Towards a Postcolonial Critical Realism

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Abstract
This article proposes postcolonial critical realism (PCR) as an ontological framework that explains the structuring relationship between racialized, colonial discourses and the social world. Beginning with the case study of the global climate crisis, it considers how scholars and activists have made sense of the present crisis, and how their discourses reflect and reproduce the climate crisis at large. To theorize the relationship between racialized, power-laden discourses and material reality, it derives five tenets of PCR: first, colonial discourses underlie, and interact with, material structures; second, coloniality is global and made visible through differential events and experiences; third, subaltern lived experiences reveal the nature of reality at large; fourth, coloniality is power-laden, sticky, and often invisible; and finally, decolonization must target all three domains of the social world and their interactions. The article concludes by considering how this framework might enrich anticolonial thought in the social sciences, as well as social movements.

Keywords
postcolonial theory, critical realism, climate crisis, ontology

Introduction
In January 2020, the World Economic Forum in Davos featured remarks by prominent climate activists, who warned their elite audience that the global climate crisis could be averted only through urgent action. Following a press conference, media outlets around the world published an Associated Press photo of four climate activists—all white, all young women—with prominent Swedish activist Greta Thunberg at the centre.

Scrolling through the media coverage, Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate immediately realized that she had been cropped out of the photo, and her statements to the press omitted. Nakate posted an emotional video on Twitter, in which she grappled with the implications of her own erasure. “Everyone’s message was being talked about,” she said, “and my message was left out.”
For Nakate, her erasure was not incidental, but signified an erasure of African experiences and perspectives at large from climate discourse: “[I’ve seen] people lose their homes, and everything that they ever dreamed of... Who is going to try and help these people bring their message across?” (6:30–6:59). African experiences, for Nakate, could not be subsumed into European experiences of the climate crisis; they were qualitatively different, and indeed more urgent. In Nakate’s words, “Africa is the least emitter of carbons, but we are the most affected by the climate crisis” (9:20–9:28).

The incident in Davos illustrates the complex relationship between reality and representation. The activists had been an incongruous presence at the World Economic Forum: amidst a celebration of wealth and power, they proclaimed that the incessant pursuit of economic growth had created the present crisis, and that businesses and governments must change course radically. Regardless of how elites understood the global economy, climate change was real—and even the most powerful individuals would eventually experience its effects. Similarly, a lack of media coverage would not diminish the reality of the climate crisis in Africa. In Nakate’s (2020: 9:34–9:42) words, “You erasing our voices won’t change anything. You erasing our stories won’t change anything.” Yet representation could also shape reality: Nakate linked the media’s erasure of African experiences to the global elite’s failure to curtail the climate crisis. In order to convey the urgency of the crisis and, in turn, to provoke climate action, media attention was crucial.

Making sense of the incident in Davos requires parsing the stratified, power-laden nature of reality. Similarly, social scientists who concur that the climate crisis is material, global, and urgent, reveal that they understand the crisis differently by giving it different names. Referencing the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2011), the Humanosphere (Lopez et al., 2013), or the Racial Capitalocene (Vergès, 2017) situates the crisis, and the speaker, in different temporal and spatial locations. Since all these terms present the climate crisis as a threat to human and non-human life, they also call for action to mitigate the crisis—and the nature of that action depends upon how they conceive of the crisis. Climate discourse points to a fragmented, power-laden reality that transcends human experience. Yet it also illustrates the importance of discourse and action for understanding, and even altering, that extra-discursive reality: climate discourse shapes climate action, which shapes the material reality of the climate crisis.

I argue that postcolonial critical realism (PCR) provides an ontological framework for the relationship between racialized, colonial discourses, and the social world. It also offers insights for the decolonial project. Beginning with the case study of the climate crisis, I ask how scholars and activists have made sense of the present crisis, and how their discourses both reflect and reproduce the crisis. I derive five tenets of PCR: first, colonial discourses underlie, and interact with, material structures; second, coloniality is global and made visible through differential events and experiences; third, subaltern lived experiences offer insight into the nature of reality; fourth, coloniality is power-laden, sticky, and often invisible; and finally, decolonization must target all three domains of the social world and their interactions. I conclude by considering how this framework might enrich anticolonial thought in the social sciences, as well as social movements.

Situating Critical Realism

Before delving into the tenets of PCR, I pause to provide a brief overview of critical realism (CR), which emerged as in the 1970s as a critique of positivism. Positivism had become the dominant epistemology in the social sciences and proclaimed that the social world was visible, quantifiable, and had a reality independent of interpretation or analysis. Wary of the corresponding assumption that social reality was universal, unidimensional, and operated according to the same logic as the natural world, Bhaskar (1975) laid out an ontological framework that distinguished between the
natural and social worlds while emphasizing the reality of both. He argued, further, that reality was segmented into different domains, which corresponded to their mutability, causal power, and relationship to human experience. CR thus provided an explanation of events that accounted for both their location in material reality and their variability of outcomes. By extension, it rebuked both positivism’s quest for universal laws and interpretivism’s reticence to make causal claims.

