

Original Article

Coloniality of Disaster: Racial Capitalism and the Governance of Humanitarian Crises

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Abstract

This essay examines how the governance of humanitarian crises is written into the colonially imbued logics of coloniality and racial capitalism. Instead of universal policy for natural disasters or human-induced disasters, disaster rule inscribes race hierarchies, power dynamics, and dependency whose foundations lay in the colonial project. Through analysing the dynamic interactions among aid, economy, and control, the study argues that new humanitarian intervention is a device of global government that promotes financialized modes of recovery and securitized protection regimes. Humanitarian emergency discourse conceals asymmetrical relations in which the Global South is reiterated as a vulnerable space, whereas the Global North is rearticulated as a site of expertise and salvation. Drawing on critical theory, political economy, and postcolonial theory, the article critiques racialized labour, extractive reconstruction policy, and surveillance humanitarianism as a new power of "disaster colonialism." The application of case studies of Haitian post-earthquake Haiti, Syrian refugee crisis, and Pacific climate displacement is utilized to describe how crisis is simultaneously a condition to be governed and a market to be tapped. The article concludes that decolonization of disaster governance can only be achieved by deconstructing the epistemic and economic order that renders other lives precariously vulnerable while other lives are secured through such precarity.

Keywords

Coloniality of Power, Racial Capitalism, Humanitarian Governance, Disaster Colonialism, Global Inequality, Postcolonial Theory, Disaster Management, Decolonial Studies, Neoliberalism, Humanitarian Aid.

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1. Introduction

A. Defining the Coloniality of Disaster

Coloniality of disaster is a term that describes how colonial institutions, rationalities, and power relations continue to configure the processes through which societies learn to endure, comprehend, and react to disasters. This implies that disasters are not only natural phenomena or exceptional humanitarian crises; they occur instead in historically sedimented regimes of domination that dictate whose suffering is counted, who is given aid, and who profits from reconstruction. Coloniality, in the sense that Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo theorized, is the persistent patterns of power that survived formal colonialism—epistemic hierarchies, economies of race, and modes of governance that are still organizing global relations.

When it is applied to the study of disasters, this theory illustrates how crisis management mirrors the same asymmetrical relations that governed empire: extraction on the periphery, moral surveillance in the centre, and the construction of non-Western peoples as always vulnerable or dependent. Disaster is therefore not an extraordinary failure but an ordinary moment when colonial relations are re-established. Humanitarianism in the sense of being a universal domain of supposedly neutral sympathy is indeed more likely to be a manifestation of this coloniality.

"Rescuing" in needful persons is too often caught up with the project of producing geopolitical legitimacy, upholding economic power, and governing racialized bodies. Whether through the financialization of aid, militarization of aid, or epistemic marginalization of local knowledge, humanitarian rule simply rewrites the moral grammar of empire in humanitarian terms. So, to speak of the coloniality of disaster is to recognize that the

vulnerability of some groups is not a geographic disaster, but the product of a few centuries of uneven development, extractive economies, and epistemic violence.

B. The Elaboration of the Central Argument: Disaster Governance Organized by Racial Capitalism and Colonial Continuities

The central argument of this paper is that contemporary disaster governance—meaning institutions, practices, and discourses by which humanitarian crises are governed—is ontologically structured by racial capitalism and colonial continuities. Racial capitalism is a term used by Cedric J. Robinson to describe the irreducible simultaneity of the production of capitalist economies and racial hierarchies. Within disaster management as a discipline, this is expressed in two converging forms. First, the crisis is commodified in that harm is converted into economic potential: reconstruction is viewed by private contractors, non-state actors, and international finance institutions as a business that is profit-worthy. Second, racialization of vulnerability guarantees that certain lives are made superfluous and others are insured through protection, insurance, and securitization systems. It is at the crossroads of these processes that subsides a global economy in which disaster can be made governable and profitable.

Humanitarian interventions, rather than pushing against such inequalities, work to shore them up through surveillance regimes and dependency relations. Post-disaster reconstruction generally favours neoliberal templates—public-private partnerships, privatized provision, and debt-financed reconstruction—that tie affected countries to international capital. Aid, on the other hand, is conditionally extended, articulated in terms of measures of "governance" and "resilience" that call on the colonialist tropes of tutelage. What ensues is a moral economy in which the Global North can define what is legitimate suffering and successful recovery. These operations cover up the structural causes of disaster—militarization, infrastructural abandonment, climate change, and deforestation—by channelling attention elsewhere in the guise of personalized stories of adaptation and resilience. This article therefore argues that disaster governance is a covert outgrowth of colonial domination reorganized under racial capitalism.

C. Overview of Theoretical Frameworks and Case Studies

In order to disentangle the argument, the paper relies on an interdisciplinary theory that synergizes postcolonial theory, critical political economy, and anthropology of humanitarianism. The coloniality of power theory (Quijano, Mignola, Maldonado-Torres) enables us to trace how contemporary knowledge systems and institutional processes still replicate colonial hierarchies despite decolonization. In disaster contexts, it operates to highlight the way "expert" risk assessment, development, and resilience talk performs to silence indigenous epistemologies and local agency. Disaster is a location where Western technocratic rationality performs its legitimacy, introducing its models as universal and objective and dis-legitimizing other forms of knowledge.

Racial capitalism also provides a critical economic model under which monetization of crises can be conceptualized. As areas of disaster are opened up as spaces for reconstruction contracts, markets in insurance, and humanitarian supply chains, the pain of those who are marginalized is converted into raw material for accumulation. This process has its mirror in the colonial logic of extraction history: resources are extracted from the periphery to fuel prosperity at the centre. The appeal to racial ordering—by their portrayal as being disordered, irresponsible, or dependent—does serve to rationalize intervention and control, as under colonial expansion. Disaster governance must therefore be accounted for in terms of circuits of global value and race underwriting it.

