



Horizons of liberation: materialism, ecology, and the colonial question

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HORIZONS OF LIBERATION: MATERIALISM, ECOLOGY, AND THE COLONIAL QUESTION

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Colonial question
ecology
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materialism
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The question of materialism – what it is, how it is studied and practised, and who takes it seriously enough – has long animated debates among Marxists and scholars of race and the colonial question. Today, our contemporary socioecological crises challenge established understandings of materialism and merit a return to these debates with the goal of collective liberation on a warming planet in mind. Taking up this task, this article builds an understanding of materialism as theory and practice working towards liberation – a theory and practice shaped variously by culture, ontology, and the experience of oppressive structural conditions. The contributions of scholarship focused on race and colonial projects and legacies particularly illuminate these multiple dimensions of materialism. Among a wealth of other insights, anticolonial Third Worldist thinkers left us with an astute diagnosis of value in the world system; Black radical scholars have revealed the ontological roots of material struggles; decolonial scholars have exposed the solidification of racial classification systems as structures; and Indigenous (Fourth World) ontologies continue to maintain a commitment to metabolic repair and reciprocity. While contemporary

ecology-focused conceptual innovations – such as metabolic rift and material throughput – expand materialist analyses, approaches focused on race and the colonial question bring particular insight to the global structural elements of socioecological crises and generate a materialism oriented towards horizons of liberation for all.

Introduction

1 “The colonial question” is used in this essay to refer to political and scholarly work focused on colonialism, coloniality, neocolonialism, and other related forms of power. It provides a way of grouping together work across anti-, post-, and decolonial scholarship and praxis which is often separated by perceived difference but which nonetheless shares common ground in terms of concern for colonial forms. The formulation “colonial question” is used by Césaire in correspondence with the French Communist Party (Shilliam 2017) and incorporated by Robbie Shilliam as a way of referring to a consciousness around colonialism within a particular epistemic project (Shilliam 2017).

Scholars and movements focused on race and the colonial question¹ have endowed us with vast archives of theory and practice through which to build historically informed approaches to living and organizing in the present. In light of the contemporary specifics of global ecological breakdown, this essay searches those archives for (sometimes errant) materialisms; draws in and reflects on materialisms developed in broader literatures on ecology; and maps out materialist horizons of socioecological repair. This text takes seriously the lessons of a range of scholars of race and the colonial question to inform a global structural and materialist analysis of socioecological crisis that is oriented towards liberation.

The argument here centres on how shifting forms of materialism (understood as theory and practice oriented towards liberation), in the context of socioecological crisis, can be adjusted and reformulated with lessons drawn from the broad landscape of work on race and the colonial question. For example, and as elaborated in the analysis below, where Marxists broadly see the practice of materialism as emerging from the experience of capitalist relations of production, Indigenous and Black Radical contributions emphasize both pre-/non-capitalist ontology *and* the experience of contemporary socioecological conditions as generative of revolutionary consciousness. And where degrowthers seek to stem material throughput in the global economy, Indigenous movements have long sought to limit resource extraction at source, while Third Worldists have worked against the law of value which produces cheap labour and natures for extraction from the South in the first place.

The analysis opens with a condensed summary of colonialism’s impact on world ecology, before defining materialism in relation to liberation. Then the text takes a journey through the lost and found materialisms of anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial work, revisiting points of discord and possibility along the way. From here we engage with Third and Fourth World materialisms, considering what each of these bestow for a reparatory approach to socioecology that works against extraction and contamination. The Third and Fourth World are referenced here, not strictly as places, but as self-authored emancipatory political projects that are extensively documented in wider literatures (see, e.g. Coulthard 2019, 2020; Manuel and Posluns

2019; Rao 2010; Sajed 2019). Finally, working through conceptual and political advances in ecology around material throughput and metabolic rift, the analysis applies insights gleaned from colonial critique to these recent expansive understandings of materialism and considers how they might be adjusted with lessons on the socioecology of race and colonialism in mind.

