



# Progress report in Political ecology II: Conjunctures, crises, and critical publics

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## Abstract

Political ecologists focus on power relations across scales to develop assessments of systems that produce and maintain crises, such as the overlapping conjunctural crises of the coronavirus pandemic and climate breakdown. Such analyses clarify processual and interconnecting factors, exposing the contours of uneven differentiations and coproductions, while offering possible alternative futures. This report engages recent scholarship wherein conjunctural analysis raises issues for how we understand socio-natural processes and outcomes, lessons learned, and the exigencies of critical publics in academia and beyond.

## Keywords

capitalism, climate change, conjuncture, COVID-19

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. (Arundhati Roy, *Pandemic is a Portal*, 2020)

## Introduction

It is predicted that global pandemics will likely become more frequent with climate change and thereby portend a ‘new normal’ (Forster et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2021). Transformational changes to human–nature relationships and systems will become necessary to alter this projected trajectory. Such endeavors require taking stock of emergent explanations and analyses. Political ecology has a long history of investigating, explaining, and exposing various nature–society relationships. Since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020–2021 is one of nature–society relationships at multiple

spatiotemporal scales, political ecology scholarship can help critically explain ongoing trajectories and explore alternatives. Furthermore, given the existential, epistemological, and ontological crises wrought by the pandemic along with simultaneous climate change, for political ecologists – and indeed a progress report at this current conjuncture – to not pause to analyze the ramifications of the conjoint crises and lessons learnt ‘would deny our ability, and arguably abdicate our responsibility, if we did not use our skills in geographical scholarship to help bear witness and make sense of what is happening and to help cultivate new critical publics’ (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020: 100). Indeed,

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praxis and public engagement are hallmarks of political ecology beyond critical and analytical contributions. In my second report on political ecology, I engage recent scholarship that elucidates the concerns that conjunctural analyses raise for how we understand uneven and unequal socio-natural processes and outcomes, what is at stake, possible alternatives, and the exigencies of critical publics in academia and beyond.

### **Registering Crises**

How do we know or register conjoint crises, who are impacted and in what ways? In a conversation with geographer Doreen Massey, cultural theorist Stuart Hall posited that conjunctural crises are the coalescing of processes that produce distinctive realities and ruptures, whereby radical changes become possible (Hall and Massey, 2010). Crises are contextual, material, and discursive (Castree, 2020). In the public sphere, the pandemic was largely mischaracterized as a health crisis and climate change as an environmental crisis. Some crises are chronic, and as Rob Nixon argues about climate change, involve slow violence (Nixon, 2013). Others are abrupt and temporarily constrained, such as the pandemic. The immediacy and urgency with which the pandemic forced states, societies, and individuals to act were in stark contrast to the slow temporality and inertia with which climate has been addressed (Markard and Rosenbloom, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020). Both crises are global but uneven emergencies with differentiated responses and lived experiences (Sultana, 2021). There is inequitable distribution of material burdens from diverse vulnerabilities to, exposures from, and abilities to cope with these dual nature–society challenges.

The pandemic brought into sharper relief the coproductions of inequities, vulnerabilities, and marginalizations. The harsher realities of the necropolitics that undergirds the current global

ideological and economic orders became more apparent (cf. Mbembe, 2003). Scholars such as Nancy Fraser have argued that the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic and climate breakdown are fueled by neoliberal globalization and capitalist exploitation (Fraser, 2021). Relatedly, others have posited that the pandemic revealed how global circuits of capital created and maintained the pandemic (Malm, 2020; Wallace et al., 2020). Capitalism uses crises to reinvent itself, so the pandemic offered fertile grounds for more expropriation (e.g. foreign investments), exploitation (e.g. wage labor), and commodification (e.g. health care). The rise of disaster capitalism in the wake of climate-induced disasters (e.g. hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico) as well as the pandemic (e.g. bailouts of corporations) led to a more significant accumulation of wealth for some at expense of billions of others (Klein, 2020). Indeed, the COVID-19 virus was termed the ‘inequality virus’ as the wealthy shored up more wealth while many were pushed into poverty with pandemic lockdowns, recessions, job losses, and precarity (Morales et al., 2021). Concurrently, the same capitalist class continued to produce massive carbon footprints that further exacerbated climate breakdown (Wilk and Barros, 2021).

