In early 2022, over 30 years after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its first report on the challenges posed by climate change and four subsequent Assessment Reports later, the word ‘colonialism’ finally entered its official lexicon. The sixth report on ‘Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability’ references colonialism, not only as a historical driver of the climate crisis, but also as something that continues to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of communities to it (IPCC, 2022). As Funes (2022) argues, this comes in the wake of long-standing arguments made by Indigenous groups and others on the frontline of climate change about the centrality of colonialism to comprehending and responding to the crisis. The last decade has also seen a significant increase in scholarly literature that draws explicit links between colonialism and climate change – much of which is referenced in the latest IPCC report. While formal acknowledgement of this relationship is long overdue, in this article we argue for caution and precision in the invocation of colonialism within these debates. Following Tuck and Yang’s (2012) classic article setting out why ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’, we argue relatedly that colonialism needs to be understood as more than a metaphor in climate change debates.

Key words climate change • colonialism • capitalism • modernity • reparations

Key messages

• We argue for the use of caution and precision in the invocation of colonialism within climate change debates.
• We discuss the ways in which colonial histories are constitutive of climate change and the importance of acknowledging such histories.
• Any effective response to climate change must reckon with the colonial histories that have produced it.
• Understanding climate change in the context of colonial histories implies more than the payment for loss and damages experienced today as a result of accumulated emissions.

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Introduction

The language of colonialism is increasingly invoked to describe a variety of acts of domination and control associated with the injustices produced by climate change and responses to it (Mahony and Endfield, 2018; Sultana, 2022). It is often employed as a catch-all description for a host of acts of violence, dispossession, control and cognitive injustices (Liboiron, 2021) which are not historicised. For example, ‘colonialism’ is invoked as a metaphor for expansionism (occupying atmospheric space, seizing resources such as land and minerals) and accumulating ecological debts to the South and to the planet. Applications range from analysis of the colonisation of the atmosphere through the commodification of carbon (Bachram, 2004; Lohmann, 2006), to ‘Co2lonianism’, and patterns of ‘accumulation by decarbonization’ (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008). Alongside this, the need to decolonise ecology and the dominant knowledge systems for understanding climate change is increasingly emphasised (Whyte, 2017; Mehta and Srivastava, 2020; Ferdinand, 2022). There is little analysis, however, of the systematic processes of colonialism involved in these phenomena. Instead, colonialism is often understood as deriving from the logic of a system defined separately from it, specifically, the logic of global capitalism and its core relationships.

Climate change tends to be presented, for example, as a consequence of the rise of a modern world and its energy intensive systems of production and consumption, implicating the aggregated wealth of its developed nations. In more critical accounts, it is presented as a consequence of capitalism’s logic of expansion and the contradiction of infinite growth on a finite planet (Koch, 2012; Di Muzio, 2015; Hickel, 2020a), its associated dispossessions (Harvey, 2003), and in relation to the globalisation of ‘fossil capital’ in particular (Malm, 2016). Paradoxically, colonialism as a system with distinct characteristics is absent from these accounts, which represent the consequences of the logic of colonialism dominating over new areas as capitalism. For a similar example, think of Habermas’s (1987 [1981]) identification of the colonisation of the lifeworld in an analysis that otherwise has no place for colonialism as part of the system whose logic is producing that colonisation.

What these accounts leave out, therefore, is the extent to which the modern world is specifically a colonial modern world. It is not simply a capitalist world that colonialism had facilitated through ‘primitive accumulation’, but a world in which colonialism is continuous with the reproduction of capitalism (Bhambra, 2021). The inequalities generated and exacerbated by climate change in the present have longer and connected histories once colonialism is properly acknowledged as a continuous factor. Why the conceptualisation of modernity matters in such debates is because it has an effect on how we think about addressing the causes and consequences of climate change – whether in terms of mitigation or adaptation, or more profoundly in relation to understandings of reparative justice. As such, we argue that consideration of colonialism needs to be more substantive within such debates.

If climate change is linked only to capitalism, then emphasis is placed upon proposed solutions that align with capitalist imperatives, such as carbon trading. Or else an assumption is made that if industrialism is state-controlled and organised along socialist lines, the climate crisis could be solved through an eco-socialism aimed at socialising production (Huber, 2022) but failing to attend to the historical production or ecocidal impacts of dominant models of extractivism. Yet rising real incomes in the West and the establishment of welfare provision have depended on colonial extraction to a very significant extent. This has created a fateful ‘social democratic’ politics where economic
More than a metaphor

growth is understood as the condition for redistribution, but fails to recognise the wider processes of colonial extraction within which that ‘national’ redistribution is located (Bhambra, 2022a). This misses the political (and historical) context that brings into being the structures of inequality associated with uneven economic development and impending climate catastrophe. Beginning with an understanding of the modern world as based on the historic destruction of the worlds of others, poses the question of what it means to accept as necessary the achievements of economic growth that have been at the expense of the impoverishment of others. Untangling and illuminating this relationship in the context of climate change is the task at hand.