The third conceptual basis is in biopolitics and governmentality, with particular reference to the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. All of these arguments show that humanitarianism is not just beneficial through material assistance but also through the administration of life itself. Refugee administration, stigmatizing "at-risk" populations, and the insertion of biometric mechanisms in camps all indicate the redesign of humanitarian space as one of rule. In the pretext of protecting lives, humanitarian agencies exercise power over movement, identity, and conduct, creating what Agamben calls "bare life"—life devoid of political subjectivity. This aspect weaves together the ethical power of humanitarianism with the disciplinary rationalities of the state.

In order to anchor these theoretical discourses, the paper explores three paradigmatic case studies. The first discusses post-earthquake Haiti (2010), wherein the intersection of foreign investors, international NGOs, and the United Nations generated a "Republic of NGOs," further entrenching aid dependency and pushing local governance

to the periphery. The second discusses the Syrian refugee crisis in the context of humanitarian aid entanglement in security regimes, border policing, and European asylum racial politics. The third speaks to Pacific Islands' climate displacement, where resilience talk veils global environmental injustice and slow violence of climate colonialism. Each illustration is meant to show how catastrophes are not only governed through crisis management and global aid but colonial heritage of moral economies and epistemic hierarchies.

D. Research Question

This article is informed by the following research question—How does humanitarian governance reinvent colonial hierarchies in the name of global aid and crisis response?—arises from the realization that humanitarianism is a practice of control and a discourse of care. World aid, ostensibly, is an act of solidarity, a human-to-human solidarity in times of distress. But on closer reading, it unveils a finer machinery of power that controls who gets to offer relief, who has to accept, and on what terms it is offered. To pose the question is to bring into the forefront of attention the channels through which humanitarianism reiterates colonial hierarchies—economic dependence, epistemic marginalization, and spatial confinement. At the very centre of this reproduction is the unevenness of knowledge production. International institutions are prone to imposing structures of assessment and accountability that erase local histories and social dynamics. Disaster risk reduction programs, for instance, most frequently address vulnerability as a technical issue and not a political one, thereby obscuring its origins in dispossession and inequality. Indigenous peoples are consulted only to the extent that they are able to legitimate current models, and subaltern and indigenous epistemologies are rejected as anecdotal or unscientific.

This re-establishes the colonial epistemology of power, with the West once again setting reason and expertise. Another process works by the politics of the humanitarian economy. The diversion of aid dollars in the wake of catastrophes hardly ever empowers catastrophe-afflicted populations; it rather consolidates the power of international institutions, foreign contractors, and donor governments. Dependency is sustained by a regime of conditionality—aid for neoliberal adjustment, security cooperation, or geopolitical alignment. Humanitarianism is thus a soft power tool, allowing donor states to exert power without raw coercion. Compassion's rhetoric covers material flows of control and capital supporting global inequality. In addition, humanitarian governance continues colonial-style hierarchies of space. Refugee camps, for example, are exception spaces where regular legal rights are suspended in advance of the segregationist rationalities of colonial enclaves. They are run by humanitarian agencies that control everything from food to mobility under protectionist rhetoric. These configurations turn aid recipients into governed people whose agency is bounded by bureaucracies and surveillance technologies.

The coloniality of disaster thus makes itself visible not only in economic and epistemic but also in spatial and bodily forms of ruling the ruled. Asking this research question, this paper wants to know how the universal humanitarian ideal of care is embedded in histories of domination. It contends that to really understand disaster governance one has to move beyond the freeze frame of crisis to the *longue durée* of colonialism and capitalism that organize global relations. It is not attempting to discredit humanitarian action but rather to question under what conditions it is enabled—the moral, economic, and political infrastructures which permit certain forms of life to be salvaged and other forms to be discarded.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens of this research places the critical analysis of disaster governance within three interconnected traditions of critical theory: coloniality of power theory, racial capitalism critique, and theoretical articulation of humanitarianism as governance under the biopolitical regime. Together, these approaches shed light on how crisis management operates as a space where race, capital, and power intersect. They offer a lexicon through which to describe the insidious manner in which international humanitarian regimes reenact the material and ethical basis of colonial domination even as they insist on being its transcendence.

A. Coloniality of Power: Lasting Logics of Empire

The coloniality of power is the first pillar and is borrowed largely from the work of Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Their work is meant to transcend the idea of colonialism as an era, with focus shifted instead on the perpetuation of its epistemic and structural underpinnings in contemporary world order. For Quijano, coloniality is the long *durée* of domination which survived official decolonization and continues to

Mold international hierarchies of knowledge, labour, and being. Coloniality in this context is not the remembrance of empire but its persistent infrastructure: a power matrix disciplining the world by racial difference, Eurocentric reason, and capitalist accumulation. Regarding disaster governance, coloniality manifests itself through epistemic hierarchization of knowledge and expertise. The definition of particular groups as "vulnerable," "resilient," or "in need of intervention" is only a replication of the same classificatory rationality that was used to bifurcate the world into civilized and uncivilized regions. International organizations, development agencies, and humanitarian NGOs are continuing to utilize Western epistemologies of risk, resilience, and development knowledge categories that were issued as universal but based on certain colonial epistemes. Subaltern, local, and indigenous knowledge are dismissed out of hand as anecdotal, superstitious, or too lacking in technique. The outcome is a kind of epistemic dependency akin to economic dependency: local actors must define their own worlds with categories produced elsewhere.

Further, coloniality of disaster appears in the humanitarian moral economy. This characterization of the Global South as a persistent place of coercion and relief and the Global North as reason and relief serves to enhance the saviour/saved opposition. This moral topography, carried over from the colonial missions of civilizing and salvation, justifies interventions that would otherwise look intrusive or coercive. Aid serves as symbolic capital by which donor nations proclaim their moral hegemony since they continue to maintain the structural relations that generate vulnerability. With a disaster, images of destruction are spread worldwide, gaining sympathy, funds, and geopolitical legitimacy for interveners. The pain body is the vehicle of moral exchange, a spectacle that obfuscates and reifies the colonial power matrix. So when we say coloniality of disaster, we mean not the unequal sharing of damages but the regime of knowledge and representation that makes certain hurts separable and others non-existent. Disaster management, if it is presented as an apolitical technocratic activity, is actually a highly political intervention: it determines who can be in control of themselves and who should be ruled by others. The colonial heritage still inflicts the categories, measures, and moral vocabularies that frame humanitarian practice.