A range of scholars have argued that the planetary challenges of pandemic and climate change are outcomes of extractive capitalism, commodification, and financialization while noting how these are expressed through contextual socio-spatial inequities. Confronting common underlying structures of exploitations, oppressions, disposessions, and degradations thereby become necessary (Fernando, 2020). Climate change increasingly produces sacrifice zones, wherein those made vulnerable by capitalism’s predatory methods of accumulation are acutely harmed. Frequently, the same communities facing climate impacts more severely are also the ones facing greater pandemic inequities. The political economy of the pandemic shows colonial patterns, where poor and racially

marginalized communities in the Global North and entire countries in the Global South were subjected to colonial attitudes in public health (Bump et al., 2021; Richardson, 2020). Racialized treatment of minoritized communities occurred across different contexts (e.g. greater pandemic mortality rates among Black communities in the United States; ramped up xenophobia against Asians globally). Colonial racial abandonment, gendered violence, and economic precarity further intensified globally throughout the pandemic (Liebman et al., 2020). Various context-specific outcomes can be understood through the racialized and colonial ideologies of disposability and grievability, in that there are differences in who is deemed worthy of grieving and who is not (cf. Butler, 2004). Some lives were deemed disposable from pandemic deaths with denials of their right to breath (Mbembe, 2021) and subsequent global vaccine apartheid (Byanyima, 2021). That these are concurrent with long-standing climate necropolitics is not surprising to critical scholars (DeBoom, 2020). The co-constitutive nature of these crises thus revealed similar patterns of colonialities, racial capitalism, and lack of sufficient solidarity or justice. These critiques disabuse persistent notions of ‘we are all in this together’ (e.g. Guterres, 2020).

### **Commonalities and Conjectures**

What critical insights and tools do political ecology perspectives provide for better understanding the crises of our times? Established political ecology scholarship on extractivism, racial capitalism, and resource frontiers are helpful. While the pandemic felt novel or abrupt to the general public, it is a conjunctural outcome of global processes set in motion centuries ago. Colonial extractivism and racial capitalism produce local socioecological crises (Davis et al., 2019), and the pandemic further facilitated extractivism of both labor and nature by capital. Capitalist expansion relies on enrolling

nonhuman nature into processes of control, collaborations, exploitations, and extractions. Extractivism is increasingly understood beyond site-specific extractions to wider political economies of production and social reproduction (Arboleda, 2020). The continuities of destructive capitalist extractive approaches to ecosystems sit alongside the violent ruptures that the global pandemic wrought in reconfiguring societal, political, and health behaviors in inequitable ways. The emergence, spread, and impacts of the virus operated along pathways of modes of production, consumption, travel, and health-care systems (Sell and Williams, 2020).

Emerging infectious diseases such as COVID-19, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Ebola, and viral epidemics may follow the global trajectory of wildlife habit destruction and agribusiness models (Davis, 2020). Ongoing expansion of large-scale industrial agriculture with intensified monocropping and livestock production, concomitant changes in dietary habits and global food chains, and expanding frontiers of human–wildlife encounters are expected to increase zoonotic spillovers and transmissions (Akram-Lodhi, 2021; Gibb et al., 2020). Agri-industrial complexes are at the forefront of habit destruction and deforestation, loss of biodiversity, commodification of land and water, and intense industrial farming becoming dominant globally (Flachs, 2020). Closer understandings of contextual ecosystem destruction, pathogen epidemic, and agricultural practices of accumulation thus become essential (Bledsoe, 2019; Neimark, 2016). Loss of local control over animal husbandry, agroecology, soil regeneration, and biodiversity results from the incorporation of ever-expanding geographical areas into capitalist extractivist systems of plantationocenes (cf. Haraway, 2015) – when combined, these increase vulnerabilities and impoverishment of populations and contribute to coproducing pandemics and ecological injustices. Such practices also increase greenhouse gas emissions that