An additional distinction, between CR and idealism, provides particular insight into CR’s epistemology and ontology. Idealists, like critical realists, distinguish between an object in itself and knowledge about that object (n.b. Collingwood, 1940). Idealists, however, claim that the object and knowledge thereof—that is, the social world at large—may be understood in their totality. They privilege the study of ideas, arguing that this negates the need to study historical events. Consequently, Bhaskar argues that idealists are guilty, with Kant, of the epistemic fallacy: idealists conflate knowledge about an object with the object itself. Critical realists, in contrast, argue that the social world is an open, stratified system, such that an event may never be reduced to its material form or the logic of its key actors. Rather, the amalgamation of objects and knowledges that produce an event are fluid and blurred.

According to CR, both the natural and social worlds consist, first, of the domain of the real. Within the domain of the real are largely invisible social structures and discourses, which interact in patterned ways (Fairclough et al., 2002). Because the social world is an open system, it changes in light of human intervention. This holds implications for causality, which is a function of multiple, contingent causal mechanisms. Yet the fluid social constructions underlying human interactions create a reality that transcends individual belief. The tension between the reality and transience of the social world is apparent in what Archer (1995) calls “analytical dualism,” which acknowledges the importance of both structure and agency: ideologies are “real” in their effects. The question of ideology introduces a distinction within the domain of the real between intransitive and transitive dimensions. Intransitive social structures always have a material dimension; the practices that compose them concern human survival. The transitive dimension consists of knowledge about the social world. Yet knowledges also shape structures, through a process of emergence: making meaning of a structure in a particular way can alter the structure itself (Bhaskar, 1992; Nellhaus, 1998).

Causal mechanisms, as noted above, exist within the domain of the real. Yet the events they produce belong to a second domain: the actual. These events may be visible or invisible, and they vary on the basis of temporal and spatial context. Colonialism, for example, produces visible and invisible phenomena in the domain of the actual—including acts of violence and depletion of resources. It also produces the possibility of phenomena that are not activated by particular configurations of causal mechanisms.

The third, and most visible, domain is that of the empirical. Here, human beings experience events; their experiences are the product of both the domain of the real and the domain of the actual. It is tempting to reduce the social world to that which can be experienced. It is equally tempting to claim that the invisible cannot be measured, and is thus beyond the remit of social science. Yet a complete understanding of the empirical is impossible without acknowledging either the actual or the real.

By critiquing positivism and interpretivism alike, CR provides a way to make sense of both the structure and subjectivity of human experience. It also attends to the differential expressions and real effects of power, as well as the relationship between systems of knowledge and the material world. Given its ability to analyze and destabilize hegemonic knowledges, CR seems to complement subaltern studies, decolonial studies, and other counter-hegemonic projects. Critical realists, however, have often critiqued postcolonial theory as relativist and inattentive to the material reality of domination. I intervene by proposing a critical realist ontological framework for postcolonial theory. Below, I elaborate the five tenets of PCR, illustrating them in relation to the global climate crisis.
PCR Confronts the Climate Crisis

Postcolonial critical realism provides a framework for making sense of the social, economic, and political legacies of empire. It integrates a critique of colonial discourses, an analysis of their material manifestation, and a call for anticolonial liberation. The ontology of the climate crisis, I argue, is such that its origins lie in the domain of the real—as colonial discourses that continually produce, and are produced by, racial capitalism in its material form. The real produces events in the domain of the actual, including the global climate crisis. That crisis, in turn, holds varying implications for lived experiences in the domain of the empirical. Yet through emergence, people may draw from their experiences to intervene in the domain of the real. To resolve a climate crisis that threatens the very future of life on Earth, the climate movement must overcome the colonial discourses that made the crisis possible.

Tenet 1: Colonial Discourses Underlie, and Interact with, Material Structures

Postcolonial theory is best understood as an approach that takes European colonialism as a critical moment in knowledge production. Knowledge, further, interacts with, and reconstructs, the identities of its authors and audiences (Nandy, 1983). In response, postcolonial theory recovers the perspectives that were relegated to the margins by colonialism. It equally interrogates “the authority of Europe’s story-lines” (Spivak, 1990), analyzing how hegemonic knowledges have been constructed through empire. The emphasis on discourse in postcolonial literary criticism has prompted charges that postcolonial theory neglects colonial institutions and structures (Bartolovich and Lazarus, 2002; Boehmer, 1995). Yet postcolonial theory in the social sciences is more attentive to materiality, to new forms of colonialism, and to the prospects for liberation. Further, Go (2016) demonstrates that even “discursive” postcolonial theorists tacitly acknowledge social ontology: Spivak’s strategic essentialism and Bhabha’s hybridity, for example, infer the effects of colonial discourses on colonized subjectivities, alongside possibilities for resistance.