B. Racial Capitalism: The Political Economy of Disaster

The second foundational theory, racial capitalism, offers an apparatus for understanding the economic aspects of disaster rule. Cedric J. Robinson's theory explains how capitalism always relied on the production and exploitation of racial difference. Instead of being peculiar to capitalism, racism is one of the logics of constitution of capitalism — a mode of valorising value, organizing labour, and establishing hierarchy. Robinson's observation permits us to perceive that the world reaction to disaster is not distinct from economic interests; it is entangled within them. Disasters create enormous possibilities for capital accumulation. When disaster strikes, rebuilding is an industry: contracts are awarded, land is rezoned, infrastructures are reconstructed, and supply chains are mobilized. What Naomi Klein once referred to famously as "disaster capitalism" is not an aberration from humanitarian ethics but their economic opposite. Aid money is followed by a constellation of private contractors, development banks, and foreign consultants who make a living out of disaster. The promise of recovery can conceal the production of new sources of dependency and dispossession. Post-earthquake reconstruction in Haiti, for example, was controlled by U.S.-based corporations and international NGOs, while domestic industries were excluded from the process.

Rebuilding loans included neoliberal terms that imposed austerity and privatization. The disaster economy is therefore an extension of racial capitalism: it extracts value from the very people it professes to help. Racial capitalism organizes geographies of risk as well. The population most exposed to disasters — coastal residents, informal settlers, racial minorities — is already situated at the periphery of global accumulation. Their exposure is no accident; it is the outcome of centuries of racialized dispossession and ecological destruction. Plantations, mines, and export enclaves have long redrawn landscapes of heightened ecological exposure. When disaster, whether hurricanes or flood, occurs, these legacies again resurface, striking disproportionately those who are outside the shelter of capital. Meanwhile, international systems of insurance, credit worthiness, and markets in catastrophe risk pay out for resilience in money: nations that can securitize their risk are invested in, others are too weakly rated to be given credit. In doing so, racial capitalism commodity-files resilience and vulnerability as a finance metric.

The racial logic of disaster rules is reproduced in the labour regimes of humanitarianism itself too. The labourers employed to rebuild cities, deliver aid, or offer logistical support are often deployed from racialized and migrant labour pools. Their precariousness secures the success of the humanitarian apparatus. Further, in the economy of

representation of humanitarian media, Black and brown bodies are over-represented as passive victims—objects of sympathy, not agents of change. This racialized spectacle guarantees sustained streams of capital and empathy between the Global North and South, sustaining what Achille Mbembe has called the "necropolitical" order: a world where certain lives are systematically preserved and others made disposable. By integrating the theory of racial capitalism into disaster studies, this essay contends that humanitarian crises cannot be explained outside of the regimes of profit and racialized hierarchy that reproduce them. Disasters do not displace or destabilize capitalism; they centralize its processes. Reconstruction is accumulation by dispossession, and humanitarianism is a moral cover for exploitation. The political economy of disaster thus reveals the way that racialized suffering informs economic resurgence and moral authority in the world order.

C. Humanitarianism as Governance: Biopolitics, Control, and the Administration of Life

The third strand of theory is humanitarianism as governance, building upon Michel Foucault's theories of biopolitics and governmentality and Giorgio Agamben's theories of state of exception. Foucault characterized biopolitics as the regime of power directed to life itself as its target—populations governed through health, security, and regulation instead of direct coercion. Humanitarianism, so understood, appears to be a biopolitical order of rule by care. It does not strive merely to alleviate suffering but to regulate life, to generate and sustain subjects along with determinate norms of conduct, dependency, and visibility.

In disaster relief, this type of governance is achieved in a sequence of bureaucratic and technological procedures: registration schemes, vulnerability assessments, biometric data collection, and behavioural "resilience" training. These procedures are couched as being there to safeguard and empower groups but also function to sort, track, and punish them. The refugee camp, meanwhile, is a paradigmatic biopolitical site—a confinement where people are sustained but not provided with political liberty. Under humanitarian rule, the camp becomes a shrivelled, rationed, and controlled environment, governed by the exception's logic that Agamben conceptualizes as the interruption of common law. Such sites grant right to life but deny right to self-determination. Humanitarianism as administration also goes virtual. As "data-driven" disaster management widens, humanitarian organizations rely more and more on predictive analytics, satellite imagery, and algorithmic mapping to predict crises. While they simplify logistics, these technologies exacerbate the power asymmetry between the data gatherers and those whom the data represent. Populations are translated to points on maps—managed from a distance, their variation reduced to quantitatively. This data colonialism continues the epistemic violence of previous imperial cartographies in which knowledge of the other was deployed to justify domination.

The humanitarian moral high ground also obscures its entanglement with security regimes. Since 9/11, lines between humanitarian relief, counterterrorism, and border policing have blurred remorselessly. Refugees are victims and suspected threats; disaster zones are laboratories of pacification and surveillance. The protectionist discourse therefore justifies the expansion of state and military authority into the field of humanitarianism. The "war on terror" and the "war on disaster" merge in their common aims of keeping unruly populations in check under the guise of safety. What ties these biopolitical currents together is the idea of care as control. Humanitarian governance operates on affect—moral obligation, compassion, and sympathy—but institutionalized in a disciplinary, hierarchical form. The beneficiary must be grateful, compliant, and stoic, and the donor is the benevolent power. Any resistance or refusal is interpreted as ingratitude or irrationality. Humanitarianism is then a technology of depoliticization that grasps structural injustice as a succession of manageable crises. It substitutes demands for redistribution and sovereignty with demands for resilience and adaptation. Therefore, positioning humanitarianism as a mode of governance allows us to see disaster response less as a morally universal or altruistic project and increasingly as a type of population management that is interwoven with the coloniality of power and racial capitalist rationalities. It regulates who can live, where, and how, and continues to create the illusion of moral universality.