Colonialism and the biosphere

European colonialism instigated a profound rupture in world ecology, while contemporary forms of embedded imperialism have continued to propagate and reinforce structures and processes which deepen the laceration of the biosphere.² The colonial plantation system, for example, replaced vibrant Indigenous ecologies with monocultures, degrading soil nutrients and expunging biodiversity (Beckford 1999; Chao 2022; Tilley 2020b). Eric Williams ([1964] 1983, 7) was keenly aware of the “land-killer” character of plantation enslavement that extended across the Caribbean, where soil exhaustion in turn drove colonial plantation expansion further still. In its first few decades alone, European settler colonial cultivation in North America eroded the soil one hundred times faster than would have otherwise occurred (Reusser, Bierman, and Rood 2015). Such processes in turn gave reason for the establishment of new extractive economies of guano to replenish nutrients in over-exploited areas (Cushman 2013). In addition, relentless industrial-scale extraction in colonized areas cleared, and continues to clear, millennia-old temperate and tropical forests, and fractures geologies to access carbon and minerals, releasing locked-up contaminants into the air, earth, and waterways.

In tandem with the more extensively documented colonial primitive accumulation of land and labour across the Global South, the systems instigated by European powers have also effected the enclosure of the atmospheric commons (Sharife 2011) by polluting the planet’s air and releasing greenhouse gases that would linger cumulatively and generate climate breakdown in the decades and centuries to come. Industrially extracted and commodified materials have been converted into vast volumes of contaminating wastes to be deliberately discharged on the Global South,³ which bears the greatest burden of the world’s pollution. Excessive disposable consumption, private luxury, and the enjoyment of protected landscapes for the wealthy in the Global North are enabled both by degrading extraction and by polluting waste dumping in the Global South.

In these ways and more, colonialism and imperialism instigated and institutionalized biosphere-degrading structures; from infrastructures of over-extraction of undervalued commodities drained from South to North, to

2 See, variously, Whyte (2017); Sealey-Huggins (2017); Gill (2023); Perry (2023); McMichael (2007); Tilley et al. (2023); Ferdinand (2022).

3 Scholars of environmental racism have long drawn attention to the explicit racism in decisions around where toxic waste should be located. Bullard (1993, 20), for example, emphasised a leaked

memo from then World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence Summers which read, “‘Dirty’ Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]?” The distribution of contamination has long been organised along racial lines.

the embedding of plantation landscapes and industrial-scale mining. However, rather than representing secondary or derivative crimes, these processes should be understood as bound up with colonial genocide, enslavement, exploitation, and other unbearable crimes against the human. These are inseparable, in part, because historical and ongoing planetary ecocide works according to the genocidal logic of the embedded racial systems of colonialism. And despite the extraordinary achievements of anticolonial movements in ending direct European domination, these could not stretch to undoing its enduring technologies of extraction and contamination which continue to asphyxiate world socioecology today.

With all of this in mind, where does political and scholarly work centred on race and the colonial question take us in light of contemporary ecological breakdown? If this “moment” of political urgency demands a materialist politics attuned to socioecological liberation (where “moment” is a marker in geological time reaching back at least to 1492), we can begin by defining “materialism” directly in relation to liberation, before recovering lost materialisms from the landscape of scholarship on race and the colonial question.

Materialism and liberation

4 See Sinha and Varma (2017) for analysis of the character of materialism within postcolonial scholarship. And see Aymara scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui for a cutting critique of some decolonial scholarship as “logocentric and nominalist” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 102).

The presence or absence of materialism has been a recurrent focus of contention around and within work on the colonial question,⁴ but what is this materialism whose presence is measured so attentively? And how does it relate to struggles for liberation? Of course, Marxism looms large in these debates (see, for example, Sinha and Varma 2017) and makes for an apt departure point. Marx’s historical materialism concentrates on the production of the conditions to support human life, as well as on the distribution of surplus value and its impact on the class formation of society under capitalism. Within this frame, the dynamism of political agency is understood to be generated, not so much in the realm of ideas, but in the material configuration of production and exchange that effects collective struggle (Engels [1880] 1999). Going beyond simply the study of such dynamics, historical materialism is crucially, in Stuart Hall’s terms, “a method of thought *and practice*” (2003, 117; emphasis added); in other words, a form of scholarship articulated in complex ways with “the revolutionary practice of a class in struggle” (Hall 2003, 146). For Samir Amin, historical materialism is similarly characterized by the articulation of the class struggle with the scholarly endeavour, in his case specifically, development economics ([1978] 2010, 74).

The *historical* part of historical materialism indicates a particular – and contentious – understanding of time as stadial and teleological, although Marx’s own commitment to this formulation waived over time. In

concise terms, the original Marxist conception of history set out a trajectory in which: “Capitalism first negates past backwardness by destroying pre-capitalist ways of life. And by providing the preconditions for human fulfilment while also denying their realization in social life, capitalism negates itself” (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, 150). After the second negation, the future telos of communist victory secures the historical process. Historical materialism, through this stadial progression, is therefore always closely bound up with liberation – specifically in the form of the proletariat victory of seizing the means of production through revolution.