Early iterations of CR, conversely, emphasized the material structures that existed independently of human knowledge or experience. Bhaskar’s early work, in particular, gave primacy to historical materialism. However, transcendental dialectical critical realism (TDCR), alongside critical discourse analysis (CDA), provides insight into the ontological status and causal power of discourse. Thirty years after popularizing CR, Bhaskar (2000) proposed that “spirit” preceded every other domain of the social world. Acknowledging a departure from his previous work, Bhaskar turned to ideologies and intentions, going so far as to assert that a person “can change [the world] just by observing it” (p. 140). When coupled with the stratified nature of reality, this approach provides insight into the ontological status and causal power of discourse: systems of thought produce material structures, which may reinforce, or undermine, the systems of thought that gave rise to them. Discourse, in this respect, is not simply knowledge about an object; it is also knowledge that produces an object. Given its multiplicity, discourse cannot be encapsulated in its totality. Indeed, CDA elaborates on the causal power of discourse in conjunction with other domains of the social world: its meaning lies in speaker intention, spatial context, audience interpretation, and material consequences (Banta, 2012). Bearing this framing in mind, I turn to climate discourse.

The “authority of Europe’s story-lines” imbues contemporary representations of the climate crisis. Thus, a postcolonial approach to the crisis must recognize that Eurocentric story-lines preclude the material causes of climate change. PCR, that is, retains an emphasis on discourse while theorizing a causal relationship between discourse and materiality. To confront the climate crisis, PCR must dislodge three interconnected story-lines: the human/nature binary, the idea of the human, and control over nature.
European historiography long has drawn a sharp line between natural and human history: the former changes so slowly as to be the virtually stagnant backdrop for the dynamism of the latter (Chakrabarty, 2009). Further, nature does not act, since only sentient animals are conscious of their own action. Deprived of agency, nature also holds no causal power: whereas human action causes events, natural events play out with no underlying logic. Assumptions about the human/nature binary have passed largely unchanged into Green Thought (Moore, 2017), which proclaims the importance of nature to the “whole” while classifying humans as a separate component of the whole. Human beings exercise their agency to alter nature: late twentieth-century environmental history, for example, characterizes human beings as biological agents, who threaten nature through their actions (n.b. Crosby, 1972; Smail, 2007). Taking this claim further, the Anthropocene extends human agency to the geological scale (Chakrabarty, 2017).

Writing human history separately from “natural history” both derives from and perpetuates an exclusionary notion of the human. As Wynter (2003) recalls, the sixteenth-century Christian conception of “Man” drew a racialized distinction—what de Sousa Santos (2007) calls an abyssal line—between those who exercised dominion over nature and those who belonged to nature. Enlightenment thought provided another logic for the same divide, classifying racialized Others as irrational. Humanity was measured by distance from nature: racialized Others were imagined as animalistic, while white Europeans had conquered nature in the service of civilization. With the expansion of scientific racism and social Darwinism in the nineteenth century, humanity was categorized and situated along an evolutionary path, with Northern Europeans positioned as the furthest removed from animals. The idea of evolutionary superiority, in turn, justified European dominance over nature—and over other human beings.

A brief review of contemporary African political philosophy provides insight into how the human/nature binary, and the racialization of the human, shaped colonial and postcolonial configurations of power. They also point to the ways in which colonized subjects have constructed new, ambivalent subjectivities. Mamdani (1996) traces “decentralised despotism” throughout Africa under British rule, arguing that this has facilitated the exclusion of rural populations from postcolonial political life. Lending support for this thesis, Sefa-Nyarko (2020) points to the solidification of ethnic identities under British indirect rule in Ghana. He argues that despite postcolonial Constitutional restrictions on ethnic politics, ethnicity remains a salient predictor for voting behaviour. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), similarly, draws from Quijano (2000) to argue that the colonial matrix of power shapes African socio-political formations. Mbembe (2001) identifies a different consequence of the colonial binary in overlapping postcolonial subjectivities. The colonial commandment—inflict pain or suffer pain—is deeply engrained in the ruling strategies of the postcolony. The legacies of colonialism, in other words, play out in unintended ways.

The literature reviewed above is not exhaustive; it does, however, point to the complex legacies of colonialism for nations, ethnicities, and political subjectivities. It also reveals the scale of destruction wrought by dividing the world into binaries, and hints at an alternative. Hare (1970) concludes that anti-Black racism and environmental devastation have the same root, such that neither can exist (nor be resolved) without the other. Newton, in pursuit of an anti-racist ontology, proposes an intercommunalism founded on the “unity of nature underlying and transcending all arbitrary national and geographic divisions” (quoted in Vasquez, 2018). Newton cautions that humans, included in his understanding of nature, manipulate nature in order to exercise power over other humans. This manipulation creates the climate crisis and accelerates its effects in the Global South.