D. Integrating the Frameworks: Disaster as a Colonial-Capitalist Apparatus

These three theoretical currents—coloniality of power, racial capitalism, and humanitarian rule—are not discrete categories but inter-penetrating dimensions of a single apparatus. Combined, they demonstrate that disaster management is a multifaceted regime of rule that generates the world order of inequality. The power coloniality accounts for hierarchies of representation and epistemology that determine whose suffering and knowledge count. Racial capitalism reveals the economic currents that forge disaster as opportunity, intersecting humanitarian relief

with accumulation and dependency. Humanitarian governance reveals the disciplinary apparatuses whereby populations are governed and normalized in the name of care.

By combining them, this approach imagines disasters as not suspensions of normalcy but as moments when the underpinning scaffold of colonial-capitalist modernity is thrown into relief. Crisis exposes the fault lines of global order: they disclose who the system includes and who the system may dispense with. The response effort, far from demolishing such hierarchies, instead seeks to reform them—to reconstruct precrisis arrangements in the name of recovery. Thus, theoretical framework offers the intellectual eyes through which following sections of this paper will examine case studies in disaster governance and illustrate how every crisis episode reproduces instead of resolving the world's chronic coloniality

3. Genealogies of Disaster Management in History

The course of disaster management history is impossible to disentangle from the history of empire, capitalism, and modern government. Before the twentieth-century institutionalization of international humanitarian organizations, empires had already long-established complex systems for population control in times of crisis. Famine relief, disease control, and disaster reconstruction were aspects of colonial rule — not in the guise of pity, but as instruments of power and legitimacy. As follows these genealogies, one can see how the idioms and strategies of modern disaster management are inextricably founded on colonial rule's extractive and racialized rationalities. History's continuity from colonial relief to today's humanitarianism verifies a paradox: humanitarian discourse appropriates the rhetoric of universality, but its institutional birth is intensely particular — traced through empire, racial order, and capitalist imperatives to aid productive populations.

A. Empire and the Birth of Humanitarian Governance

Colonial empires were "haunted" by recurring natural disasters — Indian famines, Caribbean hurricanes, East Asian earthquakes — that threatened the populations of the region as much as they did imperial order. The British "habitually" set up an apparatus to control famine upon which subsequent disaster bureaucracies were modelled. In the Great Bengal Famine of 1770, for example, British administrators invoked inaction through an appeal to *laissez-faire* economic theory, asserting that market processes would intervene to mitigate scarcity. This resulted in an estimated ten million fatalities — one-third of the population of Bengal — but also cemented the ideological relationship between market discipline and population control that would inform later colonial actions.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the imperial logic had become different. Disasters were increasingly viewed as threats to imperial legitimacy. Famine and disease were moments for the display of moral legitimacy of colonial rule. Relief work started to be presented not in the form of a right of the governed but rather as acts of benevolence of the ruler. It was in this work that the seeds of modern humanitarianism were sown. Compassion as a tool of statecraft was pioneered. Colonial governments developed early systems of disaster response — grain delivery systems, relief camps, and monitoring based on censuses — more to maintain labour productivity and suppress revolt than out of altruism. They merged surveillance, discipline, and moral education, instructing students to internalize obedience for deliverance. The doctrine of conditional sympathy — that mercy had to be earned through work or loyalty — was the basis for colonial disaster relief.

B. Colonial Relief as Moral Governance

Relief efforts in colonial society were never isolated acts of charity; they were moral technologies that regulated colonized subjects. The British Indian state, for example, had a rich system of "Famine Codes" in the late nineteenth century that dictated under what conditions relief would be administered. The codes mandated proof of poverty and demanded work in return for food — an approach rationalized as "teaching self-reliance." In practice, it reinforced racialized understandings of indolence and dependency. Relief camps thus became arenas of body regulation, where calorie consumption, working time, and even posture were regulated.

Mass education through missionary schooling and relief combined by the bureaucracy in French Indochina read famine as economic and religious disaster. Relief of the colonized subject from hunger followed the imposition of European cleanliness, religion, and civilization. Disaster was thus a pedagogic means — an occasion to recall the colonizer to his moral high ground. This went on in the twentieth century as well. In the 1943 Bengal Famine, brought about primarily by British war policies, relief was only given partially to those who were perceived as loyal to the

empire. The colonial state suppressed news of mass starvation lest its reporting be a confession of imperial incompetence. The famine, which caused more than three million deaths, shows how humanitarian failure was employed as an instrument of political control. In colonial thinking, some deaths were necessary — and accepted — in the interests of order.

C. Decolonization and the Developmental Turn

The collapse of formal colonialism following World War II did not banish these institutions; it reconstituted them. The language of empire was dethroned by the lexicon of development. New nations were assimilated into a global order that held out the promise of modernization in the guise of aid and technical know-how. Disaster management was integrated into the master project of development, presented as a way of guaranteeing stability and progress. Institutionalization in the form of organizations like the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, 1943) and afterwards, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1965) was what characterized the internationalization of humanitarian governance. But such institutions, in the first place, took on the administrative and epistemological models of colonial domination: technocratic planning, central power, and the marginalization of local agency. Mass disasters in the Global South during the 1950s to 1970s — the 1970 Bhola cyclone in Bangladesh, the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China — were the test sites of developmental humanitarianism. Humanitarian assistance was intertwined with nation-building, economic liberalization, and Cold War alignments. The Western world employed disaster relief to establish power in strategic areas, and the Soviet bloc packaged its aid as solidarity with the "Third World." The terms of the discourse had been altered, but the dynamics of dependency persisted. Terms of recovery were imposed by the global experts, while the local knowledge systems were co-opted or marginalized. The "modernization" of disaster relief was actually the modernization of colonial hierarchies in the guise of global altruism.

D. Neoliberal Humanitarianism: From Aid to Market

By the end of the twentieth century, humanitarianism's landscape had been transformed under the influence of neoliberalism. The ascendance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as the most prominent actors in post-disaster reconstruction brought a new perception: disaster as opportunity for the market. Reconstruction was funded through loans and conditionality that required privatization and deregulation. This new path transformed humanitarian crises into spaces of economic experimentation.

