaky ground. The grounds that Africa is standing on today are shaky epistemologically, existentially, philosophically, economically, socially, morally, religiously and from many other countless fronts. All this was courtesy of Euro-North American modernity which Benyera described as the mother of all distractions and accumulations. Chapter 7 is a prediction of Africa’s eventual destination in the 4IR which is recolonisation. What is important in Chapter 7 is that it locates the recolonisation of Africa not on physical Africa but on the new cyber online geographies which are resultant of the 4IR. Chapter 8 is the final chapter in the book and consolidates the argument made in the book by demonstrating how Africa was rendered what Benyera termed a eunuch continent. Benyera uses Ali Mazrui’s observation that Africa produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce, to sum up, the status in the 4IR.

The book introduces the notion of the Coloniality of Data and proceeds to undertake a critical analysis of how “data is now the new gold and oil” which can be mined, processed and utilised to make “data-informed policies and decisions” with the critical question of who benefits from these data-informed policies? These decisions are in favour of those who mine, process and own the data. The capitalisation, politicisation and, not surprisingly, the abuse of data was argued as the new frontier for what Benyera argued constitutes the recolonisation of Africa. Big Data is demystified as not constituting an innocent resource but as the latest instrument in the never-ending armoury of coloniality. The most important contribution of the book was the introduction of the Coloniality of Data as a form of epistemic crime and injustice as it perpetuates asymmetrical power relations with those who enacted colonialism continuing to benefit from its infrastructure. This way, Benyera draws a direct causal link between Euro-North American political modernity, colonialism and the Coloniality of Data. This is an innovative way of drawing insights into new academic terrains such as how the massive amounts of data being generated are being related to those who produce, but not won the data.

This book questions what seems to be the unquestionable trajectory of life during the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and its trumpeting as the panacea to the African problems. In his latest book, Everisto Benyera takes time to build, layer-by-layer, the dangers inherent in the 4IR for the Global South in general and Africa in particular. Unfortunately, this also constitutes one of the weakest aspects of the book. Generalising about a phenomenon as wide, deep and as nuanced as the 4IR to a geography as wide, deep, and as complicated as the Global South is bound to produce a narrative that tends to gravitate towards over-generalisation. To address the problems of tending to overgeneralise, Benyera laced his book with a lot of details on the concept that he developed known as the Coloniality of Data. It is debatable whether to attribute the concept and the notion of the Coloniality of Data to Benyera. However, what is undoubted is that he made a significant contribution in bringing this concept to a wider readership and also presenting it as one unified analytical
concept applicable and efficacious in unpacking the challenges faced by the Global South. Of course, the Coloniality of Data, as a concept, is not yet at the levels of the other three established decolonial analytical frameworks: coloniality of power, knowledge and being. Instead of lambasting Benyera for contributing to the development of this notion and then deploying it to analyse how Africa is prone to (re)colonisation in the 4IR, it is an ethical scholarly endeavour for others to take the proverbial button instead and developed the notion of the Coloniality of Data from where Benyera left. Benyera exposes a new form of the empire which in his view is emerging. This is a non-territorial technology empire that is powering the 4IR. Data is mined from social media platforms which Benyera correctly characterised not as social media companies but as digital and online mass surveillance and data farms.

The book cautions against the blind celebration of the 4IR across the main sectors and geographies of the Global South. The 4IR is presented as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, just like the past three industrial revolutions for which Africa has very little if anything to celebrate, he asserted. The emerging technological empire is presented in the book as a new system that is dispossessing people of their sovereignty as they tick the Terms and Conditions in order to be accepted onto the online digital platforms and the resultant digital geographies. It must be noted that the cautioning of those that tick the Ts and Cs without reading them is almost void as there is no way in which consumers can change the Ts and Cs of social media platforms. They are non-negotiable.

One issue that is bound to generate a lot of debate in the book is the concept of the recolonisation of Africa. These debates will happen at various levels. Firstly, there are views that Africa was decolonised and hence there is no talk of a recolonisation. The logic is that what can only happen for Africa is what has been termed coloniality and not recolonisation. At another level, there is the debate that Africa was never fully decolonised hence it cannot be recolonised since it is already colonised. While these are legitimate arguments, the bottom line is that they need not divert us from the key argument which was made by Benyera which is that we should not blindly accept the 4IR as a part of the solution to the African problem, because the past three industrial revolutions spelt disaster for the Global South. The past three industrial revolutions, for Benyera, deposited all their toxic wastes in the Global South. These include the slave trade, colonialism, imperialism and now coloniality. What is not clear though is whether what he terms the recolonisation of Africa is the same as coloniality. Conceptual clarity is lacking in this regard, which must be interrogated, perhaps in another study.

The book is written in eight chapters and the style of writing is very easy to follow as the book criss-crosses and intersects a lot of disciplines. At times, the books read more like what can be termed un-disciplinarity. Benyera glides smoothly between disciplines; from Geography to Musicology, Social Anthropology, Physics, Chemistry and back to International Law and International Relations. This way, he managed to tackle a very complex and otherwise vexatious and very contested terrain which is that of mapping the future of Africa in the 4IR. The take-home from the book was his argument that colonialism was not just the occupation of the land, but rather it was also the occupation of the minds, the establishment of networks, and the displacement of epistemologies and their subsequent
replacement with Western-centric epistemologies which were then naturalised and are now accepted as the norm.


Written from a decolonial perspective, this book employs three analytical pillars of coloniality of power, knowledge and being. The author argues that Fourth Industrial Revolution, the process of accelerated automation of traditional manufacturing and industrial practices via digital technology, will serve to further marginalise Africa within the international community. This book will be useful to those who wish to understand the notion of coloniality and how it applies to data and subsequently how it affects Africa and Africans. Those who want to understand the 4IR and how it relates to Africa will find the book useful in the debate of whether the 4IR is a blessing or curse for Africa. While the book may not be prescribed for a specific category of readers, groups such as post-graduate students, civil society and non-governmental organisations doing advocacy work in development, governance, and human rights will find this book useful. The book is also a useful tool for researchers of African studies, politics and international political economy.