Climate activists in the global North frequently challenge the human/nature binary. The Extinction Rebellion (XR) UK Vision team, for example, proclaims in an essay titled “Why We Rebel”, “In the delicate web of life, everything depends on everything else: we are nature and it is
us, and the extinction of the living world is our suicide.” (Griffiths, 2020). XR insists that the survival of humanity depends upon conditions of the natural world—that humanity, indeed, is part of nature. By extension, climate activists critique the discourse of human control over nature. Yet this critique is incomplete without interrogating the category of the human. The racialized origins of the human have given rise to a racialized discourse on the Anthropocene—and, as I detail below, racialized lived experiences of the climate crisis.

Tenet 2: Coloniality Is a Global Phenomenon Made Visible through Actual Events and Empirical Lived Experiences that Vary across Time and Space

The reality of the climate crisis is tangible and global: rising temperatures, extreme weather patterns, and the threat of mass extinctions. Experiences of the climate crisis, however, vary in ways that map onto historical patterns of racial capitalism and imperialism. Scholarship and activism frequently fail to interrogate the invisible racialized discourses that enable the climate crisis. This, in turn, shapes how they make sense of the crisis and propose to respond. Returning to the overview of climate discourse, I consider how the various names for the crisis point to different material manifestations and lived experiences.

Scholars who frame the crisis as the Anthropocene debate its start date—a controversy that reflects divergent understandings of the crisis. A start date of 1784, for example, coincides with Watt’s invention of the steam engine, and places blame on the Industrial Revolution. Malm (2016) and Moore (2017), preferring the term Capitalocene, argue that the crisis is the product of the longue durée cycle of resource depletion and fossil fuel dependency within the capitalist world system. A third approach recalls long-standing patterns of extraction and control—of “nature” and of racialized human bodies—in the service of a narrow definition of “Man” (Wynter, 2003). Whilst the first two approaches acknowledge the pitfalls of control over nature, the third interrogates all three discourses: the bifurcation of human and nature, the racialization of the human, and control over nature.

Racialized discourses of the human and nature supported, and produced, material structures. Indeed, the sixteenth-century Christian conception of “Man” enabled white Europeans to justify the conquest, genocide, and enslavement of the “non-human.” With colonial enterprise, control extended to land and resources, which were extracted, and monetized. European elites then subdued the land, segmenting continents into colonies and dividing commons into privately owned fields. The consequences of colonial extraction demonstrate the impossibility of bifurcating “human” and “nature”: the destruction of a community’s ecosystem entailed destruction of their social life, cultural heritage, and economic livelihood (Mbembe, 2001). The result was, in part, what Haraway et al. (2015) call the Plantationocene: the ordering of land, flora, fauna, and microbes into quantifiable, profitable units. According to this logic, the relationship between units is severed, and any threat to a segment of the fragmented natural world (e.g., floods, crop failure) is perceived as a crisis. Examples of this logic abound in the colonial order: the plantation model shaped colonial forestry, emphasizing the uniform appearance of trees, and culling unprofitable plants and animals to create space for commercially valuable species. In Kodagu, Karnataka, beginning in 1854, European planters cleared 20,000 acres of forest and repurposed the land for meticulously maintained coffee plantations. Within a few years, the coffee trees were beset by rot, leaf disease, and infestation by the borer—all results of an imbalance in the ecosystem (Pouchepadass, 1995).

For Woods (2007), the successors of plantations are “enclosures and reserves; industrial estates and mill villages; . . . ghettos and gated communities; . . . and migratory and prison labour” (p. 56). Listing disordered alongside ordered spaces illustrates their interdependence: development, gentrification, and enclosure yield extraction, displacement, and exclusion. Thus, for example, the
apartheid-era dispossession and displacement of Black South Africans to ever smaller and less arable tracts of land was instrumental to the white consolidation of wealth and power. Failing to recognize both categories of space as expressions of the racial capitalist world system inhibits the imagination of solutions to the present crisis (Davis et al., 2019; Haymes, 2018).

Postcolonial theory is well positioned to critique the coloniality that haunts contemporary climate discourse. Yet as the previous section has indicated, discourse alone cannot encapsulate the material expressions of the climate crisis. Consider, for example, Murphy’s (2006) critique of “cornucopia analysis”: regardless of powerful discourses of limitless economic growth, the reality of the natural world constrains human ambitions. Elsewhere, Foucault tacitly acknowledged the existence of the extra-discursive while neglecting to define it or to theorize its interactions with the discursive. His realist critics help to make sense of this relationship: both the discursive and the extra-discursive must interact to produce emergent entities, which are greater than the objects and forces that produce them (Elder-Vass, 2012). This realist account provides a nuanced reading of Foucaultian power relations as multiple and contingent, while qualifying their effects on subjects (Hardy, 2010).