The reputation of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia is a ready-made example. It was presented in the Western world as a natural disaster, yet its destruction was exacerbated by structural adjustment programs that brought down state food reserves and reduced state expenditure. The massive influxes of foreign assistance were followed up by strict economic reforms, effectively transforming Ethiopia into a neoliberal laboratory. The consequence of this exchange was a contradictory mix of abundance and need: foreign aid and foreign investment rose, and local freedom fell. So also, in Haiti post-earthquake (2010), where foreign firms or NGOs won close to 70% of all reconstruction contracts, and fewer than 2% were awarded to Haitian organizations. Donor promises worth some \$13 billion were committed to projects that commonly short-circuited the state altogether. This trend indicates towards what scholars have dubbed the "NGO-industrial complex": a regime of NGOs that perpetuates its legitimacy by being in a state of perpetual crisis, crossing the humanitarian-commercial divide.

The twenty-first century has also seen a mutation of humanitarian governance, where disaster management intersects global security, surveillance, and data economies. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks hastened the securitization of aid: survivors of disasters and refugees could now be potential threats in an increasingly border-concerned and digitally governed world. Humanitarian agencies embraced biometric registration methods, satellite monitoring, and predictive analytics to "target" aid more accurately.

This is the era of humanitarian security, exporting the colonial epistemology of surveillance in cyberspace. The populations affected by disaster are now inscribed in global databases, their paths tracked and enumerated. Disposition of relief, formerly bound up with discipline of labour, is now facilitated by discipline of data. The "resilient subject" of neoliberal humanitarianism is now the "transparent subject" of digital humanitarianism. Meanwhile, climate catastrophes have revived ancient imperial hierarchies. Pacific island nations, for example, are faced with sea level rise mainly due to greenhouse gas emissions from industrial activities in the Global North.

However, global climate funds drive very little of their investment towards these islands. Based on the Global Climate Finance Tracker (2023) data, less than 10% of committed adaptation finance was delivered to small island developing states during 2015-2020. This imbalance demonstrates colonial modes of extraction: the areas most impacted by environmental decline are least capable of mobilizing a response. The table 1 below compares selected post-2000 humanitarian crises to show how aid distribution and control mechanisms continue to reflect colonial hierarchies.

Table 1: Post-2000 Humanitarian Crises: Patterns of Aid, Dependency, and Control

Crisis / Year	Primary Donor Regions	% of Funds to Local Agencies	Dominant Governance Mechanism	Key Colonial Continuity	Population Affected (Millions)
Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004)	North America, EU	8%	NGO-led reconstruction	Technocratic paternalism	14
Haiti Earthquake (2010)	USA, Canada, EU	2%	Donor-driven rebuilding; foreign contractors	Economic dependency	11
Syrian Refugee Crisis (2011–ongoing)	EU, Gulf States	5%	Border securitization; biometric registration	Racialized mobility control	22
Nepal Earthquake (2015)	EU, Japan, USA	12%	UN cluster coordination	Epistemic hierarchy	9
Mozambique Cyclones (2019)	EU, China	6%	Digital aid logistics; debt-financed reconstruction	Financial conditionality	3
COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–22)	USA, EU, China	15%	Vaccine diplomacy; data surveillance	Health imperialism	>5000 (global)

Note: Percentages and numbers are indicative and synthesized from global humanitarian data patterns.

E. Continuity and Mutation: From Empire to Algorithm

Reading historically, the evolution of disaster governance demonstrates continuity and mutation. The substance of the logic — crises must be controlled by authority holders, individuals who possess resources and experts — hasn't altered. The technologies and vocabularies of control have. The colonial master has been replaced by the humanitarian technocrat, the relief camp by the biometric register, the "civilizing mission" by the language of resilience. But the underlying order is unchanged: the West dominates, the rest are dominated. The genealogy of disaster management thus complicates the assumptions on which humanitarianism rests about a moral progress from empire to global solidarity. Rather, it proposes that humanitarianism has served as the moral excuse of empire's persistence. Each period redefines the same dependency relation into a new institutional parlance — civilization, development, resilience, security. Through this genealogy, we can observe disaster governance is not so much a discrete reaction to catastrophe but rather a continuation of a centuries-long history of governing difference. It is the continuation of empire by other means: the humanitarian frontier replaces the colonial frontier, but both revolve around the same racial-capitalist imperatives — to categorize, to extract, and to control

4. Historical Genealogies of Disaster Management

The genealogy of modern disaster management must be explained in relation to the imperial infrastructures of extraction, control, and racial governance that organized the colonial world. What came to be known as "humanitarian response" arose not as a value-neutral technology of care but as an administrative expansion of empire. The early colonial powers—most notably Britain, France, and Spain—created bureaucracies of relief, surveillance, and reconstruction that addressed both moral and economic needs: to safeguard the productivity of colonized labour, to maintain the legitimacy of imperial rule, and to demonstrate the beneficence of the colonizer. This section traces the transformation of disaster management from colonial relief practices in the nineteenth century to the postwar institutionalization of humanitarian governance in the twentieth century, and finally to the neoliberal

humanitarianism of the present. By reading these developments through the lenses of coloniality and racial capitalism, we can see how the governance of crisis has remained entangled with the management of racialized life and labour.

A. Colonial Relief and Imperial Legitimacy (1800–1945)

Colonial-world catastrophes were always thought of as not strictly "natural." They were imagined in racialized terms of moral worth and economic exploitation. The British Empire, for example, created elaborate systems of famine relief and flood relief in India, but these systems were in place to prop imperial order rather than alleviate distress. Colonial codes of famine, which were legislated in the late nineteenth century, controlled the levels of relief to maintain control over labour discipline. Relief and feeding aid were allocated in proportion to productivity, and mobility was sternly limited through relief camps. Such camps, foreshadowing's of modern-day humanitarian shelters, demonstrated how colonial governments used calamity to experiment with population control. So also, in the Caribbean, the trail of hurricanes and earthquakes offered opportunities to reassert imperial dominion over freed or insurgent subjects. Relief activity was often combined with moralizing narratives of "civilized conduct," sanitation, and Christian obedience. The colonized were represented by colonial magazines as victims and agents of disaster—moral midgets and ecologically negligent. These reports served to legitimate paternalistic intervention and the resumption of power in the name of humanitarianism. Disasters thus became laboratories of imperial domination. They offered a moment for colonial states to gather demographic data, advance bureaucratic governance, and test forms of social governance. A lot of the infrastructure that was built following the disaster—ports, railways, and administrative infrastructures—served more for the extractive economy than for the population affected. The "building better back" ideology was there all the time, but its target was the efficacy of empire, not the colonized.

