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## Ecological Catastrophe, Capitalist Excess or Ongoing Colonialism

How should we understand the crisis?

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**Abstract:** Many social and natural scientists would agree with the conclusion that humanity is at a point of self-inflicted crisis. Of special significance is how we frame the crisis and, relatedly, what we understand to be its root cause. Framing is an act of diagnosis which suggests possible remedies. This paper argues that the current framings of the crisis – though accurate – are insufficient. The ecological framing of the crisis tends to generate false solutions such as carbon markets or geoengineering. It also tends to confuse the symptoms of the crisis – climate change being an obvious example – with the cause. The social framing of the crisis better diagnoses the root cause, but it also has limitations. An understanding of capitalism in crisis has been used by different groups – reformists and revolutionaries – for more than a century without sustained success. At the current political juncture, nearly every state – including self-proclaimed socialist states – has neoliberal tendencies, meaning that governments tend to side with capitalist elites. It is therefore difficult to imagine the anti-capitalist framing being successful. A more effective and complete framing would be to understand the current crisis to be one of colonialism. At its core, colonialism is a project of commodification and competition; therefore undoing the ongoing damage caused by colonial systems would entail developing and nurturing institutions designed to enhance human cooperation and stewardship of the commons.

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Metabolic Rift, Anthropocene, Capitalism, Global Warming, Communications strategy, ecological crisis, heterodox economics, historical economics

# Introduction

Despite broad consensus that humanity is at a point of crisis, there is no consensus on what to call the crisis.

Are we even discussing the same crisis? For reactionary elements, the crisis a threat to the status quo. New categories of people (women, immigrants, racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, etc.) threaten a status quo where **my** community (older white men, Hindus, Sunnis, etc.) was in power.

This right-wing “crisis” is very different from the crisis with which the rest of us seem to be concerned. Biologists and other natural scientists are unable to do their work without taking into account the effect of what is usually termed the “climate crisis”; NGOs increasingly describe the “inequality crisis”; Marxists have been talking about the coming “crisis of capitalism” for the past 150 years.

How we define the crisis matters in several respects. First, we must define the crisis in a way that is consistent with the best possible scientific evidence. If the crisis is being defined as one of immigration, the first question we must ask ourselves is “Is there really an immigration crisis?” All of the reactionary framings fail this first test and therefore need not be further scrutinized.<sup>1</sup>

But there certainly is a crisis. The crisis has many components and one of the key drivers of this crisis is that a small minority of the population – call them the one per cent, though this may be a generous estimate – benefits enormously from the social relations that create and exacerbate the crisis. That same one per cent are the people who will resist any attempts to resolve the crisis. If humanity were to continue on its current path, something like an extinction level event is a possibility – with climate change and nuclear war being the most likely causes of such an event. The other way the crisis could resolve itself is if a small group of people – let’s call them activists – were able to convince the majority of the population who does not benefit from the social relations causing crisis, to pull away from those social structures and establish new ones that would not lead to crisis.

Unfortunately, most of those who struggle and campaign against elements of the crisis do so using methodologies that seem to be failing. In part this is because of a communication failure. If a person who does not self-define as an activist but is sympathetic to the problems of global hyper-capitalism hears about a plastics crisis, a transgender-rights crisis, a polar-ice-caps crisis, and so on, what does she perceive? The likely perception is that there are many issues – too many issues – to handle and they all seem to be in competition with one another (for funds among other things). So pick one or two that you feel passionately about and don’t worry about the bigger picture. The result is that you might cause some

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<sup>1</sup> One could go into a lot of detail on each right-wing “crisis” and why it’s not really a crisis. In general the approach taken in this Atlantic article can be applied to a myriad of issues. Right-wing crises are not even meant to be taken seriously; the panic opens the door for political opportunism. Beinart, Peter. 2018. ‘There Is No Immigration Crisis’. The Atlantic. 27 June 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/06/democrats-immigration-not-a-crisis/563855/>.

fluctuations in the nature of the crisis – the hole in the ozone layer is no longer an issue, for example – but you do little to transform the structures that lead to crisis.

In order to counter this, I will propose below that activists should develop a narrative of a grand crisis within which there are particular domains of struggle. That narrative has to be *accurate*, that is, in keeping with a reasonable interpretation of the scientific evidence, *wholistic*, meaning that all the crises can be reasonably understood to be components of this big crisis, and *effective*, meaning that it should give activists a good framework for convincing non-activists of the need for action to resolve the crisis.

While there are wholistic and accurate framings of the crisis, these framings (I will argue below) fail to provide an effective narrative. Most of us frame the crisis around who we are, what we do, and the knowledge systems with which we are familiar. In a culture that prizes technical specialization, this obscures the problem. For a neoliberal economist, the crisis will always be about too much regulation or perhaps asymmetric access to knowledge, which leads to market imperfections. This is because a neoliberal economist - almost by definition - believes that every problem boils down to human failure to step away and let markets do their thing. (Neoliberals tend to be very good at contemplating markets without humans, but never humans without markets.)

It's easy (and necessary since they still enjoy so much power) to ridicule neoliberals but it should be said that this applies to all of us. A Marxist tends to see the problem as one of labour versus capital; an eco-feminist will see the crisis underlined by problems of gender hierarchies and a patricentric understanding of our relationship with nature. I once had a conversation with a geologist who kept insisting that since the earth had been through much hotter periods millions of years ago (long before humans or even mammals were around), we needn't worry about climate change! (It should be noted that this was one conversation with one geologist; most geologists are deeply concerned about climate change.)

We should not ignore the deep truths that specialization within the social and natural sciences can bring to our understanding of the crisis, but we should also ask whether their framing is the most useful for transforming social structures so that they are compatible with longer-term human existence.

With this in mind, let's consider the two most widespread framings of the crisis - the ecological framing (climate change, pollution, etc.) and the social framing (inequality, excess, conflict, wars, etc.) I would propose that we test these framings against the two criteria already mentioned, namely: *veracity* (is the framing in line with a reasonable interpretation of scientific data?) - and *utility* - (is the framing conducive to posing questions that, if answered, would actually address the root causes of the crisis?).