Applying this critique to poststructuralist accounts of environmental disasters, we can identify both the role of discourse and the importance of the extra-discursive. Pearce and Tombs (1998), analyzing the Bhopal disaster, argue that discourses of profitability, safety legislation, and organizational systems created the conditions in which an industrial “accident” was possible. Extra-discursive factors (chemical reactions, bodies, and buildings) interacted with discourses to produce a profoundly material disaster. Similarly, postcolonial theory must reckon with extra-discursive objects which produce, and are produced by, discourses of wealth and power. This interaction between the discursive and extra-discursive produces the extra-discursive manifestations of the climate crisis, including floods, droughts, and rising temperatures.

In order to interrogate the materiality of the crisis—and to avoid the Foucaultian version of the epistemic fallacy (Frauley, 2007; Pearce and Woodiwiss, 2001)—postcolonial theory must revisit its colonial humanist roots. Certainly, postcolonial theory owes much of its inspiration to Cabral (2016), Césaire (1955), Fanon (1952), Nkrumah (1963), Nyerere (1967), and others who conceptualized colonialism as a system that bifurcated the world into clearly defined, oppositional categories of colonizer and colonized, then set about building economic and political systems that enriched the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. For mid-century anticolonial thinkers, colonialism was “the theft of nature and the ruination of lifeworlds” (Potter, 2017: 381). This framing illustrates the relationship between discourse and materiality in PCR: discourses of a human/nature binary, in which the former proclaims its control over the latter, have culminated in a global crisis. The crisis is most acute, however, for those relegated outside the category of human.

**Tenet 3: Subaltern Lived Experiences Provide Insight into the Nature of Reality at Large**

Just as measuring climate change solely by the rise in global atmospheric temperature masks localized patterns of extreme heat and cold, measuring its consequences for humanity at large masks extreme wealth and poverty, power, and oppression. Similarly, responses to the climate crisis that originate in the North mask long-standing and everyday interventions by people in the South (Ali et al., 2019). These localized, patterned, experiences constitute the empirical domain of the climate crisis. They also reflect colonial structures and the discourses underlying them: whereas power permits denial of oppression, oppression reveals power in all of its violence. Thus, the Racial Capitalocene foregrounds the disproportionate effects of climate change on the Global South, and on people of colour in the Global North—and the origins of both in racial capitalism (Pulido, 2018; Vergès, 2017; Whyte, 2018).
Postcolonial theory, with its emphasis on the “native subject,” has given voice to subaltern experiences of the climate crisis. To that end, works of postcolonial literature, often criticized for privileging discourse at the expense of materiality, highlight the reality of the climate crisis for their subaltern subjects. Ghosh (1992), for example, points to the prevalence of explicit depictions of oil in Southern literature—consider, for example, Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), which follows two journalists through the oil-polluted wetlands of the Niger delta as they encounter abandoned villages, desperate locals, corrupt officials, and aggrieved militants. Northern Anglophone literature, in contrast, is awash with descriptions of consumerist lifestyles dependent upon oil, but virtually silent on oil itself (Szeman, 2017). Mukherjee (2019), invoking postcolonial theory’s turn to the material in the early twentieth century, calls for engagement with the environmental humanities in response to the climate crisis (Yaeger, 2011). Representing lived experiences reveals the reality of the global climate crisis—the empirical makes visible the real. By extension, any meaningful action to resolve the climate crisis must entail listening to the subaltern, who have experienced racial capitalism and its ecological consequences even as the same forces empowered white Europeans. This was evident for Vanessa Nakate: excluding African stories in Davos was harmful because it impeded both a complete understanding of the crisis and African participation in its resolution. In line with standpoint theory (Nakata, 2007; Rolin, 2009), emphasizing the lived experience of the oppressed provides greater insight into the mechanisms of oppression, and the structure of society at large.

Reading the dynamics of the postcolonial through a critical realist lens helps to rebuke the claim that postcoloniality is uniquely suited to the effects of European colonialism (see, for example, Chen, 2010; Desai, 2007). In particular, a critical realist notion of causality rejects any universal explanation for a social phenomenon, arguing instead that an event is contingent upon a particular configuration of causal mechanisms in the domains of the real and the actual. This produces a conceptualization of postcoloniality as both dynamic across time and space and laden with material implications. It also centers the varied lived experiences of the subaltern, rather than subsuming them into states and systems.