This conception of linear time as progression away from “backwardness” has been roundly critiqued by a wealth of post- and decolonial scholarship and is also at odds with complex and diverse Black radical and Indigenous ontologies of time. To give just two examples, for Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, 96), “the past-future is contained in the present” within Aymara ontology, and for Robin D. G. Kelley, the “blues time” of Black revolt “is simultaneously in the moment, the past, the future, and the timeless space of the imagination” (2020, xxviii). The stages of historical materialism do not fit such expansive temporal perceptions, which see feudalism as remaining present within contemporary capitalism, rather than being negated by it (see Robinson [1983] 2020). In short, in these ontological challenges to *historical* materialism, there is no clean temporal rupture and the archaic⁵ haunts the future.

Scholars working within the Black radical tradition have instead built a “dialectical critique of Marxism” (Kelley 2020, xix) that works towards a distinct materialism. From here, two of the major Black radical departures from historical materialism have been, first, centring the enslaved (who always refused the socioecologically deadly plantation), peasant producers, and others beyond the European (male) proletariat as revolutionary agents of history. And second, shifting from the *experience* of capitalist labour exploitation itself as the “ideological source” of revolt (Kelley 2020, xvii), instead focusing on prior cultural formations as vital to revolutionary consciousness. In short, they question the ability of capitalism to “create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in culture” (Robinson [1983] 2020, 170). These expansive analytics of Black radicalism open up understanding of the practice of materialism to both pre-/non-capitalist cultural and ontological formations *and* to the phenomenology of peasant, Indigenous, and other forms of collective being as generative of revolutionary consciousness. Organized workers remain vital in contemporary struggles, but other collective experiences and dynamic ontologies generate forms of revolutionary consciousness working for socioecological liberation as well. Think of the peasant and Indigenous movements behind La Via Campesina, the Indian farmers’ movement, and Pacific and Caribbean island communities fighting climate change as just a

5 The term “archaic” also echoes Rivera Cusicanqui’s (2012, 96) use of it here: “The present is the setting for simultaneously modernizing and archaic impulses, of strategies to preserve the status quo and of others that signify revolt and renewal of the world: *Pachakuti*.”

few examples of struggles generated *both* from contemporary socioecological experience *and* from deep-rooted ontologies.

This emphasis on wider freedom struggles leads to a distinct understanding of materialist method and to divergent horizons of liberation from those emphasized originally by Marx. Importantly, Kelley draws our attention to the separation made by Cedric Robinson between liberation and victory – with the latter being the focus of Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto ([1848] 2002). Dispensing with the emphasis on victory or triumph as the promise of struggle, Robinson holds on to liberation alone as a horizon of Black radical resistance. In his words: “No nice package at the end, only that you would be free. ... Only the promise of liberation, only the promise of liberation!” (Kelley 2020, xxvii, cites a lecture by Robinson in 2012). The distinction implied here between *victory over* and collective *freedom from/to* as possible outcomes of materialist analysis/practice is open to a whole range of grounded struggles beyond those of the European proletariat. Overall, Robinson’s ([1983] 2020, 171) materialism maintained a sharp focus on “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation” without the constraints of historical materialism made to the measure of European workers.

If materialism and liberation have always been deeply bound up with one another, but also restricted in European ontology by a linear temporal imagination, how has broader work on the colonial question approached materialism? And what do those analyses bring to the struggle for liberation in the context of contemporary socioecological crisis? To explore these questions, the following section rehearses contributions from anti-, post-, and decolonial political/scholarly currents and traces some of the movements of assertion and elusion that have characterized the treatment of materialism within these fields. From here, the analysis goes on to revisit the position of Fourth World Indigenous struggles within global socioecology and in relation to Third World anticolonial projects.

Recovering materialisms across the colonial question

Anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial work has been generated variously from bloody revolutionary streets to relatively peaceful academic halls; from times of political urgency to times of slower reflection. These changes in tempo across moves in and out of revolutionary time and place partly explain some of the shifts in focus across these interrelated and overlapping bodies of work. And these shifts in focus can be delineated roughly along the lines of emphasis on materialism and representation; the centrality of the

Third and Fourth World questions; the valorization of modernity or more-than-modernity; and the collective horizon of developmentalism versus other ways of being and conceiving of liberation.