## The Ecological Crisis

It should go without saying by this point that the ecological framing is true. 2018 was a year which saw report after report on the dire nature of climate change and the threats we

humans pose to numerous species, including our own.<sup>2</sup> Some scientists have begun to talk about a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, which would follow the Holocene and be marked by the influence humans have had on the planet.<sup>3</sup> For present purposes we need not go into the details, but humans have already unleashed planetary forces we cannot control and all of the many ecosystems in which humans live are under threat due to climate-related disasters, sea level rise, what appears to be a new era of mass extinctions, and so on.

Framing the crisis in ecological terms is not a new idea. The Rio conference, which marked the first scientific consensus on an official, global stage that climate change was a threat, took place in 1992. Since that time (and arguably earlier with fears of pollution/acid rain in the 1970s and 1980s), this framing has sought to affect policy. Unfortunately, even in the rare cases where it succeeds in doing so, this framing fails. It may affect policy but not at a deep enough level to resolve the crisis.

The upshot of summits like the one that took place in Rio or the 1997 Kyoto conference has been to propose (and sometimes implement) false solutions. Carbon trading markets are perhaps the biggest example of a false solution, but there are many others.<sup>4</sup> Evaluations of these frameworks, such as the one famously carried out in 2006 by British economist Nick Stern and others,<sup>5</sup> tend to go out of their way to defend these false solutions. As the authors of such papers know, these “solutions” are better than nothing and therefore must be defended. But as those authors also surely know, those “solutions”, even if fully implemented, would only delay the inevitable and sometimes only by a short amount of time. By now this is largely a moot point; the Kyoto agreement is more or less dead and no agreement or policy change in the last 30 years has done anything to halt the increase of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>6</sup>

As the crisis becomes more dire, the ecological framing is leading to even worse proposals including those related to geoengineering. Countering global warming through a small nuclear war has been put forward as a serious proposal.<sup>7</sup> Other proposals include sulphur injections in the stratosphere, cloud seeding to reduce overall sunlight exposure and other ideas that are extremely likely to have unintended side effects. There is no second earth to

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<sup>2</sup> See examples here USGCRP. 2018. ‘Fourth National Climate Assessment’. 2018. <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov>. and here: ‘Global Warming of 1.5 °C —’. n.d. Accessed 11 December 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

<sup>3</sup> Zalasiewicz, Jan, Mark Williams, Alan Smith, Tiffany L. Barry, Angela L. Coe, Paul R. Bown, Patrick Brechley, et al. 2008. ‘Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene’. *GSA Today* 18 (2): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1130/GSAT01802A.1>.

<sup>4</sup> A number of those can be found in Paul, Helena, Almuth Ernsting, Stella Semino, Susanne Gura, and Antje Lorch. 2009. ‘Agriculture and Climate Change: Real Problems, False Solutions’. *Climate Change*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Stern, Nicholas. 2008. ‘The Economics of Climate Change’ 98 (2): 37.

<sup>6</sup> The Montreal Protocol (which took effect in 1989) limiting CFCs out of concern for the health of the ozone layer is the only exception to this rule. At the time, Montreal was seen as a model - indeed many in Rio and Kyoto hoped to replicate it. But we now have 30 years of failed attempts to replicate this model.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Small Nuclear War Could Reverse Global Warming for Years’. 2011. National Geographic News. 23 February 2011. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/02/110223-nuclear-war-winter-global-warming-environment-science-climate-change/>.

experiment with; therefore our ability to understand the full implications of a given geoengineering proposal is extremely limited.

And there are even deeper problems with the ecological framing. By posing the crisis as something external - it's in the environment not in us - it suggests that humans must do something - some sort of tweak, or maybe an engineering miracle - to fix it. It plays into a certain "human vs nature" logic that is a product of the European enlightenment thinking that itself is part of the crisis. It also does not fully recognize the crisis for what it is. Climate change is the present manifestation of the crisis but even if we were to find some technological fix to the current crisis, another crisis would follow.<sup>8</sup>

As long as humans treat ecosystems both as an endless resource and as an endless garbage dump, we will continue to create ecological crises. This was understood right at the very beginning of the capitalist industrialization project.<sup>9</sup> So at its core, the crisis is not an ecological crisis. Rather one symptom of the crisis is the human tendency to create ecological crises. The climate crisis is the most daunting of many ecological crises transpiring, and all of these crises develop from something deeper.

## The Capitalist Crisis

While even capitalists are concerned about inequality these days, the anti-capitalist framing is the most powerful articulation of social crisis.

According to proponents of this framing, there has long been a conflict between capital and labour which arises from the need for the capitalist to exploit the worker in order to maximize profit. The rise of union movements and the end of enslavement and child labour put constraints on the extent to which elites could exploit workers; but the elites found new ways to make money through imperialism and speculation. After the second world war there was a kind of a truce between labour and elites (at least in Western Europe and the USA), but since the advent of Thatcher and Reagan and especially since the fall of the Berlin wall, elites have been able to control a larger share of global profit and have established a neoliberal status quo that remains largely in place. This has led to increasing levels of inequality and the recreation of an uber-elite - a tiny percentage of the world's population that controls a majority of its wealth - similar to other phases of capitalism (the 19th century "Robber Barons" or the gross inequalities of the 1920s for example). The amount of new wealth that can be created is limited by a number of factors including the fact that we live on a planet with finite resources; yet global capitalism assumes limitless growth. In recent years, this assumption has led to the creation of asset bubbles and financial crises as capitalists rely on financial chicanery of one kind or another to create wealth out of debt and currency speculation.

The assumption that limitless growth is desirable (or even possible) will inevitably lead to a breakdown of the system in part because the capitalist system ignores things that are really

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Klein discusses this in detail in the following: Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*. Simon and Schuster.

<sup>9</sup> English satirist Jonathan Swift and US colonist Benjamin Franklin - both writing in the 18th century - are considered some of the first to articulate environmentalist critiques of capitalism.

important - that reliance on fossil fuels is causing climate change, or the huge proportion of the economy devoted to unpaid care work to give two examples. These it relegates to the realm of “externalities”.

As was the case with the ecological framing, there is no doubt that this framing is true. Even capitalist institutions like Fortune Magazine routinely run articles [decrying increasing wealth inequality](#) and the [failure of regulators](#) to hold financiers to account. But is it effective?

In order to assess the effectiveness of this framing we need to consider that it is used by different groups of people for different ends. Let’s specifically consider Marxists who want to destroy the capitalist system and neo-Keynesians - people like Yanis Varoufakis, Jeff Sachs or Joseph Stiglitz to give some contemporary examples - who want to reform the system to curb some of its worst aspects and to limit the frequency and severity of economic crises, especially financial crises.