According to critics of postcolonial theory, privileging individual perspectives brings two pitfalls: first, it applies the native informant’s perspective to ill-fitting contexts. Second, it neglects the role of macro-level legal frameworks, political economy, and national and geographic contexts in shaping postcolonial formations. Perhaps the most forceful charge is that postcolonial theory fails to engage with race and class as structuring forces that govern the lives of the colonized and provide the basis for solidarity. Chibber (2013) argues that by neglecting the extra-discursive reality of capitalism, postcolonial theory has “hollowed out” the critique that informed mid-century Tricontinentalism and the Non-Aligned Movement. Similarly, Third World Marxism (Alavi, 1982; Washbrook, 2007) and the Black Radical Tradition (James, 1996[1948]; Rodney, 1972) reject the claim that Marx’s own European standpoint taints an entire ideology and the political movements that stemmed from it (Sinha and Varma, 2017). Rather, their understandings of the nature of imperialism, and the mutual construction of race and capitalism, have enriched Marxist analyses of global capitalism. Consequently, Marxism belongs as much to anti-colonial and anti-racist thinkers as it does to its namesake.

A critical realist understanding of causality helps to address the aforementioned critiques: colonialism and its aftermath are produced in the domains of the real and the actual, and are experienced by individuals in the domain of the empirical. This framing rebukes both the notion that each individual experiences colonialism in the same way, and the corresponding assumption that the “real” institutions underlying those experiences are unchanging. Rather, each domain plays a crucial role in the articulation of colonialism and postcolonialism—in line with what Go (2016) terms postcolonial-perspectival realism. The social world is a web of relations in which each domain is
distinct, but all interact in order to produce events (Gandhi, 2019). Further, the material effects of colonialism are not confined to economic and political structures; they extend to individual psychologies and interpersonal relationships. Making sense of postcoloniality at the individual level serves to illuminate the extent of colonial violence, beyond the broad strokes of imperial history. It also reveals that the postcolonial is contingent, and that individuals, engaging discursively with social structures, have the agency to alter it.

**Tenet 4: Coloniality Is Power-Laden, Sticky, and Often Invisible**

The climate crisis is the result of real colonial discourses and structures. It gives rise to actual events—droughts, floods, and extreme temperatures. These, in turn, produce localized experiences—extreme poverty and climate migration. According to this framework, the climate crisis is largely invisible. Further, because colonial discourses and structures are closely intertwined, the crisis is power-laden and sticky.

Climate activism in the Global North frequently focuses on the domain of the empirical, situating the crisis in the future and warning that current carbon emissions are unsustainable. The symbol of Extinction Rebellion (XR), for example, is an abstracted image of an hourglass, signifying that time is limited to prevent catastrophic climate change. This framing errs in two respects: first, it erases the experiences of subaltern groups for whom the crisis is already a lived experience, universalizing the experiences of privileged groups in the North. This replicates the violent process of establishing the humanity of one group by dehumanizing another. Second, climate activism in the North neglects the structures and discourses underlying lived experiences. Gauging the crisis based on one group’s experiences misrepresents its nature and scale. Similarly, proposing solutions based on those experiences leaves intact the discourses and structures that gave rise to the climate crisis. The result is that the crisis is perceived as inevitable or irreparable.

Policy-orientated approaches similarly err by universalizing local events. This negates both the global character of the climate crisis and its differential expressions. In 2018, for example, the National Climate Assessment warned that some sectors of the U.S. economy would lose hundreds of billions of dollars if climate change continued unchecked (Reidmiller et al., 2018). By nationalizing a global crisis, the report underestimated both the severity of the crisis and the global, transformative approach needed to resolve it. A new UK political party, Beyond Politics, errs in the opposite direction. The group criticizes mainstream political parties for prioritizing short-term gain over long-term survival, and calls for an approach that disregards inter-party differences. The Beyond Politics website includes a statement called “On Fire,” which is worth quoting at length:

> Our house is on fire... You could be trapped inside a nylon sleeping bag on top of a bed of free newspapers under a bridge, on fire... The church is on fire, and the mosque and the synagogue... So is the Bank of England, and Number 10. So is Buckingham Palace... Blacks are on fire, whites are on fire. And asians [sic], queers, golfers and artists; people in wheelchairs are on fire. Hippies are on fire, and pregnant people and nazis [sic] and bankers and vloggers are on fire. (Beyond Politics, 2020)

Their message is clear: climate change will affect everyone, without exception, in the same way. Social and political divisions are meaningless in the face of a global threat. Indeed, the climate crisis is global. Yet because colonialism underpins the social world—shaping institutions, events, and experiences—there is nothing universal about the crisis. Rather, the same divisions that Beyond Politics deems insignificant have given rise to both the crisis itself and to differential individual experiences of it. To dismiss the colonial origins and differential expressions is to underestimate the severity and stickiness of the climate crisis.
PCR identifies the shortcomings of Northern climate activism and policy by theorizing the stratified nature of reality. Colonialism underpins lived experience, but the complexity of causal mechanisms means that colonialism is rarely the obvious or immediate cause of a single experience. PCR, however, identifies colonialism as the reality underlying lived experiences and actual events. It also explains the limitations of interventions that target the empirical but neglect the real.