Very minimally summarized, anticolonial scholarship (for example, Cabral 1979; Césaire 2001; Fanon 1967; Nyerere 1967; Sankara 1985; Sukarno 1955) was, and still is, politically innervating work. Further, it has long held a resolute focus on vital material questions around extraction, the drain of resources, and securing sovereignty in the more full and meaningful sense, including land reform and economic autonomy. However, when operationalized in political projects, anticolonial work has also generally been, by necessity, oriented towards productivist and developmentalist goals. And, again due to the exigencies of the most intense era of mid-twentieth-century decolonization, at that time it generally sought to reproduce the nation as an exclusive, bounded community with the militarized state as its guarantor, even as anticolonial projects gestured towards wider political communities beyond the nation as ideal future horizons (Sajed 2019). In terms of materialist practice and liberation struggles, anticolonial projects overthrew colonial regimes and informed Third Worldism as a collective liberation project among formerly colonized peoples (as elaborated further below).

Postcolonial critique (for example, Said [1978] 2003; Spivak 1985), generated initially from within the humanities, went deep into the analysis of representation, carried less immediate political urgency than anticolonial interventions, and is often judged (sometimes unfairly) for being unmoored from the material focus of anticolonial work. Decolonial work later re-energized the colonial question in scholarship, opening up analysis towards a broader understanding of *coloniality* as a global condition with deep and related dimensions across knowledge, power, and economy. Avoiding euphemism, early decolonial scholars squarely confronted the materiality of “race” in a global capitalist system structured by the “rationality” of Eurocentrism. Quijano, most notably, originally sought to confront global capitalism as a class system built onto a skeleton of racial classifications:

That specific basic element of the new pattern of world power that was based on the idea of “race” and in the “racial” social classification of world population – expressed in the “racial” distribution of work, in the imposition of new “racial” geocultural identities, in the concentration of the control of productive resources and capital, as social relations, including salary, as a privilege of “Whiteness” – is what basically is referred to in the category of coloniality of power. (Quijano 2000, 218)

The *coloniality of power* here is unequivocally structural and material. Early decolonial work, like that of Quijano, was also informed by the structural

categories of dependency theory, yet it incorporated more explicit emphasis on race as the foundational category of classification in the production of class exploitation.

However, other decolonial scholars began to veer again towards a greater emphasis on concerns of language, knowledge, and representation, displacing the structural and material as central concerns. Perhaps, as with prominent postcolonial scholars, this shift is simply down to the disciplinary moorings of scholars who entered the canon in formation – semioticians and literary scholars will inevitably deepen textual analyses using the tools of their training. Even so, there may well be an observable tendency in the academy (especially in the Global North) to canonize works that dilute structural material concerns in favour of such a textual, epistemic orientation. Structures of power will inevitably co-opt those parts of a project that do not deal centrally with the pressing need for structural reform and leave aside those that do. We might even say that the arc of the Northern academy itself bends towards representation.

The semiotician Walter Mignolo, for example, has become the most widely read and cited decolonial scholar. The political prescriptions offered in Mignolo’s work follow from a diagnosis of problems of epistemology and enunciation. For example: “decolonial thinking and doing *focus on the enunciation*, engaging in *epistemic disobedience* and delinking from the colonial matrix in order to open up decolonial options – a vision of life and society that requires decolonial subjects, decolonial knowledges, and decolonial institutions” (Mignolo 2011, 9; emphasis added). In short, a key practice linked to the method of decolonial thought is “epistemic disobedience”. Of course, there are deep connections between epistemic and material injustice, and decolonial scholars clearly see epistemic transformation as a route to more just material relations. However, when held up against squarely material demands centring on modes of land reform and return, economic delinking, structural reform of the global economy, control over the means of production, and other proposals by Third World and other revolutionary movements, the decolonial emphasis on the epistemic seems comparably irresolute.

In spite of the drift towards representation noted above, one vital contribution of decolonial scholarship and related political projects has been to generate reflection on the tensions and synergies between the Third World and the Fourth World questions in the Global South. This is one terrain on which the inevitable pitfalls (see Fanon 1967) of Southern anticolonial projects can be confronted, as well as firm ground for productive conversations with Indigenous scholarship developed by communities resisting white settler colonialism in the Global North. Anticolonial thought and praxis nourished vital Third Worldist liberation projects, defeated seemingly invulnerable colonial powers, and extended political freedom across so much of the

globe. This defiance and these concrete gains in turn also inspired Fourth World liberation struggles, especially on Turtle Island, as explored below. However, the dominance of developmentalism within Third World projects also allowed for continued forms of expropriation, contamination, and harm across Indigenous communities/ecologies. With a view to working through these seemingly contradictory materialisms of Third and Fourth World, anticolonial and decolonial politics and scholarship, the following section extends the analysis of Third World materialisms, drawing out lessons for contemporary mobilizations around socioecological crisis.