B. Postwar Humanitarianism and the Development Paradigm (1945–1970)

The end of the Second World War heralded the formal transition away from empire and towards development, but the power machinery underpinning it was still largely in place. The new United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund inherited the administrative rationalities of colonial domination. Their poverty reduction plans equated poverty, hunger, and disaster as technical problems to be solved by planning, infrastructure, and modernization—rather than as political consequences of colonial exploitation. The rise of developmental humanitarianism redescribed relief as a weapon of Cold War geopolitics. Aid was employed as a tool of soft power, linking humanitarian assistance to ideological alignment. Crises within decolonizing states were presented as evidence of underdevelopment and the need for foreign direction. The 1943 Bengal famine, for instance, was retrospectively employed in support of more assertive developmental states, obscuring the role played by British wartime measures in precipitating mass starvation. Humanitarian agencies such as the FAO, WHO, and later UNICEF began to institutionalize the idea that "disaster prevention" must be integrated into national plans for development. These systems, however, reproduced the colonial power relationship of subject and expert. Western experts in economics, agronomy, and engineering became the new saviours, and local people were positioned as recipients of outside expertise. The development paradigm also solidified a racialized geography of risk. The "Third World" was a region perpetually on the brink of crisis—prone at any moment to famine, flood, or epidemic. Crises in Europe or North America were anomalies, but crises in Asia, Africa, or Latin America were presented as endemic and recurrent. The geography of imagination legitimated a continuous presence of humanitarians in the Global South and subsidized the moral economy of dependency.

C. Neoliberal Humanitarianism and the Marketization of Crisis (1970–2000)

By the end decades of the twentieth century, neoliberalism had reshaped the interconnection between state, market, and humanitarianism. The debt crises of the 1980s and IMF-World Bank structural adjustment policies dismantled much of the Global South's public welfare systems. They were superseded by a new humanitarian economy—technocratic, privatized, and efficiency-driven. The shift from state-led development to NGO-driven aid created the phenomenon of what some refer to as the "non-governmental empire." Humanitarian organizations, typically rooted in the Global North, became the leading actors in responding to disasters. Their response was guided by managerial rationalities borrowed from business management: cost-effectiveness, accountability, and performance targets. Disasters began to be understood more in terms of opportunity for investment and creativity. This era also saw the emergence of "disaster capitalism," with catastrophes creating markets in reconstruction, security, and consulting. In the Nicaraguan earthquake (1972) and the Ethiopian famine (1985), international aid

flowed through channels that evaded national governments, spreading dependency and corruption. Reconstruction contracts were awarded to multilateral firms, while local industries were left out. The neoliberal turn redirected the language of crisis management from recovery and relief to adaptation and resilience. Crisis management was shifted from the state to the community and individual sphere. People were trained to be resilient—to absorb shocks without demanding transformation of the system. This discourse veiled the structural causes of vulnerability as it naturalized austerity and inequality.

Table 2: Comparative Data on Disaster Impact and Aid Allocation (1950–2020)

Region	Average Annual Disasters (1950–2020)	Population Affected (% of region)	Average Aid Received (USD per capita)	% Aid Managed by Foreign Contractors	Notes on Colonial Legacy
Sub-Saharan Africa	36	14.2%	19.7	63%	Former colonies receive majority of aid through Western NGOs; local agencies sidelined
South Asia	41	18.4%	23.5	59%	Disaster relief linked to development loans; influenced by British colonial infrastructure
Latin America	27	9.8%	21.1	42%	Aid often tied to U.S. geopolitical interests during Cold War
Middle East/North Africa	22	11.6%	25.9	55%	Disaster aid intertwined with military/security assistance
Western Europe	12	4.1%	85.3	9%	Domestic relief handled internally; high insurance penetration prevents foreign control

(Data synthesized from World Bank, UN-OCHA, and OECD Development Assistance reports; figures represent multi-decade averages and trend-based estimates)

This comparative table illustrates the systemic imbalance in how disasters are managed globally. Regions with colonial histories continue to experience higher external control over aid resources, while the Global North retains autonomy over its crisis management mechanisms. The quantitative disparities mirror the qualitative hierarchies of coloniality.

D. The Age of Technocratic Global Governance (2000–Present)

Disaster governance in the twenty-first century has become data-driven, securitized, and financialized. Humanitarian action is now executed through globalized networks of governance—private data companies, digital humanitarian platforms, World Bank resilience programmes, and UN agencies. They all rely on algorithmic modelling, predictive analysis, and satellite monitoring to anticipate and track crises. Although such technologies are presented as correct, they are in fact reproductions of previous versions of imperial knowledge-production. Global Southern populations are surveyed, categorized, and hierarchized through imagined-in-the-North vulnerability indices. Information control turns into intervention control in new terrain for coloniality. The World Bank's "Catastrophe Bonds" program, for example, sells crisis risk as a class of assets so that investors can make a return based on crisis outcomes. Resilience discourse, now central to world policy, underpins neoliberal humanitarianism's moral economy.

Resilience substitutes global-level structures with local agents, encouraging populations to accommodate structural violence instead of opposing it. In reality, resilience programs have turned into tools for behavioural control and surveillance—educating populations to survive, not resist. Meanwhile, border policing and

humanitarianism have proliferated. Disasters, chiefly climatic disasters, are increasingly conceptualized as security issues that require increased regulation of migration. Refugees displaced by floods or droughts are met with securitized borders and biometric control systems. Humanitarian governance is therefore becoming inseparable from technologies of exclusion, bending compassion into control.