Colonial histories and climate change

As Amitav Ghosh has recently set out, ‘climate change is but one aspect of a much broader planetary crisis’ (2021: 158). That crisis is understood in terms of processes of resource extraction, settler cultivation, enslavement and indenture, as well modes of terraforming that have dramatically altered, to our collective detriment, the environment upon which life depends. In this way, colonialism, capitalism and catastrophic climate change are structurally – and not simply contingently – linked. Colonialism does not simply prepare the ground for capitalism’s expansionist impulses in the pursuit of markets for its products; colonial extraction remains integral to that expansion. The latter is not a consequence of the economic imperative of capitalism, rather it is a consequence of the logic of colonialism and its political economy. Not recognising the patterns of political economic development that produce the global inequalities associated with climate change undermines the possibility of developing effective and socially just political solutions to the problems we face.

European colonial expansion, from the 15th century onwards, was characterised by systematic resource exploitation, often accompanied by the elimination of Indigenous peoples and their societies (Guha, 1989; Galeano, 1997; Tharoor, 2016; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). The various East India Companies that were established in the early 17th century participated in what has been called ‘colonialism by corporation’ whereby trading relations gave way to the exercise of sovereignty over other populations and their territories and resources (Phillips and Sharman, 2020). This occurred alongside modes of settler colonialism, which came to involve settler cultivation and the establishment of colonial plantations using coerced labour (Voskoboynik, 2018). These processes brought about significant shifts in the environment that are the basis for ongoing inequalities through to the present.

We suggest that ‘colonialism by corporation’ gives way to various kinds of ‘national colonialism’, culminating in the organisation of global political economy among competing empires. In this way, we do not see empire as a late stage of capitalism, but rather as the framework within which capitalism secures its development. The end of European empires and the rise of new postcolonial nations is not the final realisation of a global, capitalist market economy, but a return to ‘colonialism by corporation’, by transnational corporations with assets beyond the scale of all but a few nation states. This is the context in which we argue for a continuity of colonialism and that capitalism is embedded within colonialism rather than vice versa. It is not simply a matter of ‘adding’ the colonial relation to what is otherwise understood as the capital–labour relation of capitalism, but to understand that the capital–labour relation is mediated nationally and that the national is embedded within broader
colonial relations. In this way, we bring land, its dispossession, appropriation and its use centre stage in historical and future accounts of climate change.

Whereas theories of capitalism outline political economy in terms of the relations between nation state and economy, colonialism posits a different political economy of imperial states and post-imperial transnational organisations (Slobodian, 2018; Bhambra, 2021). As such, while it is clear that the effects of climate change are mediated by global inequalities (O’Brien and Leichenko, 2000; Adger et al, 2006), we would go further to argue that climate change has been brought about through the colonial processes implicated in the production and reproduction of those very inequalities: the colonial and racialised disposessions that severed peoples’ access to land and resources to sustain their livelihoods and set them to work in the plantations and factories that went on to drive extraction through industrial development (Nikiforuk, 2012; Voskoboynik, 2018). Any effective response to climate change, then, must reckon with the histories that have produced it and not just its contemporary manifestations represented in a political economy that effaces its history.

Paradoxically, another way in which colonialism comes to be elided from debates on climate change is via the move to ‘deep history’. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, argues that the nature of our present is defined more by ‘the much larger processes of the earth systems and evolutionary history’ (2014: 21) than it is by the colonial and capitalist processes of the last five hundred years. He makes this argument in order to dismiss calls for postcolonial justice in the present on the basis that ‘anthropogenic climate change is not inherently – or logically – a problem of past or accumulated intrahuman injustice’ (2014: 11). He suggests that it is ‘thanks to the poor – that is, to the fact that development is uneven and unfair – that we do not put even larger quantities of greenhouse gases into the biosphere’ (2014: 11). ‘The poor’, in his analysis, are separated from the process of wealth creation that is identified as the problem. That is, he posits ‘the poor’ as a category produced by uneven development processes that themselves have no social relations integral to them. However, the poor are not poor because they are poor; they have been made poor through the very same processes that have made the rest wealthy; that is, colonialism (Rodney, 1972). Another problem with his analytic frame is that it fails to understand the extent to which anthropogenic climate change is historically accumulated.

In contrast to Chakrabarty’s deep history, debates on how to mark shifts in geological time that have occurred around the idea of the ‘Anthropocene’ recognise the colonial actions of humankind as being of the greatest significance. Early arguments about the Anthropocene situated its beginnings with the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the 18th century. However, more recent research points to an earlier starting point, that of the European colonisation of the lands that we now call the Americas. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2018) have been central to the development of arguments pushing the starting point of the Anthropocene back to this period. Their review of the evidence suggests that human activity has been responsible for changing the state of the Earth; that this new state ‘is marked in geological deposits’ (2018: 301); and that ‘as a geological time-unit’ it began in 1610 (2018: 318). This was primarily a consequence of European arrival in the Americas leading to the deaths of ‘about 10 per cent of all humans on the planet over the period from 1493 to about 1650’ (2018: 158). This led to the collapse of farming across the continent, the regrowth of tropical forests and a significant sequestration of carbon which, they argue, was marked in geological deposits (the Orbis Spike). The 1610 Orbis Spike ‘marks the
beginning of today’s globally interconnected economy and ecology, which set Earth on a new evolutionary trajectory’ (2018: 13).

