

## **Colonial Identities: Stuart Hall's Articulation as Stabilizer for Extractive Flows**

Shara Merrill

Cultural, Social, and Political Thought, University of Lethbridge

CSPT 7307: Settler Colonialism & Postcolonialism

Dr. Paul McKenzie-Jones

February 6, 2026

In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba takes us on a journey around the world, where we learn how colonial powers reshaped the societies they encountered, not just through conquest, but by permanently altering the social and cultural landscape to serve the needs of extraction, making it easier and more reliable as they went. Loomba highlights how naturally diverse and fluid social variations in humans were distilled into rigid identities like race, gender, and class (Loomba 2005, p. 110–115), becoming fixed through efforts to stabilize the extractive process.

One of the most important theorists Loomba cites in her discussion is Stuart Hall. Hall provides a way for us to think about the relationship between race, class, and other identities, by introducing the concept of *articulation* to explain how identities and social structures become linked together into structures of dominance. Hall's analysis shows how race was used in the process of colonialism, and how it continues to function in very similar ways today, continuously produced and maintained, rather than just inherited (Hall, 1980).

This paper will begin by taking a deeper exploration into the words of Stuart Hall and his important work *Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance* (Hall, 1980), focusing on his ideas of how different identities are articulated together. The second half of the paper will discuss my reaction to Hall's work, recognizing articulation as part of a broader pattern, where identities like race and class become linked together with gender, sexuality and religion to produce stable, manageable conditions for extraction.

The problem that Hall seeks to tackle in his seminal work about race and articulation is the persistence of race beyond colonial structures. Hall is unsatisfied with the dominant approaches to explaining this. He rejects both "economic reductionism," which attempts

to reduce race to an effect of class, and the “sociological” approach, which explains racism as a product of culture, ideology or prejudice, while sidelining the economic structures altogether (Hall, 1980, p. 323). Instead, he suggests that these social formations are “not that of an identity” but rather a “complex structure” of different elements that cannot be reduced to each other, but become linked together to function as a “structure of dominance” (Hall, 1980, p. 320). This explains the persistence of racialization, because of the work race is doing for maintaining hierarchy.

To explain how different identities – economic, political, ideological and cultural – become linked together, Hall introduces the idea of “articulation” (Hall, 1980, p. 323). He means to invoke the imagery of an articulated joint, where several pieces are independent, but are joined and move together in unified motion, coordinating while remaining distinct (Hall, 1980 p. 323). Hall uses this idea to explain why race and class are neither an expression of the other, but also why they are joined together in practice. They worked together in particular colonial forms, Hall says, because of the historical conditions which were present, insisting “there is no guarantee” that they will always be linked together in this form (Hall, 1980, p. 325). Hall uses this to explain how different colonial and post-colonial arrangements have differed and changed over time, rather than following a single developmental path (Hall, 1980, p. 325).

However Hall also emphasizes that the process, while not determinative, is also not random. While identities like “race” and “class” retain “relative autonomy,” their linkage produces predictable patterns of social inequality (Hall, 1980, p. 326). This is why these articulations always appear in what Hall describes as societies “structured in dominance” (Hall, 1980, p.320), with their connections shaped by relations of power. Hall uses these ever-present power relations to make the point that, while other identities are not reducible to class, economic relations operate *through* identities, rather than just alongside them. Race can then be described as a “modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced,” without being identical to it (Hall, 1980, p. 325).

Hall goes on to use race as his example to explain how his idea of articulation works in practice. Rather than existing simply because of prejudice, race becomes articulated to capitalism because it performs a specific function in colonial and postcolonial societies for organizing the labor force. The presence of racialized populations actively shapes how labor markets are organized. Racial differentiation, to Hall, determines who does what work, for what wages, regulating the social distribution of labor (Hall, 1980, p. 296). Colonial capitalism, as Hall describes, does not produce a uniform working class, but instead a racially differentiated labor force that can more easily be managed and exploited (Hall, 1980, p. 299). Racial identity then becomes a stabilizer for the labor force,

smoothing the way for high levels of extraction, while limiting mobility and collective resistance.