Following the global financial crisis that started in 2007 in the United States, we have seen a resurgent interest in the sort of financial regulation that Keynes was obsessed with in the later years of his life. Neo-Keynesians (for the most part) accept the tenets of capitalism but fear that certain kinds of capitalists - those involved in speculative as opposed to productive financial activities - have very little interest in the long-term stability of the system and in fact often benefit from instability. If left to their own devices they will bring down the financial system and with it the entire economy, and therefore regulation is needed to keep them from their own destructive tendencies. We can therefore talk of neo-Keynesians using a mild version of the anti-capitalist framing as a way to save capitalism from itself through regulation, especially regulation of speculative capital.<sup>10</sup>

Since the Bretton Woods System (that Keynes helped to create) fell apart in the 1970s, financial crises have been occurring with greater frequency and severity. The upshot of the last 40 years or so of history makes two things very clear: a) the neo-Keynesians are correct in their analysis that unregulated financial speculation poses systemic risks to the capitalist system, and b) being correct in itself does not generate the reforms or regulations which would resolve the problem.

We have now reached a point where, barring the kind of draconian measures that were put in place during World War II, the super-rich have enough power and influence to stop regulation that they do not like and resist systemic change. Most of this boils down to the power of wealth, but (as anyone who’s watched Fox News for a few minutes knows) they can use that power to manufacture some degree of popular support through propaganda that panders to racism, sexism, classism and xenophobia. So the neo-Keynesian framing is correct but ultimately not useful even for a limited reformist agenda. The inequality has given rise to a super elite class - a predatory capitalist class beyond anything Marx could have dreamed of - who can collectively block the regulation that the neo-Keynesians propose.

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<sup>10</sup> In some formulations, this is a temporary measure to stave off disaster before some later shift to socialism. See for example: ‘Yanis Varoufakis: How I Became an Erratic Marxist’. 18 Feb, 2015. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/18/yanis-varoufakis-how-i-became-an-erratic-marxist>.

(This is of course a moving puzzle. With the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Bernie Sanders in the USA and similar politicians around the world, neo-Keynesianism might yet have its day. But even if this does come to pass, it will likely just delay the inevitable - the system is designed to maximize inequality and sooner or later the oligarchs will defeat the regulators unless there were to be more meaningful structural change.)

Practical limitations aside, the neo-Keynesians have no response to the deeper criticisms of capitalism. For the hundreds of problems that capitalism engenders in society, they see only one solution: regulation. Regulation assumes that governments can act independently from capitalists, especially from speculators. Given the problems with our current form of parliamentary democracy and the tendency of governments to be beholden to investors, is this a solution at all? If it were a solution, it would assume that the masses of people would be willing to stand up and defend a regulatory framework that would have to work for those masses. With the rise of the super-rich, stagnant wages, declining union membership, deindustrialization, jobless growth and more, it's difficult to see the political movement that would defend regulation from the oligarchs who have largely succeeded in destroying it.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that, despite some utility in arguing against the worst elements of neoliberalism, the neo-Keynesian theory itself takes for granted elements of neoclassical economics that we know to be demonstrably false. People are not machines that make decisions based on calculations about profit or utility.<sup>11</sup> The structures of capitalism that the economist claims are rooted in human nature are in fact rooted in systems of elite control. They are there to maximize profits for the elites and there's no reason that change shouldn't or couldn't happen at a much deeper level in a much shorter timeframe than Varoufakis and others would argue for.

## Transformation Delayed and Denied

Traditionally Marxists have debated what should replace global capitalism through a "reform versus revolution" lens. On one side, reformists have argued about the need for labour to build up power within global capitalism so as to encourage a transition within liberal capitalist democracies to encourage an evolution towards (an often loosely defined) socialism. On the other, revolutionaries have argued for the necessity of seizing the means of production by any means possible. Usually that has meant a takeover of the State by a political party that claims to represent the working classes.

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<sup>11</sup> The body of evidence for the hypothesis that microeconomics cannot account for human behaviour is so large and obvious that it is rarely considered by economists as it would undermine the discipline. See here for one discussion: Rosenberg, Alexander. 1981. 'A Skeptical History of Microeconomic Theory'. In *Philosophy in Economics: Papers Deriving from and Related to a Workshop on Testability and Explanation in Economics Held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1979*, edited by Joseph C. Pitt, 47–61. The University of Western Ontario Series in Philosophy of Science. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8394-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8394-6_5).

Over the past 150 years<sup>12</sup>, each of these approaches has been tried.<sup>13</sup> One would have to call the revolutionary approach a complete failure. As evidenced so clearly by the example of the Soviet Union and to lesser extent in current-day Mozambique, Vietnam and China, political parties claiming to represent workers end up forming a new class. The state - meant to be the manifestation of the dictatorship of the proletariat - ends up being a dictatorship of the party. (In the one example where this was not the case - the Spanish Revolution of 1936 - the revolution was crushed by an alliance between fascism, international capitalist “democracies” and Soviet-backed Bolshevism.<sup>14</sup>)

Some would argue that these dictatorships are not as problematic as the kind of dictatorships that global capitalism tends to bring about. That line of defence is very telling. If the best thing you can say about the revolutionary approach is that it is only slightly better than the vile system that you spent so much time, resources and loss of life replacing, how can you call it a success?

The reformist approach has perhaps been more successful. The Scandinavian countries are usually examples given here, along with sometimes Germany, France or other countries where self-identified Socialist political parties are part of the mainstream polity. Certainly, the form of capitalism in the few places where a reformist approach has taken hold is less predatory than in the case of countries like the US and the UK. But that seems to be a very low standard to hold ourselves to. Even the best of these models tend towards more inequality<sup>15</sup> and overexploitation of resources.<sup>16</sup> When compared to the United States, Norway might seem like a pretty good model. But when understood in the context of the crisis, Norway does not offer a way out. It might perhaps offer ways to delay the inevitable.

These are very serious critiques of both the reformist and the revolutionary socialist model but there is an even deeper critique which applies to both. Neither of these addresses the key question: What are we fighting for? There are answers which sound more like slogans - the dictatorship of the proletariat, human rights for all, putting people before profit, human dignity, etc. These may be noble aims, but they beg the question of how social structures may be established to bring about those aims.