exacerbate climate change while fueling zoonotic viruses to spread (Tollefson, 2020). Warmer temperatures with climate change are expected to further increase transmissions and pathways of global infectious diseases (Phillips et al., 2020).

Some climate solutions have also resulted in the intensification of industrial extraction and greater exploitation of disparate ecologies. New extractive and resource frontiers are emerging for climate mitigation with the search for carbon capture and storage as well as raw materials for renewable energy sources, resulting in land grabs and dispossessions (Ye et al., 2020). Sacrifice zones are linked to climate solutions such as the Green New Deal and other forms of green capitalism, which fuel climate colonialisms (Kolinjivadi, 2020; Zografos and Robbins, 2020). Land grabs for financial speculation and agri-biofuels for usage in hyper-capitalist economies exacerbate local economic precarity, food crises, and conflicts in historically impoverished communities across Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Manzi, 2020; Wallace et al., 2020). Similarly, privatization of water and gas, expanding monocrop plantations, and land/water grabs intensify community conflicts with states and transform how states function in these contexts (Cons and Eilenberg, 2019; Kenney-Lazar, 2019). Complex global formations of trade policies, institutional arrangements, and development ideologies extend violent extractivist frontiers, land dispossessions, and consolidate racial capitalism globally (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020; Liebman et al., 2020). Ultimately, neoliberal capitalism undertakes the extractive capture of value, while devaluing and destroying the material conditions of nature and labor in the process (Ye et al. 2020).

There are different tenors and registers of the solutions to the capitalist crises of the pandemic and climate breakdown. Calls for increasing biodiversity of livestock and crops have been strident (Sandbrook et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2020). Since food systems are often

tenuous, making global supply chains more robust and equitable became ostensible during the pandemic (Benton 2020). Resistance to extractivism and ecological exploitation have been growing, often under the age-old 'environmentalism of the poor' (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997; Martinez-Alier, 2014). For instance, Indigenous tribes in Brazil self-isolated during the pandemic for protection while using the pandemic to strengthen further a collective resistance to state-sponsored industrial extraction and conflicts (Menton et al., 2020). However, resistance endeavors are frequently most visible and repressed at resource extraction frontiers, commodity frontiers, and sites of encroachment, where justice is either delayed, denied, or ignored (Gonzalez, 2021). Resistance movements that challenge capitalism's fixes demonstrate the overarching importance of collectivizing and solidarity-building as strategies and lived experiences of resistance and for envisioning alternative futures and more just relationships with nature (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020). Anti-capitalist and anti-exploitative articulations and reformulations have become further clarified and garnered wider attention in the current conjuncture. I consider these next.

## Alternative Visions and Pathways

How should academic researchers relate to the 'real world' they study? While extractivism, neoliberal capitalism, and concomitant exploitations have proceeded and are remade in the interregnum (cf. Gramsci, 1971), they have also been contested, reconfigured, and navigated in several different ways. The material and discursive cracks emergent from overlapping crises of pandemic and climate/ecological breakdowns revealed intervention points for political ecologists to consider reimagining, regenerations, and reparative possibilities. These are proposed along various pathways – such as agroecology, food sovereignty, and various anti-capitalist

systems to resist capital's spatial and socioecological fixes and profit-driven logics of ecological destruction (Escobar, 2017; Moore and Patel, 2017). Confronting necessary structural and systemic changes is tempered with bottom-up strategies, such as mutual aid, solidarity networks, and shared governance to sustain lives and livelihoods (Cadieux et al., 2019; Nelson, 2020; Springer, 2020). Together, these highlight the interconnections and interdependencies of individuals and systems in survival beyond the capitalist framework, while cautioning the limitations of seeking singular solutions.