Hall specifically lays out the ways that racial difference structures the extraction of labor in colonial contexts. Race determines not only “access to employment” in the sense of who can do what labor, but also how much coercion or consent is considered acceptable in securing that labor. Some racialized groups can be incorporated into the working class, under conditions that systematically depress wages below the cost of social reproduction (Hall, 1980, p. 322). Even worse, some groups can be legally compelled into labor and even subjected to overt violence (Hall, 1980, p. 310). This, Hall says, is part of how race mediates the lived existence of class relations (Hall 1980, p. 325). The perception of “race” shapes how inequality and exploitation are justified, normalized, and perceived, both by the ones who are maintaining and benefiting from the system, as well as those who are being subjected to it. Of course this structures the political systems as well, determining in particular who is regarded as a legitimate political subject (Hall, 1980, p. 322), and conversely who can be excluded, marginalized and traumatized.

Hall’s formulation shows that racism is not simply cultural, or a result of psychological out-grouping, but is a structure that is being constructed and maintained because it is operational (Hall, 1980, p. 306). It is a means through which capitalism manages populations, organizes production, and secures labor on an ongoing basis (Hall, 1980, p. 317). Hall explains how race is “articulated” in some places and times by securing exploited, forced labor, where in other contexts it may be more important for cultural legitimacy, but in many cases race does seem available to “link” to capitalism when by doing so it helps to stabilize extraction (Hall, 1980, p. 317). Lastly, Hall says that race is just one example of this, and that multiple levels of economic, political and ideological identities can be articulated together (Hall, 1980, p. 321). So while the prevailing culture enforces prejudice by seeming to despise difference, capitalism seeks not to abolish it, but to recruit difference for its own ends.

Stuart Hall’s work has triggered a profound restructuring of my own thinking on the role of race, class and other identities. This reaction is shaped in part by familiar echoes I heard in Loomba’s presentation of Hall, to the words of another thinker I just read on the subject of identity, Silvia Federici. Federici’s work explores how not race but gender was used to instill labor discipline during the time of enclosure in Europe. Witch hunts were used as a means to dispossess and terrorize independent women who owned property, or knew herbs which could control fertility (Federici, 2004). This reign of terror was used to help secure the labor force, by producing more of capitalism’s preferred family unit – a heterosexual pair comprised of a male laborer toiling in production, a female doing

absolutely everything else and reproducing him, with clean, predictable lines of inheritance (Federici, 2004).

When I learned from Stuart Hall that colonial perceptions of race were being used for labor discipline in a similar way to Federici's understanding of gender, I began to wonder what kind of work other identities might be doing, so I examined the question through my own theoretical perspective.

The framework that I have been developing for critical theory is based on a principle of thermodynamics, the Constructal Law by Adrian Bejan, which emphasizes the self-organizing properties of flows in nature (Bejan, 2000). Both living and non-living systems that have vital currents evolve to increase these flows (Bejan, 2000). In the case of colonial expansion, the vital flow in question is that of capital, and through the constructal lens, we can see the way all of colonial society continuously self-organized around improving this flow, in how colonial powers created and used identities to stabilize their extraction in various ways.

Thus my reaction to Hall, along with my recent read of Federici, was to examine how other identities could be constructed or co-opted into the service of stabilizing labor flows. In constructal terms, enhancing flow is not an ideological project, but more of an engineering challenge. And this is where Hall's concept of articulation provided a powerful concept for me, because the joining of these identities looks very much like a flow stabilization system. In social terms, flow stabilizers are social structures that reduce unpredictability, make behaviors routine, and minimize the cost of enforcement. These are not planned so much as selected for, and refined over time, eventually interlocking and becoming self-reinforcing (Bejan & Lorente, 2010).