Third world materialisms

Third Worldist political figures guiding their peoples through newly won independence in the “Bandung moment”, along with the dependency theorists associated with them, diagnosed the structural problem of the global economy as one of ongoing, persistent value extraction from peripheral post-colonial states to the imperial core. Bandung-era political projects sought to close the core–periphery gap and turn off the taps on unrelenting colonial drain by mobilizing developmentalism for peripheral accumulation and the transcendence of low value-added production and resource extraction (Ajl 2021; Amin 1990). Returning to this historical moment, a wealth of contemporary literature is currently revisiting Third Worldism, the Bandung projects, and dependency theories. This recovery opens the door of return to an intellectual and political project squarely aimed at breaking global structures of extraction – what Amin (1990) best theorized as “delinking”, or the deliberate national-scale rupture from the global capitalist law of value (see Kvangraven, Styve, and Kufakurinani 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). Reigniting Third Worldism means precisely a return to confronting the global law of value, which, in Samir Amin’s terms, “is operative on the scale of the really extant polarizing system of capitalism/imperialism” (Amin [1978] 2010, 13). Within this frame, the relative prices resulting from undervalued labour power and natures of the Global South enable the extraction of “imperialist rent”, which in turn reproduces Southern underdevelopment (Amin [1978] 2010). In short, it was, and remains, vital to end the relative cheapness of Global South labour and resources in the world economy in order to end socioecological exploitation and extraction.

Back in the 1970s, Samir Amin had also already connected the asymmetries in the global value structure with the concentration of contaminating waste and toxins in areas from which cheap materials are extracted (Amin 1977). In brief, this work identified “uneven waste accumulation as the other side of the coin of uneven value accumulation” (Ajl 2021, 86). This

still rings true today, and we can go further to reinforce the fundamental point that the law of value that enables undervalued resources to be extracted from the South, in turn, enables the current excessive world-exhausting and atmosphere-enclosing consumption now in evidence in the Global North.

It is difficult, then, to overstate the importance of Third Worldist emphasis on the global law of value. The material and structural changes that early anticolonial movements and academic Third Worldists were aiming for would have made for a less environmentally catastrophic system; one in which resources would not be so cheaply available, such that fast, disposable cultures could not have been developed and sustained. However, the darker side of Third Worldism in practice lay in its productivism, and its orientation towards grand industry and infrastructure projects that often expropriated Indigenous land, overturned important ecologies, and continued to generate the displacement of communities in the name of national development.

Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in Indonesia, home and host of the 1955 Bandung conference, where the ideals of Afro-Asian solidarity were affirmed and a world free from colonial oppression was imagined by assembled delegates. However, at the same time as generating and committing to anticolonial Third Worldist ideals, Indonesia was asserting sovereign dominance over the resource-rich lands of West Papua (previously Irian Barat and Irian Jaya) whose people were fiercely seeking independence of their own, and continue to do so today. Indonesia convinced other Third World delegates at Bandung to support its territorial claims over West Papua as the only alternative to Dutch imperialism in the region, and the *Final Communiqué* of the conference sealed this position (see Hernawan 2016; Swan 2018). In the words of Quito Swan, “Bandung represented a consolidation of Indonesian imperialism in the region, as Indonesia functioned as a racialized colonial power” (Swan 2018, 60). West Papua remains under Indonesian colonial occupation today.

Nonetheless, the complexity and contradictions of post-independence projects meant that they could also inspire contemporaneous struggles, even as their flaws were apparent. Over on Turtle Island, for example, Blackfoot intellectual Marie Smallface Marule was influenced by Non-Aligned Movement activists while residing in Zambia in the late 1960s, while her colleague and mentor, Secwepemc leader George Manuel, drew inspiration from Third Worldist leader Julius Nyerere while visiting Tanzania in 1971 (Coulthard 2019, xiv–xv). Manuel would go on to write *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* in 1974, documenting how Third World projects both inspired and sounded a warning for Indigenous struggles. In Manuel and Poslun’s words: “Even within the past four years we have seen newly independent people colonize their smaller neighbours, or continue to keep them in subjection, because they are using the symbols of power left behind by the conquerors to establish their own status” (Manuel and Poslun [1974] 2019, 245).

