

# A link between colonialism and environmentalism

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**Abstract:** Dr. Malcolm Ferdinand's book "Decolonial Ecology: thinking from the Caribbean World" comes at an opportune time and fills a historical gap in the literature on colonialism and ecology. Provocative and daring, the sections masterfully address the themes of ethnic-racial relations, gender, and vulnerabilities. The book is a vital invitation to understand the interrelationships of gender, race, and class in the pursuit of justice and how these interrelationships manifest themselves. The compendium of information provided strengthens the multidimensional coalition of interests to better understand environmental injustice and widespread social inequality associated with a colonial ecology.

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Review

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## Introduction

The development of research aimed at discussing the interrelationships of gender, race, and class has gained notoriety in recent years, mainly due to the neglect of government policies that favor marginalized, historically segregated, and invisible groups. Based on the core of the racist capitalist system, many of these policies defined different forms of society and ways of life.

It is precisely in this gap that Dr. Malcom Ferdinand in his book “Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World” inserts himself by proposing the strengthening of this debate based on a historical recovery of the double colonial and environmental fracture. The debate proposed by the author reveals, through the “ecological deluge”, the problems involved in the complexities of contemporary times and their contribution to the formation of current societies.

To cover years of debates about environmentalism and colonialism, Ferdinand makes use of a profusion of references and illustrations, which support his narrative and insights. Dense and surgical, the book promotes a change of lenses throughout just over three hundred pages. Briefly, the work is divided into four parts, discussed metaphorically in terms of the modern storm, Noah’s ark, the slave ship, and a world ship. These parts are associated with the double fracture that runs throughout the book. The approach proposed by the author is timely and makes an extremely important social contribution given the current gap on the topic.

Ferdinand talks about colonial living to define colonial ecology, decolonial ecology, and ecology of the world, with abundant evidence from the Caribbean experience. Based on the continuous dialogue with current reality, the book becomes enjoyable and stimulating. While reading, it is impossible not to identify traces of colonial habitation even today, as discussed, for example, by the environmental justice movement or experienced by modern migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

The starting point and catalyst is the colonialism of exploitation that marks the history, past and present, of colonized and colonizing nations. In criticizing the dominant vision of modernity – anthropocentric, dualistic (contrasting humans with non-humans), and confident in scientific solutions to socio-environmental problems, the author proposes a change of perspective and rescues the Caribbean experience, which becomes a universal example.

After a scathing rescue, the author writes about the struggles caused by the racist, misogynistic, and colonial scenarios that have taken root in our society since 1492. Initially, the book criticizes colonialism, condemning the usurpation of land, the massacre of Amerindians, the domination of black women, the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, and the exploitation of millions of black people over the years. Colonial slavery and the transatlantic trade in enslaved people are among the most brutal and intense forms of conquests imposed by the European colonization of the Americas.

As if the dark past narrated by Ferdinand weren’t enough, many of these traits persist like “weeds” in society year after year, especially after the Industrial Revolution,

– leaving marks of dizzying changes on the planet. Several environmental disasters have killed thousands of people around the world and, since the end of the 1960s, there has been evidence of the need to reform production and consumption systems (POTT; ESTRELA, 2017) due to the harmful impacts on the most vulnerable groups in society. But, as Ferdinand points out, the damage affects those who find themselves “in the basement of the modern world” (Ibid., p. 209).

In other words, the consequences of environmental, social, and economic harm are selective. Environmental criticism highlights the extent of ecosystem destruction and loss of biodiversity caused by the European colonization of the Americas. Artaxo (2020) emphasizes that after the Industrial Revolution, the planet entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which the unbridled search for economic growth is the main driving force of global environmental change and, in addition to the Anthropocene, Ferdinand proposes the Negrocene.

The double fracture proposed by the author eliminates the continuum in which humans and non-humans are confused as resources that feed the same colonial project, the same conception of land and world. In short, the correction of this double discontinuity is proposed by returning to the main gesture of colonialism, the act of inhabiting. Colonialism shapes inhabitation by imposing violence and domination on human and non-human inhabitants that modify the relationships between beings. Colonial inhabitation is characterized by three main dimensions: geographic subordination (European countries-colonies, center-periphery); exploitation of the land and nature; and altericide, that is, living without the other.

In this context, it is important to bring up the expression of Necropolitics coined by philosopher Achille Mbembe (2016). Thinking about Necropolitics in the context of environmental injustices is relevant for the interpretation of this reality since the history of structural racism in the development of societies raises questions about the exercises of institutional power, which act in the stratification of people according to class, gender, status, type of work, the area where they live, among others.

Furthermore, the trinity of structural, institutional, and environmental racism exposes a disproportionate share of society to polluted ecosystems. Racism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that constantly interrelates, with the intersection between gender (misogyny), social class (racial capitalism), and race-ethnicity (colonialism), giving rise to the heteronormative patriarchal racism experienced today. Abolitionism and environmentalism are in the same colonial, patriarchal, Christian, and racist environment, serving the interests of environmental colonialism - where the State or potential groups impose a use of land that usurps the commons for private profit and degrades the livelihood of local inhabitants.

