

Forward Ever, Backward Never: Examining the Relationship between Colonial Violence and Capitalist Development in a Caribbean Context

Alyssa Nurse

Centre for Caribbean Studies

Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

Alyssa Nurse is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto completing an Honours Bachelor of Arts while double majoring in Economics and Political Science. She has been actively involved with the Centre for Caribbean Studies and is the incumbent Co-President as of 2021 of the Caribbean Studies Students' Union (CARSSU). She was born in Barbados but was raised in Guyana prior to moving to Toronto, which has significantly influenced her academic interests especially in the field of economic growth and development in the Caribbean region.

KEYWORDS:

Caribbean
Development
Capitalism
Colonialism
Violence

ABSTRACT

This paper very briefly challenges the normative understanding of development as purely beneficial and aspirational. It argues that capitalist development, as it manifests in the Caribbean, is built on a foundation of colonial violence and exploitation. The paper takes a twofold approach to exploring this relationship, arguing (1) that colonial violence and capitalist development are mutually reinforcing and (2) that the violent legacies of the colonial encounter are replicated in modern-day development initiatives. Through an analysis of development projects in Haiti and Belize, this paper shows how development-induced displacement, environmental degradation, and the erasure of indigenous culture and customs are all examples of this ongoing replication of colonial violence. The paper incorporates scholarship that explains the continued existence of this relationship and raises important questions about how to move forward. Finally, it calls for more decolonial perspectives and critical approaches to capitalist development that recognize and address the ongoing effects of colonial violence especially in Caribbean contexts.

I. Introduction:

In a normative sense development can be considered as beneficial and even aspirational. It implies a sense of advancement, improvement, or progress, whether that be understood in terms of one's material conditions, economic growth indicators or even societal indicators such as literacy and life expectancy. Regardless of how the concept is perceived, what is often missing or left out of the conversation is not only the pervasiveness of violence and exploitation in the name of capitalist development today, but also the origins being rooted in the colonial encounter. The aftermath has grave ramifications on the social, cultural, and political integrity of formerly colonized countries, especially when you apply such considerations to the Caribbean, a region described by Dr. Kevin Edmonds as "at crossroads, due to the intense political and economic fracturing resulting from the multifaceted legacies of colonialism and the current crisis of capitalism."¹ My argument is twofold: (1) I argue that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between colonial violence and capitalist development. (2) that the violent legacies of the colonial encounter are still replicated in modern day development initiatives as evident by development induced displacement, environmental degradation as well as the erasure of indigenous culture and customs. To illustrate this point, I turn to two examples of development projects in the Caribbean, specifically in Haiti and Belize. However, my analysis goes a step further by incorporating scholarship that explains both how and why this is still the case.

II. Situating The Colonial Violence and Capitalist Development debate:

Any attempt to disentangle the relationship between colonial violence and capitalist development should involve some contextualizing of the ongoing debate that exists. In the eyes of institutions such as the World Bank

as well as some scholars violence is understood as "development in reverse."² For all intents and purposes this mutually exclusive relationship predicates that once there is conflict or violence present in a society, vital resources are often reappropriated or redirected for destructive means and ends.³ Such that the result has negative spillover effects relating to the productivity of other resources.⁴ Ultimately it is repeated violence and conflict that impedes development as it obliterates any advances or improvements made in economic growth, infrastructure, healthcare, education etc. This line of thinking perpetuates the notion that one of the primary barriers to development is violence. While there is merit to these considerations, there are issues that persist.

For instance, this linear prescription of conflict divergence to sustained development, prosperity and peace misses the nuanced interplay between violence and development.⁵ Historically, the rise and spread of capitalist modes of production both in Europe and beyond was anything but peaceful. The economic and social structures that emerged were often the product of violent processes in which economic surplus were acquired through the exertion of coercion.⁶ As Frantz Fanon, a prominent Caribbean political thinker frankly puts it, "for centuries the capitalists have behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world. Deportation, massacres, forced labor, and slavery were the primary methods used by capitalism to.... establish its wealth and power."⁷ From this perspective colonial violence and capitalist development are implied with each other and instead have a mutually inclusive relationship.