This again reminds us that, even as anticolonial independence projects liberated, they often simultaneously continued and extended colonial dynamics of expropriation across Indigenous terrains that had previously resisted, or remained beyond, the reaches of European colonial states. From the “Europeanized elites in the Andean region” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 95), to the settler colonial logics persisting in Brazil (Poets 2021), to the ongoing expropriation of Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia (Tilley 2020a), and the internal colonialism of Adivasi and Dalit communities in India (Aravind 2019; Shah and Lerche 2020). The lesson to hold onto here is that where the developmentalism of the anticolonial-turned-postcolonial state meets Indigenous socioecologies, we find a key location for the acceleration of ecological harm and expropriation of Indigenous peoples, and therefore a locus of central concern for a contemporary materialist practice of liberation.

Even so, Third Worldism has never been a monolith, and sympathetic internal critiques within Third World circles rejected the most socioecologically ravaging grand projects in favour of quite different visions. In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab *dependistas* such as Mohamed Dowidar and Fawzy Mansour – part of what Max Ajl terms the Tunisian School – elaborated a route to delinking based on what we would now recognize as agroecological methods, the recovery of meaningfully sustainable farming systems and situated knowledges centred on ecological regeneration. Mansour’s proposals, for example, diverted “from the productivist orientation that dominated in the 1960s amongst the Bandung states, and began to imagine reorienting production while being attentive to the technological inheritance from the past and what it might offer to future ecologically sound and decentralised development programmes” (Ajl 2021, 89). Dowidar similarly sought an ecology-centred development with an emphasis on the use of renewable resources as far as possible.

The agroecological orientation of the Tunisian *dependistas* represented an important Third World ecologist alternative to productivism and industrialized agriculture that brought the promise of working towards the scaling down of non-renewable resources. Beyond this prospect, a comprehensive reconciliation of the Third and Fourth World questions requires a broader confrontation of the accelerating extraction of raw materials for developmentalist, and often world market-extractive, ends in postcolonial states. It also requires a deeper understanding of the raced modes of expropriation of Indigenous communities that reproduce colonial violence and enable such extraction in the first place. The following section pursues this central Third/Fourth World tension further towards the goal of reconciling contradictory materialisms in light of contemporary socioecological dynamics.

Contemporary ecological materialisms and the fourth world

Scholars and grassroots voices are increasingly contesting the *postcolonial* status of those Global South countries, such as Brazil, where substantial settler populations remain and continue to exert political and economic power over Indigenous (Fourth World) populations. In these contexts, in the words of Desiree Poets (2021, 2): “formal independence from the metropole does not imply decolonization, for as long as settler sovereignty takes precedence over Indigenous sovereignty, settler colonial logics, practices, and power relations persist across shifts in formal political regimes, structuring the present.” The material implications of this are continued domination, expropriation, and extraction across racialized difference by postcolonial/settler states in articulation with (and effectively in the service of) international capital. This ensures that Indigenous socioecologies remain sacrificial zones of extraction for capitalist accumulation in the world system. These harms, which may appear remote to many, are in fact central to facilitating the everyday lives of many communities across the world, especially in high-consumption areas of the capitalist core where the end products of resource frontier extraction are most liberally consumed.

Almost every new product, whether that product is a US military jet or a smartphone with an expiry date built in through planned obsolescence, begins its life on a site of extraction somewhere, and more often on one of the many resource frontiers (Peluso 2017; Tsing 2003) of the Global South or settler colonial North. In recent years, the pressure on resource frontiers has redoubled in the scramble for “critical minerals”, such as lithium and nickel, which carry the false promise of an energy transition without compromise to Western lifestyles. Despite being the cradle of these commodities, resource frontiers are too often forgotten in analyses of the world economy, and yet these have long been sites of intense resistance struggles for racialized peasants and Indigenous peoples. These frontier communities of struggle are among the vital revolutionary subjects of our times, despite being eclipsed in Eurocentred scholarly literature by the European proletariat.⁶ Peasant and Indigenous struggles are too often isolated in global solidarity terms, and the burden remains mainly on those communities themselves to engage in collective acts of resistance and legal struggles to defend their claims to the land and their rights to protect Indigenous socioecologies (Aravind 2019; Estes 2019; Tilley 2020a).