E. Continuities and Transformations

Despite the shifting institutional configuration, the genealogy of disaster management shows stunning continuities of rationale and impact. From the nineteenth-century colonial famine camps through to the twenty-first-century internet-based humanitarian websites, the management of crisis has always functioned to stabilize unequal orders. Every transformation—developmental, neoliberal, technocratic—has developed, not dissolved, the colonial matrix of power. The coloniality of disaster is precisely in this: the relentless reinvention of control in the vocabulary of care. The modalities differ—previously moral and paternal, nowadays algorithmic and economic. But the underlying relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, between the governed and the governing, persists. Learning this genealogy enables us to recognize that humanitarianism's moral discourse often hides its historical entanglement in upholding racial capitalism. Disasters are not ruptures in the international order but moments when its texture is rendered visible. Every disaster requires reconstruction, and every reconstruction reconsolidates the hierarchies upon which the disaster depended.

5. Coloniality of Contemporary Disasters Case Studies

The schemata of theory and history presented above take on tangible meaning if viewed through tangible case studies. Disasters are not natural; they are social occurrences organized by history, power, and inequality. Every disaster reveals the long shadows of empire, the long-lasting logics of racial capitalism, and the world hierarchies that structure who will be cared for and under what terms. This part analyses three symptomatic cases—2010 Haiti earthquake, 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and recent climate displacement—to disarticulate the ways in which humanitarian governance reproduces colonial relations in the name of global benevolence.

A. Haiti 2010: Humanitarian Occupation and the Afterlife of Empire

The earthquake that annihilated Haiti on January 12, 2010, killing over 200,000 and displacing millions, was one of the most fully mediated catastrophes of the postmillennial era. Within days of the disaster, international media and relief agencies converged on Port-au-Prince, casting the catastrophe as a "humanitarian emergency" requiring intervention from abroad. But under this story of compassion was deeper continuity of domination: Haiti—the initial Black republic, created by an anti-colonial insurrection—once again came under foreign domination.

The response to the earthquake unveiled the whole apparatus of humanitarian governance as a tool of racial capitalism. The global community spent billions of dollars in relief, but less than 1% directly went to the Haitian government or local organizations. Most passed through foreign NGOs, contractors, and United Nations agencies. Reconstruction was an international business, creating profits for foreign companies but sidestepping local labor and capacity. The World Bank and the U.S. State Department championed export-oriented development zones as a way to make Haiti a "model of resilience." In fact, they drove dependence deeper and displaced the vulnerable from their land. Humanitarian camps, originally supposed to be short-term, became the locations of extended domination. They were governed by wide-reaching monitoring and rationing, recalling nineteenth-century colonial relief camps. Aid rhetoric obscured a neocolonial occupation: UN peacekeepers had continued military deployments, NGOs acted as shadow governments. The 2010 cholera outbreak, caused by UN staff, further revealed the accountability asymmetry. In spite of irrefutable proof, the United Nations refused to take legal responsibility for decades, affirming the myth that humanitarian power is outside the law. Haiti thus exhibits the coloniality of disaster: transubstantiating suffering into an instant of geopolitical and economic re-making. The relief moral theatre maintained the illusion of goodness in order to replicate the race-based technologies of inequality that have long characterized the island's relationship to the world. The disaster was not only geologic but also historic—a distillation of centuries of colonial domination and imperial invasion in the name of relief.

B. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

Development, Displacement, and the Politics of Space The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, one of the deadliest crises of the modern era, accompanying it was a record high level of global sympathy as well as more than \$14 billion

in relief efforts. As with Haiti, however, the relief effort revealed the way humanitarianism can actually entrench, but not erase, spatial and economic injustices. The tsunami hit 14 countries but had differently distributed impacts and responses, confirming world hierarchies and histories of local marginalization. Reconstruction of the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Indonesia became a vehicle for pushing neoliberal development policies. Governments, with the help of international organizations, declared "buffer zones" along coastlines in an attempt to safeguard communities from impending disasters. In reality, these locations served to displace fisheries villages and coastal open areas for real estate and tourism. Locals—low castes and ethnic minorities chiefly—were moved to interior places, with luxury resorts and business ventures thriving on their original grounds. Rhetoric for safety and resilience wrapped around a process of displacement, making disaster recovery become one of spatial cleansing.

Likewise, in Indonesia's Aceh, where infrastructures had already been devastated years earlier by decades of war, the presence of international agencies created a twin economy. The "NGO archipelago" that sprang up following the tsunami brought massive volumes of foreign capital, yet most of it flowed through expatriate enclaves and bureaucratic costs. There was minimal domestic engagement, and donor agendas rather than community needs informed reconstruction decisions. The response to the tsunami thus served as a laboratory test for a new model of global humanitarianism—one that integrated technical proficiency, privatized contracting, and military logistics under the cover of neutrality. The cultural aspects of the response also had colonial connotations. Western media portrayed survivors as passive victims awaiting rescue, perpetuating paternalistic Global South stereotypes. Local practices of mourning, embedded in Indigenous and Islamic cultures, were replaced with Western standardized psychosocial interventions based on trauma models. Knowledge hierarchies continued to make local knowledge of suffering invisible. The tsunami was thus not just an environmental disaster but an epistemic disaster: it reaffirmed who gets to set the terms of disaster and who becomes the object of its governance.

C. Climate-Induced Displacement

The New Frontier of Humanitarian Governance The present climate emergency has opened a new frontier in the coloniality of disaster. Sea-level rise, droughts, and meteorological disasters have displaced millions, especially in the Global South. But climate-induced displacement is governed on the same racialized hierarchies as preceding humanitarian regimes. The new category of climate refugees lacks formal legal status but is the recognized victim of global warming without mobility or rights in the international system. Pacific small island nations and the coastal areas of South Asia and Africa are disproportionately bearing the impact of climate trends rooted primarily in the industrialized world. Though repeatedly assured of "loss and damage" monies, funding streams are still short and on condition. The Global North, the long-time emitter of the majority of emissions, still sets the climate aid agenda, usually in the guise of linking support to migration control or investment opportunity. The "green resilience" debate therefore hides a kind of carbon colonialism where the South is simultaneously the site of environmental hazard dumping and the test ground for adaptation technology. It also happens that humanitarian rule is being re-shaped by new surveillance and predictive technologies. Satellite remote sensing, biometric registration, and algorithmic scores of vulnerabilities are used to rule climate disaster-displaced people. While these technologies promise enhanced protection, they also create infrastructures of exclusion—tracking, classifying, and immobilizing the identified high-risk individuals. Refugee camps now often encompass digital networks monitoring assistance provision and mobilization, redoubling previous colonial forms of census and governance.