Socialist thinkers tend to make the same mistakes as capitalist thinkers insofar as they posit an economy as distinct from society. Their focus becomes limiting and regulating financial

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<sup>12</sup> For somewhat arbitrary reasons, I'm using the date of publication of Marx's *Das Kapital* as the starting point. One could make a similar point with a longer timescale going back to the French Revolution.

<sup>13</sup> In the following three paragraphs, I am using and building slightly upon the Immanuel Wallerstein's arguments in his work on anti-systemic movements. See here for one example: Arrighi, Giovanni, Terrence Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Benedetto Vecchi. 1989. *Antisystemic Movements*. London: Verso.

<sup>14</sup> Woods, Alan. n.d. 'The Spanish Revolution Betrayed'. In *Defence of Marxism*. Accessed 12 December 2018. <https://www.marxist.com/spanish-revolution-betrayed.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Egholt Søggaard, Jakob, Jesper Roine, P.-O. Robling, Jon Pareliussen, Causa Orsetta, Petter Lindgren, Audun Langørgen, et al. 2018. *Nordic Economic Policy Review 2018: Increasing Income Inequality in the Nordics*. Nordisk Ministerråd. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-5213>.

<sup>16</sup> Wiedmann, Thomas O., Heinz Schandl, Manfred Lenzen, Daniel Moran, Sangwon Suh, James West, and Keiichiro Kanemoto. 2015. 'The Material Footprint of Nations'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112 (20): 6271–76. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1220362110>.

flows in order to a) limit the power of the capitalist class (and/or the bourgeoisie), and b) finance the State's projects to address the problems of poverty, deprivation and environmental devastation caused by decades of capitalist excess. Whether or not these aims are effective, they are short-term aims, or at least they should be. If the State is effective in limiting the power of the richest, within a short period of time there should be a more equitable distribution of resources and the effective destruction of the class of the uber-rich as the wealth they have appropriated from the people gets appropriated back. If the State is successful in financing projects to alleviate poverty, within a short period of time there should be no poverty. These projects do not answer the question of what the objective of socialist society is but rather serve as a means to that objective. The approach taken by both reformist and revolutionary socialists - first take political power, then redistribute, then figure out what the society will look like - is unsatisfactory.

The short-term redistribution project has never met with success. Capitalists, whether in Zimbabwe or in Cuba, have chosen to use their wealth to run away rather than allow some more equitable distribution of that wealth. (It should be noted that capital flight is a problem that goes beyond this limited discussion of Statist socialism, and it involves the proliferation of tax havens, double taxation treaties, regressive taxation systems and so on.) As a result, the State's poverty reduction measures remain underfinanced, and poverty and deprivation spread. In Africa we have seen a tendency towards corruption and misappropriation of state finances as opposed to a universal commitment to a revolutionary project. The question of what the society should look like in the longer term - after the problems of excess and deprivation have been solved - is never even asked, let alone answered.<sup>17</sup>

In all these cases - save-the-system-from-itself Keynesianism, reformist Socialism and revolutionary Socialism - the anti-capitalist framing ultimately fails because it focuses too narrowly. It looks at a broken society - broken through class exploitation but also broken in many other ways - and seeks to use the power of the state to mend it. But by focussing almost obsessively on the question of labour exploitation, many Marxists fail to sufficiently interrogate whether that exploitation might itself be a symptom of a deeper problem. Similarly by effectively resigning themselves to the use of only one strategy - capture of State power whether through reformist or revolutionary tactics - they fail to consider that the State might also be a part of this broken society and that therefore efforts to use its power - even for noble ends - are likely to replicate elements of the problem.

## The Picture has More Depth

One way to understand the above discussion is to see these two framings as a progression towards a deeper analysis. The ecological framing sees the external symptoms of the crisis but fails to go deeper and sufficiently locate the problem within human society. The anti-capitalist framing goes deeper in that it sees the huge disparities and injustices in the system and seeks to correct them. But it does not go deep enough. It does not understand how and

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<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion along these lines, see Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1998. Utopistics. New Press.

why humans should be living in such desperate circumstances in the first place. A more complete framing must go even deeper than the anti-capitalist one.

Imagine that you are a member of a team of scientists who have been studying chimpanzees (with whom we share about 99% of our genetic material) over the span of a few generations. The experiment involves creating a habitat where the chimps can live on their own without human interaction. You provide them with the means to find their own food as they would in the wild, but you don't directly feed them.

At some point your team discovers that the chimps don't seem to be sharing. Whereas in most chimp societies everyone gets enough to eat, these chimps seem to be working together to collect resources for one or two alpha chimps who hoard them. Worse, although the experiment should carry on indefinitely given the environment and resources you've provided for the chimps, they are going to run out of food and starve at some point in the near future.

Given this situation, what would you as a scientist conclude? There are really only two possibilities. The first is that the chimps have somehow evolved to be prone to this kind of self-destructive behaviour. The problem with this hypothesis is that evolution does not happen on such a short time span. If the ancestors of these chimps were already behaving like these chimps do, they would have died out long ago.

So, we're left with the second hypothesis. There's something in the environment which is stressing these chimps out and causing them to act in ways that are contrary to the behaviour patterns they evolved with. So, the task of the scientist is to determine what structures and institutions caused the problem and continue to replicate it.

Replace chimps with humans and we have one explanation of what John Bellamy Foster (in his interpretation of Marx) terms "metabolic rift".<sup>18</sup> Like chimps, we evolved to be social animals. The helplessness of our young when they are born and the length of time and amount of energy it takes to raise them is one key piece of evidence that humans evolved to cooperate and to share resources. So, when we see excess competition and a hoarding of resources we know that something has gone terribly wrong.

But what has gone wrong and how can it have gone wrong in nearly every society around the globe? In the remainder of this paper I will argue that there is a simple answer to this question: colonialism.

## Colonial Rift

As you read these words, where are you physically located? Wherever you are located, that village or city, country or region has a history. I write these words from a region in Africa whose history reaches back to the very beginnings of our species some 200-300 thousand years ago. If you are reading this from India, China or one of the West Asian countries you

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<sup>18</sup> Foster, John Bellamy. 1999. 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology'. *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2): 366–405. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210315>.

might learn history through a study of various dynasties, the Ming, the Ottomans, the Mauryas and so on. But wherever you are reading this from, you are located in a place that has a recent history with Europe.