Such efforts have always warranted much more attention than they have ever been given, but in the present, resource frontier struggles also fight directly and indirectly against climate breakdown, holding back state-corporate activity from churning Indigenous socioecologies into commodified material, and terminating the regulatory functions these ecologies perform for earth systems as a whole (see World Resources Institute and Climate

6 To draw again on the framing of Robinson ([1983] 2020).

Focus 2022). The loss of regulatory Indigenous socioecologies and sustainable peasant agriculture results in the rapid acceleration of climate change which, in turn, impacts first and hardest on racialized, impoverished populations globally, who feel its effects most harshly. Further, some of today's active forms of colonization – through which resource frontier dwellers are expropriated from the land, proletarianized or simply rendered disposable, urbanized, and compelled to join societies based on distinct ontologies – continue to be intensified as a result of the sheer demand for cheap material in the global economy. These processes of contemporary primitive accumulation and enclosure, driven ultimately by consumerism, productivism, and capitalist growth-oriented economies, are inevitably central to the entwined production of poverty and ecological degradation.

All of this evidences a pressing need, as we contend with planetary ecological crisis, for a reorientation of the material question towards a more complex understanding of “the material” in focus. As noted above, historical materialism focused on the reproduction of the conditions to support human life, but with a stadial orientation towards proletarian victory. And material conditions in Marxist work broadly refer to the mode and relations of production, the production of value and accumulation, and the distribution of wealth and poverty, especially with concern for the conditions experienced by the working class. Breaking with more productivist and stadial materialist traditions, recent “degrowth” knowledge shifts in the Euro-capitalist core have analytically centred the physical movement and processing of matter as resources (material throughput) in the global economy (for example, Hickel 2019). In addition, over the last couple of decades, Marxist ecology scholarship has developed a concern for environmental degradation in relation to capitalist production, with a focus, for example, on the deterioration of the soil in areas of intense monocultural production (for example, Foster 1999). However, Indigenous ways of understanding material relations have always reached far beyond class to understand human and more-than-human forms of life relationally, including that which is understood as inanimate in European traditions (for example, Simpson 2017; Todd 2017, 2018). We can engage with each of these in relation and reflect on the lessons they may hold for a contemporary materialism for socioecological liberation.

Contemporary Marxist ecologists have extended the original observation of Marx that social metabolism processes tend to replenish what is extracted from agricultural production via the nutrient cycle if cultivation, consumption, and replenishing waste are all fairly spatially contained (Foster 1999). Recovering the long overlooked ecological dimension of Marx's thought, this literature reflects on how the fertility of the soil is closely dependent upon social relations, while analysing how the capitalist mode of production

ultimately relies upon the exploitation of the soil as well as the exploitation of the labourer (Foster 1999). With a particular concern for the increasing separation between the country and the city, Foster developed Marx's theory of how the capitalist mode of production enacts a metabolic rift through the depletion of nutrients from the former and the concentration of nutrient-rich "wastes" in the latter. Later work in this area expanded beyond a city-country analysis to identify the global core-periphery dynamics of the metabolic rift within ecological imperialism (Clark and Foster 2009). In short, this work extended world systems concepts to deepen understanding of global ecology.

Quijano's decolonial thought also began on, and diverted from, the terrain of world systems and dependency theories, so there is common materialist ground between these projects. However, there are also key differences, including the decolonial importance placed on "race" in organizing the world system, which is generally missing from Marxist ecologies. There is, therefore, significant scope to extend understanding of metabolic rift on the basis of the insights of scholarship and practice on race and the colonial question. For example, integrating the structuring role of racial systems of classification as well as the reparative possibilities of Indigenous ontologies expands our understanding of world-ecology (see, for example, Gill 2023). Centring Indigenous ways of being also reminds us that these have always involved practices of returning what is taken out of the land, water, and soil in some way, thereby fulfilling nutrient cycles. Ethical orders beyond homogenized colonial social space maintain what Todd calls "reciprocal responsibilities" with nature. Supporting "the integrity of our homelands" in Simpson's (2017) words means "[w]e should give more than we take". Overall, the essential logic of extraction for accumulation is antithetical to Indigenous ethical and legal systems in which metabolic rift is rendered unthinkable at the level of ontology.

Taking seriously a wealth of work on race and the colonial question also reminds us that the construction of race – and specifically the construction of the colour line which created and elevated whiteness (Du Bois [1903] 2008) – is foundational to the world system as it is structured today in material terms. The fifteenth-century rupture between those designated as "human" and those excluded from humanity by European colonial projects opened a world-scale rift between producers and consumers; the enslaved and enslavers; the dispossessed and settlers; the sacrificial and the saved; the poisoned and the polluters. The creation of the world market solidified this epistemic rift into enduring structures which continue to organize the actual physical matter of economy and ecology. In brief, the construction of "race" as a rift in the human structured the original metabolic rift in world ecology (Ferdinand 2022; Tilley et al. 2023).