One relevant point of contention across these debates is the definition and understanding of violence. For proponents of violence as development in reverse, violence tends to take the form of organized crime and civil wars.

¹ Kevin Edmonds, "An elusive independence: Neocolonial intervention in the Caribbean," *International Socialism* 2, no. 146 (2015): <http://isj.org.uk/neocolonial-intervention-in-the-caribbean/>.

² Paul Collier, Lani Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol and Nicholas Sambanis, "Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy," *World Bank Policy Research Report*, 56793. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003)

³ Samir Elhawary, "Violent Paths to Peace? Rethinking the Conflict-Development Nexus in Colombia," *Colombia International*, no.67 (2008): 87

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87

⁵ *Ibid.*, 87

⁶ *Ibid.*, 88

⁷ Frantz Fanon, "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 57

Their focus is on violence strictly in the physical sense, which is easily quantified and categorized, especially for the purpose of drafting reports or conducting quantitative analysis. For example, according to the 2011 World Development Report on Conflict, Security and Development “on average, a country that experienced major violence over the period from 1981 to 2005 has a poverty rate 21 percentage points higher than a country that saw no violence.”⁸ Contrastingly, for scholars that tend to recognize an inextricable link between capitalist development and violence, there is a greater tendency to focus both on the physical understanding but also the structural, systemic and psychological dimensions of violence. These academics have scholarship which highlights that structural violence also encompasses various forms of suffering and trauma especially due to negligence and inaction⁹. There is even what is coined as “slow” violence which “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction” and it is “typically not viewed as violence at all.”¹⁰ This tends to take the form of toxic dumping, deforestation, wildlife loss etc. These alternative depictions of violence highlight the total disregard of their lives and livelihoods from the idea of national development and progress.

III. Development Induced Displacement in Haiti:

Often when countries undertake development projects such as the construction of dams or highways, it entails the forced relocation of people and entire communities. This is why the displacement in question is development induced. Haiti much like countless other countries has dealt with such occurrences.

In 1956, the Lake Péligre Dam was completed in the Artibonite District, with the intention of serving as a hydroelectric facility. The project was funded via a US\$40 million loan from the United States government and was

executed by the Artibonite Valley Development Organization (AVDO).¹¹ The construction of the dam was coupled with intense logging operations which rapidly decimated the river basin above the dam and eroded much of the topsoil. The environmental degradation also lowered the quality and quantity of land and freshwater resources. In turn, rural agriculture saw much of its economic opportunities destroyed.¹² Consequently, significant mass migration ensued from more rural areas to urban centers. Unfortunately, the rapid growing urban population put significant strain on available resources and created more social and economic challenges for Haitians in the slums of Port-au-Prince.¹³ So while the hydroelectric and irrigation facility increased the production of some crops in the valley downstream,¹⁴ it came at a significant cost.

In evaluating the Haiti case study, Robert Nixon’s theory regarding “unimagined community” is of particular use in understanding how development projects like the Péligre Dam violently harmed residents of the Artibonite District. When countries construct their vision of national development, it is contingent on the creation of imagined communities but also unimagined ones.¹⁵ What this means is that long before any construction of the dam transpired and before any physical bodies were displaced, the residents, in the eyes of the AVDO were removed from the idea of Haiti’s developing nation state. Based on Nixon’s theory, the violence inflicted is two-fold; the physical eviction of Haitians from the Artibonite District but also the less explicit violence of perceiving the locals as invisible and dispensable. It is this erasure of impacted communities from development discourse that is extremely harmful, and this has been an ongoing issue since the colonial era. In this context, unimagined community offers a more nuanced picture of the variations of violence that tends to accompany capitalist development.