In fact, I would argue that nearly every country in the world owes more in terms of the form and structure of its institutions to Europe (or European settler colonial states like the USA) than to its own history. For example, nearly every country in the world has some model of parliamentary democracy - even the least democratic states (Saudi Arabia or Nepal prior to 2008) have something that resembles a parliament. The idea of a parliament was first used in the 12th century by the Spanish King Alfonso IX and later adopted by numerous European Kingdoms as a form of compromise between the King and other elites (landed gentry and later rich merchants) who wanted more power.<sup>19</sup>

(As an aside, the term “parliamentary democracy” would be seen as a contradiction in terms by the ancient Greeks, considered the inventors of democracy. Elections were favoured by the Oligarchs, who knew that they’d always be able to buy the votes they needed to govern. The democrats favoured other systems, notably sortition, as a form of representative government.)<sup>20</sup>

So globally nearly every country’s government is more connected to European systems and institutions than to those of its own pre-colonial past. And not just governments. Well before the term “globalization” became popular, companies like the Dutch East India Company were exporting a certain European model of business around the world. Today nearly every company in the world adheres to one of a handful of European templates for what a corporation should look like. The exception to this rule, the Japanese model, is still highly influenced by the role that US planners took in shaping post-WW2 Japanese institutions.

A third example might be the nuclear family, a modern construct which has spread around the world. The nuclear family also has its origins in 17th century Europe.<sup>21</sup> Missionary Christianity, which defined acceptable sexual norms and family conduct for so much of the world, spread the idea of a nuclear family and today it is globally a kind of idealized existence. Research on the nuclear family as a colonial construct is at a very preliminary stage so at the moment we must frame this critique as a question: to what extent does the nuclear family replicate colonial structures?

There are potentially many more examples, but these three - our governments, our businesses/places of work, and our families - are the most important to illustrate the point: To the extent that we can talk of a global culture, we are talking about a culture that is largely derived from European institutions.

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<sup>19</sup> Seijas Villadangos, Esther. 2015. ‘The Decreta of Leon (Spain) of 1188 as the Birthplace of Parliamentarism: An Historical Review from a Time of Crisis’. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2627069>.

<sup>20</sup> Bouricius, Terrill. 2013. ‘Democracy Through Multi-Body Sortition: Athenian Lessons for the Modern Day’. *Journal of Public Deliberation* 9 (1). <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol9/iss1/art11>.

<sup>21</sup> Schochet, Gordon J. n.d. *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in 17Th-Century England: Patriarchalism in Political Thought*. Transaction Publishers.

Despite the protestations from people like Thomas Friedman today or Samuel Huntington before him, the world has not adopted European institutions because Europe had the best model. The world copies Europe because Europe conquered the world brutally and only left most countries on the condition that certain institutions remain in place. This includes such outrageous cases as that of Haiti, where the French were successfully able to argue that their property rights over Haitians (as enslaved people) had to be respected.<sup>22</sup> The result was an extraordinary reparations agreement in exchange for Haitian independence whereby the people of Haiti had to repay France for themselves (as they were all once property)!

A full study of the extent to which colonial institutions dominate our daily lives would dig much deeper into the structures and history of these three institutions - the nuclear family, the corporation, and parliamentary democracy. For the present purposes of addressing the question of how to frame the crisis, we need not enter into this level of depth. In terms of framing, the interesting question is the following: what values and principles animated these colonial institutions? To address that question we need to look back at history, specifically the beginning of the colonial era which gave rise to these models.

Before continuing the argument that framing the crisis as a crisis of European colonialism is better than the alternatives considered above, I will address one fundamental objection (other objections will be considered below). Europeans, it will be said, did not invent colonialism and nor did they invent the domination of one society over another. This argument therefore attributes too much power to colonialism and too little power to the systems that preceded it.

The first response to this objection is to accept its merits. In so far as humans have long been in relations of conflict and domination with one another, we may concede that metabolic rift is a process. It doesn't necessarily happen all at once and it has been happening to various degrees since the dawn of the Neolithic period when humans first began to acquire more than they could immediately consume. That is a discussion that is interesting, but beyond the scope of this article.

But European colonialism was an innovation, and an innovation directly related to the crisis in which we currently find ourselves. It sought not only to destroy or subjugate societies but also to generate wealth from those societies primarily for use by European elites (a process of commodification discussed below). In so doing, it established or transformed a host of institutions – including those institutions that govern our daily lives today – and is therefore a point of metabolic rift to which it is worth paying special attention.

## Colonialism Is Theft

In the 15th century, Europe was in a state of disaster. War between royal houses was practically unending; disease had wiped out a huge percentage of the population. A tiny elite - at most 1% - controlled all of the land and most of the wealth. Most people had no hope of escaping the desperate life of Europe's underclasses. What hope there was lay in serving

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<sup>22</sup> Phillips, Anthony. "Haiti, France and the Independence Debt of 1825." *Canada Haiti Action Network* (2008).

and (with luck) making one's self indispensable to the aristocracy, preferably a royal family on the ascent.

In this context begins what the text books call "the age of discovery"; it would be better termed "the age of theft and murder". There were always two aims of the early European conquerors - gold and a quicker route to Asia for trade in spices. These were necessary to generate wealth<sup>23</sup> for the exploring marauders and for their patrons, the royal houses of Europe who were constantly fighting with one another in an effort to survive. Those royal houses invested in these early expeditions out of desperation as much as anything else. They needed wealth to feed their armies for bitter and ongoing wars, and nothing could end a dynasty as quickly as an underfed army. Soon these battles would become even more brutal as the wars of the Reformation added a religious dimension to feuds that had already been boiling over.

As colonialism began to take root in the Americas and in parts of Asia and Africa, Europe relied on its colonial "possessions" to feed the soldiers who fought the brutal wars of the Reformation. That reliance would run even deeper as parts of Europe began to industrialize in the 18th and 19th centuries around an industrial model that relied on raw materials from those same possessions.