Resistance movements against capitalist exploitation and dispossessions are complementing and collaborating with existing environmental justice activism (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). Environmental, labor, and social justice movements have become sites for thinking of alternative futures (Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2020). Indigenous environmental movements globally have challenged notions of modernity and progress, despite repression from state and corporate actors (Scheidel et al., 2020; Toumbourou et al., 2020). Calls for decolonial environmental justice approaches, especially from Latin America, underscore subverting structural, ecological, and cultural violences (Navas et al., 2018). New forms of Indigenous resistance such as *buen vivir* and *ubuntu* have been advocated for (Broad and Fischer-Mackey, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014), even as the limitations of both are noted (McDonald, 2010; Radcliffe, 2018). Farmers alliances globally that are resistance movements from below, such as *La Via Campesina* (Busck and Schmidt, 2020), have garnered considerable attention in support of food sovereignty and agroecological resurgence. Relatedly, youth climate activism has emerged as a site of anti-capitalist resistance (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Another body of scholarship and praxis gaining traction against endless capitalist growth that exacerbates extractivism has been degrowth (Hickel, 2020; Kallis et al., 2020).

Degrowth is a vision that favors egalitarianism and redistribution over expansion, calling for reduction of hyper-consumption, especially in industrialized economies, to pursue climate justice that centers the needs of historically over-exploited economies. Its relevance has gained popularity to reimagine an alternative system to the material and discursive pursuits of capitalist growth that fuel ecological breakdown and rifts (Paulson, 2020). Degrowth, nonetheless, remains an arena of considerable debate within political ecology (Gómez-Baggethun, 2020; Robbins, 2020).

Moving closer to home, the destabilization of social reproduction conditions, wrought by both the pandemic and climate crises, drew public attention to the contours of care work (UN Women and UNEP, 2020). While care work became increasingly necessary and a site of struggle during the pandemic, the importance of care work, social reproduction, and revaluing this 'low-skilled' labor was evidenced (Dang and Viet Nguyen, 2021; Ho and Maddrell, 2021). Scholars have long demonstrated the intersectional gendered, racialized, and classed nature of the burdens of care work (Bhattacharya, 2017). Such fault lines became increasingly visible throughout the pandemic. Beyond recognition and addressing such concerns, praxis of healing collectively, sharing empathy, radical care, and commoning become more profound (Paulson, 2019). However, care work is also necessary to address ecological crises (Bauhardt and Harcourt, 2018). The pandemic highlights how the care of self and others is intimately imbricated in the care of the earth and more-than-human geographies, whereby species interconnectivity needs to be better understood and heeded. Such care-full connections challenge ongoing alienations and crises produced from capitalism, colonialism, and development. Care of ecological systems relies on humans and nonhuman nature, highlighting the need for a critical understanding of the ways that alternative futures necessitate radical

rethinking and relating (Simpson, 2021). Geographers JK Gibson-Graham's insights on feminist belonging in the Anthropocene through more-than-human regional development – belonging in non- and anti-capitalist projects that promote nurture, enhance resiliency, and conviviality of both humans and nonhuman collectives – are particularly prescient (Gibson-Graham, 2011).