From an engineering perspective, five problems that colonial extraction needed to solve were: 1) a stable labor force, 2) free care and reproduction of the labor force, 3) predictability through policing of private behavior, 4) motivation and compliance, and 5) stable distribution and accumulation of surplus. From Hall's articulation, we can see that not only does race serve to stabilize the labor force, but that other articulated identities are doing similar and specific things:

- Race stabilizes the labor force by relegating who does what work and forcing wages down.
- Enforcing gender norms is what provides care for and reproduction of the labor force.
- Policing personal behaviors to make them more predictable is managed by scapegoating of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual behaviors.

- Encouraging or enforcing religious belief in external supernatural rewards, and basing morality on obedience to hierarchy, gives the labor force a reason to work and conform.
- Dividing the population into economic classes provides a systematic justification for hierarchy and a reliable means to harvest as much of the surplus as possible for elite coalitions.

By examining each of the stabilizers, we can see the work each one is doing for extraction, articulating together to reduce volatility and costs, replacing force with ideology.

It's important to acknowledge that colonialism did not invent these identities. Religion, for example, obviously precedes extractive technology, and religion also does many other things besides just supporting extraction (Rue, 2005). However in the manner of a self-organizing, adaptive system, these existing features of the human condition were exapted into use by selection for extractive efficiency.

What's more, once put into use, these stabilizers are mutually reinforcing, stabilizing each other as well. In particular, we can see that the labor force is segregated by race, but relies heavily on gendered care to be able to function reliably as labor. Ensuring consistency in gender roles relies on the enforcement of sexuality that is also used to dictate heteronormativity. Justification for enforcing strict norms around gender and sexuality is provided by European colonial forms of Christianity. This religion, in turn, needs access to surplus and institutional authority provided by class elites in order to act as infrastructure and to propagate itself. And finally, the class elites need the stable labor force to continue the extraction.

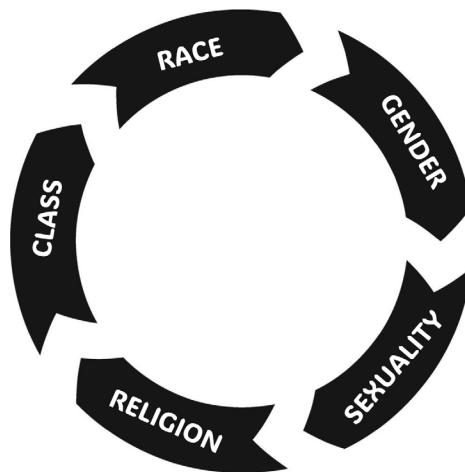


Fig. 1. The Cycle of Extractive Identities

Other ways to sort and stigmatize identities exist and contribute, such as ableism and ageism, etc., but these five in particular form the stabilizing core at the heart of colonial extraction.

The flow-stabilizing framework, I believe, not only helps explain Stuart Hall's observations about race as a labor force regulator, but it also explains how other identities - gender, sexuality, religion and class - were articulated with race in colonial systems, and why they make up the core of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) today. Each identity emerged and hardened in this form because it solved a specific engineering problem for smoothing colonial extraction. Once articulated together, these identities reduced friction and turbulence, and lowered the cost of enforcement, by substituting ideology and self-regulation for the use of force. The system became autopoietic, able to reproduce itself through everyday interactions and relations without coercion. Intersectionality, as we know it, is the observation of the way these identities still interlock and reinforce each other today.

Loomba, Hall, Federici and other theorists help illuminate how colonialism created and continues to underly the structure of our world today. With a little constructal perspective, we can sharpen their analysis even more, and hopefully move closer to making colonial identities a thing of the past, and not of our world tomorrow.

## References

Bejan, A. (2000). *Shape and structure, from engineering to nature*. Cambridge University Press.

Bejan, A., & Lorente, S. (2010). *The constructal law of design and evolution in nature*. Cambridge University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*. Autonomedia.

Hall, Stuart. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance." In *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, UNESCO, 1980, pp. 305–345.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2005.

Rue, L. (2005). *Religion is not about God: How spiritual traditions nurture our biological nature and what to expect when they fail*. Rutgers University Press.