What does it mean to "possess" another country? In the case of European colonialism, it meant various euphemisms for theft. One of the more well-documented aspects of this theft was the 18th century incarnation of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people.<sup>24</sup> Historians have documented how African people were sold to European "traders" at ports in West Africa. Those who survived the deadly journey to the Caribbean would face brutal conditions working sugar cane fields. They were paid nothing for the harsh labour they endured, so the rum and sugar the slave traders took back with them to Europe was incredibly cheap. They could then sell that rum and sugar for huge profits, use some of the profits to purchase cloth to exchange for people in West Africa and begin the process again.

While the "traders" (a better word might be "pirates") are certainly villains in this story, it should be remembered that very few of them owned their own ships. They were backed by aristocrats and merchants who may or may not have ever left Europe and to whom they would pay the majority of their profits. Many investors backed multiple ships both as a way of hedging their bets and as a way to encourage competition between their workers. The captain who brought back more profit would receive more rewards. This was also an innovation linked to the process of wealth generation.

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<sup>23</sup> The difference between wealth generation and stealing is largely one of scale. Stealing would entail a short-term taking of some resource. Wealth generation involves the long-term establishment of social and economic structures which create more resources which can then be "stolen" (though legally stolen) by the colonial power. The difference between the early and later colonial periods (Spanish and Portuguese as opposed to French and English) is largely that the latter were more successful in generating wealth whereas the former used something more like stealing).

<sup>24</sup> Slavery was not a new institution, but many scholars have argued that the transatlantic slave trade introduced a level of brutality and commodification of people ("chattel slavery") that did not previously exist. See for example Rodney, Walter. 1966. 'African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave-Trade'. *The Journal of African History* 7 (03): 431. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700006514>.

Though the above analysis only begins to scratch the surface, the deeper one looks the more one is certain that colonialism - at its core - was a project whose objective was theft and whose preferred mode of operation was to encourage *competition*. Structurally, it was about Europeans stealing from non-Europeans in order to better to compete with other Europeans.

There were other elements - notably the Christian mission - that were also key to the process, but these other elements were only useful to the extent that they could serve the overall process of theft. In places where proselytizing might endanger the theft - such as in Indonesia or Bengal where Muslims and Hindus were unlikely to take kindly to coercion and had the strength to fight back - the spread of Christianity played a much smaller role. In the Americas; where technological superiority and the spread of disease meant that the Europeans eradicated entire cultures and civilizations, Christianity was allowed a place of pride in the colonial project.

The theft around which colonialism was built goes by fancier names today. "Privatization" is one term that is often just a euphemism for stealing. But privatization (as the term is currently used) refers to a specific kind of theft - selling assets, often at a fraction of their worth, from public entities to private ones.

A more accurate term might be "commodification". Without turning things (and people) into commodities, colonialism could not have existed and thrived for as long as it did. Natural resources had to be transformed from what they were - part of nature or what we might term common public property - to a commodity that an individual could buy and sell. This process - primitive accumulation in Marxist terms - continues today and underlies all aspects of the environmental crisis.

But the colonists discovered very quickly that you can't just walk in and take what you want from indigenous peoples. Though they often had a technological advantage in military terms, that technological advantage alone would probably not have been enough to consolidate the political power needed to continue an ongoing process of theft that would have been opposed by the entire indigenous population. Europeans soon understood that the only way to continue the process of looting was to pit one part of the indigenous population against the other. Where rivalries may previously have existed, such as between various tribes of Southern Africa, they were exploited. Where rivalries were largely absent, such as between Hindus and Muslims in India, Europeans did everything they could to create such rivalries through supporting both Muslim separatists and the Hindu Mahasabha.<sup>25</sup>

Divide and rule is one form of competition that characterized the colonial period, but it was not the only form. Competition was prevalent at the very top of the colonial hierarchy between European kings and queens and also between the various nobles competing for favours from those kings and queens, as any study of Europe in the colonial period demonstrates.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For a deeper discussion see: Islam, Shamsul. *Religious Dimensions of Indian Nationalism: a study of RSS*. Anamika Pub & Distributors, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Levy, Jack S., and William R. Thompson. 2005. 'Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999'. *Security Studies* 14 (1): 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410591001465>.

Today the politics of competition permeates our cultures to such an extent that we are more likely to blame people with less power than ourselves - immigrants, Muslims, women, LGBTQ+ people or whoever the demon of the moment might be - than the exceedingly rich for our own misfortunes. We compete for jobs in an environment where jobless growth is the norm; we compete for state resources in an era of tight budgets and cuts to social services. To use the language of the Occupy movements, competition between different groupings of the 99% - who are divided by class, race, gender, sexual orientation and more - and the relative cohesion of the wealthiest 1% ensures that the system of wealth transfer from poor to rich is never threatened.

## Assessing the Colonial Frame

At the beginning of this paper we discussed two criteria for assessing alternative framings of the crisis - veracity and utility. How does the "crisis of colonialism" fare when put to the test?

The first criterion was that the framing be true, or at least not demonstrably false. Insofar as most global institutions - especially the multinational corporation which is at the heart the crisis both in social and ecological terms - have origins and precursors in the colonial era, this seems to be an accurate framing.

Some will raise the objection that colonialism formally ended in the 1960s. There are two things to say about this objection. The first is that if we abide by the maxim "none of us is free if one of us is chained" then the colonial era has not yet ended. Palestinians, Kurds, Catalonians and others have yet to actualize a sufficient degree of self-rule; there are still people who live and die in colonized territories.

The second is that even in places where colonialism has formally ended, the structures of colonialism remain in place. At a macro level this can be seen in trade and consumption patterns. Despite some changes over the years, formerly colonized nations still play the role in the global supply chain that they did during colonization - as a source of raw materials and as a market for goods manufactured in the West. The changes that have come have largely been about undercutting unionized labour in developed countries by developing supply chains that exploit cheap labour in developing countries. These policies have gone hand-in-hand with an insistence that countries adhere to intellectual property regimes which limit technology transfer and ensure that developing countries do not industrialize.<sup>27</sup> So the disparity in power between the former colonizing countries and the former colonized countries remains.

But even within countries, the institutions of colonialism remain largely intact. The great Indian freedom fighter Bhagat Singh died 17 years before India won independence from Britain, but he foresaw what was about to happen: "I have no doubt that my country will be

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<sup>27</sup> China is a special case in this discussion. In part because China refuses to adhere to the global intellectual property regime it has been able to industrialize at a rapid rate. It's no coincidence that China has also reduced poverty at a rapid rate.

one day free,” he wrote in a letter to his mother. “But I am afraid that the brown *sahibs* are going to sit in the chairs the white *sahibs* will vacate.”<sup>28</sup>

Bhagat Singh saw that the anti-colonial movements did not seek to structurally transform the colonial state but rather to occupy positions of power within the existing structures. One need only go to any courthouse in Africa to see evidence of costumes and uniforms that could not possibly have been designed to suit the African climate. Leaving aside the question of structural transformation, liberated states did little to remove the trappings of colonial Europe from their institutions.