Work in the flourishing field of “degrowth” is among the most politically urgent of all the Global North movement-scholarship on contemporary ecological crisis. This work also broadens and extends dominant materialisms to incorporate a greater focus on the physical processing of biological matter in the global economy. Degrowth movements have focused on devising ways of drastically reducing the amount and rate of material processed – i.e. the material throughput – in the global economy as a whole (Mastini, Kallis, and Hickel 2021). Decolonial conversations with degrowth ideally centre the Global South in order to correct analyses that tend to linger on the North Atlantic (Escobar 2015; Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019). These should also confront and expunge the lingering populationism that can remain below the surface in movements taking cues from “deep green” and “limits to growth” projects. Any liberation-oriented materialist approach, as degrowth aims to be, needs to be definitively severed from the population question, which itself is rooted in racial power projects. Again, an anti- or de-colonial engagement with material throughput would centre the instrumental role of systems of racial classification in enabling material expropriation for extraction.

Another area to reckon with in the task of expanding materialist approaches to contemporary ecologies is precisely where the degrowth concern for stemming material throughput complements Indigenous movements’ efforts to bring an end to destructive extraction and contamination in Indigenous socioecologies (see Aravind 2020; The Red Nation 2021). European movements often find themselves attempting to synthetically create ways of living and understanding the world that Indigenous communities have always maintained, in spite of five hundred years of colonial brutality and expropriation. In short, Eurocentred ecological scholarly and political movements could simply listen to, and take the lead from, Indigenous communities on ecological, materialist, and liberation questions who maintain a dynamic reciprocity within nature at the level of ontology.

Conclusion

The long moment of planetary crisis began at least in 1492 with the Colombian incursion that globalized “race” as a rift in humanity and, by extension, in global ecology. Since then, the wrecking of the biosphere has been intimately bound up with successive genocides of colonized peoples for whom existential crisis has been a centuries-long condition, rather than confined to a climate change-era shock to the system. Contemporary ecological crisis is the latest iteration of these dynamics and, yet again, is affecting

working-class, Indigenous, and other communities of colour around the world the most.

This article revisited work on race and the colonial question, in light of contemporary ecological breakdown, in order to recover forms of lost and contradicting materialisms contained in the interventions of a range of revolutionary texts. Accepting that ecological crisis in the present demands much more than epistemic disobedience as a collective response, this analysis worked towards a rejuvenated and expansive materialism upon which to rebuild socioecological political projects. Recovering the best of Third and Fourth World projects also means confronting the contradictions between the two – particularly those contradictions that have sacrificed Indigenous socioecologies under the kinetics of postcolonial developmentalism in articulation with international capital.

Anticolonial Third Worldists diagnosed, and fought hard to correct, the global law of value that continues to enable the extraction of undervalued material from the South to feed the excessive militarism, corporate activity, and consumption cultures of the North. This global structural diagnosis is as pressing as ever, but the structures identified remain physically protected by the forces of global capital and imperialism. Meanwhile, Fourth World Indigenous political projects, social orders, and ways of being never divided culture from nature, as in European colonial-capitalist ontology. Indigenous peoples continue as dynamic custodians of ecologies that are the remaining vital organs of the biosphere, where metabolic repair is not a theoretical proposition but a daily, intergenerational practice. The best of both of these projects attending to structural reform, ecological reciprocity, and repair are urgently needed in the present.

In stark contrast, the tools, technologies, disciplines, and practices of colonialism are still at the fingertips of the powerful who reach for these again and again as “solutions” to colonially inflicted harms. The colonial imagination leans instinctively towards the exclusion and restriction of racialized peoples through the construction of deadly borders and the reproduction of reproductive injustices, now in the name of ecology. If we are to survive, thrive, and remake the world in an ecologically viable way in the face of this, we need broad coalitions of resistance and repair that overcome the rift in human/ecology on a planetary scale. Solutions span (and stretch beyond) rift-repairing agriculture through agroecology; the protection of climate-regulating Indigenous socioecologies; the urgent administration of climate reparations; complementary structural reform to end the debilitating outflow of value and resources; uncompromising commitment to resisting renewed eugenics; and just transitions for the resource-export-dependent South. Dismantling colonial ecologies and moving towards these materialist horizons of liberation is a task for vibrant coalitions of communities of all workers and producers from South to North, from Third World to Fourth,

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working together against extraction and contamination and towards the structural repair of collective socioecologies.

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