Tenet 5: Decolonization Must Be Both Global and Variegated, Targeting All Three Domains of the Social World and Their Interactions

Because postcolonial theory is widely associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism, critics argue that it undermines the potential for collective struggle. Universalizing ideologies, including Marxism, are dismissed as Eurocentric, such that the colonized are left with no basis upon which to unite against colonial oppression. In Grosfoguel’s (2012) words, “I can’t speak if the moment I open my mouth, it’s deconstructed.” A related critique holds that subgenres of postcolonial theory, such as Afropessimism, produce fatalism by treating colonialism and its legacies as insurmountable. Finally, critics including Ahmad (1995) and Dirlik (1994) argue that by focusing on European colonialism and its aftermath, postcolonial theory neglects new, global expressions of colonialism. In its most extreme form, this critique holds that postcolonial theory is complicit with neoliberalism because it centres the individual and rejects collective identity as a locus of struggle. More recently, decolonial theory seeks to overthrow the hegemony of European thought and embrace the “messiness” of othered knowledges while pursuing political and social liberation (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

All of these critiques are linked to postcolonial theory’s supposed failure to engage with the domain of the real. Yet an explicitly critical realist framework answers these critiques and enriches the project of postcolonial theory in at least three ways: first, CR qualifies the power of colonial discourses by foregrounding the relationship between discourse and “real” social structures; second, it provides an understanding of causality that is contextualized in time and space but carries lessons for new expressions of colonialism; and third, it creates space for subaltern individuals to disrupt hegemonic structures of domination.3 This holds implications for the prospects for liberation in postcolonial theory. Mannathukkaren (2010) argues that the promise of postcolonial theory is that it destabilizes the linear modernization process and aspires to open up multiple paths to modernity. He concludes that this promise is largely unfulfilled since the theory limits itself to the discursive realm. Yet a critical realist approach to postcolonial theory makes sense of both the discursive and material facets of racial capitalism. Thus, Connell (2007) looks to the Global South for new ways of knowing—an approach that has also been taken up in search of new approaches to development and modernity.

Such an approach to the material is compatible with—and, indeed, frequently present in—postcolonial theory. Said, for example, combines intellectual critique with revolutionary politics (Spencer, 2006). For Said, anticolonial discourse is distinct from anticolonial struggle, yet the former finds its fullest expression in the latter. From a PCR standpoint, this means that recognizing the stratified nature of the social world enables us to intervene in it, targeting political and economic structures as well as colonial discourses. Decolonization is incomplete unless it targets every domain of the social world. Examples of this approach abound within postcolonial theory: Prakash (1999), writing from a subaltern studies perspective, explores the dual role of science as a (real) instrument of empire and an (actual) symbol of the postcolonial nation. Consequently, decolonizing the mind provides the impetus for decolonizing the “real.” Such is the case for Chakrabarty’s (1989) seminal argument that the (real) social milieu of Kolkata jute-mill workers gave rise to (actual) class consciousness and, ultimately, revolutionary action.
Responding to the climate crisis begins by making sense of its discursive origins, then considering the implications of discourses for the material reality of the climate crisis. The climate crisis is made visible through events and experiences—particularly the experiences of subaltern groups, who recognize stratification and violence that is invisible to privileged groups. The complexity and stickiness of the Racial Capitalocene create pitfalls for those who attempt to address only one facet of the crisis. Some climate activists, however, have intervened in both colonial discourses and the structures they produce.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In May 2019, as Extinction Rebellion (XR) was engaged in a wave of public protests throughout the UK, a collective of forty-eight Black, Indigenous, and diaspora grassroots organizations called Wretched of the Earth published an open letter in the magazine *Red Pepper* (Wretched of the Earth, 2019). Their analysis of the climate crisis, and their call to action, exemplify how PCR can parse the ontological reality of coloniality and prescribe revolutionary social change.

After affirming their general agreement with XR’s agenda, the authors cautioned that XR’s assumptions about the nature of the climate crisis risked supporting changes that would be at best superficial, and, at worst, supportive of systems of oppression. They argued that the origin of the crisis lay in discourses, among them “capitalism, extractivism, racism, sexism, classism, and ableism” (paragraph 5). These discourses—located in the domain of the real—have produced the materiality of the Racial Capitalocene. They provided the logic for events in the domain of the actual, including conquest, slavery, globalization, and, ultimately, climate change. Within this context of extreme power and oppression, individuals experience floods and famines, forced migration and border regimes. The domain of the empirical is sharply differentiated. As the authors point out, “whenever the tide of ecological violence rises, our communities, especially in the Global South, are always first hit” (paragraph 3).

For the Wretched of the Earth, XR’s ontology may err in two ways. First, it foregrounds the visible effects of climate change for the privileged, warning of future crises. This approach neglects patterned variations in lived experience, such that marginalized groups have long borne the brunt of the climate crisis in order to insulate the privileged. Acknowledging variations in lived experience will compel the climate movement to examine the structures and discourses underlying the empirical. The alternative—focusing on a narrow range of lived experiences—risks producing superficial solutions for the privileged, while leaving intact the systems that gave rise to the crisis.