The ecological crisis reinforces colonial domination and oppression – climate events, for example, promote the maintenance of groups that can be affected, in addition to recreating different forms of coloniality, – global warming will be welcomed to profitably get rid of black people. For centuries, the different forms of development of societies have contrasted Global North and Global South, women and men, white and black, human

and non-human, native and non-native, power and subservience. In other words, some groups are historically privileged to the detriment of others, as reported: “my world at the expense of the world of others” (Ibid., p. 107). In general, not everyone contributes to the pollution of ecosystems in the same way, not everyone suffers the same consequences or does not have the same ways to protect themselves. Furthermore, based on the discourse that socially and economically vulnerable people are largely responsible for pollution, deforestation and contamination of the planet is unfair, and strengthens colonial ecology.

The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2004) points out that the communication and coordination between the life policies carried out by the individual and the political action of the human collective are the portraits of the negligence adopted by local authorities that benefit from the fruit of the collective. In the work in question, social minorities are treated merely as a commercial objective.

Human solidarity is the first victim of the consumer market’s triumph; in short, there is no way for a small group to select their trash or choose to buy durable goods when what prevails is the law of obsolescence where nothing was made to last (BAUMAN, 2004), not even black lives. This individualistic idea does not nullify the social composition in question, since society is made up of people who have no choice as to what to eat or wear, but they dress and eat what they have. From this perspective, one can see the insufficiency of the efforts of a small class whose power of choice is a privilege. The way out consists of a direct and efficient change in the gears of the production and consumption system, otherwise, it is experiencing the hostile response of the planet to man’s actions.

It is difficult to synthesize the entire framework that encompasses themes, studies, references, illustrations, analogies, and metaphors. However, Ferdinand’s sagacity sews his work with a thread of urgency – of political, scientific, legal, and philosophical struggles. This urgent effort aims to dismantle the colonial structures and colonial paradigms that sustain coexistence on a planet dominated by racists, misogynists, and plutocrats. After all, it is related to the whole, but it does not allow people to think about the composition of the whole, and not even about issues of equality and justice.

In this sense, if it were possible to summarize Malcolm Ferdinand’s work with one phrase, it would certainly be “The ecological crisis is a crisis of justice” (Ibid., p. 267). This statement is a common denominator in Ferdinand’s historical analysis of development, as well as a critique of the predominant formulation of sustainable development published by the United Nations.

Environmental policies often “forget” the most vulnerable populations, forced to live in degrading and unhealthy places that place them at risk. These consequences affect the quality of life, hunger, education levels, income, and other issues. The process of allocating hazards and risks differentiates between groups exposed and not exposed to environmental risks. In this sense, black people are targets of historically privileged groups within the hierarchy created by risk society. It is worth highlighting that in this hierarchy, there is a gap between the white man (top of the pyramid) and the black woman (base of the pyramid). Black women occupy an extremely underprivileged position to the detriment of black men, white women, and white men.

Women and people of color are key groups in the movement against global warming and the quest for environmental justice. Building on this and the clear contribution of gender equality to climate and social justice, Rainard, Smith, and Pachauri (2023) discuss how greater equality reveals the essential elements for organizing a more just society to achieve a sustainable future. In this sense, ecofeminist perspectives might be a direction to follow. Gender and other forms of inequality are highlighted as inherited from the Enlightenment and fundamental to helping overcome the climate crisis.

Environmental and equality policies were and are driven largely by white men. This meant that black people were removed from public arenas, where the organization of the world occurs. Mainly women, and especially black women, were silenced by not having the right to vote, to occupy positions of power in sovereign councils and courts, or to hold positions in the government. This misogynistic and racist characterization silences the voices of groups that need to be heard and turns them into objects of others' will. For Ferdinand, this approach enables an environment that denies the world and exacerbates colonial discrimination and social inequality, in other words, colonial ecology.

The work presents not only the systematic role that racism plays in the lives of groups most vulnerable to environmental issues, but also how colonialism encouraged the process of environmental degradation. In this sense, Ferdinand proposes, based on the tripartite antislavery, anticolonialism, and environmentalism, the escape from the Anthropocene as the message of decolonial ecology.

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# Uma ponte entre colonialismo e ambientalismo

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**Resumo:** O livro do Dr. Malcom Ferdinand “Uma ecologia decolonial: pensar a partir do mundo caribenho” surge em momento oportuno e preenche uma lacuna histórica na literatura sobre o colonialismo e ecologia. Provocantes e ousadas, as seções abordam com maestria os temas das relações étnico-raciais, de gênero e de vulnerabilidades. O livro é um convite vital para entender as inter-relações de gênero, raça e classe na busca por justiça e como essas inter-relações se manifestam. O compêndio de informações fornecidas fortalece a coalizão multidimensional de interesses para entender melhor a injustiça ambiental e a desigualdade social generalizada, associadas a uma ecologia colonial.

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*Resenha*

**Palavras-chave:** Colonialismo; ambientalismo; desigualdade de gênero; justiça ambiental; racismo ambiental.



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**Resumen:** El libro del Dr. Malcom Ferdinand “Una ecología decolonial: pensar desde el mundo caribeño” surge en un momento oportuno y llena un vacío histórico en la literatura sobre el colonialismo y la ecología. Las secciones provocadoras y audaces abordan con maestría los temas de las relaciones étnico-raciales, de género y de vulnerabilidades. El libro es una invitación vital para comprender las interrelaciones de género, raza y clase en la búsqueda de justicia y cómo se manifiestan estas interrelaciones. El compendio de información proporcionada fortalece la coalición multidimensional de intereses para entender mejor la injusticia ambiental y la desigualdad social generalizada, asociadas a una ecología colonial.

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*Reseña*

**Palabras-clave:** Colonialismo; ecologismo, desigualdad de género; justicia ambiental; racismo ambiental.