⁸ World Bank, “Overview” *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2011): 5

⁹ Filiberto Penados, Levi Gahman and Shelda-Jane Smith, “Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean,” *Geoforum* (2022): 5

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5

¹¹ Phillip Howard, “Development Induced Displacement in Haiti,” *Refuge* 16, no. 3 (1997): 6

¹² *Ibid.*, 10

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁵ Robert Nixon, “Unimagined Communities: Developmental Refugees, MegaDams and Monumental Modernity,” *New Formations*, no. 69 (2010): 62

IV. Erasure of Indigenous Culture and Customs in Belize:

Moreover, the erasure of indigenous culture and customs of the Maya people of the Toledo District in Belize is testament to the violent legacies of colonialism prevailing for the sake of capitalist development. For context, there is a long and complicated history between the Belize government and its indigenous people who have long fought and resisted relentlessly against their government's misappropriation of their land. In 2015 the people of the Toledo District were victorious in their court case against the Government of Belize as the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) ruling recognized their rights to occupy indigenous lands.¹⁶ At the heart of the grievance both the government as well as multinational corporations failed to obtain Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of Maya communities regarding logging and mining concessions on their ancestral territories.¹⁷ While the ruling was historic in nature, both the Belizean government and third party multinational corporations were still complicit in repeated FPIC violations.¹⁸ In fact, said violations coincided with indigenous land defenders facing assault, harassment, unjust imprisonment and other forms of physical oppression.¹⁹ Moreover, these violations were constituted as "slow" violence as it disrupted indigenous lives and livelihoods, fractured relationships with ancestral lands and destroyed the integrity and ecology of the environment. It is argued that the mere existence, necessity and even violations of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) are a result of the colonial encounter and emphasizes the inherent dispossession and violent character of capitalist development.²⁰

Furthermore, scholars have provided a useful theoretical lens through which the rationale of dispossession, domination and exploitation of indigenous people can be analyzed. "Misanthropic skepticism involves doubting and condemning the humanity of others based on categorical differences such as their phenotype, melanin

levels, ethnicity etc.²¹ It is but one example of the ways in which colonizers and capitalists constructed the "other" in order to justify the enslavement, torture and indentureship of colonized people. Forms of racial dehumanization such as misanthropic skepticism are the reason indigenous people tend to be critical towards development initiatives as they have been subject to centuries of violence and exploitation from colonizers and are repeatedly excluded from the benefits of development. Misanthropic skepticism illustrates and draws attention to how and why more modern and conventional capitalist development initiatives still perpetuate a violence that originated in the colonial era.

V. *Forward Ever, Backward Never: Where do we go from here?*

The intent of this paper is to invoke thought and spark conversation surrounding how we understand development, especially in a modern Caribbean context. In addition, the scholarship introduced provides some framework to identify and address the relationship between colonial violence and capitalist development, whether that be understood via. "misanthropic skepticism" or "unimagined community." Yet, many questions still need to be considered. Will truly autonomous, self-directed development in the Caribbean not involve the exploitation and dispossession of its own people? How do we rethink or reimagine approaches that mitigate both the "slow" and more visible forms of violence that arise due to international development projects? And why do decolonial perspectives and critical approaches to capitalist development get sidelined?

In conclusion, not only did colonial violence lay the foundation for capitalist development, its legacy lives on as a version of neocolonialism, disrupting lives and livelihoods, perpetuating environmental degradation, and eradicating indigenous histories and cultural endeavours. It is challenging to fully adhere to the forward

¹⁶ Filiberto Penados, Levi Gahman and Shelda-Jane Smith, "Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean," *Geoforum* (2022): 1

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2

ever, backward never mindset, when the adversities and atrocities of our colonial past still plague us in new variants to this day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Collier, Paul; Lani Elliott; Håvard Hegre; Anke Hoeffler; Marta Reynal-Querol; & Nicholas Sambanis. 2003. Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy, *World Bank Policy Research Report*, 56793. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Edmonds, Kevin. 2015. "An elusive independence: Neocolonial intervention in the Caribbean." *International Socialism* 2 (146). <http://isj.org.uk/neocolonial-intervention-in-the-caribbean/>.
- Elhawary, Samir. 2008 "Violent Paths to Peace? Rethinking the Conflict-Development Nexus in Colombia," *Colombia Internacional* (67): 84-100
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press: 1-62.
- Howard, Phillip. 1997 "Development Induced Displacement in Haiti," *Refuge* 16(3): 1-11
- Nixon, Rob. 2010. "Unimagined communities: Developmental Refugees, Megadams and Monumental Modernity." *New Formations* (69): 62- 80
- World Bank. 2011. "Overview" *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group): 1-16
- Penados, Filiberto, Levi Gahman and Shelda-Jane Smith. 2022 "Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean," *Geoforum*: 1-11