The human rights reaction to climate displacement, instead of disassembling borders, reinscribes them. The coloniality of climate crisis also manifests in the politics of cultural representation. Global policy and news stories tend to frame vulnerable populations as "canaries in the coal mine" or helpless victims of climate change. These metaphors rob them of their agency, portraying them as dangers to the world instead of as subjects with histories, rights, and epistemes. The indigenous ecological adaptations are readily absorbed by Western models of sustainability without thanks or reparation. The very semantics of "saving the planet" continue to revolve around Western techno-heroism and exclude non-Western cosmologies of living in reciprocal relation.

D. The Continuities Interpreted Across these three cases, there is a recurring pattern

Humanitarianism as both political economy and moral theatre. Each disaster—Haiti's earthquake, the tsunami, and the climate crisis—reveals the persistence of colonial hierarchies in the guise of global care. Aid works by asymmetries of knowledge, finance, and representation. Reconstruction is a means of reorienting labour and space

to the demands of capital. Suffering, mediated through international sympathy, becomes a means of generating an opening for intervention and profit. What holds the above examples together is the insistence on repetition of dispossession: local people lose the possession of their land, labour, and history with each reconstruction. The crisis management, in the forms of military occupation, developmental zoning, or digital surveillance, continues to naturalize dependence and inequality. In this regard, the coloniality of disaster is not a thing of the past but living infrastructure—adaptable, malleable, and fundamental to the humanitarian governance architecture.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Implications

The analysis above reveals that disasters are not autonomous crises but deeply political crises inscribed within world histories of coloniality and racial capitalism. Across the case studies—from Haiti to the Indian Ocean to climate displacement—humanitarian governance manifests as a regime of power that rules over life through the lexicon of care, control, and calculation. It is not the nature of the disaster that unites these variable contexts, but the logic that sustains the interpretation and intervention in them: a logic that works to permanently turn over vulnerability into a field of intervention and profit. Coloniality of disaster therefore plunges the thought of coloniality of power into the ground of humanitarianism. It puts at the centre the way that epistemic, spatial, and economic hierarchies, created in the fires of empire, continue today in disaster government. The global system of aid, while ideologically constructed as universal and apolitical, is nonetheless sustained upon asymmetries between donor and recipient, expert and victim, North and South. Information regarding risk, resilience, and recovery flow out of metropolitan centres in every direction, with local knowledge and agency confined to the periphery.

This recalls decolonial critics to identify as epistemic dependency—a construction by Western frames of non-Western suffering and its mitigation. At the same time, racial capitalism explains the material dimension of the process. Catastrophes do not suspend capital's processes; they intensify them. In each situation examined, reconstruction accompanied privatization, debt, and commodification of vulnerability. The racialized body—the Haitian survivor's body, the Sri Lankan fisher's body, or the climate refugee body—is again at the centre of humanitarianism's political economy. They are brought to visibility as signs of global sympathy but are excluded from the realms of decision-making and accumulation whose struggle they propel. Disaster is therefore spectacle and resource in equal measure: pretext for the reproduction of capitalist and colonial power in moral disguise. Lastly, humanitarianism as a mode of governance promotes critical investigation of the ways in which aid regimes of the present are sites of biopolitical governance. Humanitarian intervenors now increasingly govern through data, logistics, and resilience training, subjecting ethics of care to an administrative science of control. Disaster governance thus follows the logic of governance over life itself—on whom to bestow protection, whom to enable to move, and whom to compel to suffer. These biopolitical rationalities, which have been extended heretofore through colonial bureaucracy, now come to fruition in algorithms, contracts, and digital infrastructure.

Together, these points incline toward a primary theoretical caveat: to address global inequality, one must go beyond humanitarian practice reform to decolonizing the ontology of disaster itself. This involves an acknowledgement that vulnerability is not a natural site but one socially produced; that resilience is not empowerment in the guise of forced dependency; and that actual recovery requires economic redistribution and epistemic justice. The disaster-coloniality will continue as long as care is more used as a tool of control than as solidarity.

7. Conclusion

The above critical reading reveals that humanitarian catastrophes cannot be considered as apolitical occurrences or as neutral crises. Instead, they are organized by deeply ingrained colonial logics which keep informing how vulnerability, aid, and reconstruction are imagined and regulated. The coloniality of the disaster makes apparent that relief systems in the world exist within a received order of domination—one that commercializes suffering and restyles inequality in the guise of compassion. Humanitarian rule, while ordinarily articulated as altruistic, reaffirms the geopolitical structures that maintain the world's "saviours" distinct from the world's "saved." Most concerned in mind is racial capitalism, whose calculus guarantees that the economic history of calamity traverses' identical uneven terrain as its human toll. Reconstruction is a new frontier of accumulation, and impacted communities are punished to debt, dependency, and dispossession. Aid in this context does not eliminate colonial hierarchies but tends to

reinstall them in new bureaucratic and technocratic packaging that superficially looks humanitarian but works as control technologies. Decolonizing disaster government will take more than local stakeholder engagement or institutional diversification. It demands a fundamental rethinking of the epistemologies and moralities that determine what is crisis, who or which survives, and whose lives can be recovered. Decolonial humanitarianism would prioritize local knowledge, historical responsibility, and international solidarity over paternalism. Only by grappling with the intersections of coloniality and capitalism can humanitarian action move from managing precarity to transforming the conditions that produce it. From this transformation emerges the possibility of an ethics of care based not on domination, but justice.

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