Alternatives to epistemic violence have been sought with the denaturalization of Eurocentric values, economic rationality, and the coloniality of power. Greater attention is given to explore relationality, convivialities with nonhuman nature, and abolition ecology that involves ethics, care, and reparations (Montenegro de Wit, 2021). Narratives of endurance and refusal are invoked to break from a past that fosters white supremacist politics of climate apocalypse (Davis et al., 2017; Whyte, 2020) and instead towards BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) futurisms that provide alternate flourishing (Mitchell and Chaudhury, 2020). Fighting racial capitalism through emancipatory internationalization across differences and borders are proposed in calls for abolition of systems that produce these harms (Heynen and Ybarra, 2021). Shared lifeworlds became more widely known and scholarship on pluriverse ushered in conversations around the existence of many worlds in one world (Escobar, 2020; Kothari et al., 2019). Escobar (2020) posits that a 'radical relationality', the deep interconnectiveness of all living forms, is critical to reimagining viable and just futures. Other worlds within, under, and between extractive relations of colonialism and capitalism are visible when decolonizing nature away from 'resource' by reckoning with colonial and capitalist legacies (Tsing, 2015).

Therefore, thinking from below to resist capitalist extraction involves feminist, Indigenous, and queer logics to counter the dualism of Eurocentric epistemologies and colonial capitalism. Post-pandemic reimaginings encourage

learning and coproducing a world that fosters reparative relations, localized solutions, community sovereignty, mutual aid, nurturance of biocultural relations in places, regenerative economies, degrowth, agroecology, and practices of care and commoning. Engaging meaningfully with a range of alternatives offers the possibilities to not only confront ongoing and emergent crises but also configure trajectories beyond the projected 'new normal.'

## Conclusion

Contra Jameson (2003), systems failures open possibilities for imagining an end to capitalism by suggesting radically different worlds and emancipatory potentials. Political ecologists and cognate scholars are increasingly theorizing and investigating alternative ecological futurities and relationalities. The pandemic underscored how human societies are interconnected and entangled in the world via extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of goods and services of everyday life. Post-pandemic narratives to build back better, that largely involve capitalist restructuring and retrenching, could instead be a portal – one that would do well to heed the scholarship covered within this review – that when taken together, focus on undoing the violences of capitalism and colonialism (Rodriguez, 2020). The very processes that gave rise to the conjoint crises of the early 21st century, while globally occurring but extremely uneven spatially and socioecologically, are being questioned even as these processes are repackaged as solutions to the very problems.

The alternative visions, arising out of critiques of interlocking systems of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, financialization, and techno-managerialism, can offer radical alternatives to the capitalocentric present and subvert the 'new normal'. The pandemic was generative for fostering debates on how to do capitalism differently or resist it altogether (e.g.

decarbonization gained more traction to tackle climate mitigation, as did state-led investments/interventions protecting public health and social safety nets during the pandemic). As a result, power relations at various scales and distribution of power across peoples have been questioned. This opens up possibilities to nurture alternative imaginaries and revolutionary potentials, while addressing the tensions therein. Scholars have argued that post-pandemic development urgently tackles several issues to alter past trajectories. At an international scale, some have called for a greater focus on redistribution, debt cancellation, reduction in consumption and travel, regenerative agriculture, convivial conservation, and a move away from aggregate growth that compounds climate breakdown (Büscher et al., 2021). Similarly, post-pandemic transformations necessitate a rethinking of international development models and political ideologies of growth imposed across the post-colonial world by global institutions and imperial states (Leach et al., 2021). These important critiques and analyses should not fall by the wayside going forward.

Ultimately, radical solidarities and collectivities also mean rethinking how knowledge is produced and circulated to influence policy imperatives, project design, and decision-making. Indeed, decolonial scholars have posited that capitalism and modernity drive epistemic violences resulting in coloniality of knowledge and power, which need to be confronted and undone in academia and beyond (Santos, 2014). Political ecology can develop further conjunctural analyses by focusing on the concretization and fragmentation of different social relations, occurring at various registers spatially and temporally. These are productive grounds for further analyses and praxis that foster transformations. Capacious, fluid, creative, and subversive thinking is necessary not only in further critiquing complexities of empire, imperialism, and capitalism but also decentering them and fostering cognitive and epistemic

justice. Thus, for political ecology to further nurture critical publics, it becomes imperative to rigorously engage with anti-capitalist critiques and pedagogies, while exploring alternative futurities and emancipatory potentials.

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