In the economic sphere, many post-colonial states did pursue policies that I have described above as neo-Keynesian; let’s call them a form of neo-Keynesian nationalism. And these policies met with some early success. But the neoliberal period, and especially the period of IMF-backed structural adjustment that most of these countries had to endure, effectively rolled back any progress they might have made. Today the Washington Consensus is weaker than it has ever been and some countries have been experimenting with something closer to a neo-Keynesian development policy, but these examples are few and far between.<sup>29</sup> The continuation of colonial trade policy is constant and ubiquitous. So we can conclude that the colonial framing at least is not demonstrably false.<sup>30</sup>

But our earlier framings around an ecological crisis and a crisis of capitalism were also true. They fell at the second hurdle namely the utility of framing the crisis in those terms keeping in mind that the objective is to develop a framing which will help activists ask the right questions, garner significant public support and ultimately resolve the crisis by creating alternative social structures to the one that has led us to crisis. How does the colonial framing fare in this regard?

When we articulate the problem as one of colonialism, many things become clear. The first is that human societies globally are still very much in the grip of European colonial institutions.

But just saying that they originated in Europe is not a sufficient critique of these institutions. The problem with these institutions is that they were established to control human societies through encouraging various forms of *competition* in order to facilitate *commodification*. A colonial framing of the crisis suggests that these two aspects of human behaviour - competition and commodification - have run amok.

Do these two tendencies explain the crisis? To go back to our earlier thought experiment with the chimps who’ve forgotten how to share, if our fictitious scientist concluded that the chimps had developed unhealthy levels of competitiveness and a tendency to commodify

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<sup>28</sup> Nayar, Kuldeep. 2000. *The Martyr: Bhagat Singh Experiments in Revolution*. Har-Anand Publications. Page 16.

<sup>29</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzania stands out as a potential model of industrialization fueling development. See their current 20 year plan: ‘THE TANZANIA DEVELOPMENT VISION 2025’. n.d. Accessed 7 January 2019. <http://www.mof.go.tz/mofdocs/overarch/vision2025.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> While I do want to address the criteria laid out in the beginning of the paper, “truth” seems a strong statement for what is (it seems to me) either a new hypothesis or a new formulation of an old hypothesis. The hypothesis needs much more testing than is possible here to determine its accuracy.

their natural resources, would that explain the problem? The commodification would explain why the elites want to control all the resources and the competition might explain how they managed to do it (by dividing the community into smaller groups who all compete with one another for the rewards associated with getting the elite chimps what they want). No doubt our fictitious scientist would want to test this hypothesis, but at least we've developed a hypothesis worth testing.

The next advantage of this framing is that it actually gives us an inkling as to what's needed. If the problem is the pervasiveness of colonialism, what's needed is a process of decolonization. Since we have identified that the key drivers of colonialism to be *commodification* and *competition*, decolonization involves transforming our institutions based on the opposite principles in order to undo the damage of the past five centuries.

The opposite of competition is pretty clear - cooperation. In the environments in which we evolved - or even in daily life today - humans do compete with each other but in limited and specified ways. Sibling rivalry among humans exists, but it is not analogous to sibling rivalry among brown pelicans, a species of bird that gives birth to more than one chick but where the stronger or older sibling will almost always kill the younger or weaker one.<sup>31</sup> Those birds have evolved a very brutal form of competition that is part of their DNA for reasons biologists are still exploring (most likely it is impossible for the parents to feed more than one chick).

Whereas brown pelicans have evolved a very deep form of competition, primates and especially human primates have evolved very deep forms of cooperation. Cooperation is key to every human society and probably always has been. Biologists tell us that our great evolutionary advantage over other animals lies in our advanced brains, but the trade-off for this is a long childhood. Without a lot of cooperation from mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers and friends, the human experiment might have ended long ago.

The colonial framework does not encourage cooperation. Under modern neoliberal capitalism we are told that we are all profit-maximizing machines - buyers and sellers trying to cheat each other to maximize our own net worth. Nearly every aspect of our lives in the modern system is about competition - we compete for jobs, we compete for promotions, we compete for power, we compete for sexual partners, we compete with our neighbours by showing off fancy cars, we compete for fun by backing our favourite sports teams, when we have children we compete vicariously through them, etc. The competition makes us overly self-centred but there are very few alternatives for those who aspire to a decent standard of living (or who don't want to starve) other than to be part of competitive structures. We are then moulded by these structures to be the kind of person who can thrive within them, meaning that we end up being even more self-centred. (And every once in a while we look around and wonder why everyone we see is a self-centred asshole.)

Framing the crisis as one of colonization that encourages toxic forms of competition gives campaigners a framework within which to push for reforms that would challenge the core of the system. The average corporate workplace is a hotbed of neo-feudal hostility. As

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<sup>31</sup> Pinson, D., and H. Drummond. 1993. 'Brown Pelican Siblingicide and the Prey-Size Hypothesis'. *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 32 (2): 111-18.

campaigners set out to transform it, they must destroy those structures which encourage that toxic competition and encourage structures and relations that encourage cooperation and mutual aid. Cooperation at a macro level allows for the possibility of changing the “logic” of our institutions. At the moment 99.3% of us compete against each other not just to enrich ourselves but (primarily) to enrich the remaining 0.7%. Cooperation allows us to imagine structures where, a) the wealth of the billionaire class is controlled by the whole society and b) we value each other not for transactional purposes but rather because all humans have value.

The opposite of commodification is perhaps less clear. To define it we need to understand two things. First, for most of human history there was no commodification, indeed there was hardly any private property. Does that mean that there were no possessions and no innovation? Of course not. We know from the archaeological record that humans did create new and more advanced weapons during this time;<sup>32</sup> we have evidence that poisons to kill big game were in use and that their use spread among different regions.<sup>33</sup> We also know that not everyone would have been able to gather food or hunt in those early communities, so not everyone had to be part of productive (or reproductive) work. Instead of private property there was *the commons*, a collective pool of resources to which every member of the society would have had a right.