The Anthropocene, then, began with the birth of the colonial modern world; a modern world that was characterised by colonial processes including processes of dispossession, elimination, settlement and extraction. The ‘larger processes of the earth systems’ (Chakrabarty, 2014: 21) have been demonstrated to have been disrupted by human action, namely colonialism. Chakrabarty’s logic of ‘deep history’ is further undermined by focusing on processes that have directly contributed to global inequalities in the present. Jason Hickel (2020b) in a recent piece for the Lancet, for example, argues for a differentiated account of countries’ historical responsibility for carbon emissions based on their territorial (1850–1969) and consumption-based (1970–2015) emissions adjusted for scale and population. Assuming that the atmosphere ‘is a shared and finite resource, and that all people are entitled to an equal share of it’, Hickel then calculates ‘the extent to which nations have exceeded or overshot their fair share of a given safe global emissions budget’ (2020b: e400). His analysis indicates that formerly colonising countries (those he calls the Global North) are responsible for over 90 per cent of excess emissions. This would probably increase further if the ‘national’ share attributed to those countries during the period that they were colonised was also included in the total for the state that colonised them. This clearly indicates the scale of imbalance in the responsibility for climate change and opens up the question of what an equitable response to it would now be.

**Centring colonialism in climate debates**

It is commonly recognised that those who have contributed the most to produce the life-threatening consequences of climate change are less exposed to the worst effects and have the greatest capacity to mitigate those consequences for themselves (Paul, 2021). Rather, countries that have contributed minimally, if at all, to such changes often bear the brunt of increasingly catastrophic events. However, it has been difficult to persuade richer countries of the extent of their responsibilities for both historical and present actions. The solutions put forward often lend themselves to the entrenchment of patterns of socially and ecologically uneven exchange rather than resolving these in a globally just manner. Carbon reductions in the Global North, for example, are achieved by outsourcing more carbon intensive processes to the South through the use of spatial (displacing responsibility) and temporal (pushing responsibility into the future) fixes (Newell, 2021). Here, dominant neoliberal logics combine with scientific rationality to allow the Global North, through carbon trading, to pay poorer communities in the Global South to reduce emissions on its behalf where labour and land are cheaper, rather than take responsibility for their own emissions (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008).

Indigenous groups and writers (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; IEN, 2021) have emphasised historical colonial continuities in modes of extraction and exchange central to many decarbonisation initiatives from the Global North. The need for cleaner fuels in the Global North, for example, comes at the expense of the food security of farmers in the Global South whose land is set aside to cultivate biofuels for export (Smith, 2000). Further, the drive for electric vehicles in Europe intensifies mining for cobalt and lithium in Africa and Latin America respectively (Sovacool, 2019; Soto Hernandez and Newell, 2022) as part of the ‘decarbonization divide’ (Sovacool et al, 2020).
Such strategies, over time, have come to be seen as inadequate responses to the scale of the problems posed and arguments for more far-reaching transformations have increasingly been put forward (Roberts and Pelling, 2019).

While arguments for adaptation and mitigation have been central to many initiatives for addressing climate change, calls for financing ‘loss and damage’ are becoming more prominent within such debates. COP26, the UN climate change conference hosted in Glasgow in 2021, saw increased debate on the need for dedicated funds to address demands by vulnerable countries for ‘loss and damage’ caused by the significant and globally uneven consequences of climate change. But it is increasingly recognised that beyond a certain point climate change cannot be adapted to. What is needed is a comprehensive commitment to reparations for climate change that acknowledges the histories that have produced it and is oriented to a world that works for us all (Adow, 2020; Stanford-Xosei, 2020; Paul, 2021; Táíwò, 2022).

Close to a century ago, Gandhi called for us to live differently such that all could simply live. His understanding recognised the false promise of progress inherent in much social science; that is, that economic growth based on colonial extraction can never enable us all to live well. The poverty of the situation that the majority find themselves in is the very condition for metropolitan others to live well. Wealth and poverty are relational. Of course, this was also Marx’s analysis of capitalism, that poverty was the necessary condition of the proletariat (Marx, 1976 [1867]) and, between states, underdevelopment the consequence of colonial extraction (Naoroji, 1901; Rodney, 1972). However, Marx’s account of the logic of capitalism proposed a transcendence that maintained its wealth, albeit organised cooperatively. Understanding the logic of colonialism places that wealth into question such that the solution lies outside Western, linear models of development, radical or not (Bhambra, 2022b).

Understanding climate change in the context of colonial histories implies more than the payment for loss and damages experienced today as a result of accumulated emissions. It requires instead a broader recognition of how socially and regionally uneven concentrations of wealth, which have resulted in climate-changing emissions, were created in the first place. It is not simply that climate change follows from the logic of the market, but that the market is embodied in private property relations and that the latter are misunderstood if the colonial appropriation of land is not made central. Colonialism appears to be a metaphor because its continuity is elided. It is the reality that a reparative approach to climate justice reinstates.

**Conflict of interest**
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**References**