A second danger for XR is that it upholds science as the objective measure of the crisis at hand. This approach emphasizes the actual—the quantifiable, material outcomes of the crisis in the form of carbon emissions, rising temperatures, and extreme weather. For XR, measuring the crisis in scientific terms invites scientific interventions—in particular, finding and extracting “clean” energy sources. Doing so leaves racial capitalism unscathed, reproducing privilege and oppression. It also erases Indigenous knowledges that have endured and resisted climate crises for generations. Included in this knowledge is a decisive rebuke of the human/nature binary: “Indigenous communities remind us that we are not separate from nature, and that protecting the environment is also protecting ourselves” (paragraph 4).

The preceding pages have argued for a postcolonial critical realism. Beyond the case study of the global climate crisis, PCR is an ontological framework that proclaims the reality of colonial discourses underlying the social world. It proposes a multidirectional, causal relationship between those discourses; political and economic structures; and tangible events and experiences. It also emphasizes subaltern narratives as crucial for understanding the relationship between reality and representation.
PCR responds to criticism of postcolonial theory, suggesting a way forward that is grounded in social ontology. In response to the allegation that postcolonial theory overemphasizes discourse, PCR argues that colonial discourses give rise to material structures. In response to the claim that postcolonial literature fetishizes the “native subject,” PCR argues that individual, subaltern experiences provide insight into the reality of colonialism at large. And in response to the confinement of postcolonial theory to twentieth-century European imperialism, PCR extends to contemporary manifestations of colonialism. Recent postcolonial work in the social sciences is conducive to a PCR reading: examples include Bhambra’s (2017) genealogy of discourses of Britishness and imperial governance; Go’s (2012) comparison of late imperial military conquests in the British and American Empires; Mahoney’s (2010) exploration of the relationship between colonial conquest and postcolonial development in Latin America; Edwards’ (2017) analysis of anti-colonial popular movements in resource-rich Gabon and Trinidad; and Shilliam’s (2015) account of the racialization of state institutions. What these sociologists share is a recognition that the imposition of colonial ways of knowing holds real consequences. PCR provides an ontological framework for their claims.

PCR equally provides insights from postcolonial theory for critical realism. First, it takes up the call of critical discourse analysts to theorize the causal power of discourse to shape social institutions and practices (n.b. Fairclough et al., 2002). Second, and by extension, PCR is attentive to power in general, and to coloniality specifically. Presenting colonial knowledges as the discursive framework underlying the domain of the real gives a historical dimension to CR. It also emphasizes the violence that maintains the social world. These interventions respond to D’Souza’s (2010) call for critical engagement with postcolonial theory from a critical realist perspective, centering on the question: “what type of nature-society-human relations causes this problem, and how must that relation be transformed for emancipation to be real?” (p. 272). Similarly, PCR takes up Mannathukkaren’s (2010) call to grapple with the challenges that postcolonial theory presents for a critical realist understanding of modernity.

The implications of PCR extend to social movements—in particular, to the project of decolonizing universities. By calling on social scientists to revisit postcolonial theory, I do not aim to deflect or supplant the growing wave of scholarly and activist attention to decolonial theory. Decolonial theory, indeed, builds upon the project of postcolonial theory, extending its temporal and spatial scope, foregrounding the coloniality of institutions (including universities and academic disciplines), and rooting itself in praxis. Rather, my aim is to bring postcolonial theory back into the conversation, such that the decolonial project may take on board, and build upon, postcolonial theory’s attention to the discourses underpinning both the colonial project and various forms of resistance. This, I hope, will only enrich anticolonial scholarship and social movements.

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Notes
1. This does not imply that postcolonial configurations of power and knowledge simply replicated their colonial predecessors. Indeed, such a claim would deprive colonized societies of agency and deny the resilience of Indigenous political and social institutions. Rather, as Cheeseman and Fisher (2021) argue, postcolonial authoritarianisms resulted from a combination of colonial political and economic legacies and localized contexts (see also Herbst, 2000).
2. While a detailed discussion of materiality in Bhaskar’s (1975, 1979) early work is beyond the scope of this paper, it bears emphasizing that most critical realism—including foundational works in the 1970s and 1980s—privileges the materiality of the domain of the real. Discourse (knowledge) is included in the transitive dimension of the real, but does not underlie that domain at large. Consequently, my claim that discourses precede, and underlie, material structures marks a departure from most critical realism and aligns PCR more closely with postcolonial theory in this respect.
3. Here, another useful contribution from CR lies in Bhaskar’s (1987) explanatory critique, which derives normative statements from factual ones. If colonial discourses engender oppression, then those discourses should change. If, further, the climate crisis poses an existential threat to life on Earth, then we must urgently fight the crisis and the institutions and discourses underlying it.

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