Second, that pool of resources was not treated as something external to the society. For example we now know that large sections of the Amazon rainforest are not “natural” in the way we usually use the term - humans shaped and cared for much of the forest.<sup>34</sup> People planted the kinds of trees and plants that were the most useful to them and used discarded clay pots to renew the soil. This is evidence that humans have *stewarded* the commons throughout our history. We have understood that we are dependent on nature and so we have tried to preserve and replenish the resources necessary for human survival.

This is very much the opposite approach of the colonial system including its current neoliberal phase. Colonialism encourages a kind of linear thinking. We go out and “find” inputs - meaning we effectively steal them from nature - and after we’ve processed and consumed those inputs anything remaining is a waste product. This linear pattern is visible in the fossil fuel economy, in the mass production of foods and the waste products associated with food, and in practically every element of modern economic life. Stewardship involves giving and taking in a cyclical pattern; colonialism involves stealing inputs and then wasting the excess.

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<sup>32</sup> Petraglia, Michael, Christopher Clarkson, Nicole Boivin, Michael Haslam, Ravi Korisettar, Gyaneshwer Chaubey, Peter Ditchfield, et al. 2009. ‘Population Increase and Environmental Deterioration Correspond with Microlithic Innovations in South Asia ca. 35,000 Years Ago’. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106 (30): 12261–66. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0810842106>.

<sup>33</sup> Chaboo, Caroline S., Megan Bieseke, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Andrea Weeks. 2016. ‘Beetle and Plant Arrow Poisons of the Jul’hoan and Hai||om San Peoples of Namibia (Insecta, Coleoptera, Chrysomelidae; Plantae, Anacardiaceae, Apocynaceae, Burseraceae)’. *ZooKeys*, no. 558 (February): 9–54. <https://doi.org/10.3897/zookeys.558.5957>.

<sup>34</sup> Levis, C., F. R. C. Costa, F. Bongers, M. Peña-Claros, C. R. Clement, A. B. Junqueira, E. G. Neves, et al. 2017. ‘Persistent Effects of Pre-Columbian Plant Domestication on Amazonian Forest Composition’. *Science* 355 (6328): 925–31. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal0157>.

There is a saying often attributed to the North American Cree: “Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money.” In the 21st century we are closer than ever to realizing this prophecy. Our only hope lies in reversing the trend by going back to three key principles: stewardship, the commons, and cooperation. If we see that as daunting, consider that we are all descendants of humans who were living in societies animated by these principles for the vast majority of the time humans have been on the planet. By framing the crisis as one of colonialism we at least identify the problem in a way that gives us a chance to fix it.

Objections will be raised to this framing, some valid and some perhaps less so. Let me address the obvious objections first. There are those who will (perhaps deliberately) misinterpret a call for decolonization as a call to return to the pre-colonial era of 500 or 5,000 years ago. Others may point out that there was plenty of conflict prior to colonialism. Still others may point out that Europe did not invent colonialism; Chinese, Mongol, Indian, Roman and Muslim empires were pioneering forms of colonialism long before the first Portuguese expedition to Africa.

The response to the first point is that while time only moves in one direction, history may give us examples of civilizations that have organized along different lines to our own civilization and from which we may seek to learn. Just because we want to learn from the structures and institutions that animated pre-colonial societies does not mean that we imagine it is possible to recreate them.

The response to the second two points is that they are not relevant. Things may have been bad, or, to use our terminology, commodification and competition may have existed in other civilizations. **But those other civilizations are not the civilization from which the institutions that dominate our lives are derived.** Indian or Chinese colonialism is certainly a topic worthy of further academic study but it is not directly related to the current crisis.

There may be deeper objections questioning whether the distinction I’m making between capitalism and colonialism is genuine or whether this framing really does lead to more constructive lines of thought around structural transformation than already exist. Exploring those objections and possible responses to them is beyond the scope of the present article.

## What the Colonial Framing Affords Us

Aside from the problems with the social and ecological framings that I have discussed at length above, we should also note that neither of these framings are new and to some extent these framings keep coming up against the same sets of objections. By framing things in terms of ecological concerns, one can be accused of being a luddite or a hypocrite who is fine with the developed countries exploiting their resources for social gain but against poor countries doing the same. By framing the crisis in anti-capitalist terms one can be accused of supporting failed models of socialism that were never very egalitarian to begin with, such as in the Soviet Union.

Neither of these objections are valid, but they are powerful. Based on my own experience, it’s difficult for people who may be sympathetic to the problems of extractivist capitalism to

get past some of these lines of attack, meaning that elites who want the continuation of the status quo can continue to use these framings in their propaganda.

Framing crisis against the backdrop of colonialism allows us the advantage of using an unpopular system as a foil. Capitalism may have its proponents but virtually no one in the 21st century will go on record in support of colonialism.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Framing the crisis as one of colonialism has a number of advantages. First, while the ecological and anti-capitalist framings of the crisis were certainly true, they were not sufficiently deep. By framing in terms of colonialism, we go straight to the values at the very heart of the colonial project and open the door to alternatives. Second, by naming those values - competition and commodification - we begin to articulate a lens through which modern institutions can be evaluated and reformed. When reforming the institutions that we know to be dysfunctional - we've named three so far (the corporation, parliamentary "democracy", and the nuclear family) - we must therefore ask how to transform them to be more conducive to *cooperation* and *stewardship* of the commons. Third, the colonial framing puts the onus on defenders of the status quo. The minute the mainstream conversation shifts towards being a conversation about colonialism, defenders of the status quo will be put in the uncomfortable position of defending a social system that is synonymous with racism, slavery, and even genocide. That shift would give us – not just those who have long been critical of the system but the human species itself – at least a fighting chance.

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<sup>35</sup> There are exceptions of course. Helen Zille in South Africa and Niall Ferguson in the UK are among the handful of people still willing to argue in defence of empire and colonialism. See here for a discussion of the historical revisionism that such efforts entail: 'So Brits Are Proud of Colonialism? Clearly They Need Some Lessons about the Reality of the British Empire'. 2016. The Independent. 21 January 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/so-brits-are-proud-of-colonialism-clearly-they-need-some-lessons-about-the-reality-of-the-british-a6825666.html>

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